

CHAPTER: 7

LEGISLATOR OF THE WORLD

“While thought exists, words are alive and literature becomes an escape, not from but into living.”

– Cyril Connolly

“Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and the nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.”

– P.B. Shelley

“Besides self-expression it is also a responsibility. Creative expression is a lone man’s battle against the enormous uncertainty of this universe. It also helps in understanding the distance between information and the mystery that still surrounds the human condition. I may not be able to transform the world but I can certainly make them see through my minus-three eyesight. On the threshold of a brand new century, who knows, people may just tire of telly inanities, electronic amenities, information bonanzas, and get back to books. The hope of being heard and read always exists.”

– Mamta Kalia

Any sustained critical study of Kamala Das' poetry is bound to implant in our minds disquieting questions about the role of society in shaping and in most cases suppressing the individual identity, about the real motive for and value (or the lack of it) of violence and violation, and about the role of the poet in establishing a better and more equitable order. As William Radice has pointed out, "[...] I do believe that a new belief in, and practice of poetry and art for the good of the community – local, national, or international – will require a major cultural and ideological shift" (Radice: 2003, 16). Das' solidarity with the 'weak' and the 'weakened' sections of society and her strong aversion to the discriminatory norms that 'weaken' individuals and groups and keep them 'weak' only to perpetuate the ruling class' hold on 'power' and access to resources have led her to speak for the marginalized and against the marginalizing discourses. As a responsive and responsible writer she truly belongs with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who has commented:

[...] literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose is one or the other side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (Wa Thiong'o: 1981, xii)

Das' poetics of resistance, therefore, can be likened to the dual role of the West wind in Shelley's Ode as 'destroyer and preserver' (Shelley: 1994, 362). What assumes special significance in her case is that she not only shows the causes and effects of marginalization but also suggests ways of rehabilitation of the marginalized through 'understanding', 'toleration', 'accommodation' and 'love'. In fact, she tries to promote harmony and proscribe discrimination not only in her poetry but through her activism as well. Having perceived the degenerate state of the modern world, Marx had commented, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx: 1982, 30). Kamala Das, for one, has stated, 'I

was fully conscious of my role in society that I have come here to change it a little bit if possible' (Quoted in Dasan, in Dodiya: 2000, 120). So, keeping with Marx's injunction and Das' own stated position, the poet makes a valiant bid to improve the world through both her life and literature.

In the foregoing chapters Das' multivocalism as and for the other has been briefly discussed with suitable illustrations from her poetry and corroborative excerpts from her prose works. By discussing the following poems, we may review her negotiations with and resistance to the supremacist and/or marginalizing discourses like patriarchy, classism, ethnocentrism, chromatism, ageism, etc.

The title of the poem 'Drama' symbolizes the 'performative' and consequently 'observed' aspect of women's life in a male-dominated society. Once on stage, the female-speaker had played the role of a 'tragedienne', 'black gowned', 'black veiled', and speaking of 'unrequited love'. But, the audience, a majority of whom could have been male, did not feel the female character's grief:

It was a tiny drafty stage
With bleary footlights, wooden boards
And just a red, red lamp above
Like an angry sun and a huge
Untagged bouquet lying behind,
Somewhere in the green rooms chaos
Like confidence, slowly dying ...

It was soon my turn to be the
Tragedienne, to take vague steps
Black gowned, black veiled
And wail, and beat my breast
And speak of unrequited love.
I am wronged, I am wronged,

I am so wronged ...

Then at me, from rows and rows of
Cavernous mouths where reason died
A hundred deaths, the laughter rose
Like locust hunger; I turned round
And asked them why, they said ha ha
ha ha ha ha ... (SC 62)

So, as Dorothy Jones has pointed out, the audience received with 'derision' 'her wailings, breast beatings and talk of unrequited love' (Jones in Das: 1986, 199). Later on, the speaker is most unpleasantly surprised to realize that be it life or art this unfeeling reaction of the male is forever to be her fate. In fact, far from the bleary footlight of 'a tiny drafty stage', in 'sunlit balconies' she can peacefully 'adore a married man' (her husband). But, when she dares to speak her 'lines' (revealing her unhappiness) the reaction she gets becomes all too familiar:

There is no such stage today, no
Footlights, no veil, no lamp shining
Like a crimson sun. I sip my tea
In sunlit balconies, adore
A married man; and, when I speak
My lines, though his lips do not move,
I hear him laugh, ha ha ha ha
ha ha (SC 62)

In hindsight, it seems that her lines on stage 'I am wronged, I am wronged, / I am so wronged', did prefigure the unhappy conjugal life of the speaker. The woman's marginal status is brought to the fore by patriarchy's stern refusal to grant the woman even the right to express grief. The woman's performance of her assigned roles on stage

as well as in life is at once observed and assessed by society, and the first casualty of such a social attitude is reason.

If the consideration of 'gender' is seen to have divided humanity between the observing and assessing male and the observed and assessed female in 'Drama', then the phenomenon of class is seen to stratify the same humanity between the marginalizing and exploiting 'haves' and the marginalized and exploited 'have not's' in 'A Paradox'.

The wide chasm between the rich and the poor and the apparent unalterability of the situation receive a graphic portrayal in another of Das' unpublished poems, 'A Paradox', shared with me by my supervisor I.G. Ahmed by permission of the poet. Much like R.L. Stevenson's 'From a Railway Carriage' and Philip Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings', this poem too is a description of perceived scenery (and also contemplated ones) described on the move. But, unlike those poems about train journeys, the present poem recounts a car ride from the poet's dwelling to the airport. The poet begins by describing differences – between the younger poet and her older mother, between the old mother on the one hand and the young trees and the merry children on the other – perceived by the apparently middle-aged poet:

Driving to the Airport on the way
I see my mother, beside me,
Already ashen faced, loose skinned and
Smelling of age ... looked out at
Young trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out

The last five words of the excerpt quoted introduce the main theme of the poem but the use of the epithet 'merry' that cheers us up at the expectation of the heavy smell of age lifting from the scene proves to be just a red herring.

We receive the first shock when the children who have already been described as ‘merry’ are seen and shown to be ‘spilling out’ of their ‘slum dwellings’. The not-too-positive expectations, associated with the slum coupled with the verb ‘to spill out’ with its implication of ‘large number’, immediately takes us to the shabby world of the indigent strata of society:

[...] the merry children spilling out
Of their slum dwellings that
Skirt the broad highway
With their hamstrung presence,
Merrily do these dust children cruse
The rich and their sky scrappers...
Merrily do they fight the dogs for
Scraps of food ...

The breadth of the highway and the ‘hamstrung presence’ of the slum give to the scene the inner dynamics of tension. These ‘dust children’, living in the confined space of their slum dwellings, cannot tolerate or accept the sky scrappers of the rich. So, their curses for the rich should ring authentic to any sensitive listener. The repeated use of the adverb ‘merrily’ suggests a manner quite opposed to either the cause or the expression of merriment. Their fight with the dogs for ‘scrapes of food’ again shows the dehumanizing aspect of poverty. The next phase in the lives of these children proves to be infinitely harsher than their harsh childhood. In a passage redolent of a similar excerpt from ‘An Introduction’, the speaker shows some young girls who are made into women before it is due. Of course, their journey of ‘becoming women’ goes through the realm of the brothel, poverty forces them to save their flesh (body) by serving flesh to lecherous customers whose brutal unconcern for these under-aged girls change them from merry children to child prostitutes. So, their pretence of glee while serving (dehumanizing) themselves is yet another means of saving their flesh and presumably that of their families. The presence of children obviously presupposes that of their mothers. If on the one hand, they have to rear their children or offer support to their

long-since-womanized girls, then on the other hand, they have to endure the daily beating and the marital rape from their equally unconcerned husbands:

Merrily do these dust children cruse
The rich and their sky scrappers...
Merrily do they fight the dogs for
Scraps of food ... and merrily do
The young girls womanized before time
Serve flesh to save flesh and
Merrily do the mothers – wives of
Ill paid drunkards fast for their
Daily beatings and the marital rape
Prompted by a day's ordeal
Building houses for the alien rich

That they can 'fast' for their unfeeling husbands points up their traditional moorings as well as their sympathetic understanding of the wretched condition of their husbands. Just like 'Velappan' ('The Field Hand') or the house builders ('The House Builders'), these husbands too are over-worked, ill-paid, and alienated from self and society. That they have to earn a living by building houses for the 'alien rich' whereas they themselves have to live in the narrow confines of their slum dwellings so frustrates these ill-paid labourers that they guzzle hard. When the drink gets to their heads they can vent their anger and frustration only on their hapless wives by beating them up or forcing them to have sex. The sexual exploitation to which both mothers and daughters are subjected testifies to their gendered marginality. But on another level, it also shows their economic dependence on, and then therefore, sexual subservience to heteropatriarchy. Thus, the aggravating potential of class as a marginalizing discourse that affects even gender discrimination is well brought out in this excerpt.

Faced with a very tough life, these slum dwellers must have had temptations to leave (end) their life. But, their inability to take that step forces them to live on

irrespective of the impediments and hardships encountered, 'Yes these creatures live in the slum / Live hard since its harder to leave'. The poet's use of the term 'creatures' to refer to these slum dwellers plays up the dehumanizing aspect of poverty once again. Since they cannot change their situation for the better, they are left with the option of living 'hard' or living to the full. In fact, the other option, that of leaving this wretched life or committing suicide, is rejected on account of being 'harder'.

The second reality that constitutes this paradox concerns that of the rich who have enough of food to enable them to throw grains to the pigeons, enough of money to get drunk and womanize:

Yet at Marine Drive Millionaires throw
Grains to the pigeons ... yet at the nearest bar
The choicest whisky flows to release
The tough lust and let loose the fracas.

If throwing grains to the pigeons may be thought of as a positive gesture of 'giving' then it also highlights their lack of such sympathetic overtures to the poor. The 'choicest whisky' that flows even at the nearest bar testifies to the magical power of money because the contrasted pair of adjectives 'nearest' (ordinary) and 'choicest' (very costly and extraordinary) point up their apparent incompatibility. The tough lust and the fracas that are released by the 'choicest' whisky are not too dissimilar 'from'/'to' the reaction of the ill-paid house builders under a similar intoxication.

The poet's movement through this disparate locale affords her the leisure to be conned by these. But that this con has only a temporary hold on her consciousness determined by the sight of the approaching airport:

I have the leisure to be conned by
These ... But soon through the wind screen
I see the airport coming

With its lofty pride and its promise of flight

From this sullen Earth ...

The promise of flight from this 'sullen earth' that this airport makes sound 'lofty' (falsely superior or haughty) to the sensitive poet, because she is well aware of the constraint to return to this 'sullen earth' after each of such temporary flights from it. Thus the 'paradox' of the title releases its multivalence in encompassing and pointing up the contrasts between youth and age, between the rich and the poor, and last but not least, between the temporary escape from and the ultimate return to the sullen earth.

The same theme of contrast is continued in and through the next poem, 'Summer 1980'. The contrast in this poem is between what we expect out of religion and what we get. Marginalization of individuals and social groups on the basis of religious fanaticism that may lead in extreme cases to large-scale killing of the marginalized religious groups forms the background to Kamala Das' 'Summer 1980'. In an unpublished interview with I.G. Ahmed, Das has clarified that she had to write this poem after reading in the newspapers about the rise of insurgency in Punjab in the summer of 1980.

In fact, Punjab was already simmering with religious tension by the end of the 1970s. The demands of the Sikhs for a separate homeland or Khlistan (land of the pure) in the contiguous areas of Indian as well as Pakistani Punjab, and the hate-laden ideology of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwalle further exacerbated the already tense situation. The long-standing feud between the Sikhs and Nirankaris resulted in the assassination of Baba Gurbachan Singh (the Nirankaris leader) which caused a lot of unrest and bloodshed in April 1980. Subsequently, the Hindus were also engulfed by this religious conflict and a bus carrying Hindu passengers was attacked leaving many of the passengers killed and injured. This bit of history is brilliantly poetized in the poem 'Summer 1980' (<http://www.panthic.org>).

'Summer', to the poet, has been an oppressive season, signifying heat, dust, sensuality, and loss of vitality. So, the opening salvo made by the poet reads 'Summer's

catchword was always / Always destruction' (CP 79). So, when the religious violence broke out in Punjab in April 1980 and turned the peaceful province into a veritable battleground, the vexed poet could only exclaim:

[...] and this
year's, wrapping us like some
Prickly mantle cried kill, kill
all that was, till a while ago,
So dear, so beautiful, [...] (CP 79)

That the 'catchword' of 'this' summer (1980) is 'kill' implies that the prevalent ideology is certainly hate-laden and its reach is all pervasive, which is why it can wrap 'us' (all) like a 'Prickly mantle'. The command of the time is to kill 'all' that till then seemed 'so dear' and 'so beautiful'. The command certainly hints at some kind of brain washing and takes us back to the Fascist ideology of a 'reincarnated' Hitler who could hail the 'robust Aryan blood' and proclaim 'the right' of its owner 'to kill his former friends' ('After July').

In this killing spree, the temporal motivation is provided by the city air and its 'malevolent' 'alchemy':

[...] yes,
Perhaps the malevolent
Alchemy of the city air
Aided us, turning gold to
Lead, so that the familiar
Caressing hands unshaped the clay
And swiftly formed a death-head.... (CP 79)

The use of 'malevolent' (negativistic) to qualify 'alchemy' (a pseudo-scientific method of turning baser metals into gold) turns this art on its head. In fact, in the hate-marred

city air governed by the spell of killing, we discover the inverse alchemy of turning gold into lead (a baser metal). Here, the association of 'gold' with the Golden Temple of Amritsar and 'lead' with the bullets that were fired in course of the unrest connect the generalized portrayal of violence with the historically specific Punjab unrest of summer 1980. The result of this degenerative process can only be disastrous, whereby the 'caressing hands' that had till then nurtured life swiftly 'unshaped' (distorted) the 'clay' to form the 'head' (embodiment) of 'death'.

In this poem, the initial command 'kill, kill' and the eventual action of forming a 'death head' are linked by a retrograde causality that at once forms and frames the ideology of extremism which can only sever the normal human bonds to substitute the same with an illogical hatred.

The illogical hatred that vitiated the atmosphere in 'Summer 1980' is again seen to be up to no good in 'Punishment in Kindergarten'. Hatred, here, is motivated by the attachment of 'illogical' attachment of undue importance to someone's colour of skin with no regards to his/her talents.

As has been previously discussed in the chapter on marginality and the anguish of colour, in *My Story* Das has recounted a painful episode from her childhood. In this instance, the colour of the poet's skin became a determining factor in either her acceptance or her rejection by the chromatist community of teacher and schoolfellows.

'Punishment in Kindergarten' is a poetic rendition of this incident from Das' childhood. The title of the poem seems slightly oblique, because neither is the poem about a 'punishment' (imposition of penalties or censor) nor did the event take place within the precincts of her 'kindergarten school'. In fact, 'punishment' here is the poet's 'inflicted' sense of alienation due to her 'swarthy skin', and 'kindergarten' becomes a temporal frame for her childhood years.

The poem begins with the poet's adoption of temporal distancing whereby the present world that is a little more her own is placed in a direct contrast with a past world that was a little less her own. As a result, there is 'no' need to remember the pain 'a blue-frocked woman caused'. But, willy-nilly that memory wells up in her, making her remember how she was slighted by her Anglo-Indian school mistress as well as by many of her schoolfellows. By throwing words at her like 'pots' and 'pans', her school mistress shattered the honey-coloured peace of that picnic day and of that dark-skinned girl who had sought that peace.

As we already know from the prose account of the same incident given in *My Story*, the dark-skinned poet was feeling 'lonely' and 'unwanted' because of her 'nut-brown skin'. So, when the unfeeling words of the mistress hit her ears regarding why she did not join the other children, or when she was unsympathetically dubbed 'a peculiar child', she could only try to cling to her pain and loneliness. What aggravated her dejection all the more was the almost sadist enjoyment of others' tears by unsympathetic schoolfellows:

Today the world is a little more my own.
No need to remember the pain
A blue-frocked woman caused, throwing
Words at me like pots and pans, to drain
That honey-coloured day of peace.
'Why don't you join the others, what
a peculiar child you are!'

On the lawn, in clusters, sat my schoolmates sipping
Sugarcane, they turned and laughed;
Children are funny things, they laugh
In mirth at other's tears, I buried
My face in the sun-warmed hedge
And smelt the flowers and the pain. (SC 43)

The poet's reaction to this unfeeling derision was characteristic. In fact, like in 'For Cleo Pascal', discussed in a preceding chapter, here too the poet feels it wiser to take refuge in a natural world, never bothered by any chromatic considerations.

In the world of nature time passes. As a result, those insulting words have now become 'muffled' with time, blurring the laughing faces in the process. In a near Shakespearean apprehension of transience, the poet asserts:

The words are muffled now, the laughing
Faces only a blur. The years have
Sped along, stopping briefly
At beloved halts and moving
Sadly on. My mind has found
An adult peace. No need to remember
That picnic day when I lay hidden
By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun
Standing lonely in the sky. (SC 43)

The beloved stations of life are thus soon left behind to bring the poet to the threshold of a hoary old age. Once there, the resolution not to remember the past is undercut by a deep-rooted nostalgia that forces the poet to remember that picnic day and the sad memories thereof. It is the uneasy calm of an 'adult peace' that can accommodate these contrary polls of the poet's mind, whereby the vital solace of the flowers is counterpointed by the proud loneliness of the white sun, showing to the poet her two options of lying low in passive acceptance of her so-called chromatic inferiority or giving vent to her own identity, regardless of censor or appreciation.

The allusion to old age that rounded off 'Punishment at Kindergarten' comes to start off the next poem, 'Women's Shuttles'. Physical deterioration, bereavement, and dementia that accompany old age are given a faithful portrayal in this short poem. The

poet-speaker's sad experience of walking after 'dear one's hearse', her inability to remember the name of the person who had claimed recently to have loved her poetry, and her remembrance of her child's face 'As it looked, fifteen years ago' – all mark her out as old and decrepit.

At her age, everything seems negative – no 'homecomings', no 'twinkle' in 'those eyes' and even no recollections save from a distant past:

At my age there are no longer
Any homecomings. Nothing can
Bring back a twinkle in those eyes
That took root in memory
During those innumerable
Trips behind a dear one's hearse. No,
I cannot recollect the face
Of the man who told me he loved
My poetry, just yesterday,
At someone's party or, his name.
I see only those faces that
Have returned to dust, or my child's,
As it looked, fifteen years ago. (CP 65)

In fact, after enduring deaths of the dear ones and not having seen her own child even once in fifteen years the poet-speaker has to discount the possibility of any more homecomings. As a result, poetry, which is at bottom a reflection or celebration of life loses, its interest to the aged mother and even admiration rings hollow in her ears.

She is, therefore, always assailed by the feeling of being left behind to grope in the dark for the right path ahead:

My mind sleeps, I watch the rear lights

Of vehicles move on the dark

Looms of night like women's shuttles ... (CP 65)

The loss of her mental agility in old age coincides with a loss of luck. So, she has to satisfy herself by watching the rear lights of vehicles that elude her forever. These vehicles that could have been her means of transport to her desired destination only seem to move without direction on the dark looms of night, indicating thereby women's uphill struggle to weave fir pattern of life. Women's shuttles, to which these vehicles are compared, remain equally incapable to weave the desired tapestry on the loom of life.

The vehicles or means of transport that are alluded to at the fag end of 'Women's Shuttles' introduce the journey motif that is continued and complicated in the next two poems ('The Cart Horse' and 'Old Cattle'). If the 'vehicles' in the old woman's life are at once directionless and ever-to-be-missed, then the 'cart' that the old cart horse has to draw proves too heavy and deadly to be drawn.

Arthur Rimbaud had held poets responsible not only for humanity but also for animals (Rimbaud in Ellmann and Feidleson: 1965, 204). Following in full Rimbaud's advice Kamala Das too shows her artistic concerns for both human beings and animals. Poems like 'The Cart Horse' and 'Old Cattle' point up the similarities that mark and mar the aged as much as the human world as among the animals.

As suggested by the title, 'The Cart Horse' is a poem about animals domesticated and overworked to do others' bidding. The 'arduous' roads and the 'too heavy' burden of the old cart horse make its gallop 'jagged'. But, this mention of the cart horse's plight is made by the poet-speaker to implicate her own condition in old age:

Of late my words have worn

Thin, my speech resembles

The jagged gallop of
A cart horse that needs to
Be reshod and perhaps
Given rest, for, poor thing
Its roads were arduous
And its burden always
Too heavy. [...] (CP 62)

The fact that 'Of late' her 'words' have worn 'Thin' and her 'speech' resembles an old cart horse's 'jagged gallop' glance backwards at a purple patch gone by during which the speaker had been in total control of her writing and speech. P.P. Raveendran in this connection has observed, "In [...] 'The Cart Horse' the image of a tired horse is used to suggest both physical weakness and poetic failure" (P.P. Raveendran in Das: 1991, XV). To recall Shelley in this context, the 'heavy weight of hours' seems to have 'chained and bowed' the once-free poet-speaker and brought on the loathsome old age the consequent dissipation of the persona's poetic powers ('Ode to the West Wind'. P.B. Shelley: 1994, 362).

At this juncture of the poem, the vehicle of the comparison, namely, the old cart horse is brought to the foreground to point out the sad plight awaiting the aged in the animal world. Since the unlucky old cart horses are 'taken out' and 'shot' dead in an utter disregard of past services faithfully rendered, to the poet those horses that die in harness seem 'lucky':

[...] An old horse,
If lucky, dies on road,
Flopping on its side with
Pink foam spurting from its
Twisted jaw and four of
Yellow front teeth showing
The not so lucky are

This foregrounding of the cart horse by showing the marginal status of the aged animal also reveals the poet-speaker's subaltern voice. As a result, even physical annihilation seems preferable to creative impotence.

The old horses being starved or under-fed become 'decrepit' and sometimes wake up from their senile stupor to 'neigh, / loud in hunger'. The strategic use of three separate lexical items (i.e. 'old', 'decrepit', and 'senile') from the same semantic field serves to play up the wretched condition of the age-worn cart horses whose hunger may at once reflect a lack of, and then therefore, a craving for food; for the 'parents of the rich' who are relegated to a life of retirement and destined to remain without their children and with paid keepers, this 'hunger' may be for the non-existence of filial affections:

[...] for,
The old and decrepit
Waking at times from their
Senile slumber, neigh, loud
In hunger, and parents
Of the rich who sit with
Their keepers on benches
Beside the sea wall, with
Cataract on their minds
Tremble at this sound, for
No reason the old ones
Purse their mouths and tremble. (CP 62)

These old men can, therefore, empathize with the old cart horses whose loud 'neigh'-s make them 'purse their mouths' (in disapproval) and 'tremble' (for fear of being similarly abandoned in future). In the final analysis, the fact that the aged ones (i.e. the

poet-speaker, the old cart horses, and the parents of the rich) had once wielded authority or been useful and potent, aggravates their marginal status. As P.P. Raveendran has opined, “In old age there is no poetry; there is no communication; there is no present. Only the past seems to have any meaning for the old” (P.P. Raveendran in Das: 1991, XVI).

As in ‘The Cart Horse’, the ruthless societal attitude towards the domesticated animals is revealed in ‘Old Cattle’ as well. How perception of similarity may lead to empathy is shown afresh in this poem. The ‘Old Cattle’ of the title have grown old in human service and yet at old age receive no sympathy and compassion from their owners. On the contrary, they are taken to the slaughter house to continue their service to and feeding off human beings through and after their death.

In fact, the beginning of the poem reveals how the poet-speaker saw aged cattle being taken to the slaughter house when she was being taken home after a heart-attack. K. Radha has pointed out that this incident took place when she was being taken home from a hospital near Calicut, after receiving treatment for her heart trouble (Radha: 1986, 54). The vermilion brand on their shoulders as well as their thin haunches greatly upset the sensitive poet who is further disturbed by seeing their innocent reaction of chewing at the ‘shrubs’ or gazing around:

When I was being taken home from the city’s nursing home three weeks after a heart attack I saw near the mountain passes the aged cattle being driven to the slaughter-house. I saw their thin haunches and the vermilion brand on their shoulders. Some of them paused to chew at the shrubs and to gaze around. [...] (CP 66)

Having suffered a heart attack that had taken her to the verge of death, the aged poet can easily empathize with these hapless creatures. This feeling of sadness instigates her to think of getting down from the car and join these poor and death-bound animals. Ultimately, however, she realizes the basic similarity between the old cattle and herself

(an aged woman), since as the old cattle are being taken to the slaughter house she too is being taken home where the children's indifference and irritation will ensure a veritable slaughter of the sensitive poet:

[...] I wanted to, for one short moment,
get down from the car and join them.

Human beings are never branded with a hot iron. They are merely sent home with their electrocardiographs and sedatives. (*CP* 66)

If their 'thin haunches' stood for the decrepitude of the old cattle, then, in case of the aged poet, her electrocardiograph and prescribed sedatives are seen to perform the same function. Like the 'vermillion brand' on the shoulders of the old cattle, these marks of disease and infirmity ('electrocardiograph' and 'sedatives') have signalled her impending death also.

This reappraisal of Kamala Das' poetry with a view to zoom in on her altruistic concerns will be positively incomplete if we leave out 'The Seven Ages of Woman'. In fact, the negative determinants of gender, class colour, and age which have been seen and shown to cause marginalization of women are all dwelt upon with considerable aplomb in this panoramic view of the life of the female-speaker. Neglected in childhood, laughed at a swarthy skin, domesticated after marriage, tormented during childbirth, given then cold shoulder by her growing up children, and abandoned in old age, the woman in question typifies most of the marginal figures seen to people Das' poetic canvas.

Giving vent to the burden of a life that attaches like a leech to a human being and sucks the sap dry to leave a woman, Kamala Das' long poem 'The Seven Ages of Woman' becomes a true 'autogynography', to borrow the term from Domna C. Stanton (Stanton: 1987, 29). If Shakespeare's 'Seven Ages of Man' gives us a celebratory account of male life (Shakespeare: 1991, 227), then Das' poem contracts and contextualizes the scope of the hypotext from the female perspective, whereby the

'seven ages' become seven chapters that cut and bleed the woman from the 'first intake of breath' to her consignment to the 'displaced generation'. The ages of woman described are birth, childhood, schooldays, marriage and early married life, conception, childbirth and motherhood, middle age and old age.

The poem begins with the description of childbirth and the moment the sex of the child is ascertained, the tag of being 'not wanted' is attached to her being:

Born squalling into sudden gloom
the girl-child's first wail resembled
a cry of distress, for each cell
within her did tell that she was
not wanted there, the search had then
begun with the first intake of
breath, the search for a love that was
kith and kin to the celestial
realms of the unborn, the dream-plains
that precede birth and follow that
hushed moment of death when all leaves
and boughs of the mind freeze and the winds
are, all of sudden, still. (*Savvy* 27)

The realization of not being wanted begins in her a search for love that as revealed in 'An Introduction' may have disastrous consequences. In fact, born into an alien loveless world the girl child misses, and then therefore, seeks that state of bliss which characterized the dream-plains preceding birth and succeeding death.

If birth showed to the girl child her unwanted status, childhood confirms the same through her mother's neglect of her and the delegation of the responsibility of the mother to the nurse maid:

Milk has a slight taste of rubber
she learns and recoils from the perfumed
arms that welcome her once a day
or once a week; recoils to hide
her face in the warm nest of her
nursemaid's bosom. [...] (*Savvy* 27)

The slight taste of rubber that is added to milk proves the lack of breast-feeding and the use of feeding bottles. The perfumed arms of her reluctant mother that welcomes her 'once a day' or 'once a week' instils in the girl child only apathy, and she chooses to avenge herself on the mother by showing her preference for the 'warm nest' of her nurse maid's bosom in lieu of her mother's arms.

The school days bring to the girl's life the unhealthy condescension with which a patriarchal society wishes to hoodwink the female. 'Each gilded report card' adds to and corroborates the girl's educational accomplishments. In this context, the use of the word 'gilded' points up her academic excellence. But, the reaction this consistency elicits remains patronizing rather than appreciative:

[...] Then, at school, each
gilded report-card must bring forth
a father's tolerant grim and
perhaps a gift, neither cheap nor
excellent, just a fountain pen,
or a watch with a Mickey Mouse,
painted on its dial. The neighbours
cry, you are indeed lucky, for
although a girl, your father seems
to love you so, Look at the gifts
he bought for you! [...] (*Savvy* 27)

The father's 'grim' is conspicuously tolerant and his gifts more routine than spontaneous. What galls her all the more is the unsolicited interference of the neighbours. At one and the same time, it reminds her of being a girl (some kind of lesser human being), and puts forward 'luck' rather than talents to be the real reason for her father's condescending kindness to her.

How independence remains a red herring in a girl's life, is brought to the fore in the next section of the poem. If growth into womanhood offers a temporary hope of liberation from protectors of name and norm, it is ultimately invalidated by 'tradition and society'. Prompted by the insatiable desire to uphold the societal decree/dictate, 'her guardians thrust her into / the trap of matrimony'. Marriage which initially seemed to the bride to be a nice dream with 'din', 'gifts', 'silk' (saree) and 'greetings' eventually shows up its 'coarse' reality. In fact, the 'new fact' assigned to her is that of a 'plaything' – 'a doll he [the husband] can / crush in his arms and chew upon'. The high hopes of a dream honeymoon are unceremoniously shattered when love and companionship get upstaged by male sexual brutality ('clumsy use') and she has to return feeling 'silly' and 'sullied':

With purple weals around her throat,
bruises on her limbs and lips much
swollen, battered with clumsy use,
she returns from her honeymoon,
feeling silly, sullied, for lust had been
taken for the real mucky and
marriage, despite its awesome earthiness,
mistaken to be divine. [...] (*Savvy* 28)

Since her 'woman's body' feels so 'beaten', her woman's mind succeeds to see through the façade of marriage. As a result, 'divine' halo surrounding marital lust soon disappears to reveal its 'awesome earthiness'.

The 'lethal doses' of lust prove so shocking to the woman-persona that even the realization having 'conceived' fails to cheer her up. The 'celebrated motherhood' arrives through and after the savage pain of childbirth:

[...] Then,
in silence the woman conceived
not sure if she fancied that
celebrated motherhood at all.
And, the savage pain of child-birth
no leap in science could yet
alter or mitigate was hers
to undergo. [...] (*Savvy* 28)

The woman's 'silence' is indicative of her marginal status; for in all her female avatars of daughter, wife or mother, she is forever fated to subserve societal rigours. The celebration of motherhood always precludes any rightful celebration the woman who has to make a mother of herself through excruciating pain and suffering.

The celebrated motherhood not only comes at a price but demands a continuing devotion to the new-born as well. The mother's joy at 'washing' and 'feeding' the 'young one' is at a far remove from her (the woman) mother's apathetic response to the now-grown-up girl-child. The comparison of this woman with her child to 'Mary and the infant Christ' or to 'Yashoda with her blue lotus of a son [Krishna]' subtly suggests that she has given birth to a male child. The outside response to these two child-births (the birth of the girl and that of her child) testifies to the societal double standard as well as the discrimination against the girl child:

[...] Washing and then
feeding the young one gave her joy.
Her beauty startled the passers-by;
as if her animality

had climbed its most radiant peak.
A woman with her baby in her
arms becomes a divine, resembles
Mary and the infant Christ, or
Yasoda with her blue lotus
of a son. [...] (*Savvy* 28)

Significantly, her 'beauty' is associated with 'animality' with reference to her 'plaything'-status, and her fulfilment is judged and accepted in terms of her attainment of motherhood. These achieved, she gains the power to startle (move) the passers by but only if she is blessed of 'tradition and society'.

This sense of fulfilment that pleases and glorifies the mother is only short-lived, because soon she has to enter the 'waning phase'. Her child grows up – grows out of needs and hence out arms. But, as a child grows up, the mother grows old and is left with 'black-rimmed nails' and a scalp 'from which emanates a sweet mouldy smell'. The child who has now grown up discovers these marks of ageing in his mother and begins to feel ill at ease with her. Here, by referring to the 'black-rimmed nails' and the 'sweet mouldy smell' emanating from the scalp, the poet recalls the poem 'Composition' and this practice may be termed a kind of self-pastiche that endows Das' poetic oeuvre with a sense of uniformity.

The natural order determines that the mother's hair turns 'grey' and her skin 'acquires its rightful / etching'. But, these signs of her advancing years render her 'ugly' and 'affront'-able to her children whose love for her diminishes with their diminishing needs for her. The mother, as a result, is slowly but surely consigned to the 'displaced generation' waiting for and yet deprived of love and understanding:

And, then when the hair is grey
and the skin acquires its rightful
etching the mother's newfound ugliness

seems an affront to her children
and, love reduces itself to
a greeting card at the years' end
or a phone-call that abruptly
ends on an optimistic note—
I shall write you a long letter,
mother...Of course, such a letter
does not ever reach the one waiting
for mail at the doorway of an
old home every morning without
fail. Yes, mothers are merely
a displaced generation and wild
they seek their cheap analgesics,
bitter gourds, fruit salts, health foods and
misplaced ration cards, they seek that
long forgotten thing, the concept
of love, a love at least in small change,
as beggars do, awaiting those
strangers who arrive with money
in wallet a yen to give... (*Savvy* 29)

The greeting card 'at the year's end', the phone call that 'abruptly ends', the letter that 'does not ever reach the one waiting / for the mail' – all these unrealities accentuate the mother's emotional need for and dependence on her children who seldom fulfil their filial duties.

Throughout the 'seven ages' of a woman's life as revealed in this poem, she is allowed only one 'sound' – the squall of / as the new-born (before its 'gender' is determined). The rest of her life is marked only with 'silence' forcing us to ask the oft-repeated question regarding the subaltern subject's ability to speak, because Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has stressed that in the 'context of colonial production' the

subaltern 'has no history and cannot speak' and in the female avatar 'the subaltern' remains 'even more deeply in shadow' (Spivak in Nelson and Grossberg: 1988, 287), Peterson and Rutherford had previously posited women as victims of a 'double colonization' – both 'political' and 'familial' (Peterson and Rutherford: 1986). The socio-cultural impositions are resisted in this poem neither by a satirical exposure nor by a shrill denouncement but by a graphic portrayal of injustice and inequality perpetrated against women.

It is Kamala Das' ability and readiness to confront as well as expose man's cruelty to man and beast alike that makes her poetry uniquely relevant to the present time. Repudiating the critical verdict of obscenity, Kamala Das proceeds pro se to fight her case in the court of her readers, and that she has won the case hands down is proved by her continuing popularity and importance as a poet. The relentless pursuit of the true theme and its befitting medium takes her through the 'possessive trap' ('Effusions IV', *Symposium* 2005, 48) beyond the 'chilling flesh' ('Anamalai Poems V' *BKD* 155) 'To crumble, / to dissolve / and to retain in other things / the potent fragments / of oneself' ('Composition', *D* 35). It is a poetic manifestation of her personal quest for the true self-identity beyond the fixed norms and their attendant constrictions.

This crusade against constrictions both in life and in literature makes her poems amenable to critical pluralism. In keeping with this amenability, separate and full-fledged studies discussing the feminist, postcolonial, new historicist, post structural, and eco-critical perspectives on Das' poetry, can easily be pursued. Moreover, the dialogic of Kamala Das' poetry, her treatment of age and ethnicity, and the question of the 'double' in her poetry deserve to receive separate and sustained critical attention. The above-mentioned approaches to Das' poetry, the fullest pursuit of which is beyond the scope of the present study, show the almost inexhaustible range and variety of her oeuvre that is sure to tease us out of thought as doth eternity.