

CHAPTER III

KAMALA DAS:

THE CONTEXT OF POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

Let me not be sad because I am born a woman

In this world; many saints suffer in this way.

(Jana Bai)

As discussed in the first chapter, modern Indian-English poetry is a post-independence phenomenon. The poets of the earlier phase had yet to break with the poetic conventions and idiom of their colonizers. This pre-independence poetry was more in consonance with Victorian romanticism. The phase was represented by Aurobindo Ghose. Owing to his inability to substitute an adequate idiom he has had to suffer considerable marginalization. However, an important fact concerning his complementary role in the formation of a postcolonial consciousness has been overlooked. It is manifest in his choice of oriental subjects in poems like *Savitri*, although the bulk of the work and its metaphysical pressure on the reader weaken its poetic value. But Aurobindo Ghose deserves a fairer deal at least for his contribution to Indian poetics, however unimpressive his poetical output may be. Some of his conclusions can provide valuable insight into Indo-Anglian poetry including that of Das. This becomes specially essential when one considers the vacuum in the Indian literary-critical circle created by nonavailability of indigenous tools of criticism. The task of forging a new kind of idiom to suit the native sensibility fell on the new

generation of poets for whom a postcolonial context was gradually taking shape. The spirit of modernism manifests itself in the new poet's rejection of the ossified remains of the colonial past.

It remains a deplorable fact that despite its sustained stress on nativism, Indian literary criticism has yet to develop an indigenous apparatus for decoding gender and reading texts deforming and foregrounding the feminine. The problem needs to be seen in the context of postcolonialism in its secondary sense of providing a forum for the subaltern and the down-trodden. Cultural decolonization is in a process of becoming a mere theoretical concept, perhaps an abstraction, owing to a visible onslaught of various forms of neo-colonialism. As a result postcolonialism, with its primary sense of interrogating the relationship between culture and imperialism, is becoming a vague and self-defeating idea, despite its emancipatory agenda to develop separate critical tools to suit one's native sensibility. As K. Satchidanandan observes: "Postcolonialism can be neo-colonialism with or without a hyphen, the empire assigning a role to former colonies and commanding them once again to speak its language" (*IL* 175, 96, 6). Even Aijaz Ahmed shares the above view in his critique of postcolonial theory. Bart Moore-Gilbert sums up Ahmad's argument thus:

Postcolonial theory is simply one more medium through which the authority of the West over the formerly imperialized parts of the globe is currently being reinscribed within a neo-colonial "new world

order” and is, indeed, best understood as a new expression of the West’s historical will to power over the rest of the world. (18).

The remarks are highly revealing and thought-provoking as far as the primary meaning of the term is concerned. But they seem to ignore the secondary meaning of the term which may be more useful and relevant, specially in the context of a writer like Das, than its primary meaning. In this sense postcolonialism, like feminism, is a theory of engagement—creating agency for the marginalized, the oppressed and the underprivileged, the Other. As mentioned above, Das is a postcolonial writer more in its secondary sense than the first.

Her writings in general and her poetry in particular can be seen as a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive patriarchal structures of power, antecedent to a profound sense of alienation in the personae of her work. The idea can be illustrated with examples from her autobiography *My Story* which has been a subject of prolonged controversy ever since its publication in 1976. Of course the controversy has mellowed considerably with the growing recognition of the notion that autobiography is first and foremost a literary form and is therefore as much about the persona as any historical individual. It is an imaginative representation of certain selected facts of the subject’s life. There is no difference between the “I” of the poems and the “I” of the autobiography. Therefore a

backward reading from Das's *My Story* to her poetry is unwarranted. Or, as Katherine R. Goodman remarks:

To read an autobiography one must know the fiction it engages. No more or less than men, women have fashioned the stories of their lives from the ready-made images at their disposal. Indeed, all of us tend to read our real and daily lives guided by these ready-made images. But successful autobiographers have also broken with those fictions, manipulated and altered them, thus revealing important and genuine experiences from their lives. (1989, 118).

My Story engages its own kind of fiction that is certainly not easy to identify because it is seamlessly blended with facts approaching magic realism. Taking the book very close to a novel. Critical response becomes difficult if it is considered to be a factual account. This kind of reading makes Vincent O'Sullivan voice her own difficulty in responding to this work:

It is little hard to know how to respond to this book which, while adopting an openly confessional tone, conceals quite as much or more as it reveals. But if considered as a literary rather than a factual recreation of the writer's life, it often serves as an illuminating comment on her poetry and fiction. (1986, 197).

However strong the fictional element may be, an autobiography like this has its roots in the writer's life that often gathers fictional layers as the book progresses. This is precisely what happens in Das's autobiography that initially "breaks with fiction" and reveals the genuine experience of a sensitive child-poet battered by alienation and discrimination. The fiction that the book "engages" comes gradually with the transformation of the narrative from an account of a neglected child into a story of a liberated woman. The importance of this book lies in the fact that it provides a valuable insight into Das's poetry. The book is important from the point of view of genre study as well. For there is a seamless blending not only of fact and fiction but also of prose and poetry that ultimately raises question as to its specific genre. The work acquires significance from the context of postcolonial feminism. In fact women's autobiography itself is a feminist gesture as through her autobiography the woman-writer asserts the legitimacy of her personal experiences which are otherwise undermined and relegated to a lower order. Besides, the "personal experiences" are often overrated to the extent that the other aspects of the work get overlooked which is exactly the case with Das's *My Story*.

The book presents a tension between colonialism and anti-colonial Gandhism, between patriarchy and matriarchy. Significantly enough the father-figure as an employee of the British Automobile Company is represented to have adopted a British way of life even in his food-habits and choice of clothes. He preferred to eat with a knife and fork, signifying assimilated British culture,

while the children and the ladies of the house ate typically Keralian food in the Indian fashion—with their hands! However, at the theoretical level the father-figure remains out and out a Gandhian going to the extent of commanding his timid wife to strip herself of all the jewellery and wear white khaddar, insensitive to her sentiments:

After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person except the mangalsutra; to her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest. She was mortally scared of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle. (MS 4).

The passage presents a powerful image of a tyrannical patriarchy. The irony lies in the fact that an alien lifestyle is being ruthlessly inflicted upon an aristocratic Nair wife with a matriarchal and matrilineal tradition. All the accomplishments of the poet-matriarch are undermined. On the one hand the father's personality exhibits an embedded conflict between two cultures, on the other he can be seen as representing a synthesis of colonialism and patriarchy. By imposing his personal stances and points of view he becomes a colonizer at home and the wife and other women in the family are granted a conspicuously subaltern status. The phallocratic order is further fortified by the husband-figure. The domestic colonialism exemplified by the two men with all their overbearingness, becomes

an ironic sequel to the imperialism of the British settlers who “traumatised” the persona’s early childhood at school in Calcutta. As a child she felt tortured by the “subtle sadism” of her white teachers who, according to the protagonist, were “old maids turned sour with dejection”.

The theme of domestic colonization is also taken up by the poet in 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 drawing-room,
And stroke my pitted face absentmindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning
sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye....

As these opening lines suggest, among other things, the poem is also about the colonization of the woman’s mind by patriarchy. It is not a recent phenomenon; colonization has been there since time immemorial which is why the colonizer-husband is referred to as “ancient settler in the mind” while in “Gino” he is addressed as “fair conqueror of another’s/Country”. The image of the settler/conqueror also implies intruder, “fair” being suggestive of British colonialism. The husband’s imperialist authority over the female is legitimized through the age-old social sanctions and hegemonic structures of

power, particularly the institution of marriage. The retrograde value systems and obscurantism underlying domestic colonialism are significantly brought out by the title of the poem "Stone Age".

Indeed, colonization of the female mind at home far predates British colonialism. It has proved to be far more damaging and unjust than political imperialism from which there is always scope for freedom. This is not the "stone age" of the noble savage—benign and simple, but of the "old fat spider", the "carnivorous plant", the "hooded snake", an untamed "lion" and "libertine. The highly functional animal imagery is suggestive of the predatory character of the deceiving male, always weaving "a web of bewilderment", and waiting with a trap to catch the gentle dove-like woman and like a python to strangle her gradually, reducing her to a soulless shape, a mere plaything with no emotion of her own—she the "dove", he the "granite" with all their symbolic suggestions. "With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep" is an auditory representation of the brutal unconcern of the barbarous male. And, "you stick a finger into my dreaming eye" signifies extreme condition of invaded privacy and harsh denial of individual freedom. In her poetry of resistance the man-beast claws the deep interiors of her being. In protest the "funeral pyre" snarls, the "sea" roars "a hungry roar", "leaps forward and retreats", the fierce storms claw the country's face. These along with images of sickness and health conditions can be said to form the "iterative imagery" of Das.

The attitude of the poet in “An Introduction” and “Spoiling The Name”—in fact in most of her poems—is conspicuously proactive as opposed to the reactive attitude of mainstream feminists. It is this proactive position of Das that makes her a Third World feminist. As will be seen in these poems, every attempt by patriarchy to marginalize her is rendered ineffective by her persistent refusal to change her ways. These poems have identity as their major unifying theme with obvious variation in tone and treatment. In “Spoiling the Name” the poet strives to disentangle her identity from the socially woven web of names and roles. The poem is a bold affirmation of her inner identity as opposed to her “social average identity” as she puts it in her poem “Siesta”. The poet certainly does not bemoan the loss of identity but rather comes up with a unique kind of philosophy. “An Introduction” is more complexly structured. On the one hand like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, it is about the growth of a poet’s mind and on the other about the growth of a feminist consciousness. It encompasses the whole of Das’s poetic pilgrimage including the obvious postcolonial agenda with which the poem begins. The first section is about the identity of a woman battered by hegemonic discourse, or rather, the woman who suffers. The second section is about identities of personae into which the woman who suffers dissolves:

...It is I who drink lonely

Drinks at twelve, mid-night, 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....

The private self gives way to the public selves and then there is a final fusion of the two selves in the concluding climactic assertion: "I too call myself I."

"An Introduction" was published in Das's first collection *Summer in Calcutta*, 1965 which with its regionalist title situated the poet away from the colony, in the orient. It announced the advent of a robust postcolonial, Third World poetic sensibility that took the literary world by storm:

...I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see?

The lines address themselves to the key postcolonial feminist question of identity of a woman of substance who also happens to be a poet. They voice her firm refusal to abandon English as an alien tongue and on behalf of all the Indo-Anglian poets she identifies English as a vital and inseparable component of the Indian identity. In this bold rejoinder also lies a powerful vindication of Modern Indo-English poetic sensibility. It appeared at a crucial time when the Indo-Anglian poets were still passing through a period of poetic preparation and some kind of ambivalence still characterized the overall Indian attitude towards the English language.

The poem on the whole is a polyphonic text about identities with the autobiographical voice of the first section multiplying itself into myriad selves: "I am a million, million people/Talking all at once, with voices raised in clamour". As discussed earlier these myriad selves need to be seen as myriad shapes and forms of one and the same dynamic "Kaleidoscopic self" to echo Lacan once again. Audible in these lines is a strident voice of a postcolonial Third World woman-poet having to confront a captious world of "critics, friends, visiting cousins", biased against the English language and also suspicious of her ability to handle it. Undeterred by criticism, brushing aside the cultural categorizers, the poet articulates her passionate sense of possessing the language. The repetitive use of the first person singular possessive pronoun "mine" followed by "alone" indicates certain vehemence about the poet's sense of possession. With all its traits, including its "distortions and queernesses" the language gets absorbed into the poetic

consciousness leading to an empathic identification of the poet with the language which comes to acquire for the poet “honesty” and “humanness”, which also belong to the speaking voice. It becomes the only language of the poet’s unconscious mind, capable of expressing every kind of mental state including “joys”, “longings” and “hopes”. And

...it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crow or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, the mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or
the
Incoherent murmurings of the blazing
Funeral pyre....

The sudden juxtaposition of the human with trees in storm, monsoon clouds and “roaring” lions accords a certain fierceness to the instinctive nature of the poet’s assimilation of the English language. It no longer remains the colonizer’s language, superficially appropriated by an alien but a transgeographical primal force within the poet, a naturalized medium that carries within it a voice of protest and affirmation—protest against every form of colonization and affirmation of her identity as a Third World woman-poet. English becomes the language of a countercultural discourse. Furthermore, the elemental and animal images in the

above lines coalesce to enforce the notion of vehemence and impetuosity with which the poet appropriates and internalizes the English language, or, rather, snatches it from its colonial masters. Thus, English becomes the language of her instinct as roaring is to lions or cawing is to crows and the language that she dreams in is also English (as disclosed to P.P. Raveendran in *IL* 155, 1993, 148). She peels off the colonial and patriarchal layers of the language, moulds and remoulds it. This is her major contribution to the evolution of the postcolonial feminist sensibility. The view is also shared by Eunice De Souza: "Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for the post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms. Whatever her vernacular oddities, she has spared us the colonial cringe. She has also spared us what in some circles, nativists and expatriates, is still considered mandatory: the politically correct "anguish" of writing in English." (1997, 8).

As for her distortion of the English language, Das can invoke one of her "foster parents" Virginia Woolf: "Women must alter and adapt the current sentence until she can write one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it" (1966, 145). Thus, to Woolf as well as to Das distortion of language can be acceptable but not distortion of thought: "The language one employs is not important," Das asserts, "what is important is the thought contained by the words" (Replies to the questionnaire: *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Second Revised and Enlarged Edition, ed. Lal.102). the poet gives evidence of having a natural preference for

a functional use of language. Hers is poetry of ideas, of powerful thoughts which she is in a tearing hurry to record. Hence, she must write in haste:

...Write without
A pause, don't search for pretty worlds which
Dilute the truth, but write in haste, of
Everything perceived, and known, and loved...
(“Without A Pause”)

Significantly enough, “the natural shape” of Das’s “thought” includes her preoccupation not only with gender but with caste, race, class, colour and language as well. Indeed, it is this fact that separates her from most of the Western feminists and positions her as a Third World feminist. Indeed, the first thing Das asserts in the poem under discussion by way of introduction is her Indianness and the brownness of her complexion.

The essentially elemental imagery of the lines quoted earlier from this poem is also functional in enforcing the idea of naturalness and instinctuality. In these lines Das is also making a case for a natural poetic with its implicit rejection of the dictums of the ever multiplying schools of literary theory and criticism. Indeed, this kind of natural poetic alone can explain the relationship between the poet and her poetry and the English language. She defines her speech as “Indian English” and then the language gets further internalized to be designated as the speech of the mind that is

alert and aware of its environment—“...the mind that sees and hears and/Is aware”. Visible in this poetic assertion is a conscious or unconscious blurring of the distinction between her poetry and her medium because in the given context the two can be interchangeable. S.C Harrex makes similar points about the relationship between Das’s natural poetic and her Indian English in his “Strange Case of Matthew Arnold in a Sari: An Introduction to Kamala Das”: “In her poem “An Introduction” Das “defines her speech as Indian English in defence of a natural poetic, of a verse voice or language which is a natural, uninhibited expression of her personality” (Harrex, 164). Das’s natural poetics is to a large extent rooted in a distinct philosophy of language as evidenced by the following extract from one of her interviews to P.P. Raveendran:

Good, simple language comes to us quite naturally....We should have the courage to use clean, unadorned language in our writing. Our thoughts too will then be right. I always prefer to see near-naked women rather than overdressed women. Look at some of our bharatanatyam dancers. They are overdressed with a lot of jewellery and glitter. This overdressing seems to be characteristic of our writing today. We have to change this. What we need is not the extravagance of the bharatanatyam dancer but the simplicity of the ballet dancer. We must try to bring in such simplicity to our language. Use less rhetoric. Whittle your language down to the essentials. Let the

kernel come out. We should be able to produce such literature in the future. (*IL* 155, 156).

Das's doctrine of simplicity also reflects her aesthetic vision. In her poetic praxis she displays the simplicity of a ballet dancer.

Das is perhaps the first poet to voice the need to liberate the term "Indian English" from its pejorative overtones. In fact Indian English was not taken seriously. Ironically, a pioneer of Indo-Anglian poetry like Nissim Ezekiel has shown a rather disdainful attitude towards "Indian English" in his poems on various comic themes. Das's "An Introduction" stands in sharp contrast to a very representative poem by Ezekiel written in "Indian English" and entitled "Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.":

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling....

There is no need to quote the poem in full because it is one of the most popular poems of Ezekiel's. It is also one of his most anthologized pieces. It is a brilliant comic piece and reflects the poet's commendable sense of humour. But it is also a parody, a comic representation of "Indian English" with an implicit criticism of the speaker's ignorance of impeccable British English. The poem combines entertainment with derisiveness and this is not the only poem of its kind. The two poems embody polarized attitudes to the question of Indian English. Furthermore, one may also be inclined to ask: what makes these lines "poetic"?

It is far from true that Das has been able to supply a viable alternative to "British English" with neatly defined linguistic features. As a matter of fact such an alternative does not exist in spite of Indira Chowdhury Sengupta's appendix on Indian English in the current edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. In fact a close study of Das's use of the English language will show that although she does take her own kind of liberty, her "Indian English" may be found to be less "Indian" than that of many of her contemporaries. Indeed, more than her linguistic deviations which her critics like Bruce King hasten to identify as an instance of Indianization of English, it is the proactive position in respect of the language that makes her a postcolonial or rather anticolonial writer.

Thus, one of the most significant contributions of Das is her unwavering commitment to the decolonization of the English language. It consists in her developing and asserting a theoretical position as well as in her poetic praxis with an ability to mould the English language and create an idiom to suit her natural poetics. King looks at some of the features of Das's linguistic deviations and locates them in the context of decolonization and Indianization of English with which he credits Das :

Kamala Das's most remarkable achievement, however, is writing in an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech; and this is especially important for women writers. Such a development is not a matter of national pride or a linguistic equivalent of "local colour"; rather it is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what the writer feels or is trying to say instead of it being filtered through speech meant to reflect the assumptions and nuances of another society. (1987, 153).

The voice, tone and idiom also go into the formation of a distinct female identity. Despite the prolonged endeavours of the feminist critics to formulate a separate cogent poetics, the possibility of a distinctly feminine style, separable from an andocentric style, still appears remote. Das gains a strategic position in the development of postcolonial feminist poetics. Her contribution is twofold: on the one hand she has been able to nativize a colonial language, on the other she has succeeded in projecting her gender identity through the use of language and choice of diction, as much as through themes and ideas. Her gendered subjectivity inscribes itself in most of her writings. This is done by putting to effective use images of the female body and its anatomy:

This body that I wear without joy, this body
Burdened with lenience, slender toy, owned
By man of substance shall perhaps wither, battling
with
My darling's impersonal lust. Or, it shall grow gross
And reach large proportions before its end.
(“Gino”)

Or:

...you were pleased with my body's response,
Its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions....

(“The Old Playhouse”)

And again:

...For those such as me the awful
Vulgarity of the final rites are not
Quite right, the slow unwrapping of the carcass,
The many paltry human details that must disgust
The aesthete, the flabby thigh, the breasts that sag,
The surgery scar, yes, it would indeed be
Of no bloody use....

("Death Is so Mediocre")

In the following lines Das presents physiological details with rather startling candour with a concealed postcolonial feminist agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality:

Gift him all,
Give 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 hunger....

("The Looking Glass")

The general obsession with the body in Das is in a way reminiscent of the French feminist aesthetics of *l'écriture féminine* as epitomized in an assertion by Madeleine Gagnon:

All we have to do is let the body flow, from the inside; all we have to do is erase, as we did on the slate, whatever may hinder or harm the new forms of writing; we retain whatever fits, whatever suits us. (1980, 180).

However, the resemblance is only superficial. When the dictum of the exponents of l'écriture feminine is "write the body", Das's seems to be "write the body—write it away." To the former the body is often an end in itself; to the latter just a means:

I throw the bodies out,
I can not stand their smell.
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.
Only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.
.....
Bereft of body
My soul shall be free.

("The Suicide")

Or even obliterate it:

I shall some day see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing....

("I Shall Some Day")

Crossing the confines of one's body is certainly not easy; it is an arduous task but without this the full worth of living cannot be realized. The idea is fleshed out by the following poem:

When you learn to swim
do not enter a river that has no ocean
to flow into, one ignorant of destinations
and knowing only the flowing as its destiny,
like the weary rivers of the blood
that bear the scum of ancient memories,
but go swim in the sea,
go swim in the great blue sea
where the first tide you meet is your body,
that familiar pest,
but if you learn to cross it
you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,
for, even sinking would make no difference then....

("Advice To Fellow Swimmers")

The two contrasted phases of reality are represented by the river, symbolizing the temporal, and the ocean, symbolizing the eternal. Of course the natural preference of the poet is for the latter. The desire to merge into the "great blue sea" parallels her search for the right man who has the capacity to understand the needs of her soul.

Indeed, as has been discussed elsewhere, Das's concepts of love and transcendence are alien to the Western feminist

consciousness. The poet evinces her characteristic Indianness when she identifies the lovers with Radha and Krishna, who acquire at her hands distinctly human qualities. This can be seen in poems like “The Cobweb”, “Radha Krishna”, “Maggots”, “Vrindaban” and several others, a subject to be taken up in the next chapter. The male body that ultimately imprisons her female consciousness is the body of her divine lover Krishna:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,

I cannot see beyond it

Your darkness blinds me,

Your love words shut out the wise world's din

(“Krishna”)

However, the idea cannot be carried too far as there is an inherent danger of its getting hijacked by the revivalist discourse with its renewed interest in the Aryan ideals of womanhood and celebration of domesticity.

To the disappointment of the Radical Feminists Das emerges as an androgynous artist like Virginia Woolf who found her idea corroborated by a remark made by Coleridge on first September, 1832 that every great mind is androgynous. But androgyny is also an oriental concept as evident from the concept of *Ardhanarishwara*, *Shiva* and *Shakti*. The underlying idea is that unless there is a healthy coexistence of the male and female principles the artistic mind is incomplete and, therefore, artistic

creation, like biological creation, is not possible. In fact according to Jungian psychology the human personality itself by its very structure and make-up has a male and a female aspect to it: the animus and the anima. Das takes up this idea in her poem "The Doubt":

When a man is dead, or a woman,
We call the corpse not he
Or she but it. Does it
Not mean that we believe
That only the souls have sex and that
Sex is invisible?
Then the question is, who
Is the man, who the girl,
All sex-accessories being no
Indication. Is she
A male who with frail hands
Clasps me to her breast, while
The silence in her sick room, turning
Eloquent, accuses
Me of ingratitude?
And, is he female who
After love, smooths out the bed-sheets with
Finicky hands and plucks
From pillows strands of hair?

Gender is at the level of behavioural traits and the male and the female aspects in the human personality often become inseparable. It can also be one of the grounds of the rejection of the male/female binaries. From another point of view it can be seen as resulting in the mutual neutralization of the two principles during artistic creation which often transcends gender. Thus gender becomes a matter of individual voice and style. This is also the view that Das seems to share with Joyce Carol Oates according to whom "The serious artistic voice is one of individual style, and it is sexless." (Ruthven, 1990, 105).

It must be pointed out here that the poet's androgynous consciousness is also rooted in a humanistic and melioristic vision of life and art. It is consistent with the implied agenda of the postcolonial discourse to champion the cause of the victims of various oppressive structures of power. She rejects in the most unequivocal terms the binary male-female opposition posited by the Western Radical Feminists. This kind of disjunctiveness, the sense of mutual exclusion makes the Western feminist consciousness appear negative in character to Das and hence arouses her resentment. Thus, despite some very trenchant remarks made by her poetic personae and characters, the overall stance of Das is in no way anti-male:

Feminism as the Westerns see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because

I have loved my husband and I still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them. (159).

It is obvious that Das is equating Western feminism with Radical Feminism which makes her guilty of a basic reductionism. By rejecting the male-female divide Das gives a more positive connotation to feminism which emerges to be essentially of a humanistic kind. A similar stance is articulated by Margaret Lawrence in one of her interviews to Margaret Atwood:

I'm 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. But I think we have to be careful here...for instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be re-educated with the minimum damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers...we can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well. (Woodcock, 1974, 23).

Indeed, it is only as a humanistic movement that feminism can survive. Feminism as a politico-socio-cultural movement with the sole objective of achieving man-woman equality is bound to be limited because already there has been a significant narrowing of the gap between the sexes. It is this perception of the term that

aroused Virginia Woolf's resentful scepticism about the very concept of feminism:

What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word "feminist" is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means "one who champions the rights of women". Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. (1977, 117).

Das's feminism encompasses a much broader area. It explores and critiques every form of marginalization. The basic notion being that one can be marginalized not just due to gender but also due to colour, caste, race, religion, class, ageing and even language.

My Story begins in a colonial setting when India was still under British rule. As a sensitive child the poet realized that as an Indian she was being neglected and relegated to the background only because the colour of her skin was not white. She and her brother were tortured by their white classmates only "for wearing under the school uniform of white twill, nut-brown skin" (MS 2). The repeated use of the lexemes "neglect", "pampered", "hated", "white" and "brown", especially the way she has tried to juxtapose the opposites is indicative of the poet's painful awareness of her lot as compared to that of her white classmates like Shirley who carried

up the bouquets when the dignitaries arrived. She writes: "When the visitors came the brown children were always discretely hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company" (MS 3). The remarks highlight the glaring difference in treatment meted out to the white and brown children. Thus, the Europeans became the Other to her. They filled her mind with the feeling of inferiority which became her lot because by comparison she was "dark". Perhaps this is why colour imagery is so abundant both in her poetry as well as in her autobiography. Or, as Iqbal Kaur observes:

She makes a frequent and consistent use of the colour adjectives (especially the adjectives "white" and "dark") and hardly ever misses the description of the fair-complexion or the dark-complexion. Even in her moments of mystic ecstasy, she does not fail to note the colour of her God's skin. (1990, 31).

She refers to "his dark limbs" and "the dusk of his skin" and calls him "the dark God of girlhood dreams" (MS 190). The implication is that a girl with "swarthy skin" was allowed to have only dark gods. Kaur talks at length about the poet's inferiority complex in her discussion of *My Story* and ascribes it to her colour complex. But a note of caution must be sounded here for Kaur accepts the narrative voice at its face value. The book in fact is more concerned to expose the way the false sense of inferiority was inculcated in the protagonist in her childhood. The colour of the skin is presented as a

major determinant because one's sense of superiority or inferiority is determined by one's colour. Her work reveals a morbid awareness of the fact that dark complexion brings nothing but rejection, not only by the white colonialists but also at home. It is significant that the poet-autobiographer "ate" her meals not just with her "fingers" but with her "brown" fingers, instead of with knife and fork. The colour adjective reflects her acute obsession with the fact that colour should receive such importance in society. *My Story* reveals the poet's/persona's sustained awareness of her "swarthy skin", her plain features with repeated reference to the brown colour of her complexion. This awareness is manifest in expressions like:

My grandmother was worried about the duskiness of my skin and rubbed raw turmeric on Tuesdays and Fridays all over my body before the oilbath (*MS 38*)

And:

Our relatives praised my thick tresses but mumbled unkind things about my colour (38).

The sense of inferiority that the protagonist felt owing to her brown complexion as a child is also evident from the following excerpt:

It was obvious to me that I did not at all match the grandeur of the marquée and the garden. The backdrop

demanding a more elegant bride, one who was glamorous and beautiful. (90).

However, the visibly reactive position of the persona in respect of the colour of her skin is abandoned with the attainment of maturity and with the growth of her postcolonial consciousness. The assertion of the brown colour of her skin in "An Introduction" with the adjective being preceded by the modifier "very", emphasises the poet's distinctly proactive attitude.

Marginalization due to class is a global reality and a major preoccupation of Das in whose work gender-consciousness is hardly separable from class-consciousness. As will be seen in Chapter five she is as much a spokesperson for the poor and the down-trodden. The first poem in her *Collected Poems Volume 1* is about the poor Andhra labourers who devote their lives to building houses for the alien rich and in this act they appear as "cicadas in brambled foliage":

The cicadas in brambled foliage
Naturally concave. So also these
Men who crawl up the cogged scaffoldings
Building houses for the alien rich.
(*"The House Builders"*)

The image "cicadas in brambled foliage" is extremely powerful and the apprehension of their lives is sensitive. The image is also

designed to evoke the atmosphere of the industrial metropolis. There is an underlying pathos and an irony in the fact that the rich for whom these humble men risk their lives remain alien and the two will never come close to each other. The theme of ethnic violence and racial discrimination is taken up in the Colombo poems written during the poet's visit to that island in the early 80's while discrimination on the basis of caste finds treatment in "Honour".

A more disconcerting form of marginalization in Das results from the loss of gender at the biological level leading to a corresponding loss of gender identity at the cultural levels as in the case of the eunuchs. "Dance of the Eunuchs" is one such poem that is more about the loss of identity and the anguish consequent upon it:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,
Jingling....Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
and
They danced, oh, they danced till they bled....

This is a poem of high contrast. The outward extravagance of the eunuchs is only a sad commentary on their inner poverty and emptiness caused by sterility. Indeed the dance is in no way an expression of emotion but a mechanical gesture, a routine activity to

earn a living. Everything is so unnatural and artificial about their behaviour. With their natural barrenness the eunuchs become images of death and rottenness of which they sing. The dismal reality that surrounds them makes their songs melancholy:

Their voices

Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn....
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

The pathos lies more in the situation they represent; it is not created by their voices that were not gentle but "harsh". Unable to give or experience fulfilment of any kind, vacuous from within, they could only "writhe in vacant ecstasy" and all their gestures were nothing but just "convulsions". The idea of death and rottenness is accentuated effectively by the features of their emaciated body and the idea reaches its climax in the comparison of the body of the eunuch with "half-burnt logs from/Funeral pyres":

They

Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed, still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions.
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning

And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....

It is a Waste-Land-like situation that the eunuchs represent. As is evident from the above lines their inner vacuity is echoed by even nature in the sudden and unusual thunder and lightning. The “meagre rain” does not come with its natural power to rejuvenate and lessen tropical heat. It is as mechanical as the “convulsions” of these poor creatures; it can only smell of dust in attic and “urine of lizards and mice”. It is her persistent humanity that stands out. This is what is called encyclopaedic feminism or “utopian feminism”, to use a term coined by Julia Kristeva. It positions Das as a Third World Feminist with postmodernist leanings. Most of the issues taken up by her as a Third World Feminist are eternal realities and hence make her feminism more universal and less culture-specific.

A close study of the evolution of Das’s poetic consciousness will show that her gendered subjectivity is very strong in the first three of her poetical collections viz. *Summer In Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). This phase has some very “feminist” poems like: “An Introduction”, “In Love”, “The Freaks”, “The stone Age”, “The Descendants” and “The Old Playhouse”, rooted in the male-female binaries, displaying at the same time a very ambivalent attitude towards sex. The fact that these are the most anthologized of her poems testifies to their merit and popularity. One should, however, take cognizance of another equally important fact that these poems

embody only one of the many voices of Das. This is the voice of sensuality, responsible for the plethora of stereotypical interpretations of her work.

Das's contribution to the formation and evolution of a postcolonial, Third World feminist consciousness requires greater attention and a more objective assessment. By overemphasising and overrating the element of lust and physical love critics often tend to isolate the poet from her broader historical context. This kind of stereotypical interpretation can be ascribed to the fundamentally biographical methodology adopted by most of her critics.

The writings of Das impress her perceptive readers as a critique of all the various structures of power which are oppressive, corrosive and discriminatory. Her views on gender are more objective than those of her Western counterparts. She talks more about women because women are more oppressed and exploited than men. Her obsession with the body is functional in lending a feminine flavour to her style, consistent with the objectives of a feminist poetics; the hidden message, her sustained endeavour is to transcend the body. What one encounters in Das is an oriental dialectics of the body and the soul. In her realization of the past she is also aware of the thin dividing line between decolonization and revivalism; between justice to women and injustice to men; between feminism and misanthropism. Her role in the Indianization of English, her commitments to the marginalized and the overall

widening of her vision of life and art, grant Das a significant place in the topical context of postcolonial feminism.