

**THE SCOURGE OF SKIN: MARGINALITY AND THE ANGUISH OF
COLOUR IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS**

“[...] The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. “Madam,” I warned,
“I hate a wasted journey – I am African.”
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurised good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was. foully.
‘HOW DARK?’ ... I had not misheard... ‘ARE YOU LIGHT
OR VERY DARK?’ [...]”

– Wole Soyinka

“My man took off yesterday
with a waagin
He left me and the kids
To be something in this world
Said he was sick of being
black, poor and laughed at
Said he wanted to be white
have better clothes, a flash car
and eat fancy
He said me and the kids
would give him a bad name
because we are black too
So he left with a waagin.”

– Charmaine Papertalk-Green

The authentic artist that she is, Kamala Das often reveals the sinister aspect of supremacist discourses like 'Chromatism' as socio-cultural constructs. The word 'chromatism', which is a derivative of 'chromatic', originally derived from early 17th century from French 'chromatique' or Latin 'chromaticus', from Greek 'khrōmatikos' (of or relating to colour), from 'khrōma', '-atos' (colour), '+ikos' (of, or relating to, or resembling), from 'khrōmat-' (colour, chromatic scale) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM and Colman: 2006, 132).

Ashcroft et al. have defined 'Chromatism' as 'the essentialist distinction between people on the basis of colour' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 37). Evidently, it has its roots in the soil of a racist culture being the visible marker of ethnicity. So, why we should devote the present chapter to analyze Das' poetic negotiations with and resistance to chromatism when the preceding chapter has already dealt with the poet's treatment of the ethnic issue needs to be clarified. As a matter of fact, the significance of the 'colour question' in Das' life, and her incisive treatment of the issue in her poetry and in *My Story* have occasioned us to allocate a separate chapter on her treatment of marginality and the anguish of colour.

Humanity has often been divided on chromatic grounds between the Aryan whites, and the non-Aryan peoples of colour and the blacks. In the empire of the fair, the dark have often had to yield and endure marginalization. W.E.B. Du Bois in this context has observed:

[...] we are studying the history of the darker part of the human family, which is separated from the rest of mankind by no absolute physical line and no definite mental characteristics, but which nevertheless forms, as a mass, a series of social groups, more or less distinct in history, appearance and in cultural gifts and accomplishments (Du Bois in Bernasconi:2001, 4).

In fact, true to Du Bois' observation, from 'apartheid' in South Africa to 'segregation'

in the United States – the story has ever been the same. In the liberal democracies of modern times, the ‘colour bar’ is often seen to contradict the egalitarian principles of the system within which it occurs by causing ‘social exclusion’ or ‘situations of extreme marginalization’ of individuals and groups ‘especially in the setting of multi-cultural societies’ (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 204).

Since the ‘distinction’ posited by chromatism is ‘essentialist’ and not ‘accidental’, it tends to ascribe preconceived features and propensities to the colour groups, reflecting the socio-cultural assumptions of the dominant ones. As the white Europeans (Aryans) have politico-historically been the dominant group or the self, the subjugated non-Aryans have been treated as the ‘other’. As a result, the whites are often projected as being ‘fair’ (just), energetic and equanimous, whereas the ‘dark’ ones are pigeonholed as being dishonest, lazy and blindly passionate. Of course, this mindset is an off-shoot of the ill-conceived notion regarding the ‘essential nature’, as opposed to any external pressure, whereby the colour groups are made to differ because of ‘a variety of accidental or contingent features brought about by social forces’ (Blackburn: 1996, 125). What vitiates such a distinction is that simplistic generalization often leads to intolerance of, hatred towards, and violence against both the black and the brown.

Kamala Das has been highly derisive of the human obsession with colour, because, to her, there is little difference between the ‘whites’ who were not prepared to recognize her superior poetic talent on account of her ‘nut-brown skin’ (*MS* 3) and her anxious grandmother who rubbed ‘raw turmeric’ all over her body to make her look ‘fair’ (*MS* 38). Significantly, the interface within this ‘semantic representation’ is tripartite, encompassing the dominant culture of the whites, the pliant culture of the poet’s relatives, and the marginalized identity of the dark girl, who in this case happens to be the poet.

Just like Du Bois, Das too is not prepared to attach any undue significance to the colour difference because she considers the body a gift from God, and then therefore, not to be either proud of or sad about. So, in her article “Obscenity and Literature” Das

has commented, 'The body is a gift from God, just another of His gifts and the wearer of a particular body is not responsible for its cut or elegance. It is the visible container of an invisible, but more real entity. It is as cassette is to music or the fusebox to electricity' (*Weekly Round Table*, 31-32). So, repudiating the utter fatuity of the chromatic division, Das makes a fierce assertion of her 'brown' complexion, when, as has already been pointed out, she states at the beginning of 'An Introduction', 'I am Indian, very brown' (*SC* 59). In this connection, I.G. Ahmed comments, "The assertion of the brown colour of her skin in 'An Introduction' with the adjective being preceded by the modifier 'very', emphasizes the poet's bold acceptance of her colour and her distinctly proactive attitude" (Ahmed: 2005, 74). Ahmed attributes this fact to 'the attainment of maturity' and 'the growth of her postcolonial consciousness' (Ahmed: 2005, 74). This assertion takes a heavy toll on her because the cultural categorizers, unable to go beyond their colonial and chromatist mindset, forbid her from writing in English. Needless to say, the poet defies their fatwa and continues with her poetic pursuit.

Das' experience of chromatic discrimination became quite acute when during her stay in Sri Lanka she too was mistaken for a Tamil because of her dark complexion and South-Indian features. So, the poet has to conceal her 'nut-brown skin' in the face of a rampant racist chromatist culture ('Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo', *CP* 15). As revealed in 'After July' the poet-speaker has witnessed the dark Dravidian and his ilk being 'all holed up in fear' (*CP* 15) and in 'A Certain Defect in the Blood' them being made 'the hunted of the land' (*CP* 17). In fact, in 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo', the poet-speaker recounts her experiences while shopping at a departmental store in the strife-torn Sri Lanka. Her knowledge of the raging ethnic disturbance between the fair Aryan Sinhalese and the dark Dravidian Tamils makes her verily conscious of her own brown complexion. As mentioned earlier, K. Satchidanandan, in this context, observes that the July 1983 riot in Sri Lanka 'invokes the memories of another, mythical war in Sri Lanka: that between the fair Rama and dark Ravana, that in Kamala's poetry becomes the archetypal conflict between the Whites (Aryans) and the Blacks (Dravids)' (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 15). According to him, this theme 'comes up again and

again in her [Das'] poems as references to her "nut-brown skin" ('Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo') or a defect in the blood: "[...] that made us the land's inferiors [...]" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 15).

Since, as revealed in 'Smoke in Colombo', the nut brown poet-speaker had once before been 'stopped' by the thugs at gunpoint, she makes every attempt at concealing her dark skin. However, she is soon found out by the Sinhala salesgirls who try to 'stab' her with their 'smile', showing thereby the immense reach of ethnocentrism and chromatism. What is clear from these divergent reactions of the 'I' is the change in circumstances because of the changing cultural positions assumed by the intrusive, interfering or intimidating 'they' of both the poems (i.e. 'An Introduction' and 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo').

'For Cleo Pascal' reveals a sensitive poet's awareness of her 'dark' skin. Kamala Das' visits to Canada gave her a first-hand experience of the land and the people. In some ways her experiences in Canada were not too dissimilar from those in Sri Lanka. In both of these countries, the dark poet was made unduly self-conscious of her own 'visibility' (difference) in contrast with her own country India. In lieu of the atmosphere of dread and danger that accompanied her stay in the strife-torn Sri Lanka, in Canada she had to contend with a mild indifference and misunderstanding:

In Canada
it is autumn time
the maple leaves
red as drying blood
may not last out the week
I grow visible
more visible here than there
the inescapable visibility
of the darker race
peopling a white God's world
How would He have guessed

the traumas of the black? (*OSKHS* 126)

In fact, it is her consciousness of an 'inescapable visibility of the darker race' that triggers her thought process in this poem. She is also made quizzical about the fairness (or the lack of it) of that darker race (peopling a white God's world like Canada), God when racially/chromatically categorized as 'white' and given the ownership of this world is automatically set as different from and in opposition to the 'darker race' of the poet-speaker. Naturally, this inability to 'guess' the trauma of the black (and by extension that of the coloured) seems rather obvious and expected. We get to see a similar reaction to the colour-divide in Canada in Himani Bannerji's poem 'Apart-hate':

In this whiteland
Chinese coolies, black slaves, Indian indentures
immigration, head tax, virginity tests,
Apart – hate
Reagan extends his whitehand from the white house
fingers cash sells arms
the shop smells of blood, vomit and gun powder
the category human has no meaning when spoken in white
Apart – hate. (*doting time: Poems: 1986, 46-47*)

Significantly, both Das and Bannerji show their awareness of and resistance to 'Apart-hate' or the 'hate' that arises out of setting humanity 'apart' on chromatic grounds.

Far from the human world where the hierarchical categorization of the white and the black is seen in operation, the poet perceives the natural world to be more inclusive and then therefore 'grey'. Coming back to the human world Canada, we bear witness to an encounter between loving intruder (the dark poet) and the 'white' Atwood's land. The chromatic difference soon ensures that the human bond of love and understanding is disrupted by cultural preconceptions:

The sky and the wrinkling sea
peer through veils if grey
I am the loving intruder
in love with Atwood and her land
Would even my love seem dark,
dark and therefore a wee bit
sinister? (*OSKHS* 126)

As a matter of fact, even love, the primordial and tenderest human emotion, when issuing from a (dark) ‘loving intruder’, seems ‘dark’. As a result, some ‘sinister’ motive ‘is’/‘may be’ attributed to it.

Misunderstood by both God and man, the poet-speaker resorts to identify with the natural world in which for a change she receives a joyous welcome. The trees accept her as their ‘kith’ and ‘kin’, giving her the desire and access to ‘wear this land as an overcoat’ and ‘look like its trees’. In place of the silent imputation of a ‘sinister’ motif, the natural world proffers the ‘silence’ of understanding. The ‘forests’ and the poet-speaker ‘have something in common’ – they ‘don’t speak French’:

Only the trees seem glad to see me
as if I were their kith and kin
I take on their characteristics
as the days one after another pass by
while I wear this land as an overcoat
warming my breasts and belly
I begin to look like its trees
my skin dries like the bark of a birch
my hair smells of spruce
There are creatures in the undergrowth
I smell the swamp and the loam
The birds are hiding

they hoard their melodious cries
in the lockers of silence
Canada's silence is different
from other silences known
It is a gigantic deep-freeze
in which sounds lie wintering...
Of one thing I am certain
the forest and I,
we have something in common,
we do not speak French. (OSKHS 126)

That the silence shared by the wild Canada and the outsider poet 'hoard' 'melodious cries' and the message of love become clear from their harmonious coexistence. Needless to say, this friendly attitude gives the poet-speaker a chance to 'warm' her 'breasts' and 'belly' as against the Canadian autumn. Their inability to speak French – only one of the languages spoken in Canada – leaves them free of the charge of partisanship which, in its turn, may cause another heirarchization.

That this heirarchization was not an exclusively foreign affair was soon brought home to the Indian poet. In fact, much like 'An Introduction', Das' testimonio *My Story* and poems such as 'The Departing I', 'The Fair World', and 'Darkness of a Sort', too, reveal the workings of chromatism in the Indian context.

The testimonio of a nut brown Indian woman, *My Story* comes to us as a document of Kamala Das' 'colour complex', to borrow a phrase from Iqbal Kaur (Kaur: 1990, 31). Significantly, in this book, Das has related episodes from her life in which chromatic discrimination affected her or those she knew.

In fact, *My Story* begins with a description of Das' childhood, spent in the pre-independent Calcutta. The first chapter of the book describes the 'humiliation' of a 'brown child' in a 'European school'. Das graphically describes how her brother and

she were tortured by their white schoolfellows only 'for wearing under the school uniform of white twill, a nut-brown skin' (MS 2). Similarly we are informed how her brother, 'plump and dark', was 'made fun of' by the 'white boys' (MS 2). Once they tortured him by pushing a pencil up his nostril, and when his shirt front was covered with blood from his bleeding nose, William, the bully exclaimed, 'Blackie your blood is red' (MS 2). The poet could not help her brother or resist the cruelty of the tough Anglo-Indians, and this episode of humiliation left an indelible mark on her psyche.

A similarly humiliating episode is recounted in the same chapter. But, this time the 'brown child' discriminated against was the poet herself whose poem was passed off as having been written by Shirley, a Scott with pink cheeks and yellow ringlets (MS 3). This deception earns Shirley 'a special kiss' from the visiting Governor's wife whereas the brown children like the poet are 'discreetly hidden away' in the corridors behind the lavatories to be accompanied by the ayahs (MS 3).

That the previously mentioned episode could not be forgotten in a hurry by the poet came to the fore in the third chapter of *My Story*. One day all the children of the poet's school were taken to the Victoria Gardens for a picnic but the dark-skinned girl failed to establish a good rapport with her classmates. Feeling 'lonely' and 'unwanted' she 'went away to the farthest fence' and lay near 'a hedge of Henna' (MS 9). She wondered what might have happened had she been born a fair child of a European couple. It seemed to her that she could then be loved and accepted by her white parents who might have been 'proud' of her verses (MS 9). This reverie however was soon shattered by the unkind words of her Anglo-Indian school mistress who didn't care to understand the young poet's predicament and conveniently dubbed her 'a peculiar child' (MS 10). The teacher's words succeeded in further alienating the dark child by making her sob and tickling her classmates to break into a 'high laughter' (MS 10). This incident gets a superb poetic rendition in 'Punishment in Kindergarten' that will be discussed in a subsequent chapter of the present dissertation.

These statements and narrated episodes reveal the discrepancy that characterized

the treatment received by the whites and the browns in a chromacist society. Thus, in the words of Kaur 'the Europeans' became the 'Other' to her (Kaur: 1990, 31). The 'nut-brown skin' caused in her an inferiority complex that in turn led to the abundance of colour imagery in both her testimonio and in her poetry. In *My Story*, for instance, she narrates another episode when she was enamoured of an elderly dark man (*MS* 190). Once 'in his arms' she refers to 'his dark limbs' (*MS* 190) and 'the dusk of his skin' (*MS* 191), and calls him 'my Krishna' (*MS* 190) – 'the dark God of girlhood dreams' (*MS* 191). According to I.G. Ahmed, this implies that a girl with 'swarthy skin' was 'allowed to have only dark gods' (Ahmed: 2005, 73). In a marked contrast to this, in the poem, 'For Cleo Pascal', Canada the predominantly white country is called a white God's world (*OSKHS* 126).

The poet's 'colour consciousness' was aggravated by the fact that it was not only the white colonialists but also her own relatives who worried about and often made disparaging comments on her 'swarthy skin'. This fact is clearly revealed in and through 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' (*MS* 38).

How such negative responses from the relatives may cause extreme unease in a dark girl, forcing her to take drastic steps of self-concealment or even self-annihilation is clearly brought out in the next poem, 'The Departing I'. In fact, 'The Departing I' is a fierce critique of the 'fair'-fascinated society. Apparently a suicide note left by a dark girl, 'Shyama' (a 'dark-skinned woman'), the poem at once spells out the reasons of her suicide and makes a fervent plea to the leaders of the society on behalf of other dark girls like her. The 'I' that is 'departing' (presumably committing suicide) has had to endure marginalization from her very childhood. In her formative years, she had to 'sit and watch' even though she had wanted to 'take part' in the game of life. Thankfully, she was unaware of the reason at that time. But when 'innocence' born out of 'ignorance' was shattered by 'experience', she was forced to ask whether her exclusion

was motivated by chromatist concerns:

Don't take part, they said.

I didn't know then...why?

Sit and watch, they said.

I didn't know then...why?

What was my fault?

Was it a sin?

This—my dusky skin... (*Symposium 47*)

Significantly, her apprehensions about the possibly 'sin'-ful associations of her 'dusky skin' are more ironic than uninformed.

That this marginal status did cling to the girl even after she had grown up comes to the fore from her reference to her 'grandmother's grumblings', her 'mother's grief', her 'father's worries', and the jeer of the 'gibers'. The same attitude previously reflected in their (society's) refusal of her participation in the game of life still continues in their sinister intent to cause 'her rapture' from 'you' (other human beings) and 'me' (herself). The woman-speaker is thus alienated from both self and society:

At home

Grandmother's grumblings,

Mother's grief,

Father's worries, and...

And on the open road... those jeering gibers

They wished

Perhaps my

Rapture from you and

From me as well...

Yes, I too loved life

If only left alone
To my own liking...
That even was snuffed off
Why?
May I ask?
Me Lord! (*Symposium 47*)

The woman-speaker's frustrated 'love' for 'life' caused in her an extreme introversion, as a result of which she only wanted to be 'left alone' and lead *her* life to her 'own liking'. But, even this desire of the speaker was inexplicably 'snuffed off', causing the speaker for the first time to raise a question. In fact, her use of the title 'Me Lord' gives a cutting edge to her satire.

The same satirical strain remains undiminished throughout the next stanza in which marks of 'exclamation' and 'interrogation', and ellipsis points punctuate as well as prolong the mental state of irritated disbelief:

Only the colour of the skin!
Only...
I am dark.
I knew I was dark.
Was it my negativity? (*Symposium 47*)

In spite of her awareness of (her) dark colour the speaker is at a loss to understand how only the 'colour' of her 'skin' could be misconstrued as her 'negativity'.

The second portion of the poem sees a distinct increase in the narrative tempo. It seems that having made up her mind to end her life, the female-speaker thinks of bidding 'farewell' to her 'Amma' (mother). She has inferred that by ending her life she can and will spare her mother the 'tear-drenched nights', her father – the worry for the 'dowry', and her grandmother – the irritation of seeing her:

Amma... Farewell.
No more of your tear-drenched nights.
Those who always came
To test and taste my unease,
My never-to-be in-laws
And hazed their rejection slips
With civil later on-s-
No more of them as well.

Father will be free of
The dowry
Grandmother, I spare you of my sight (*Symposium* 47-48)

Of course, her death will put an end to the frequent visits paid by her 'never-to-be-in-laws' who, in her opinion, came to 'test' (examine/inspect) and 'taste' (enjoy) her 'unease' (awkwardness/anxiety). The callous bride-hunters could enjoy the hospitality and 'haze' thin rejection of the prospective bride by politely suggesting that they would inform the bride-to-be's family of their decision at a later date.

The last stanza of the poem is an impassioned prayer to 'those who matter' on behalf of the other dark-skinned girls of whom she seems to have been a representative. Rather than any 'favour' or 'affirmative' action she only seeks for her ilk understanding and liberty:

May I say something?
Me Lord!

For goodness' sake!
Spare the dark girls
Only you have darkened.

Spare them, just spare them.
Let them bloom in the dark...
Let them dream in the dark...
Let them live in the dark...
Live life as they will. (*Symposium* 48)

She is well-aware of the fact that society alone has darkened (stigmatized) the 'dark girls'. So, on her view, the responsibility lies fairly and squarely with the same society to let such girls 'bloom [fulfil their potentials] in the dark'. 'dream [aspire] in the dark', and 'live [remain free] in the dark'.

The same theme of denunciation is continued in the poem 'The Fair World' in which the marginalized and physically assaulted female-speaker lashes out at the chromacist society rather than taking the last resort of self-annihilation. The entire poem is constructed 'on' and 'around' questions that reveal the blatant double standard of the 'fair world'. The title with its ironic ambiguity subtly plays on the two possible meanings of the word 'fair' (i.e. 'just' and 'light-skinned'), and suspends the discursive domain of the 'world' between a frustrated 'sense' of 'justice' as regards the expectation of 'fair'-ness, and the 'notion' of 'ethnic' and then therefore 'social' superiority, associated with the light-skinned.

The poem has a two-fold temporal segmentation whereby the female-speaker is simultaneously seen alluding to a past event and to one that takes place in her perceived present. In place of the 'jeering gibbers' of 'The Departing I' who confined their action to taunting and teasing, the woman, in this poem, comes face to face with the 'strong ones' who subject her to a brutal rape:

Where had you been?
When they taunted me?
Or,
When those strong ones

Dragged me into the bush...
Where had you been?
Does the vulture in its greed
See only the quarry? (*Symposium* 48)

The use of the deictic pronoun 'you' reinforces the idea of an imaginary interlocutor who embodies in himself the whole of society. Since the dark-skinned woman herself is a part of this society, the 'you' has a responsibility to ensure her safety. But, the 'you' had failed to prevent 'those strong ones' from taunting and raping the woman. So, the female-speaker sarcastically asks whether the vulture in its greed can only see the quarry. In this context, whether the vulture refers to the chromatist society as a whole or one of 'those strong ones', and whether the 'quarry' is the particular dark-skinned woman or any other woman placed in similar circumstances, adds a new dimension to the poem's multivalence/polysemy.

The second portion of the poem deals with the present, and the female-speaker is enabled to assess her past experience in the light of hindsight. The 'you'-figure who had done nothing to prevent her humiliation is here appointed as a virtual judge. His act of turning a blind eye to the woman's defilement raises the suspicion of a similarly blinkered verdict:

So... this is your verdict?
Hate the skin
But heed the flesh...
You call me dark?
So am I...
But... don't we live in a fair world now?
Fair to ravish the dark... (*Symposium* 48)

The female-speaker in her naïveté or ignorance of the way of the world fails to understand the difference between hating the skin (for its dark colour) and heeding

(taking care of) the flesh (due to sexual attraction/lust). The 'you'-figure may justifiably call the female-speaker 'dark' but cannot prevent her from being ravished in this 'fair world'. The irony lies in the fact that in this 'Fair World' it is considered 'fair' (legitimate) to ravish the 'dark' (the marginalized other).

The fact that in this 'Fair World' it is also 'fair' to jeer at the dark is thoroughly exposed in the next poem 'Darkness of a Sort'. In fact, the pangs of a dark skin pervades the poem, whereby external darkness of the poet is presented as one sort of and not the only sort of darkness possible. Written in the late 1970s when Das used to stay in Bombay, paying frequent visits to her native Kerala, this poem recounts her experience during one of her encounters with her friends in her Bombay flat after returning from Kerala. The comment of her friends that her stay in Kerala has darkened her complexion makes the poet think. As a result, she is reminded of the darkness she had come upon while touring the 'eternal dusk' of forests, the 'dark shape' of the lone tusker, and the 'dark knot of fear' around her heart. But, in her view, these instances of 'darkness' can hardly match the darkness of 'prejudiced minds' that have 'never seen the sun':

After two months in Kerala
You have turned dark said my friends
Meeting together once again
At my drawing room with its
Backdrop of sea and clouds, and I
Remembered the darkness
That I came upon while I toured
The eternal dusk of forests,
The shape of the lone tusker
Looming ahead of me on
The mountain road above the Bison Valley
The dark knot of fear around
My heart, but more fearsome than these.

The darkness of prejudiced minds

That have never seen the sun. (*Symphony*, 25)

Of course, the 'eternal dusk of forests', the 'dark' complexion of the tusker and the 'dark knot of fear' at the sight of the tusker are all natural and harmless. The 'darkness of prejudiced minds', on the contrary, is caused by irrationality, because it has 'never seen' the sunlight of logic and reason. This excerpt can be profitably compared with a similar excerpt from Rabindranath Tagore's 'Africa':

O veiled one, the clouded vision of the eyes
of disdain could not recognize your humanity
under the dark shadows.

Iron handcuffs in their hands, came hordes
with claws sharper than the wolves, came
human butchers whose blind pride was darker
than your sunless forests.

The savage greed of the civilised came out
in naked inhumanity. [...] (Tagore: 1996, 213-214)

Needless to say, the pride and the prejudice of the European 'human butchers' and the poet's chromatist 'friends' respectively are caused by the same irrational mindset that can easily lead to 'hate', 'crude jealousy' or even naked inhumanity. Kamala Das' poetics of resistance that seeks to oppose marginalization of human beings on chromatist grounds tries to 'resist' this irrational prejudice.

The marginal status of the 'dark' is soon re-established as the poet comes back to reality from her remembered excursions. That the 'darkness of prejudiced minds' is more 'fearsome' than the other types of darkness, referred to earlier, is clearly revealed when it causes 'eyes' to accuse, and the poet-speaker or the 'I' of the poem to qualify 'before' those 'accusing eyes'. As Frantz Fanon has commented, "The white world, the

only honourable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man” (Fanon: 1986, 114). The power of the accusing eyes becomes all the more serious when the speaker is forced to take cognizance of their accusations in spite of pleading ‘not guilty’:

I qualified before the accusing eyes,
Although not guilty, not one sin
Of mine as bad as hate or crude
Jealousy. How much easier
To meet the tusker and return
Unhurt. I return saddened, lost.
You don't owe me a living, dear state,
But do not call me names. do not
Send me back with a dark scab on my soul. (*Symphony 25*)

The verb ‘to qualify’ may, in this context, denote the act of modifying or restricting a word or point of view. The reason why the speaker has to take a backward step is because she considers the proposition of ignoring the accusation as harder than that of meeting the tusker and returning ‘unhurt’. As a result, though not even a single ‘sin’ of the speaker (she admits to none) is as ‘bad’ as ‘hate’ or ‘crude jealousy’, it makes her return from this encounter or from the stay in Kerala ‘saddened’ and ‘lost’. She, therefore, reminds the state of Maharashtra, of which Bombay (Mumbai) is the capital, that it does not owe her a living. Besides, the same state is forbidden from calling her names (insulting her) or rejecting her by wounding her soul on chromatic grounds. Thus, the poem becomes a powerful dossier against the supremacist discourse of chromatism that leads to the marginalization of a sensitive human being by a few prejudiced minds, the arbitrary nature of which can have wider and darker ramifications.

The wider and more sinister ramifications of this supremacist discourse come to the fore in the next poem ‘A Dream’. This brief but brilliant poem describes an epoch as

well as a phenomenon – ‘Apartheid’. If ‘Darkness of a Sort’ refers to the marginalization of an individual on the basis of colour, ‘A Dream’ limns a race and community in the grip of marginalization. In an unpublished interview with I.G. Ahmed, Kamala Das indicated that this poem had been written in response to the enforcement of the 1984 constitution of South Africa that excluded the Black South Africans from participating in active politics even though numerically they made up an overwhelming majority of the population.

The poem begins with a contrast between the ‘white sand’ and the ‘dark sea’ bringing to the surface the inherent stasis of the sandy shore as counterpointed with the motion of the dark sea. By granting the virtual ownership of this landscape and the sea shore to the dark bipeds (the Black South Africans), the poet-speaker strategically acknowledges the natural rights of the land’s original inhabitants that were being taken away by the white ex-colonizers:

The white sand
And the dark sea
Of the dark bipeds (*Symposium 48*)

This gesture of altruistic empathy, however, is summarily rejected by the whites. Their racist/chromatist ideology causes an ideational storm. Motivated by their exclusionist and exploitative strategy, they seek to deny even the basic amenities to the Blacks:

And started the storm
Nothing for the dark...nothing
Even for their mere upkeep...
Was it a pointless dream?
Apartheid! (*Symposium 48*)

That this storm is designed to affect only the Blacks makes it a pointless dream. It is called a ‘dream’ on account of its ideological baggage whereas it is considered pointless

any such idealistic mission/notion as the speaker infers, is foredoomed to failure. The single word of the last line 'Apartheid' proffers a lexical certainty to this racist tice. Its origins in the ill-conceived notions of social engineering and racial segregation make its visionary aspect ('dream') a pointless one; for it is destined to be fleeting and as unstable as the white sand in the face of the inevitable advance of the dark sea.

If in 'A Dream' the advance of a 'dark sea' prefigures the overthrow of apartheid, then in 'Dark and Ugly' it may suggest the bold declaration of the poet-speaker's dark skin. One of the strengths of Kamala Das' poetry is the fact that going beyond the mere description of the process of 'othering'/'otherization' she at once shows her resistance to the marginalizing discourses and boldly asserts her 'personal', and then therefore, 'poetic' rejection of them. In 'An Introduction', challenging the gender hierarchy, Das' woman-persona reminds us 'I too call myself I' (SC 60). In 'The Flag', the poet cries out against the 'false hopes' of equality that the 'Dear flag' did extend (SC 22). And in 'The Inheritance', the disgusted poet-speaker insinuates that 'the Muezzin's high wail', 'the chapel-bells' or 'the Brahmin's assonant chant' 'that it was only our fathers' lunacy speaking / In three different tones' (OP 20).

Quite in the same vein, Kamala Das expresses her aversion to and defiance of the chromatic division in her poem 'Dark and Ugly'. If in the other poems and in *My Story*, previously discussed in this chapter, the poet is seen to have dealt with the effects of marginalization on the basis of colour on individuals and groups, then in 'Dark and Ugly', she is seen not only to accept but also to assert her darkness as a liberating and empowering element of her personality.

The poem begins with a combative speaker crying down the 'Fair' and 'lovely'. She rationalizes her preference for the 'dark' on the grounds that 'Dark is colour of strength':

Clear out

Fair and Lovely!
I cry you down...
Don't you see?
Dark is the colour of strength...
Strength of the male melanin,
Dark is the colour to be--
It's fair to be...
Dark and Ugly... (*Symposium* 48)

Faced with a similar situation, Bernard Dadie in 'I Thank You God' has gleefully expressed his approval for having been created 'black', 'White is a colour for special occasions / Black the colour for every day' (Dadie in Narasimhaiah: 1990, 122).

By positing the 'fair' as weak and the 'dark' as strong, or 'white' as 'a colour of special occasions' and 'black' as 'the colour for every day', both Das and Dadie try to counter the 'hegemonic imaginary' of the 'fair'/'white' with the 'alternative imaginary' of the 'dark'/'black'. Besides, the Das' strategic employment of 'male melanin' to tilt the case in her favour is emblematic of the gender hierarchy that she tries to subvert. In this context, we may do well to remember that skin colour, perhaps the most conspicuous human trait, is determined largely by the amount of the pigment melanin in the skin. People with large amounts of melanin have dark skin, and those with little melanin have light skin. It is a common cultural assumption that the male has more melanin than his female counterpart. The function of melanin is to absorb ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Thus, many scientists have proposed that dark skin, with its high amount of melanin, is an environmental adaptation that evolved to protect people in areas of high solar radiation from sunburn and skin cancer.

Again, the poet's use of 'lovely' and 'ugly' as markers of physicality to warrant rejection and acceptance respectively refers to a subtly subversive strategy. Words such as 'male', 'strength', and 'ugly' denote characteristics and conditions that the woman-persona lacks, and then therefore, craves for. Thus, 'Dark and Ugly' becomes a key

poem, exemplifying Das' poetics of resistance engaged in the mission to re-centre subaltern voices. If the other poems have shown the dark being hit hard by the chromacist world, 'Dark and Ugly' shows the dark in the act of hitting back at the oppressors and categorizers. The present chapter that began with Das' bold assertion of her brown complexion in 'An Introduction', therefore, comes full circle with the poet-speaker not only asserting her 'darkness' but bragging of the same. Thus, the poet is seen to create an agency for the dispossessed 'dark' in and through her poetry and prose writings.