THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF MARGINAL VOICES IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

A thesis submitted to the University of North Bengal
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in English

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DEDICATION

To my parents
who have inspired me
respired and perspired with me ...

DECLARATION

This is to certify that Sri Amit Bhattacharya has completed his doctoral thesis titled "The Poetics of Resistance: A Study of Marginal Voices in the Poetry of Kamala Das" submitted to the University of North Bengal in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in English, under my supervision. The work is original and fit for submission for the purpose of examination.

The contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to him or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and the dissertation has not been submitted by the candidate for any research degree to any other university.

Date: 16th November, 2007

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PREFACE

To read Kamala Das' poetry as an unabashed expression of 'sensuality' and 'self-pity' has been a critical commonplace. This conventional approach, however, has indirectly instigated the urge to re-read the same poems from a different perspective with a faint hope of finding other yet-to-be-explored aspects that may help liberate this much maligned poet and give researchers newer insights and critical interest. In fact, the present study of the poetry of Kamala Das has sought to traverse the road less travelled by with the glee of freedom and discovery.

I have tried to shed some light on a sensitive poet's relentless negotiations with socio-economic issues like gender, class, ethnicity, colour, age, language, etc. on the basis of which man has exploited and marginalized his fellow beings. Within the seven chapters of the dissertation, I have also tried to see and show how Das' treatment of these and such issues in her poetry as well as in *My Story* has led to the formulation of her 'Poetics of Resistance'.

In the introductory chapter, I have tried to determine the scope of my critical enquiry by reviewing the research already done in this area, by defining the relevant terms and concepts, and by discussing a few representative poems of Kamala Das to get a lead-in to the following chapters in which various causes of 'marginalization' have been discussed in some detail. The second chapter is an attempt to pin down gender (the feminine gender) as a possible cause for marginality by showing Das' treatment of the many 'denials' and 'disadvantages' that accrue to the owners of the 'woman's frame'. The third chapter has been dedicated to analyzing Das' poetic treatment of economic disparity as a marginalizing determinant. In the fourth chapter, the divisive role of ethnicity in creating and perpetuating the centre-margin binary has been discussed with illustrations from Das' poetic oeuvre. The fifth chapter is devoted to laying bare the scourge of the dark skin that has often caused irrational prejudice, exclusionary practices, and inhuman cruelty to be perpetrated on its 'unfortunate' wearers. The inevitability of age and the wanton marginalization of the aged, as shown in and

through the poems of Kamala Das, have been discussed in the sixth chapter. In the concluding chapter, attempts have been made to revaluate the poet's social consciousness and idealistic endeavours in order to help create a more equitable social order.

The methodology adopted in the thesis has been interpretative and interdisciplinary with recourse to critical pluralism, notwithstanding the fact that the nature of the subject warrants a dominantly sociological approach. The tools of Feminist, Marxist, New Historicist, and Postcolonial criticism have been pressed into service for supplementing wider views on the poet's work.

Of course, the present study does not claim to be a comprehensive survey of Kamala Das' poetry rather it is a selective analysis of those poems that have some bearing on and correspondence with the conceptual framework thereof.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If words could effectively convey the debt of gratitude that I owe to my supervisor Dr. Irshad Gulam Ahmed, Reader and Head, Department of English, Darjeeling Government College, then I should have simply done so, for he has launched me on this project, accepted my ceaseless saga of misadventures, and sustained me through trying times with the patience and sagacity of an indulgent elder. But, alas, words are worthless!

Some students owe much to their teachers whereas some teachers owe much to their students. Curiously, I can count myself among both the former group and the latter. Prof. K.K. Roy, Prof. A. Banerjee, Prof. B.K. Banerjee, Prof. U. Chakraborty, Prof. S.K. Roy Moullick, Prof. G.N. Roy, Prof. S. Samanta, late Dr. G.S. Banerjee, Dr. A. Sengupta, my teachers at the University of North Bengal, and all other eminent teachers of English with whom I have come into contact during my long years of academic noviciate have endowed me with a passion for literature and a capacity for critical thinking. Dr. C. Laha, Reader and Head, Department of English, University of North Bengal, my esteemed senior and mentor in a common pursuit of academic excellence has often given direction to my groping intellect with his love and learning. I also feel a deep sense of obligation to many distinguished teachers from diverse fields of study, including Prof. R.G. Mukherjee, formerly Vice Chancellor, University of North Bengal; Prof. P.K. Sengupta, Professor, Department of Political Science, and former Dean, the Faculty of Arts, Commerce and Law, University of North Bengal; Dr. S. Roy, Reader, Department of Sociology, University of North Bengal; and Dr. P.S. Das, Principal, Surya Sen Mahavidyalaya, Siliguri, for their timely assistance and wise council whenever I have approached them. My sincere thanks are due to all those who have directly or indirectly assisted me but escape my mind at this moment.

I must record my gratitude to the batches of students who have suffered my lectures on Kamala Das. However, a special mention must be made of Debaditya

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The test of friendship is assistance in adversity, and that, too, unconditional assistance. Oonmon Ray has stood this 'test' by proffering to me 'unconditional assistance' with his perceptive comments and enduring interest in my work.

Kamala Das, the poet at the centre of the present study, can never be adequately thanked for daring to write her poems of dream and defiance.

Any wordy appreciation will be similarly inadequate to express my real feelings for Dr. Lalita Rai Ahmed, the wife of my supervisor, and the Officer-in-charge of Darjeeling Government College, whose sisterly concern and unflinching support have been a source of great strength.

Thank I must, however, my colleagues at the Department of English, Siliguri College, Mr. S. Chakraborty, Mr. R.K. Gupta, Mr. A. Majumdar and Dr. A. Dev, and our Principal Dr. M.K. Karanjai for their constructive suggestions and co-operation at every stage of my research. I am deeply indebted to the Librarian and the staff of Siliguri College library for their courteous help and for providing congenial space. I can hardly think of a better place in which to pursue whatever truths one is capable of pursuing.

And my family! Well, what haven't they done? My parents and my elder sister who have always been there when I needed them; my wife Soma who has remained sans synonyms as my good angel; and my son little Anagh, whose uncalled-for interference in my work added relish to my pen, have all helped bring this dream of mine to the threshold of reality.

Amit Bhattacharya

Amit Bhattacharya

CONTENTS

CHAPTER: 1

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS AND THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

"I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt, desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of young women,
I mark the ranklings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs and prisoners,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon labourers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;
All these – all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon,
See, hear, and am silent."

– Walt Whitman

"Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

– Bartolt Brecht

"Standing before time, we must bear witness
To what we have done and what we have thought."

– Jibanananda Das

One of the most read and most often *misread* of all Indo-Anglian poets, Kamala Das opens our eyes to the hazards of critical *catchall-ism*. Blinded by the white-hot dazzle of the *erotica*, critics have often overlooked the egalitarian concerns expressed in Das' poetry which is primarily *poetry of resistance*. Affected by 'marginalization' and 'marginality' in her dual capacity of 'victim' and 'witness', this 'nut-brown' Indian woman dares to write poetry and prose, giving voice to the voiceless and laying bare the callous cruelty of society that is often swayed by irrationality or ignorance. As the present dissertation seeks to foreground Kamala Das' social consciousness as a poet, the first chapter will purport to set the stage, as it were, in three separate sections.

In the first section of this chapter, related research on Kamala Das' poetry will be reviewed in brief to take stock of the ground already covered by preceding researchers and critics and to re-set the critical radar for the proposed probe.

In the second section, relevant terms and concepts will be defined and contextualized with a view to clarifying the scope and terms of reference of the present enquiry.

In third and the final section, a few representative poems of Das will be discussed in order to see and show how her *poetics of resistance* seeks to oppose, refuse to comply with, and/or withstand the marginalizing discourses of 'patriarchy', 'imperialism', 'ethno-centrism', 'classism', 'chromatism', and 'ageism', to name a few.

1. REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Kamala Das has attracted critical attention from a very early age, both as a person and as a poet. In fact, ever since the publication of Das' first major poem 'Afterwards' in the PEN Asian Magazine in 1948, she has induced great critical interest. Das's first three collections, namely, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) firmly established her as one of the foremost Indo-Anglian poets. Das' unapologetic attitude to the question of poetic medium and her bold and uninhibited treatment of female sexuality in her poems, coupled with the salacious rumours and stories of her personal life soon ensured the fact that her poetry was being discussed in the books and articles of the time that dealt with Indo-Anglian poetry.

By way of initial responses to her poetry, we can refer to the works of S.C. Saha, K.R.S. Iyengar, and K.P. Saradhi. Subhas Chandra Saha in his monograph *Modern Indo-Anglian Love Poetry* devoted almost nine pages to comment on Das' treatment of 'frustration' and 'loneliness', 'sex' and 'lust', and 'filial love' in her poems (Saha: 1971, 24-32). K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar included a discussion of her poetry in the chapter "The New Poets" in the second edition of his *Indian Writing in English*, calling attention to Das' 'aggressively individualistic' exploration of the 'theatre of enervation' and the 'vestibule of unresolved tensions', her 'brutal realism' and her 'obsessive' preoccupation with 'love and lust' (Iyengar: 1973, 677-680). K. P. Saradhi in his article "Three Indo-Anglian Women Poets: Gauri Deshpande, Roshen Alkazi and Kamala Das", made a comparative study of their works taking into account their distinctive approaches towards the women's issues of the time, 'a measure of awareness of the problems of life' and 'a broad vision of life' (Saradhi: 1974, 29-35).

It was in 1975 that Kamala Das, the poet, became the subject of the first book-length study by Devindra Kohli. The book is titled *Kamala Das*. In this study the author has made a comprehensive survey of Das's poetry in a chronological manner. His discussion, for obvious reasons, is confined to her first three collections. Kohli has

created a broad perspective on the poet by comparing Das with poets like Jibanananda Das and Judith Wright. However, his scepticism about the 'Indianness' of Das' sensibility is highly questionable. It is basically a study of the erotic voice of the poet and has nothing to do with the issues of 'marginalization' and 'marginality'.

Anisur Rahman brought out his *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das* in 1980. The book is based on his doctoral thesis. He liberates the poet from the oft-levelled charge of formlessness, and commendably brings out the poet's sense of form, which he identifies as 'expressive'. Individual images and symbols are discussed with remarkable critical insight. Marginality, however, is not a subject of this work.

A.N. Dwivedi's *Kamala Das and Her Poetry* came out in 1983. As the title of the book suggests, Dwivedi examines the various aspects of Kamala Das as a poet, viz. her themes, imagery, symbolism, and diction. Quite in the manner of Kohli, he, too, places Das in the category of confessional poets like Anne Saxton, Theodore Roethke, Judith Wright, and others. The book is quite useful as a veritable vede-mecum, and Dwivedi has subsequently brought out a revised and enlarged second edition of the book in 2000, adding a new Appendix-B on Das's prose works in order to enable the reader to have a composite picture of this author. The study presupposes the univocal character of Das's poetry and does not seek to explore its non-erotic domain.

It is appropriate that the opening number of CRNLE (Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, Adelaide, Australia) Writers' Series, *Kamala Das: A Selection with Essays on Her Work* (1986), should be devoted to this much maligned Indian woman-writer. Jointly edited by S[yd] C. Harrex and Vincent O'Sullivan, it combines a healthy selection of poetry and prose by Das with four incisive essays on her work by S.C. Harrex, Vincent O'Sullivan, Dorothy Jones, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, all of whom approach her as cultural 'Outsiders'. Apart from introducing the Australasian reading public to an Indo-Anglian writer who has rapidly risen to fame, both at home and abroad, the selection serves to illustrate CRNLE's interest in Indian writing in English.

In the brief introduction, the editors try to situate Das as one of the important writers in the 'New Literatures in English' (Harrex and O'Sullivan in Das: 1986, 1-3). They foreground her bilinguality and social commitment as a writer and place her in the venerable tradition of Indian women writers as a poetic heiress to the 12th century saint poet Mahadeviykka.

S.C. Harrex's essay "The Strange Case of Matthew Arnold in a Sari: An Introduction to Kamala Das" is of course indispensable to any serious study of Das (Harrex in Das: 1986, 155-177). He positions her historically, commenting on the parallels and incongruities between Das' poetry and that of her romantic precursor, Toru Dutt. Harrex's essay is also important for its analysis of Das' 'private voice' which 'objectifies subjective experience' in a poem such as 'The Stone Age', and internalizes external experience in a poem like 'Forest Fire'. Harrex also discusses poems like 'The Looking Glass', 'Loud Posters', 'An Introduction', 'The Old Playhouse', and 'Spoiling the Name', etc. in a bid to show how 'a reader's sense of the Indian literary past enhances a reading' of Das' work vis-à-vis that of Toru Dutt, and helps him/her to perceive that 'the autobiographical currents and crises recorded in Kamala Das' poetry, and the poetic techniques she uses to present them, reflect certain problems or tendencies inherent in Indo-English poetry'.

In his essay "Whose Voice is Where? On Listening to Kamala Das", Vincent O'Sullivan has persuasively argued that the 'Mills and Boon aspect' of Das' work is essentially a poetic stance she assumes in order to destroy the societal mores and conventions determining the behaviour of women in contemporary India (O'Sullivan in Das: 1986, 179-194). Das, he explains, exposes, distorts, and mutilates in order to re-create. By briefly commenting on poems like 'The Stone Age', 'Blood', 'Gino', 'An Introduction', 'Composition', etc., O'Sullivan tries to point out how Das, the woman-poet, 'stands square on to three of the most interesting features of literature in the last twenty or so years' (presumably the time span is from the mid 60s to the mid 80s of the 20th centuries) 'the dominance of what loosely we call "confessional" poetry; the effect

feminist thought has had on how we now read writings by women; and the increasing attention accorded to "new literatures"'. Of course, 'new literatures' is a 'hold-all term for writing as it emerges from post-colonial contexts', and 'in India's case', 'it emerges in the language of former imperialism'.

Unlike O'Sullivan and Harrex who analyze techniques and voice patterns in Das' verse, Dorothy Jones in her essay "'Freedom Became My Dancing Shoe': Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Works of Kamala Das", concentrates on the theme of 'liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (Jones in Das: 1986, 195-216). The critic discusses it in relation to the Radha-Krishna cult of love-making that affords a mythical dialectic to Das' poetry. Her observation of the paradoxical concept of 'bondage' and 'liberation', suggested by the Radha-Krishna motif in Das is perceptive. Equally perceptive, however, is her inference that the sensational outspokenness of some of Das' poetic assertions has blinded many of her readers to 'what Das' poetry and fiction actually have to say about sexual experience and the situation of women' in the Indian context. Jones posits in no uncertain terms Das' poetic dilemma of individual choice and social constriction whereby she may possibly 'attain freedom' as an individualist, but 'it is likely to be at the cost of life itself' as a social being.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe's essay "The Loud Posters of Kamala Das" is brief but brilliant (Wallace-Crabbe in Das: 1986, 217-225). His main contention is that Das' 'slanted approach to form, syntax and discourse' while indeed implying her 'alienation from the dominant tenets of a male-dominated literary culture' also intimates her repudiation of it. The essay contains an excellent analysis of the poem 'An Introduction' in which Wallace-Crabbe sees and shows Das' 'seemingly documentary approach', her 'rhetorical intensity', her 'systematically unformed' dramatic monologue, and her reliance on 'the weak emphases of a syllabic measure' to simulate 'restlessness'.

The pleasing aspect about all of these commentators is that none of them engage in pseudo-criticism by studying Das out of her cultural milieu. Thus, 'unlike most of her Indian critics, they rightly play down the striking but incidental resemblance she has

with the American confessional poets', preferring instead to play up both her poetic heritage and her aggressive individualism, showing her fruitful negotiations with 'tradition and the individual talent'.

Bruce King, in his important book-length study on Indo-Anglian poetry *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987), discusses Kamala Das' poetry in the chapter "Women's Voices: Kamala Das, De Souza and Silgardo". King betrays a male bias in his discriminatory treatment of Kamala Das. While he devotes a full chapter to Ezekiel and his influence, and goes on to discuss Ezekiel's poetry in the subsequent chapter "The Poets India I: Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Patel, Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar", he lumps such a major poet as Kamala Das together with De Souza and Silgardo. It is true that King's observations on Kamala Das' 'writing about personal experiences', a 'more contemporary and less artificial manner', 'broader ranges of themes', 'more realized settings', and 'deeper feeling' are perceptive. The interest of Das' poetry stems from 'the instability of her feelings' as well as the limned 'disappointments of sexuality'. King highlights Das' use of 'writing' as a means of 'creating a place in the world' and of asserting the woman's 'self' so often oppressed, moulded, and role-assigned by a male-dominated society. The critic also praises Kamala Das for having created a 'style' and a 'language' that can adequately reflect the situations and circumstances that she deals with in her poems. King calls it 'Indianization of English' even though postcolonial studies have taught us that it is more desirable and appropriate to call it 'appropriation'.

Vrinda Nabar's *Endless Female Hunger: A Study of Kamala Das* was published in 1994. The book is based on her doctoral thesis and attempts a chronological survey of Das' poetry with a chapter on Das as a columnist. She also devotes a full chapter to the poet's life presuming that an understanding of Das' life is an indispensable prerequisite for the understanding of her poetry. She claims to have developed a very 'objective' view of the poet. At times, however, she herself is not only 'subjective' but also and even censorious. Thus, Nabar betrays her own kind of naivety in trying to evaluate, or rather straitjacket, a multifaceted poet. She often tends to forget the distinction between

the poet and the person. She is unjustifiably dismissive of the 'foreign critics', i.e. Harrex, O'Sullivan, Jones and Wallace-Crabbe whose essays are included in the previously mentioned CRNLE selection, even though she fails to justify her dismissive stance towards them showing valid critical grounds.

K. Satchidanandan briefly touches upon the question of marginality in his foreword to Kamala Das' collection *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 9-18). In this brilliant prefatory essay, he defines the context of Das' poetry and traces the genealogy of her literary creativity. He aptly points out Das' growing concern for the marginalized sections of the society. The essay is titled in a very suggestive way "Transcending the Body", thereby articulating the need on the part of the readers and critics to 'look beyond the chilling flesh' while approaching Das' poetry. By dealing with poems such as 'An Introduction', 'The Old Playhouse', the Colombo Poems, 'Delhi 1984', the 'Anamalai Poems', etc., Satchidanandan tries to reveal Das' ideational resistance towards the marginalizing discourses of patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and ageism that truly shows her to be engaged in the poetic act of 'transcending' the 'body'.

N.V. Raveendran's *The Aesthetics of Sensuality: A Study of the Poetry of Kamala Das* (2000), with its stylistic approach, is a pioneering critique of the architectonics of Das' work. The critic derives the tools of his fundamentally textual study from linguistics and stylistics, taking sufficient care at the same time not to allow the jargons of these disciplines to come in the way of the perceptive reader having no such background. The poems of Das are analyzed to show the extent to which linguistics can aid and enhance the understanding and appreciation of literature. Raveendran formulates a linguistic/stylistic apparatus that enables him to comprehend the aesthetic vision of Das. With the theoretical positions developed in western linguistics and stylistics, he expounds Das' 'aesthetics' that he characterizes as fundamentally 'sensual'. The very nature of the disciplines he draws upon keeps his book away from the glaring author-centrism of many of his predecessors. Raveendran

has nevertheless overlooked the non-sensual aspect of Das' poetry, keeping significant works like the 'Anamalai Poems' and 'Forest Fire' outside the purview of his study.

In an unpublished doctoral thesis by Sipra Sen, "The Poetic World of Kamala Das: A Thematic Study" (2002), awarded by the University of North Bengal, the researcher has tried to project Das as a poetic innovator steeped in the Indian poetic tradition and yet engaged in bold experiments in a mystic quest for the right medium as well as the right expression. She analyses the poet's use of nature as a 'recurrent symbol' in her poetry, 'as both background and subject matter'. In the fourth chapter of her dissertation, Sen presents Das as a 'socially conscious poet', 'feeling keenly from her very childhood the injustice and deprivation in the society around her'. Sen discusses, though in the passing, how this social awareness broadens Das' poetic horizon from an obsession with the 'ecstasy of love' to an engaging 'sympathy for the down-trodden'. The researcher highlights how Das' musings on 'time and eternity' induce 'the mystic quest' in some of her poems which contributes to their depth, colour, intensity and lyricism.

In his comprehensive study *Kamala Das: The Poetic Pilgrimage* (2005), Irshad Gulam Ahmed traces the thematic evolution of the poet vis-à-vis the consequent widening of Das' poetic canvas. In the introductory chapter, Ahmed discusses 'the utility' as also 'the futility' of 'biographical criticism', pointing out how the practice of pairing up 'the poet' with 'the poem' can both 'enrich' and 'entangle' literary appreciation. In the second chapter, he tries to connect Das' poetry with her 'ancestry', both 'personal' and 'poetic', showing thereby how 'remembrance of things past' initiates literary creation. In the third chapter, he gives prominence to the context of postcolonial feminism in shaping Das' poetic consciousness. In the fourth chapter, he examines the 'diverse modes in which the alienated poetic self of Das engages in a hectic search for love'. He takes up the question of marginality mainly in his fifth chapter which is exclusively devoted to the meliorist orientation of the poet. Ahmed foregrounds Das' literary crusade against intolerance and violence of all sorts, including those harboured and perpetrated in the name of gender, race, caste, religion or class.

However, the rather too broad spectrum of the study does not allow him to give sufficient space required for this subject.

Any review of the works/research already done on the poetry of Kamala Das will remain incomplete if we don't mention M. Dasan's important article on the subject "The Silenced Subalterns in Kamala Das' poetry" (Dasan in Dodiya: 2000, 117-131). As the title of the suggests, Dasan has concentrated on Kamala Das' portrayal of the underprivileged and oppressed sections of the society like 'low caste/Dalit/minority woman' ('Nani' and 'A Hot Noon in Malabar'), the hired labourers from Andhra Pradesh ('The House Builders'), and the racially oppressed Tamilians in Sri Lanka (Colombo poems)', that are gagged by those in possession of 'pelf', 'power', and/or 'prestige'. The critic admirably brings out the 'differences between western and Third World feminist positions in terms of individual/personal freedom as it forms one of the major strains of Kamala Das' poetry'. He also shows how the 'the notion of subalternity is germane to any piece of literary work' (e.g. Das' poetry) which 'concerns itself with historically determined relationships of dominance and subordination, be it Men vs. Women' ('An Introduction'), 'Rich vs. Poor' ('The House Builders'), or 'Upper Caste vs. Lower Caste' ('Honour'). Dasan mars an otherwise brilliant study when he tries to be the *oracle*, 'Kamala Das' poetry does not try to challenge the cultural hegemony of the Upper castes'; for 'Honour', a poem Dasan has himself commented upon, incontrovertibly proves Das' attempts at challenging the 'cultural hegemony of the Upper castes' of whom the poet is one.

Since this section purports to review related research that has some bearing on the present dissertation, I have discussed only a selection of the research materials available on Kamala Das' poetry. As a result, only pioneering studies on Indo-Anglian poetry that have discussed Kamala Das' work, book-length studies on Kamala Das' poetry, and a few essays on her work could be discussed in the present section, and I had to ignore anthologies of critical articles such as *Perspectives on Kamala Das' Poetry* (Kaur: 1995 [a]), and *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum* (Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000), whose worth and importance can never be denied.

In spite of an ever-increasing canon of Kamala Das criticism, there are significant areas of her poetry that have not yet received adequate critical treatment. The strength of the poet lies in her ability to speak in numerous voices, as revealed in 'Someone Else's Song', 'I am a million million people / Talking all at once' (*SC* 31). Her poetry thus is uniquely multivocal. Although sensuality is integral to Das' poetic consciousness and her natural poetics can also be called poetics of sensuality, her altruistic and postcolonial agenda manifests itself in her sustained endeavour to create agency for the marginalized sections of society. As has been discussed earlier, no attempt has been made, except in the passing, at a comprehensive book-length study of these marginal voices in Das' poetry. The present research project is born of this glaring lacuna in Kamala Das criticism.

2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

A study of the marginal voices in the poetry of Kamala Das, in terms of her poetics of resistance, presupposes the clarification of certain relevant terms and concepts. Such a study should also be preceded by a clear formulation of its scope and terms of reference. Since, the study seeks to deal with some of the factors causing *marginalization* and *marginality* of individuals and social groups, and Das' poetic *resistance* to the former as a 'process' as well as the latter as a 'state' or 'condition', terms such as *centre*, *margin/periphery*, *marginalization*, *marginality*, and *resistance* demand and deserve to be defined at the outset. Besides, the meaning of the term *poetics*, and how *resistance* at once 'forms' and 'informs' Das' poetics should receive some explanation as well.

Having originated as geometrical terms – as markers of spatial positionality – 'centre' and 'margin' ('periphery') have infiltrated contemporary literary theory and criticism as constituents of a Manichean binary in our Postmodern space and postcolonial times, thanks to the efforts of feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial theorists. Etymologically, 'centre' derives from late Middle English, from Old French, or from Latin 'centrum', from Greek 'kentron' (sharp point, stationary point of a pair of compasses), related to 'kentein' (to prick) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). 'Margin' and 'periphery' are used as synonymous terms, of which the former comes from late Middle English: from Latin 'margo', 'margin-' (edge) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM), whereas, the latter derives from late 16th century, via late Latin from Greek 'periphereia' (circumference), from 'peripherēs' (revolving around), from 'peri-' (around) + 'pherein' (to bear) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). Thus, on the spatial plane, the interiority of the 'centre' vis-à-vis the exteriority of the 'margin' as well as their relationality becomes truly axiomatic.

For feminist critics, the centre-margin binary operates in terms of the marginalization of female experience, desires, and expression by patriarchy on sexist grounds. As pointed out by Jeremy Hawthorn, it 'serves to invalidate female experience

and to consolidate patriarchal power through the social, cultural and political disenfranchisement of women' (Hawthorn: 2000, 197). As is to be expected, then, this marginalization of female experience by patriarchy has drawn the attention of feminist critics like Hélène Cixous who are not prepared to accept the male experience as the dominant and determining norm. This becomes obvious when one finds feminist writers and critics making every attempt to valorize female experience in their creative as well as critical writings. It is seen in relation to the notion of a 'fixed' centre, which they try to deconstruct or rather dislocate. We may do well in this context to quote Cixous in some detail:

> I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say "woman", I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the "dark" – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible (Cixous: 1976, 876).

Of course, when Cixous projects the 'woman' as engaged in 'her inevitable struggle against conventional man', the context of her statement touches on the re-centring of the marginal voices of 'women'. If the 'repression' of 'women' and *people*'s attempts to 'make' them 'accept' the 'dark' (their marginal status) as their 'attribute' (ascribed feature), call attention to 'their' marginalization at the hands of patriarchy, then the perception of 'the infinite richness of their individual constitutions' certainly foregrounds their *agency* of centring.

According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, drawing on the 'Marxist tradition of analysis', Marxist critics ground the 'centre-periphery model' in the 'world system of production and distribution' as a 'unit of analysis' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 61). They often aim to study economic underdevelopment and dependency of the 'periphery' vis-à-vis the developed centre not as a 'simple descriptive term' that refers to a 'backward traditional economy' but rather as a 'concept rooted in a general theory of imperialism' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 61). Thus, according to the centre-periphery model, 'underdevelopment' becomes a condition 'produced as part of the process necessary for the development of capitalism in the central capitalist countries – and its continued reproduction on a world scale', rather than being a mere 'result of tradition' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 61). In a central core of capitalist countries such as Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal in which the economy was determined by market forces and there was a high organic composition of capital, a need was felt to have trade with and political control over peripheral countries (colonies) where there was a low organic composition of capital, and an abundance of natural resources (raw materials). In this context, Scott and Marshall observes, "The centre-periphery model thus suggests that the global economy is characterized by a structured relationship between economic centres which, by using military, political, trade power, extract an economic surplus from the subordinate peripheral countries" (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 62). This practice of simultaneous exploitation and exclusion, however, does not remain confined within the international arena. In fact, it governs the political, economic and cultural aspects of the centre-margin relationship as well. Homi K. Bhabha is, therefore, justified in making the following comment:

> I do not mean, in any sense, to glorify margins and peripheries. However, I do want to make graphic what it means to survive, to produce, to labour and to create, within a world-system whose major economic impulses and cultural investments are pointed in a direction away from you, your country or your people. Such neglect can be a deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary, and it spurs

you to resist the polarities of power and prejudice, to reach beyond and behind the invidious narratives of centre and periphery (Bhabha: 2004, XI).

With a view to reconciling the Marxist and the postcolonial stances on the centre-margin dichotomy, Bhabha has found the motivation if not to 'glorify', at least to mind the 'margin'. Faced with the 'invidious narratives of centre and periphery', and the outgoing 'economic impulses and cultural investments' within the existing 'world-system', Bhabha needs no other incentive for trying to 'resist' the situation at the margins where the 'neglect' from the centre may cause a 'deeply negating experience' that is at once 'oppressive and exclusionary'.

From the postmodern critical perspective, Tracy Clark has pointed out, "While at times the word 'margin' seems to be able to stand on its own, the word 'centre' almost never seems to be able to"; for as Clark has further elaborated, "Indeed, the centre is an artificial construct that relies on the marginalization of Others for its existence" (Clark in Taylor and Winquist: 2001, 48). On the postcolonial view, the contentious nature of this idea notwithstanding, John Thieme has designated 'the binary opposition of the centre and the periphery' as 'one of the most persistence tropes of COLONIAL and NEO-COLONIAL discourse' (Thieme: 2003, 46). This 'opposition', as Ashcroft et al. have observed, is 'at the centre of any attempt at defining what occurred in the representation and relationship of peoples as a result of the colonial period' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 36).

In fact, Ashcroft et al. have pointed up how the 'gradual establishment of an empire depended upon a stable hierarchical relationship in which the colonized existed as the **other** of the colonizing culture' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 36). To maintain this 'hierarchy', 'imperial Europe' became the centre in a 'geography at least as metaphysical as physical', whereas its colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were at the margin or the periphery of 'culture, power and civilization' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 36). On the other hand, according to John Thieme, in this 'asymmetrical' and 'unequal'

relationship, 'the metropolitan centre of the colonial Mother Country' was paired with 'the colonized margins', which 'supposedly' needed the centre to 'validate their peripheral existence' (Thieme: 2003, 46).

As Ashcroft et al. have indicated, a 'geography of difference' was thus 'constructed', reflecting not so much the 'geographical fixity' as the 'fixity of power' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 36). They have sought to dismantle such binaries in a bid to 'assert the independence of the marginal' as well as to undermine 'the very idea of such a centre', 'deconstructing' thereby 'the claims of the European colonizers to a unity and a fixity of a different order' – 'different' from 'that of the others' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 37). 'In this sense', therefore, as Ashcroft et al. have indicated, 'the dismantling of centre/margin (periphery) models of culture calls into question the claims of any culture to posses a fixed, pure and homogenous body of values, and exposes them all as historically constructed, and thus corrigible formations' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 36). Tracy Clark has thus inferred, "Despite the fact that postcolonialism is heavily invested in history – which generally is not considered in postmodernist criticism – it nevertheless is part of postmodernism [...]" (Clark in Taylor and Winquist: 2001, 49). She is of the opinion that, as coeval methods of criticism, both postmodernism and postcolonialism emphasize a 're-evaluation' of the 'text'. Both are filled with 'signs', 'signifiers', and 'signified'. The centre-margin binary, in fact, 'represents the point at which postcolonialism and postmodernism meet for this very reason' (Clark in Taylor and Winquist: 2001, 49).

The centre-margin (periphery) dichotomy, as discussed earlier, has a vital spatial dimension in terms of the 'geography of difference'. Since, this geography of difference reflects not so much the 'geographical fixity' as the 'fixity of power' (and by extension 'powerlessness'), the history of postcolonial studies shows that the space between the centre and the margin has not remained fixed over time; there has been a considerable spatial shift, which is conceptualized in terms of 'porous boundaries' by Thieme (Thieme: 2003, 47), and as 'overlapping territories' by Edward Said (Said: 1994, 1ff.). Tracy Clark, in this context, has called attention to how of late 'there has been an

increasing tendency to turn the centre/margin upside down and suggest that even affluent, highly-educated, white, English, heterosexual males are at times marginalized' (Clark in Taylor and Winquist: 2001, 49). Similarly, John Thieme has shown us how by way of a virtual transcription of reality, in Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon: 2006), a group of Caribbean migrants now living in London (the 'centre') are forced to lead 'centrifugal lives', and are as 'disempowered' in London as they were in their former colonial homelands (Thieme: 2003, 47).

In fact, while analyzing the unstable and contingent nature of the centre-margin relationship in the postcolonial context, Ashcroft et al. have indicated:

> In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious (Ashcroft et al.: 1989, 12).

We can thus perceive a constant change in the distance between 'centre' and 'margin', and a 'de'/'re'-'construction' of these terms by creating the *centre* of a 'centre' and the *margin* of a 'margin'. Both Michel Foucault and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have cautioned against the celebratory third worldism of postcolonial studies and the intellectual valorization of marginality. Spivak warns that the celebratory third worldism of postcolonial studies may and often does perpetuate real social and political oppressions which rely upon rigid distinctions between the 'centre' and the 'margin' (Spivak: 1993, 55). Spivak's opinion is partially formed by her debt to and agreement with Foucault's paradigmatic resistance to the wide-spread intellectual valorization of marginality. As he argues:

> One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of 'marginality' that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of exclusion brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. If 'marginality' is being constituted as an area of investigation, this is only because relations of power have established it as a possible object [...] (Foucault: 1978, 98).

The shift envisioned by Spivak and Foucault in their distinct ways can be brought about only if the space between the centre and the margin is gradually narrowed down by the conscious and deliberate re-centring of the marginal voices as a part of a sustained postcolonial drive. Some of the factors contributing to this phenomenon of 'change' may be: an increasing visibility of the subaltern, a more combative attitude adopted by the muted sections of society, and availability of new fora/platforms for venting grievances, the growing flexibility of the cannon, a more accommodating attitude of the First World critical discourse, growing recognition of linguistic variants or dialects, and legitimization of 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' as tools of self-empowerment.

In today's world, there is greater gender equality, a symbolic collapse/rejection of the Apartheid, 'affirmative action' for the low caste subalterns through changed political policies like reservation in matters of education and employment, more rights for senior citizens, greater recognition by the West of the other creeds and cultures vis-à-vis neo-colonialism through globalization, increase in ethnic studies, and the meteoric rise of the Asian countries like China and India. However, these changes in outlook and policy remain largely operative at the ideological/ideational level as functions of certain hegemonic discourses, and 'reality' is still very bleak for many of the underprivileged and oppressed individuals as well as social groups. In this context, John Thieme has alerted us to the fact that the 'centre-periphery binary is not confined to post-colonial formations' (Thieme: 2003, 47). As a result, as Tracy Clark has indicated, certain 'groups also have been considered marginal, including people of color, women,

homosexuals, Jews, the working classes, and the illiterate' (Clark in Taylor and Winquist: 2001, 49). To put Clark's observation into perspective, 'people of color', 'women', 'homosexuals', 'Jews', 'the working classes', and 'the illiterate' are marginalized on 'chromatic', 'sexist', 'ethnocentric', 'classist', and 'educational' grounds respectively. The 'marginal', as Ashcroft et al. points out, 'therefore indicates a *positionality* that is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subject's access to power' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 135). Be that as it may, the present study owes a great deal to the growing acceptance of the academia of issues such as 'marginalization' and 'resistance' as fit subjects for critical enquiry.

'Marginalization' is a lexical item, which is formed by adding lexical formatives like *-alization and -ization* to 'margin' and 'marginal' respectively, constitutes with them a semantic field to signify the 'exteriority' of the 'margin' as well as the 'insignificance' and 'inconsequentiality' of the 'marginal'. John Scott and Gordon Marshall has defined 'marginalization' as a 'process by which a group or individual is denied access' to 'important positions' and/or 'symbols' of 'economic, religious, or political power within any society' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 380). A 'marginal group', in their opinion, 'may actually constitute a numerical majority', but may be denied 'access to political or economic power' and receive 'increasingly unequal [comparatively lesser] shares of the rewards of success' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 380). 'Marginalization', as a result, becomes a very interesting subject for study because, by analyzing what happens at the margin of a society and how it is represented in literature, one can understand how that society defines itself and is defined in terms of other societies, and what constitute its key cultural values as well as support its hegemonic structures.

'Marginality', which is formed by adding the lexical formative *–ity* (the quality or state of) to the word 'marginal', refers to the 'quality' or 'state' of being marginal. Contemporary literature and criticism are characterized not only by their negotiation with authors who occupy positions of marginality, but also by their growing accommodation of 'marginality' as representative of something central to the

postmodern/postcolonial existence. Ashcroft et al. find that the perception and description of certain experiences or experiences of certain individuals and groups as 'marginal' is a 'consequence' of the 'binaristic structure' of the 'dominant discourses' such as 'patriarchy', 'imperialism' and 'ethnocentrism' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 135). It is this inherent binarism that, in their opinion, has led to the blatant description of these experiences as 'peripheral' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 135). By extending their argument, we may safely add 'classism', 'chromatism', and 'ageism' to their list of 'dominant discourses'. The significant distance between these dominant discourses and the marginalized authors gives the latter a unique advantage of developing a more objective as well as comprehensive view of the 'centre'. Since they do not belong to it, they can see it more clearly and see it whole. They, as a result, can describe it with greater freedom, unrestrained by any 'obligation of belonging'. In the same vein, the marginal groups do not accept the idea of a 'fixed' or 'unchanging' centre, because the centre-margin relationships operate and are to be conceptualized in a complex, diffused, and multilateral intercourse. Since, 'marginality' as a 'state' or 'condition' is associated with 'marginalization' as a 'process' and 'to marginalize' as an 'act', it may give us the impression that 'power' that can alone 'marginalize' is a function of centrality. But, as a matter of fact, this impression, rather than helping us dismantle the centre-margin binary, makes us perpetuate the same; for resisting 'marginalization' may lead to the substitution of a centre rather than its dislocation in the final analysis. This trap can only be evaded by accepting egalitarianism, on the one hand, and tolerating difference, on the other.

The above discussion on the 'centre'/'margin' ('periphery'), 'marginalization', and 'marginality' logically leads us to a discourse on 'resistance'. After the breath-taking complexity and multivalence of the earlier terms, 'resistance', for one, offers us some relief by being almost self-explanatory. The word 'resistance' derives from late Middle English: from French 'résistance', from Late Latin 'resistentia', from the verb 'resistere' (hold back), from 're-' (expressing opposition) + 'sistere' (stop), reduplication of 'stare' (to stand) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). Bearing this etymology in mind, 'resistance' can be defined as the act or process that induces in the subject an

opposition to, refusal to accept or comply with, and the ability to withstand somebody or something. Thus, it signifies a counter-discourse that tries to make a stand against/in opposition to the supremacist and marginalizing discourses like patriarchy, imperialism, classism, ethnocentrism, chromatism, ageism, etc., and gives rise to feminism, postcolonialism, egalitarianism, etc. In the present work, however, the term 'resistance' refers to the 'ideational' rather than any 'physical' or activistic resistance. 'Resistance' here goes beyond the politico-historical paradigm of Albert Camus (Camus: 1960), the postcolonial paradigm of Benita Parry (Parry in Barker et al.: 1994, 172-196), or the gendered gerontological paradigm of Doris Ingrisch (Ingrisch in Arbar and Ginn: 1995, 42-55) to encompass all kinds of persecution of individuals and social groups. Of course, while resisting 'discrimination' and 'persecution' on the individual or the social level, the subject has to withstand the lures and/or the intimidations of the High and the Mighty. As Leela Gandhi has asseverated:

> The problem of 'positionality' accordingly devolves upon the progressive intellectual the task of co-option – such an intellectual must relentlessly negotiate the possibility of being, in Spivak's elusive terminology, 'outside the teaching machine' (Gandhi: 2002, 59).

According to Earl Miner, one of the possible meanings of 'Poetics' is the 'implicit principle[s]' governing an author's work (Miner in Preminger: 1993, 929). With her unquestionable social commitment, Kamala Das cannot passively put up with social injustice perpetrated by the privileged and the potent. Vocalized through many of her poems, 'resistance', therefore, becomes the 'implicit principle' that generates much of Das' poetic output, formulating thereby her 'poetics of resistance' that seeks to give voice to the muted sections of our society. The term 'poetics of resistance' will be used in the proposed thesis in the above sense.

3. IDENTIFICATION OF MARGINAL VOICES

A crucial part of the prevalent critical agenda is constituted by the project of re-centring the subaltern voices. This enterprise has often lead to radical reappraisals of certain writers, thereby liberating them from an often unacknowledged tradition of misconception and misrepresentation which comes to engulf poets such as Wait Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin, and Kamala Das, to name a few. In the case of Kamala Das, this results from the over emphasis on and over rating of the erotic elements in her poetry. There is no denying the fact that Das has been quite outspoken in her treatment of female sexuality, describing the genitalia, the desires and the constrictions that both make and unmake the female into a woman. The rather mercenary motive of the majority of poetry editors who have selectively anthologized a small number of her poems on sexually explicit themes has further aggravated the situation. A careful and comprehensive scrutiny of her poetry, however, reveals many other dimensions of her poetic output. Such an enquiry shows that her poetry is basically *poetry of resistance*, her 'love poems' (e.g. 'An Introduction', 'The Looking Glass', 'Gino', 'Cat in the Gutter', etc.) being no exception. In such poems, Das resists the 'categorization' of the female roles as also the 'commodification' of the female body on sexist grounds. Besides, there are many other poems by this much maligned poet that reveal her awareness of as well as 'resistance' to the multiple ostracisms to which man is subjected on the basis of class (e.g. 'The House Builders', 'A Hot Noon in Malabar' etc.), ethnicity (e.g. 'Delhi 1984', 'The Inheritance', etc.), colour of the skin (e.g. 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo', 'The Departing I', etc.), and age (e.g. 'Home is a Concept', 'At Chiangi Airport', etc.).

In fact, beneath and beyond the veil of the erotica, Das' poetry often resonates with voices from the margins. This marginality, as has already been indicated, may stem from diverse sources including gender, class, caste, religion, colour, language, and age, among other things. It is Das' readiness to take on such issues in her poetry that reinforces her artistic credibility. C. N. Srinath seems to concur with this assessment, when he observes, "Her [Das'] sensitive awareness of her surroundings – their

sordidness, boredom, ugliness and horror – and her love and passion gives strength to her poetry" (Srinath in Benson and Conolly: 1994, 1249).

To put Srinath's observation into perspective, it is Das' 'sensitive awareness of her surroundings' and recognition of 'their sordidness, boredom, ugliness and horror' that strengthen her love and passionate concern for the disadvantaged sections of society and rouse her righteous indignation. It is this 'righteous indignation' felt by the poet that helps her ideate a strong resistance to the marginalizing discourses of patriarchy, classism, ethnocentrism, chromatism, ageism, etc., in and through her poetry. In this context, we must remember the etymology of 'resistance', discussed in the previous section of the present chapter, while discussing the multivalent 'moods' and 'modes' of resistance, forming as well as informing Das' poetics. This 'poetics of resistance' is expressive of Das' awareness of marginalization, her commitment to the cause of the marginalized, and last but not least, her courage to expose the causes of 'marginalization' as well as the consequences of 'marginality'.

The proposed thesis, therefore, seeks to analyze the significance of 'resistance' in Das' poetry by examining her treatment of 'marginality' of the various sections of the society. Marginality too often results in alienation and loneliness, and a significant body of Das' poetry, as will be shown, deals with these conditions. The protagonist narrator of Das' testimonio *My Story* has a dual subaltern status for being a 'woman' (*MS* 24), and a 'nut-brown' Indian at that (*MS* 2). Since, *My Story* provides valuable insights into Das' poetry, it too cannot be kept outside the purview of the present project.

During a long and eventful life, Das has experienced marginalization both in her person and in her presence. On the one hand, she herself has been subjected to marginalization for being 'woman', 'Dravidian', 'dark-skinned', 'aged' as also for her non-conformist views and attitudes. On the other hand, her private voice has often been discarded in favour of multiple poetic personae:

[...] I've put

My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech; [...] (*SC* 23)

Here, the 'Typewriter's click' drowns out her 'private voice' as a part of her poetic strategy. At the same time, it also serves to confirm her multivocalism. Thus, she is enabled to speak both as and for the other, the muted sections of the society and her 'song', therefore, is as much 'someone else's song', as it is 'Song of Myself', to use the title of a poem by Walt Whitman (Whitman: 2002, 26-78). But, since the identity of the 'self' is both constituted and constricted by certain context-specific cultural constructs, the self too is at once 'stratified' and 'role'-assigned into altercast categories. Thus, even song of *myself* loses the definitive 'my'-ness to be 'ascribed' and 'attributed' to the other 'selves', dissolving thereby the self-other dichotomy.

Kamala Das has always shown an ardent zeal for social work. Through her social activism she has tried to reach out to the underprivileged sections of the society. This philanthropy, however, has been in her from an early age. In fact, it was this egalitarian concern that inspired her to contest the 1984 parliamentary elections as an independent candidate in which she lost. This debacle, though a temporary shock, besides shaping her non-conformist poetic sensibility, could not dampen her spirits either. Das carried on with her social activism with a renewed vigour ever since. In the year 2000 she founded *Lok Seva Charitable Trust*, a political party of her own, to concentrate on humanitarian work as well as to provide asylum to orphaned mothers and to promote secularism.

Thus, Kamala Das has found much incentive to connect 'life' with 'poetry', in both of which she takes it upon herself to champion the cause of the marginalized. It is in this context that S.C. Harrex and Vincent O'Sullivan have perceived and praised the 'social ramifications of her [Das'] autobiographical subject-matter', and 'the nerve of mission' in 'the timbre of her voice' (Harrex and O'Sullivan in Das: 1986: 3). Significantly, they have not failed to acknowledge that this 'evidence of Kamala Das' pragmatic and committed concern for her Indian culture and environment is also

instructive for the reader of the writings of Kamala Das' (Harrex and O'Sullivan in Das: 1986: 3). As mentioned earlier, Das through her poems and prose writings extensively deals with the causes of marginality. As G. Jordan and C. Weedon have shown us, in our 'Postmodern World' several factors such as 'class', 'gender', 'race', etc. may coalesce to cause and complicate marginalization of individuals or groups which is why 'marginality' is not to be conceived of as a 'mono-causal' condition (Jordan and Weedon: 1995). Low caste individuals are often economically backward as well. Their marginality, therefore, is a result of both 'caste' and 'class'. If such an individual happens to be a woman, e.g. Nani, in the poem 'Nani', the gender question further precipitates the victim's plight.

In the following chapters, efforts will be made to analyze Das' treatment of 'marginality' through her portrayal of figures like women and children, eunuchs, lunatics, a non-conformist Indo-Anglian poet, house-builders, abandoned youths, non-Aryan persons, aged mothers, domestic servants, particularly maid servants and their ilk. Before that, however, we must briefly discuss a few of Das' most representative poems in a bid to see and show how the poet gives voice to the marginalized, and then therefore, marginal individuals and groups.

In 'An Introduction', which is one of Das' most anthologized poems, the female-speaker candidly expresses her predicament. The poem begins with a description of the woman's marginal status in that, though her life is governed by the Indian political system, she is unaware of (in fact, excluded from) 'politics'. She is fated to 'repeat' after her male counterparts, 'the names of those in power':

> I don't know politics but I know the names
> Of those in power, and can repeat them like
> Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
> Nehru. [...] (*SC* 59)

Of course, her marginality is formed and framed by other factors as well, namely, her

'Indian'-ness and her 'very brown' complexion (indicative of her non-Aryan descent). When such a marginalized individual dares to resist her marginalization through poetic expression, and that too 'in English', the natural reaction she evokes is one of censor:

> [...] Don't write in English, they said,
> English is not your mother-tongue. [...] (*SC* 59)

This has been the command of domineering patriarchy and dogmatic critics like Buddhadeb Bose (cited in Sharma in O.P. Bhatnagar: 1981, 39), Jyotirmoy Datta (Datta: 1961, 28-29), etc. The command is of course two-fold, 'Don't *write*' since the speaker is a woman-poet, and 'Don't write *in English*' (italics mine) since she is a dark-skinned Indo-Anglian poet. The poet's refusal to obey the dictate resulted in her getting further marginalized in the male-dominated and censorious society of 'categorizers'.

The initial command 'don't write' is a result of patriarchal expectations pertaining to the 'fit' role for a woman like the poetic persona:

> [...] be girl,
> Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
> Be a quarreller with servants. [...] (*SC* 60)

The speaker promptly disobeys it, continuing with her poetic creation since she considers the expression of 'my joys, my longings, my / Hopes' to be more important than any threat of social/critical censor. Her negotiation with and reaction to the other command, 'Don't write in English', however, proves more problematic. The 'command' in this case, may reflect a slavishly colonial mindset, still persisting in the postcolonial era, regarding Das' alleged lack of proficiency in the ex-colonizer's language ('English is not your mother tongue'). It may also indicate a fiercely 'anti-colonialist' and revivalist stance that implicitly promotes writing in her 'mother tongue' and further reveals itself through the exhortation 'better / Still be Madhavikutty' (Das' pseudonym as a writer of prose-fiction in Malayalam). The poet not only refuses to

obey the command outright, she rationalizes her refusal in many ways as well. First and foremost, she claims the right to choose her linguistic medium for the sake of artistic autonomy:

> [...] Why not leave
> Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
> Everyone of you? Why nor let me speak in
> Any language I like? [...] (*SC* 59)

It is this claim of artistic autonomy that prompted Elleke Boehmer to praise Das' decision to write in English as 'a valid personal choice' (Boehmer: 2006, 201).

Secondly, she asserts her right to use the ex-colonizer's language to 'write beck' to the centre:

> [...] The language I speak
> Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
> All mine, mine alone. [...] (*SC* 59)

Here, Kamala Das takes her characteristically postcolonial stance of 'abrogation', which in the words of Bill Ashcroft et al., refers to 'the rejection by postcolonial writers of a normative concept' of 'correct' or 'standard' English, and of 'the corresponding concepts' of 'inferior dialects' or 'marginal variants' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 5). Again, Das seems to obey the spirit as well as the letter of the postcolonial strategy, when as prescribed by Ashcroft et al., she employs the allied concept of 'appropriation' to justify and tailor-make her 'choice' and 'use' of English in the postcolonial context. Thus, she appropriates English by 'taking over' and using the tools of the dominant discourse of language (English) in order to 'resist it's political or cultural control', 'express widely differing cultural experiences', and 'interpolate these experiences into the dominant modes of representation to reach the widest possible audience' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 19). Needless to say, it is by adopting the twin strategies of abrogation and

appropriation that Das is able to break the shackles of the colonizers' 'conceptual paradigm' and bring in the 'distortions' and 'queernesses' that make 'The language I speak' 'mine, mine alone' (*SC* 59). Reading between the lines, we can divine yet another reason for Das' choice of English as her poetic medium, flying in the face of the cultural fatwa, 'Don't write in English'. Surprisingly enough, Das' rationale stems from a self-perceived *stack* (and not *lack*) of proficiency in English:

> [...] It voices my joys, my longings, my
> Hopes, and is useful to me as cawing
> Is to crows or roaring to the lions, [...] (*SC* 59)

The moment Das likens her use of the English language to the crow's 'cawing', or to the lion's 'roaring' (both are natural sounds of the 'crow' and the 'lion'), she puts forward English as her natural speech. If we recall her earlier assertion in the present poem 'I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one', and give due importance to the fact that the next line that she writes is 'don't write in English, they said', the spatial proximity of 'dream in one' and 'don't write in English', as also the contextual specificity of Das' choosing to write poetry in English, may convince us about English being the language in which she dreams. On a meta-textual plane, Das has cleared up the conundrum in her interview given to P. P. Raveendran: 'I dream in English, I am afraid' (Raveendran, P.P.: 1993, 148). This position is further bolstered when we recall Das' replies to the questionnaire sent to her by P. Lal. There, Das has tried to rationalize her choice of English as a medium by posing a counter question 'why not in English'. Das further clarifies her position by stating tongue in cheek: 'why in English', says she 'is a silly question. It is like asking us why we do not write in Swahili or Serbocroate. English being the most familiar, we use it. That is all' (*The Miscellany*: 1969). Whatever Das might have thought, the fact that 'that' was *not* 'all' becomes clear first from the then hostilities of Buddhadeb Bose, Jyotirmoy Datta and their ilk, as also from a recent resurfacing of the same debate in the Neemrana Controversy of 2003 (Ashwini Bhatnagar: 2002, lead A), as regards the parasitic or vital nature of Indian English literature.

Das' description of her poetic medium as 'half English, half / Indian' has nothing demeaning about it as some of her critics have tried to suggest. In fact, as Anisur Rahman points out, the English half is the linguistic-literary component of her poetic output, whereas, the Indian half alludes to her sensibility (Rahman: 2000, 61). Obviously, each of these factors exists with and works on the other to forge a unique poetic 'voice, tone, idiom and rhythm', that according to Bruce King, creates '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' (King: 1985, 153). King has termed this phenomenon 'Indianization of English' (King: 1985, 153). Needless to say, Das has both the ideological and the linguistic justification to practise this 'Indianization of English'. This 'Indianization' which could/should be substituted with 'appropriation', operates more on the 'ideological' and less on the 'functional' level; for Das approves of Emma LaRocque's opinion, "To a Native woman, English is like an ideological onion whose stinging layers of racism and sexism must be peeled away before it can be fully enjoyed [...]" (LaRoque in Perrault and Vance: 1993, xx).

Having rationalized the choice of English as her poetic medium, Das proceeds to talk about one of her poetic subjects, namely herself. Consequently, the second part of the poem (to be amplified in the next chapter of the present dissertation) depicts the trials and tribulations of the woman-speaker at the hands of patriarchy. The speaker can still recount a childhood existence unsullied by any gender considerations. But, that she was under the panoptic gaze of society becomes clear when she is told by the 'categorizers' about her growth into a woman. The parameters of this growth are physical as indicated by *tallness*, *swelling of limbs* and the *sprouting of pubic hair*. That this growth was to prove disastrous for her gets revealed in the trident of its ramifications – premature marriage, premature pregnancy, and premature motherhood. When the disgruntled female-speaker tries to escape her fate by wearing male clothes and ignoring her 'womanliness', she is commanded to dress in 'saree', since 'It is time' to 'Choose a name, a role' (*SC* 60).

Hemmed in by womanliness, that she is, she tries to reach out to the others through love, through understanding, and through companionship. But, everywhere she has only to draw a blank or 'feel shame'. Though, she too calls herself 'I', her gendered identity puts her into a subservient position inferior to, and then therefore, at the mercy of the male who is 'in this world' 'tightly packed like the sword in its sheath'. Here, the two extremes of feeling 'shame' or feeling 'tightly packed' by the female-speaker and her male counterpart respectively, foreground the ostracism-adulation (alienation-accommodation) dichotomy that characterizes society's divergent reactions to and treatments of the two halves of humanity.

This marginal status notwithstanding, the speaker tries to resist her social ostracism. The means she adopts to fight back is writing and the medium she chooses is poetry:

> [...] it
> Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
> Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
> Is aware. [...] (*SC* 60)

It is this 'aware'-ness that helps Das formulate her 'Poetics of Resistance'. 'An Introduction' thus becomes Das' 'proem' or 'poem as prologue' that serves as her poetic manifesto by formulating her resistance to the marginalizing discourses of patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and chromatism.

If 'An Introduction' limns a marginalized Indian woman daring to be a poet, 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is a harrowing picture of a marginalized section of our society. Unfortunately, for them, it is gender negation that forms the basis of their gender-displacement. Here, the poet likens these poor creatures (eunuchs) to 'half-burnt logs from funeral pyres' who have to eke out a living by dancing 'till they bled' to celebrate the birth of children they can never have. The harsh voice, emaciated body

and the 'melancholy songs' of the eunuchs are all indicative of a harsh reality that makes them beat 'their sorry breasts', 'wail' or 'writhe' in 'vacant ecstasy'; that they sang of 'lovers dying' and of children 'left unborn'; that 'a drought and a rottenness were in each of them', and that their performance ('these poor creatures convulsions') could silence the otherwise raucous crows and chirpy children – all testify to their futile existence. The word 'poor' as affixed to these 'creatures' indicate both their destitution and their despondency. The poet shows her suggestive metier in describing the rain that follows and is presumably brought on by their performance. Since, the expectation that the crackling of the sky, thunder and lightening induce is fizzled out in 'a meagre rain that smelt of dust in attics and the urine of lizards and mice'. This description makes P. Lal comment 'The pungent morbidity of attic dust and lizard-urine smells pervades this volume [*Summer in Calcutta*]' (Lal in Kaur: 1995[a], 67). In fact, even rain, that is associated with fertility, is putrefied when caused by the dance of the eunuchs. A natural marginalization of the eunuchs that adds to and further aggravates their social marginalization is symbolized hereby.

Published in the same volume, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), as 'An Introduction' and 'The Dance of the Eunuchs', 'The Flag' is another poetization of the marginal voices. In lieu of an individual ('An Introduction') or a group ('The Dance of the Eunuchs'), what we find in 'The Flag' is a picture of a nation (India) of which the flag happens to be the emblem. The sardonic speaker begins by highlighting the hopes and aspirations of a nation as represented in and through the flag only to undercut the same by showing the terrible economic inequality that has falsified its lofty promises. The projection of one India with harlots who are forced to walk swaying their 'wasted hips' and poor old men who have to 'lie on wet pavements and cough, cough their lungs out' typifies the desperate attempt and the ultimate failure of have-nots that contrasts with the picture of another India with winking 'neons', 'whisky on the breath of winds', 'Channel Number Five', and the 'cooking's / Smell'. Das' poetics of resistance comes to the fore when she dares the flag to own up to its ineffectuality:

It is time to say goodbye to your charms

Dear flag, to your old,
Meaningless pride, to your crude postures of
Honour, to the lies
Your colours tell, to the false hopes you did
Extend, to your old
Macabre dance in the blueness of our sky.... (*SC* 22)

Poems of the Colombo group take Das' concern for the marginal groups beyond the national boundaries of India. Composed in the immediate aftermath of and in response to the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka, these poems chronicle how the ethno-nationalism of the Sinhalese people could and did marginalize as well as terrorize the minority Tamil community. As the Colombo poems will be discussed in detail in the forth chapter of the present dissertation, I propose to discuss briefly the poems 'After July' and 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo' as representative pieces of this group.

'After July' limns the brutalized Tamil community after the July riots of 1983. The disruption of normalcy in their lives is signalled by the facts that 'there were no Tamils in sight', 'no arrangetrams were held in the halls', and 'no flower-seller came again to the door with strings of jasmine to perfume the ladies' hair' (*CP* 15). The fear-driven withdrawal of the Tamils into the claustrophobic confines of house and community is both counterpointed and caused by the 'reincarnation' of Hitler 'from the dead', his demand for 'another round of applause', and his proclamation of the superiority of the Aryan blood that 'gives him [the Sinhala person] the right to kill his former friends' (*CP* 15). As a result, the Tamils become the hunted, and can only try to insulate their 'young ones' from this climate of hatred and bloodshed.

Often misconstrued as a Tamil due to her 'nut-brown skin', and then therefore exposed to the same danger, Das could easily empathize with the cornered Tamils. In 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo', the poet shows us the damaging effect of this culture of killing, this ambience of atrocity on even the common masses, including both the perpetrators of violence (the Sinhalese majority) and its prey (the Tamil minority).

Narrating her experiences while shopping at a departmental store, the poet-speaker recounts the air of apprehension. Feeling unwanted and threatened, she has to try hiding her identity, but indoctrinated to hate, the sales girls can easily 'see through her guise', and 'their cruel mouth bleed / when they make attempts to stab me with a smile' (*CP* 17).

Over and above the racial issue, we get to see in the Colombo poems Das' awareness of the 'colour' question as well. When the same poet-speaker who in 'An Introduction' had boldly asserted, 'I am Indian, very brown', tries in 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo' to hide both her 'Indianness' and her 'nut-brown skin', she does it with the consciousness of the marginalization of the dark Dravidians, the 'hunted' of the land ('After July'). Thus, even the chromatic basis of man's marginalization by his fellow human beings comes within Das' poetic purview.

If we remember the 'poor old men' of 'The Flag' who 'lie on wet pavements and cough, cough their lungs out', we can easily realize the marginalization of the aged by the capitalist society which, in the words of Willy Lowman, a character in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, remains ever eager to 'eat the orange' and 'throw the peel away' (Miller: 1990, 105). In the case of women, this ageist marginalization assumes more serious proportions, since a woman's advancing years entail a loss of productivity that is at once financial and reproductive. 'A Widow's Lament' is a poem by Das that can be cited as a classic case in point.

In fact, 'A Widow's Lament' charts a woman's life-journey from the centre of family life to its periphery whereby her children grow up and out of needs, her husband ages and dies, and she is left only with the memories of by gone times and the recognition of a desolate present. Once the woman-speaker had subordinated herself to the needs and moods of her husband and sons, she had torn to shreds the tarot cards (meaning her fate) of her life. As a result, she realizes:

This has always been

someone else's world not mine.
My man, my sons, forming the axis
while I, wife and mother,
insignificant as a fly
climbed the glass panes of their eyes,
There wasn't a thing
that I could do to make myself grow
to reach their ordained height (*OSKHS* 125)

Now that her sons have 'set forth / for other homes, other loves', and that her husband has died 'turning / toward me a frightened eye', the widow who happens to be an abandoned mother as well can only lament her fate and ready herself for the fall (death).

Any identification of the marginal voices in Das' poetry will remain positively incomplete without a mention of the 'Forest Fire'. Anisur Rahman finds in this poem, the projection of an inclusive human consciousness that helps Das engulf 'the world beyond the *self*' (Rahman: 2000, 78). Much in the same vein as Rahman, S. C. Harrex too discerns in this poem 'a point of view' that presents 'the poet as an observer who begins with the world instead of the self' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 167).

In fact, as Harrex further points out, the poem can also be read as an 'essay on literary composition – on the poetic process' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 168). Das here describes how the poetic sensibility devours like a forest fire each atom of experience – each sight and sound encountered, internalizing thereby the external experience only to recast it in the form of/into art. As a result, the bald child in a pram, the slim lovers behind the tree, the 'old man' on the 'park bench', 'cabaret girls', 'the eunuchs', 'the wedding drums', 'the wounded', and 'the dying mother' are all internalized and when the poet finishes with them, retaining only the essence, she spits out 'small heaps of ash' – their mutable parts. Significantly, after this internalization of external experience, comes the gestatory phase when the perceived 'sights and smells and sounds' 'thrive and go on and on and on' 'in me' (the poet). But, this gestatory period in its turn must

give way to the subsequent phase of poetic expression, since whatever thrives 'in me' does so only to be recorded in/as poetry. The fact that the internalized experience gets re-externalized as poetry forces us to analyze the variety of that experience. That Das can see and show both the sunny (the child, the lovers, and the wedding drums) and the seamy (old man, cabaret girls, the eunuchs, and the dying mother) sides of life, seems to foreground Das' 'inclusive human consciousness' that Rahman had pointed out. It is this 'inclusive human consciousness' that opens her eyes to the wide-spread marginalization of individuals and groups on the basis of such considerations as gender, class, age, etc. as can be ascertained from a careful reading of the 'Forest Fire'. The poet writes:

I) [...] In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in prams, and, sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers, hand
In hand, and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of sun. [...]

II) [...] In me, the street-lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, [...]

III) [...] the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing sad songs of love, [...]

IV) [...] in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms. (*SC* 51)

Significantly, like Whitman, Das too sits and looks out on these social ills. Both choose to remain temporarily 'silent' about such acts of marginalization (Whitman: 2002, 228-229). At a later stage, however, they ideationally resist those ills through their poetry.

Kamala Das is thus seen to formulate her poetics of resistance that can speak out for the marginalized.

Vrinda Nabar reinforces the common myopia of the categorizers, to borrow a term from 'An Introduction', when she likens Das' absorption of the external reality ('the sights and smells and sounds') 'with an appetite similar to her hunger for the men she loves' (Nabar: 1994, 21). That Nabar is guilty here of a pseudo-critical catchall-ism, can be pointed out if we foreground Das' 'inclusive human consciousness' – a position further strengthened by I.G. Ahmed, who in his discussion of the poem, points up 'fire' as a 'powerful metaphor for the devouring nature of the poetic sensibility' (Ahmed: 2005, 135). Ahmed further points out how 'the poem lists all the themes that one finds in Das' poetry, right from the baby in a pram to the old mother and the dying' (Ahmed: 2005, 135). In the final analysis, then 'Forest Fire', like 'An Introduction' (both poems were first published in her debut collection *Summer in Calcutta*), serves as another of her proems by recording her awareness of and resistance to the marginalizing discourses of gender-ism, class-ism, and age-ism.

The above discussion shows us how giving the lie to the wide-spread tendency of the categorizers to highlight Das' alleged univocalism, the poet's oeuvre evinces her multivocalism. Thus, P. P. Raveendran's nostrum about Das' 'ideology of intimacy' (P.P. Raveendran in Das: 1991, ix-xvi), and N. V. Raveendran's diagnosis regarding Das' 'aesthetics of sensuality' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000) – both seem to suffer from erroneous and partial views of her work – work that can be more appositely theorize as the 'poetics of resistance', vocalizing and valorizing marginal voices in a bid to promote egalitarianism, secularism, toleration, and love.

CHAPTER: 2

THIS WOMAN'S FRAME: GENDER AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

"Women are only children of a larger growth [...]. A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them, as he does a sprightly and forward child."

– Lord Chesterfield

"The word 'man' always includes 'woman' when there is a penalty to be incurred, it never includes 'woman' when there is some privilege to be conferred."

– Charlotte Carmichael Stopes

"My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing
a B plus in bed
My son says I am average,
an average Mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
In Pass/Fail, and tells me
I pass. Wait 'till they learn
I'm dropping out."

– Linda Pastan

If Kamala Das' poetics of resistance presupposes the marginalization of individuals and groups on diverse bases, then the most crucial factor behind that marginalization must have been 'gender'. When one half of humanity is constantly held back and imposed on, made aware of their biological difference as well as social inferiority, and typecast either as 'angel' or as 'temptress' by heteropatriarchy, it is bound to irritate a sensitive poet who is compelled to ideate both 'resistance to' and 'rectification of' those ills. According to Ann Oakley, 'gender' refers to the 'socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity', operates in parallel with 'sex' or the 'biological division into male and female', and draws attention to the socially constructed aspects of differences 'between' women and men (Oakley: 1972, 26).

The concept of 'gender' has now extended its 'field of reference' to include not only individual identity and personality but also, at the symbolic level, cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and, at the structural level, the sexual division of labour in the family as well as in the work place. This semantic expansion of gender has led to the development of allied concepts like 'gender roles' and 'gender discrimination'. Based on these conceptual outgrowths, we can perceive differential treatment of baby boys and girls who are turned into adult men and women by the processes of socialization in child-rearing, education, youth-culture, employment practices, and family ideology. Significantly, these 'processes of socialization' continue to differentiate between men and women for the rest of their respective lives. This 'differential treatment' based on gender has, therefore, been a major cause of marginalization, resulting in denial of certain basic rights to women.

This environment of denials and discriminations leads to the development of a 'gendered subjectivity' that at once provides women with a specific outlook on the 'self' and the 'other' and formulates an 'awareness context' whereby, according to Barney Glaser and Anselm Leonard Strauss, 'the total combination of what each interactant [including the female] in a situation knows about the identity of the other [especially the male] and his [or her] own identity in the eyes of the other' can be analyzed so as to arrive at an understanding of the social organization of 'knowledge'

and 'awareness' (Glaser and Strauss: 1965, 40). Julia Kristeva, however, has reminded us that 'a woman cannot "be"' (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 137), since 'woman' (as explained earlier) is a social rather than a natural construct, and the fight to dissolve the bourgeois humanist conception of identities must include sexual identities (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 138).

As Kathryn McPherson has taught us, this has also been the perception of the Second-wave Feminists of Europe and America in the last forty years (McPherson in Code: 2000, 209-210). Women's urge to control their own bodies led to the campaign for greater sexual freedom outside conventional heterosexual and/or marital relationships. The need for economic independence meant that women were clamouring for 'equal pay for equal work', 'equal pay for work of equal value', and 'access to non-traditional areas of employment'.

Second-wave Feminism has, however, been undermined by long-standing and radical dissensus among the various feminist movements. In fact, as McPherson has further pointed out:

> In contrast to the international consensus around questions like suffrage that had shaped the first wave of feminism, late-twentieth-century feminist movements in Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, South America and Asia challenged the priorities and analyses of their western counterparts; questions of imperialism, religion and cultural difference all demanded new answers (McPherson in Code: 2000, 209).

Much in the same vein, Kristeva has suggested, 'the women's struggle cannot be divorced from revolutionary struggle, class struggle, or anti-imperialism' (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron: 1981, 140). Besides, the development of this alternative doxa ensured that 'women's empowerment', rather than 'individual/personal freedom' or 'male/female equality', became the priority for these 'Postcolonial' or 'Third World Feminists'. As Rehana Ghadially has observed:

> India [like other Third World countries] is as yet new to the ideology of personal freedom. Both Indian men and women have hitherto functioned under rigid hierarchies, learned to curb freedom; condition them to suppress their needs, silence their senses, and sublimate their selves in a philosophy of self-denial, self-effacement and services (Ghadially: 1988, 94).

'Third World feminism', as preached by Rehana Ghadially and as practised by Kamala Das, is fundamentally humanistic and proactive, whereas much of the mainstream western feminism is 'reactive' to a significant extent (Ghadially: 1988, 94). So, in keeping with this view, Das advocates the empowerment of women through awareness and activism though not at the cost of men. Her feminism, as Das herself states, unlike that of the Western Radical Feminists, has never been 'anti-male'. In an interview with P.P. Raveendran, Kamala Das has formulated her feminist stance in the following manner:

> 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 (P.P. Raveendran 1993, 159).

From the above excerpt, one can easily divine that unlike many of the Second Wave western feminists Das glorifies motherhood as one of the unique abilities, and then, therefore, inalienable rights of women (e.g. 'Jaisurya', 'Peripuerperal Insanity').

Thus, the prevalent critical practice of virtually nailing the poet to male-female binarism is questionable in her case. Das' 'egalitarian' position, however, proves largely untenable in the light of some of her poems like 'An Introduction' and 'Spoiling the

Name' in which the poet-speaker critiques the socio-cultural assumptions and arrangements that unmake a female to make a woman, from man's equal and different counterpart to some kind of lesser man (woman). In other poems such as 'A Losing Battle', 'Glass' and 'The Stone Age', her poetic personae lambaste the inconsiderate sexual aggression of the husband-figure or the male. In poems like 'The Old Playhouse', 'Gino', 'The Freaks', etc. the poet-speaker reveals the terrible fate that awaits married women in a male-dominated society like ours. That this callous and selfish attitude of the husband-figure may lead the sensitive and independent minded woman to seek the recognition of her essential femininity outside marriage is seen and shown in such poems as 'Ethics', 'The Looking Glass', etc. In some other poems like the 'Colombo Poems', 'Delhi 1984' and 'Old Cattle' that deal with issues such as ethnicity or the environment, the poet seems to suggest that the violence and violation are offshoots of the male hegemony. She also implies that these or such other ills could be significantly alleviated, if not completely neutralized, provided women were to be sufficiently empowered. Here Kamala Das seems to concur with Rabindranath Tagore who had observed, "Barbarity is the gift of the male" (Tagore, quoted in Sen: 1968, 53).

Revealing the patriarchal bias against women and women-writers, and Kamala Das' awareness of as well as resistance to that 'bias', 'An Introduction' becomes the key poem in any discussion of Das' negotiations with marginality that this 'woman's frame' gives to its owners.

Rama Kundu has called 'An Introduction' a poem about 'identity' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 129). A careful reading of the poem, however, forces us to add 'culture' to its thematic canvas. In fact, 'An Introduction' displays the binary roles played by culture and identity in shaping Das, the person as also Das, the poet. If 'culture' is the constrictive framework, socially imposed on the individual by the various power-centres, that inhabits the mind of an individual, programming it to think and act in a prescribed way as showing marks of 'cultivation', and holding out the promise of 'worship' (social adulation), then 'identity', that roughly translates into 'that'-ness, becomes linked with the idea of Latin 'Quiditas' or 'what'-ness, turning out to be an

alternative construct that helps the individual (in this case the dark-skinned Indian woman-poet) resist, neutralize, alleviate or utilize the cultural norms to further his or her own end. Re-read with this insight, 'An Introduction' becomes a site for the contesting voices – the forbidding, ordering, judging, and punishing breed of 'categorizers' as opposed to and by the defying, suffering, and subverting 'I', representing as they do, the discourse of culture and the counter-discourse of identity respectively.

Kundu makes a controversial statement that the poem 'begins with an "I" who rejects a political identity' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 129). The first few lines of 'An Introduction', however, seem to negate this contention. K. Satchidanandan (Satchidanandan in Panja: 2001, 51) and I. G. Ahmed (Ahmed: 2005, 60) have both called attention to the unmistakably political dimension of the following statement by the female-speaker:

> I don't know politics but I know the names
> Of those in power, and can repeat them like
> Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
> Nehru. [...] (*SC* 59)

Das, here, reveals how patriarchy creates a hegemonic culture that neither expects nor accepts women knowing 'politics'. Women, both individually and collectively, are excluded from the centres of power, and can only 'repeat' the names of 'those in power', whereby this act of repetition becomes contingent on the male act of free will i.e. discussing 'politics'. As Paul Valéry had indicated, "Politics was, at first, the art of preventing people from interfering in matters that concerned them. To this, in later times, was added the art of compelling people to decide matters which they did not understand" (Valéry cited in du Preez: 1980, N. pag.).

The female-speaker's statement 'I don't know politics' and the woman-poet's act of writing the poem are tentative steps towards self-empowerment, and, therefore, entail assertions of their self-identity which can be anything but apolitical. The

speaker's 'repetition' of 'the names / Of those in power' involves a 'mimicry' of the discourse of politics that, in the words of Jeremy Hawthorn, incorporates 'the subversive potential contained in the forced and (often overtly) half-hearted adoption of the style or conventions of a DOMINANT authority – whether national-CULTURAL or GENDER-political' (Hawthorn: 2000, 209).

Kundu points out how the speaker 'proffers a national card and a colour brand which she proudly proclaims' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 130), 'I am Indian, very brown' (*SC* 59). According to Sanjukta Das, this statement 'rings with the confidence of this free nation' (S. Das: 2002-2003, 208). She further suggests that it is from this 'location' that the poet goes on to 'unravel the other tapestry woven by politics, history, literature, language, patriarchy and gender' (S. Das: 2002-2003, 208). 'An Introduction', according to K. Satchidanandan, thus becomes 'a polyphonic text with several of the poet's voices seeking articulation in a single verbal construct' (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). As regards her position as a poet, these assertions of identity, rather identities, pertaining to her 'nationality' and 'colour', take a heavy toll on the speaker. The cultural categorizers hasten to decry her act of 'write'-ing, and that too 'in English':

> [...] Don't write in English, they said,
> English is not your mother-tongue. [...] (*SC* 59)

The command of course is two-fold, 'Don't write', since the speaker is a woman, and 'Don't write in English', since she is 'Indian' and 'very brown'. Since the poet's choice of English as medium, and its many ramifications have been discussed in the previous chapter, we may safely confine our present discussion to an appraisal of her act of writing with the prior awareness that women's writing is a truly ideological act – a weapon to fight back the many socio-cultural rigours to which patriarchy has subjected them. Needless to say, the speaker refuses to obey these dictates, and instead strongly defends her right to practise and assert her identities:

[...] Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why nor let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions [...] (*SC* 59)

Of course, she will continue writing poetry to express her 'joys', 'longings', and 'hopes', regardless of the consequences. As Jayakrishnan Nair has shown us, the 'self-conscious poet' in Das cannot 'pretend ignorance about her unique position as a feminist mouthpiece' (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 68). So, her poems deliver 'the speech of the mind that is / Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and / is aware' (*SC* 59). Nair finds in this 'a confident pronouncement of the originality of her [Das'] poetic revolt' 'asserted through suggesting the spatial variations of the mind' to be found 'here' (within the poet) and not 'there' (elsewhere) (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 69). In fact, Das seems to have resolved to 'override the traditional limits prescribed for the expositions of the feminine psyche' (Nair in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 69). To keep Nair's remark in perspective, it is the acute expression of the woman-poet's 'aware'-ness of 'all' (including the persecutions of women) and not the naïve description of 'trees in storm', 'monsoon clouds' or 'rain', and not even the accurate reproduction of 'the incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyres' that should concern Das, the 'feminist mouthpiece'. Eleven years after the publication of this poem, we find the adoption of the same stance in Hélène Cixous' maxim, 'I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man' (Cixous: 1976, 877).

Putting to rest the quarrel of culture with her poetic identity in the first part of the poem, Das goes on to deal with her female identity in the second. The speaker reminisces, 'I was child'. Significantly, the term 'child' is of common gender. But, the gender-neutrality of 'child' soon gets destabilized when the speaker grows into and becomes a 'woman', a gendered being:

> [...] I was child, and later they
> Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
> Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. [...] (*SC* 59)

Judith Butler, with whom Das seems to agree here, holds:

> If there is no recourse to a "person", a "sex" or a "sexuality" that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity? [...] If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiple contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds put the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing [...]. As an ongoing discursive practice, (becoming a woman) is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most-reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means (Butler in Gould: 1997, 86-87).

True to Butler's precept, Das' poetic persona falls a prey to the matrix of patriarchal power – under its gaze, and at its mercy – in her dual role as 'object' and 'patient'. That her 'growth' is physical and not so much mental is evinced by her hesitant act of asking 'for love, not knowing what else to ask / For'. Besides, her growth is always monitored by society, active under the influence of the prevalent cultural assumptions, 'later they /

Told me I grew'. The female-speaker is thus marginalized to the position of an object under the panoptic gaze of society.

Gradually, the attacks on her female identity increase in frequency and ferocity as the first male pronoun, 'he', representing the father-figure, draws 'a youth of sixteen into the / Bedroom' and closes 'the door', or as the second male pronoun, 'he', representing the husband-figure, has sex with her, makes her pregnant, and makes her a mother – prematurely. In this context, Satchidanandan has pointed out, "Speaking of adolescence her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers too her first encounter with masculine violence [...]" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). If the father-figure's decision to marry her off is prompted by a perception of physical growth, then the husband-figure's ruthless haste in enjoying her body is also motivated by her swelling limbs. Both these male-figures are agents of the patriarchal culture and they temporarily succeed in deactivating the speaker's female identity, as betrayed by her desperate adoption of a male exterior, by putting on male attires and wearing the hair short. Satchidanandan observes, "The woman cannot change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 10). This act entails an attempt at self-empowerment through deception that had previously been attempted by the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies.

This deception, however, proves ineffective; for the lynx-eyed gaze of culture sees through it. So, the 'categorizers' cry out:

> [...] Dress in sarees, be girl,
> Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
> Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
> Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
> On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
> Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
> Still be Madhavikutty. It is time to
> Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love [...] (*SC* 60)

Sanjukta Dasgupta has rightly indicated how the tirade of the categorizers 'exposes social and cultural construction of femininity' (Dasgupta: 2000, 173). Interestingly, these categorizers say many things about the prescribed attire, occupation, and identity for and of the female-speaker that amount to a constrictive bulwark of patriarchal culture against female assertiveness. Rosemary Marangoly George is of the opinion that the poet's 'listing of the categories available to the middle-class woman (girl, wife, embroiderer, cook, quarreller with servants) all assumes a heterosexual and domestic foundation' (George: 2000, 749). To 'refuse these domestic categories is to refuse the sense of belonging and shelter offered by heteropatriarchal arrangements' (George: 2000, 749).

Choosing 'a name' will determine the role, for 'names' are indicative of 'gender' and prescribe 'fit' roles for each of the genders. Choosing 'roles' is the only way an individual can 'fit in' and 'belong', and 'fitting in' is the only way she can be safe. So, the female-speaker is confined to the inside of the house, destined to perform the household chores, and when she is allowed to assert her superior self-identity, she can do it only by quarrelling with the servants (her inferiors) and not with the husband or the male-figure (her superior) even though he can with impunity 'jilt' her in love. The 'categorizers' condescend to advise her to 'be girl' and to 'be wife'. Both of these terms are umbrella terms, exclusive of individuality and, therefore, unacceptable to any woman of substance. To abide by the cultural fatwa, she can only be 'Amy' (the pet name denoting her private identity) to her husband and very close friends and relatives, 'Kamala' (the name denoting her formal identity) to her grandmother and the readers of her poetry in English, or 'better still' 'Madhavikutty' (the pseudonym denoting an adopted and then therefore an alienated identity) to the readers of her fiction in Malayalam. These socio-cultural impositions force the female individual to fragment

her identity into specific stereotypes, lose the unity of being, and become self-alienated for the time being.

The female-speaker, to be sure, is a resilient individual who can dare to take the assertive step of meeting 'a man' – 'a man' and certainly not 'the man' or her husband. Even after being 'jilted in love' by the husband, who could hurt her womanhood by talking of women sexier than her (*MS* 87) or by flaunting his homosexuality (*MS* 110), the love-lorn woman-speaker hazards loving another man as an assertion of her indomitable femininity. In this connection, S.Z.H Abidi has opined, "For a man, a woman is almost invariably a biological necessity while for a woman the man she woos is a kind of a psychological imperative" (Abidi: 2005, 309). Faced with a constrictive culture of 'categorizers', the cornered individual i.e. the female-speaker tries to come up with different identity-formations. She had once tried to borrow the male identity as a constructive alternative. In other words, this was the intended replacement of her intrinsic femininity with the extrinsic masculinity. This failing, she again tries to cast off her personal femininity for a more inclusive gender identity:

> [...] I am every
> Woman who seeks love. [...] (*SC* 60)

This is the name-weary female-speaker – the 'Amy', the 'Kamala' or the 'Madhavikutty' of pervious lines trying to assume a name-free feminine identity. Interestingly, another shift follows here, bringing in a third male pronoun, 'he', the lover-figure. The 'I', as Kundu explains, does not try anymore to deny her womanhood (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 131); for from this 'he' she gets real companionship and reciprocity in lieu of mere male stewardship and authority. So, they (lover and the speaker) can now 'meet' and 'love' as 'every man' (any man) and 'every woman' (any woman). This uninhibited assertion of female identity gives the speaker freedom. This freedom, in its turn, gives her the capacity to observe and evaluate. Thus, she becomes capable of neutrally assessing her surroundings with both expectancy and trepidation.

The speaker is initially elated at the prospect of choice but eventually saddened to realize the contrastive way in which society holds them.

In love, as in life, the woman-speaker has to be passive and dwindle into a secondary role. She cannot 'run' or 'flow' like 'a river'. As a matter of fact, she has to 'wait' like the 'ocean'. Unlike the woman, the man can proudly proclaim his identity:

> [...] Who are you [...]
> [...] it is I. [...]

According to N.V. Raveendran, 'the male tendency to view himself as unique and to subordinate the female as a mere medium for pleasure is thwarted in this part of the poem' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 43). By revealing this self-seeking 'male tendency' and the consequent marginalization of the female, Das strategically points up the injustice thereof. In real life, however, this male 'I' gets fitted into the world like a 'sword' in its 'sheath'. As Rama Kundu points up, 'sheath also protects the sword, and the sword easily cuts through things' (Kundu in Ray: 2003, 131). Here the sexual implications of 'sword in its sheath' can hardly be overlooked. When contrasted with this male 'I', the other 'I', which is female, gets inevitably marginalized:

> [...] It is I who drink lonely
> Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
> It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
> And then feel shame, it is I who lie dying
> With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
> I am saint. I am the beloved and the
> Betrayed. [...] (*SC* 60)

The speaker feels the need to speak representatively, for all her attempts at reaching out have been thwarted and she has always had to retreat with shame and chagrin. This 'shame' is a cultural construct imposed on the individual to proscribe

individual identity and promote a 'cultural identity', which in John A. Loughney's formulation, stipulates that 'a person achieves the fullest humanity within an accepted context of traditional symbols, judgments, values, behaviour, and relationships with specific others who self-consciously think of themselves as a community' (Loughney in *CREP*: 185). Hence, non-conformist and assertive acts on the part of the female-speaker such as drinking 'lonely / Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns', laughing, and making love – all result in her eventual feeling of shame and 'dying / With a rattle in my throat'. The moral is that non-conformity to cultural norms may lead to self-reproach and social strangulation of the individual implied by both the feeling of shame and the 'rattle' in the throat. In the words of Satchidanandan, "The many ontological dimensions of her being – lover's darling, drinker of citynights, one who makes love, feels shame, sinner, saint, beloved, betrayed – are tied together at the end of the poem [...]" (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 11). The female 'I' is fated to remain passive – an object for cultural inspection and judgement. So, she can only be a 'saint' or a 'sinner', 'beloved' or 'betrayed', as the case may be, and never an individual, free to assert her own identity. In fact, the condition of the female 'I' closely tallies with what Hélène Cixous has later diagnosed as 'antinarcissism':

> They [the patriarchal society] have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove (Cixous: 1976, 878).

In a final frantic attempt to subvert cultural constrictions, the female 'I' tries to reach out to the male 'I' pointing to the fact that they are both emotionally alike:

> [...] I have no joys which are not yours, no
> Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (*SC* 60)

She further tries to point up their indistinguishable human identity, 'I too call myself I'. This final assertion by the female 'I' is a throw back to an earlier assertion by the male 'I':

> [...] Who are you, [...]
> [...] it is I. [...]

S.C Harrex in this connection has highlighted Das' 'dual vocalism' that can fuse both the 'autobiographical I' (gendered identity) and the 'archetypal I' (human identity) 'with its stress on the connecting principle "too"' (Harrex in Das, 1986: 165).

The binaries of the poem comprise of paired pronouns ('I'/'they', 'I'/'he', 'I'/'you', and 'I'/'I'). 'They' stand for the voice of culture whereas 'I' for that of identity. Similarly, 'he' and 'you' stand for the perpetrators of cultural hegemony and 'I' for its prey. Their dialogic relationship is clearly manifested in the truth and tension of their co-existence.

The poem 'Spoiling the Name' exemplifies the poet's proactive position with regard to her identity as a woman. In fact, this 'identity', as I. G. Ahmed asserts, can never be tethered to her 'name' that, like her roles, was given to her by 'somebody else', and that too, for mere 'convenience' (Ahmed: 2005, 59-60):

> I have a name, had it for thirty
> Years, chosen by someone else
> For convenience, but when you say
> Don't spoil your name, I feel I
> Must laugh, for I know I have a life
> To be lived, and each nameless
> Corpuscle in me, has its life to
> Be lived [...] (*SC* 28)

Whereas in 'An Introduction' the issue was to 'choose a name', here it is even more arbitrary, since the 'name', which was chosen by 'someone else', is pinned to the reluctant 'I'. When 'you', standing for the authoritative culture, says 'Don't spoil your name', the dictate assumes a more serious proportion; for as we have seen in 'An Introduction', choosing 'a name' implies confirming the gender and conceding the authority of culture by being confined in a constrictive social space. Here, in 'Spoiling the Name', 'spoiling' the 'name' implies daring to come out of that constrictive social space and, therefore, invites the censor of the 'categorizers'. Bruce King in his analysis of the poem betrays his own categorizing and blinkered approach to this woman-poet when he holds 'her sexual adventures' responsible for 'spoiling her name':

> Often her poetry offers her [Das'] versions of the *carpe diem* theme, a seizing the day both in awareness of the passing time and youth and in a need to live intensely. To a person who objects that her sexual advances are spoiling her name she replies: 'I know I have a life / To be lived, and each nameless / Corpuscle in me, has its life' (King: 1987, 151).

What strikes us in the above quoted excerpt is the critic's strategic and selective amnesia that leads him to categorize the 'adventures' as merely 'sexual'. King here conveniently forgets her other activities such as her frequent walks along 'the city's dusty / Streets', 'looking for old books, antiques, / And new thrills that might come my / Way'. As a result, a woman's assertion of identity, flying in the face of an authoritative culture, is reduced to 'her versions of the *carpe diem* theme, a seizing the day'.

Faced with this reality, the resilient 'I' lashes out, camouflaging her bold rejionder under the garb of derision: 'I feel I / Must laugh'. Of course the 'I' has a 'life to be lived', quite independent of the constrictive framework of name and norm. But, she is also aware of the perils of opposing culture in a reckless manner which may lead to social alienation or even social strangulation of the individual. So, she strategically disperses her individual identity and the urge to live to the 'corpuscles' (cells) that constitute her body and being. In fact, each 'corpuscle' is 'nameless', has a 'life' to be

'lived', and is unstable on account of cell division and mutation. Thus, the individual speaker's identity is first destabilized and then rehabilitated, only to be ultimately prioritized over culture.

The combative speaker fails to figure out why the constrictive framework of her 'name' should restrain her from meeting or receiving a 'man', when, as she has previously pointed out in 'An Introduction', they can 'meet' and 'love' as 'every man' and 'every woman':

> [...] why should this name, so
> Sweet-sounding, enter at all the room
> Where I go to meet a man
> Who gives me nothing but himself, who
> Calls me in his private hours
> By no name, [...] (*SC* 28)

The name-weary speaker seeks the same gift of anonymity so that she can be free to 'walk' the 'city's dusty / Streets', looking for 'old books', 'antics', and 'new thrills' that might come her way. The speaker's hatred of 'name' stems to a large extent from its incompatibility with her boundless vibrancy:

> [...] Why should I remember or bear
> That sweet-sounding name, pinned to
> Me, a medal, undeservingly
> Gained, at moments when, all of
> Me is ablaze with life? [...] (*SC* 28)

In this context, I.G. Ahmed states that 'The superfluity of a name contrasts with the beauty of the urge to live' (Ahmed: 2005, 60). But, we should add here that the 'name' is not only superfluous but positively undesirable as well, because the 'I' is well aware of the dangers it poses. Hence the refusal to 'Carry / This gift of a name like a corpse

and / Totter beneath its weight / And perhaps even fall [...]' (*SC* 28). Here, S.C. Harrex observes, 'Identity is not to be found in the "medal" of a name, but in inner commitment to living' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 172). The speaker's concluding statement that she loves 'This gift of life more than all' assumes a greater significance if we relate it to the phenomena of change and growth.

That the possibility of 'change' and 'growth' is often denied to the owners of 'this woman's frame' is clearly revealed in the next poem, 'The Descendants'; for change and growth that must lead to and culminate in women's renewal and redemption does not constitute a priority for heteropatriarchy.

In fact, 'The Descendants' is at once a satirical exposé of women's marginalization in a patriarchal society, and a sad realization of its inescapability. The word 'descendants' in the title as also the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we'/'us' bestows on the poem a representative quality. Immediately questions such as the identity of 'we' and the nature of 'descent' begin to haunt us. That 'we' refers to the marginalized 'women'-kind is determined by the poem's context. Naturally, such women can claim to be the 'descendants' of figures like Lilith and Ahalya. Throughout the youth, the speaker says, women like her had indulged in 'gentle sinning'. The ambiguous term 'gentle sinning' slowly explains itself as it is associated with the exchange of 'insubstantial love' and the adoption of 'cold loveliness':

> We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
> Exchanging some insubstantial love and
> Often thought we were hurt, but no pain in
> Us could remain, no bruise could scar or
> Even slightly mar our cold loveliness. (*D* 8)

Evidently, the 'love' that such women exchange with their lovers was 'insubstantial', because it was concerned with 'loveliness' (physicality) and ignored any 'cold'-ness (lack of emotion) that marred its vitality. In this context, I.G. Ahmed observes, "[...]

Descendants also sets out to expose the perverted male equation of a woman with her body" (Ahmed: 2005, 104). Society dubbed it sinful, but tolerated it with the palliative 'gentle', because it was needed to satisfy the carnal desires of the male. The marginalized women, however, had their own counterstrategy – that of emotionally substracting themselves from the affair. As a result, though they often thought they were 'hurt', they could easily forget those hurts and could maintain their 'cold loveliness' for their male admirers, undeterred by any personal desire or the lack of it.

That the 'gentle sinning' was the sin of the flesh – that of lying (engaging in sexual acrobatics) 'in every weather' – gets substantiated as the speaker mentions 'soft beds' and 'softer forms'. But, this cosy 'soft'-ness is immediately undercut by the word 'nailed' on account of its hardness and sexual associations. The women were 'nailed' to the 'soft beds' by their respective male lovers in 'every weather' and in spite of their 'cold loveliness'. Though the speaker denies being 'nailed' to 'crosses', the idea of crucifixion or, at any rate, that of sacrificing the women on the alter of male libido, can hardly be discounted here. In fact, their 'cold'-ness was precipitated by the routine drabness of this sexual act ('in every weather'):

> We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not
> To crosses, but to soft beds and against
> Softer forms, while the heaving, lurching,
> Tender hours passed in a half-dusk, half-dawn and
> Half-dream, half-real trance. [...] (*D* 8)

As the 'heaving lurching / tender hours' passed, the speaker could carry on with this mindless bed-game only by doing violence to her own nature, and this exacted a heavy toll on her and others like her. In fact, this act punished women with a spiritual stupor (trance) and a loss of perception that prevented them from knowing the 'dawn' from the 'dusk', and the 'dream' from the 'real'. In this context, Sunanda P. Chavan comments, "In 'The Descendants' (*The Descendants* p.8) the poet probes into the state of helpless

submission to the process of spiritual decay in the present world [...]" (Chavan: 1984, 68).

By defining herself and her ilk as 'yielders', 'yielding ourselves to everything', the speaker self-disqualifies from reclaiming the past or resisting the future:

> [...] We were the yielder,
> Yielding ourselves to everything. It is
> Not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for
> Memories, not for us even to
> Question death, but as child to mother's arms
> We shall give ourselves to the fire or to
> The hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
> Devoured. [...] (*D* 8)

Leaving aside the stupefied indeterminacy, the female-speaker now reassesses her situation. It seems to her that since they have yielded themselves to 'everything', and by implication yielded 'everything' they had (feminine dignity and sexuality), they could neither retreat to the antenatal memory of female bonding between mother and daughter within the secure confines of the womb, nor could they question and, by implication, evade death or eternalize their feminine mystique. In life, they had 'yielded' themselves to their lovers, in death they would yield themselves as 'child to mother's arms'. Here, by likening death to 'mother', and the fire/the earth to 'mother's arms', the female-speaker tries to reveal the full extent of her disenchantment with and distaste for life in the present condition; for at least in death she hopes to escape both the inescapability of yielding and the passage of the 'heaving lurching / tender hours'.

In this respect, Das' 'The Descendant' becomes a feminist critique of and rejoinder to the carpe diem theme as expressed in poems such as Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' (Marvell in Gardner: 1985, 250-252). What Marvell's male-speaker threatens the female-addressee with, namely death and dismemberment, if she refuses to 'yield'

and what Das' female-speaker sees as her impending fate, namely the same death and dismemberment, even after accepting to 'yield', testify to woman' doom in any case, and corroborate the contention of Hélène Cixous that the woman is always kept within 'the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty', 'guilty of everything, guilty at every turn, for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being too hot; for not being both at once [...]' (Cixous: 1976, 880).

In the concluding lines of the poem, as I.G. Ahmed asserts, the speaker expresses 'her gnawing awareness' of women's loss of both 'intellectual visibility' and 'freedom of choice' in the 'centres of powers', and the consequent 'commodification of their body' and devaluation of their being by the patriarchal society (Ahmed: 2005, 60). The climactic outburst apparently reveals the speaker's grief and helplessness, reverberating with inter-textual traces and echoes. She is well aware of the fact that 'none will step off his cross' or 'show his wounds' to women. Obviously, the allusion is to Christ, his reassurance of resurrection of hope and of mercy. She also knows that 'no god' (Zoroaster/Zarathustra) 'lost in / silence shall begin to speak' to them revealing ageless wisdom (he had received from Ahura Mazda, the lord wisdom) (*EWED*: 2171). She is also not impervious to the fact that 'no lost love' (like Menelaus in the Iliad) is going to 'claim' and accept them (like Helen). On the surface level, the speaker's words seem to suggest women's utter dependence on and subservience to the male gods to be 'redeemed' or 'made new':

> [...] None will step off his cross
> Or show his wounds to us, no God lost in
> Silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
> Claim us, no; we are not going to be
> Ever redeemed or made new. (*D* 8)

But, on a deeper level, the same realization of masculine inability or unwillingness to 'redeem' or 'renew' the female, may suggest alternative strategies for women, aimed at independent self-redemption and self-renewal through self-assertion. There is no

denying the fact that in the present condition there is no chance for women to be 'redeemed' or 'made new'. Writing this poem with that message, may help other women to develop alternative strategies to achieve the said goals. It is here that we find Das' poetics of resistance at work, proscribing women's dependence on male benefactors and promoting their self-reliance. The female-speaker seems to concur with Cixous, 'we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine', as well as question with Cixous, 'but who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them?' (Cixous: 1976, 885).

The role and rigour of the patriarchal culture in shaping and silencing a woman's identity receives Das' bitter reproach in the poem 'The Freaks'. That the poem is about the male-female relationship, and that the nature of this relationship is predominantly sexual, is clearly revealed in the first six lines of the poem:

> He talks, turning a sun-stained
> Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
> Cavern where stalactites of
> Uneven teeth gleam, his right
> Hand on my knee, while our minds
> Are willed to race towards love; (*SC* 10)

Significantly, it is 'he' who 'talks', turns his 'sun-stained / Cheek', laughs or, at any rate, opens 'his mouth', letting his teeth 'gleam', and places 'his right / Hand on my knee'. In short, it is he who takes the initiative in the game of 'love'/'lust'. The woman, the poem's speaker, is fated only to receive and reciprocate the male's sexual advances. That 'our minds / Are willed [by society acting under the cultural expectations of heteropatriarchy] to race towards love' is further proof, if proof were needed, of the marginalized condition of the speaker whose femineity, according to N.V. Raveendran, 'is projected only through the [her] capacity [...] to have coitus with the he' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 65). This 'will' is societal rather than individual (of the speaker),

and in lieu of any intimacy there is mere enforcement of that 'will'. As a result, 'our minds' can only wander, tripping / Idly over puddles of desire'. 'Puddles', in this context, become emblematic of the degenerate and putrefied nature of this 'coitus', whereby vitality is replaced by stagnation and sterility. In utter disgust, the speaker asks a brace of rhetorical questions with the realization of the futility of expecting any worthwhile answer:

> [...] Can't this man with
> Nimble finger-tips unleash
> Nothing more alive than the
> Skin's lazy hungers? [...] (*SC* 10)

And again:

> [...] Who can
> Help us who have lived so long
> And have failed in love? [...] (*SC* 10)

The answers, by implication, are in the negative, reinforcing the speaker's doom in the process; for 'this man' (her man/husband) cannot 'unleash' anything 'more alive than the / Skin's lazy hungers'. The 'hungers' are 'lazy' (ineffectual and short-lived) because they are 'skin's' (skin-deep). Das' strategy of qualifying and trivializing the grand *needs* like 'desire' and 'hungers' by respectively associating them with 'puddles' and 'lazy', testifies to the clash of inner feelings and outer experiences. The speaker's call for third-party mediation and 'help' is similarly foredoomed to failure; for there is no one experienced ('lived so long') or bold ('failed in love') enough to offer them any help or guidance. The 'heart' of the speaker, as a result, becomes 'An empty cistern' (a mechanical construct) – emptied of her natural feelings, and yet to be filled by either the deep affection or the passionate desire that love entails.

The woman-speaker's marginalized status is foregrounded as her 'heart' is kept 'waiting' for the touch of intimacy. This 'touch of intimacy' is never forthcoming, so the 'cistern'-like 'heart' 'fills itself / With coiling snakes of silence'. The speaker's 'silence', as contrasted with the male-figure's 'talk', frames a context of social inequality, whereby the marginalized woman has to wait for and accede to her own sexual exploitation on account of socio-cultural norms:

> [...] The heart,
> An empty cistern, waiting
> Through long hours, fills itself
> With coiling snakes of silence... (*SC* 10)

But, she has to pay a big price for doing so – that of going against her own nature and predilections. She is intelligent enough to realize this as she calls herself 'a freak' (abnormal person). The speaker proceeds to rationalize her behaviour as being directed towards saving her face:

> I am a freak. It's only
> To save my face, I flaunt, at
> Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (*SC* 10)

This 'face-saving' is directly associated with the cultural expectations of patriarchy, because the woman has to 'flaunt' (keep up the show of) 'a grand, flamboyant lust' in order to retain/maintain her spousal acceptability. The prepositional phrase 'at times' (sometimes) accentuates the 'irregular', 'unusual', and 'unnatural' aspect of this role-playing that dissipates the speaker to the level of being a 'freak'. Here, Vincent O'Sullivan comments that 'Das' fretting at having to keep in time with another's beat brings her to designating herself as grotesque, as unnatural' (O'Sullivan in Das, 1986: 187).

It is quite striking that the woman-speaker of the poem intra-textually calls herself 'a freak' whereas the woman-poet gives the poem the title 'The Freaks'. This apparent anomaly opens our eyes to a deeper level of significance, whereby the freakish woman-speaker stands for and speaks out on behalf of other women placed in similar circumstances. In this context, Arlene R. K. Zide holds that Kamala Das' themes transcend the 'personal' because what she attempts to poetize is the 'universal experience of women'. Zide argues that the self-explorations of Kamala Das are beyond the feminist haranguing because they have a universal appeal (Zide 1981, 239).

The poem, however, demands and deserves an alternative reading, since the woman-speaker is too resilient and individual to put up with the socio-cultural impositions without resisting and subverting them and asserting her indomitable feminine identity. The first step in this assertion of identity is the poetization of her condition, whereby the 'sufferer' becomes the 'speaker', enlisting both the liberation and the empowerment that comes with it. In this context, if we care to remind ourselves of how often Das has grumbled of having to disintegrate under the immense pressures that patriarchy puts on a woman like her (c.f. 'An Introduction', 'Spoiling the Name', 'The Old Playhouse', etc.), we may perceive specific points of similarity between her praxis and the precept of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar regarding those manoeuvres a woman-writer must go through with herself before she can write her 'self' into song:

> If the novelist [...] sees herself from the *outside*, as an object, a character, a small figure in a large pattern, the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the *inside* [...] she must be [...] assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness – and hence, by definition, profoundly "unwomanly", even freakish (Gilbert and Gubar: 1979, xxii).

The lyric poet in Das shows her self-awareness from 'inside' when she expresses her 'freakish' flaunting of 'a grand, flamboyant lust'. At the same time, she asserts her

powerful feeling of disgust, first in revealing the inability of 'this man' to 'unleash' anything 'more alive than the / Skin's lazy hungers', and secondly by referring to 'The heart' as 'an empty cistern' that has to wait 'through long hours' and 'fills itself / With coiling snakes of silence'.

In order to assert her identity, the speaker has to make light of 'this man' as the agent of patriarchal culture. The strategy she adopts is two-fold – 'disfigurement' and 'condemnation'. In the poem, the possessive 'his' occurs twice, in '*his* mouth' and '*his* right hand' (italics mine). As a result, we are left with no clear indication/implication as to whether the body parts ('mouth' and 'right hand') belong to the one and the same individual. This fact, according to N. V. Raveendran, may be read as 'an attempt by the poet to disfigure the "he"' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 65). In fact, in so doing, the poet tries to establish some kind of domination over the male by reversing and subverting the 'practical' (life experience) by the 'poetic' (art experience). Moreover, throughout the poem, as Anisur Rahman has observed, the male is 'presented with scorn' by describing his cavernous 'mouth', stalactite 'teeth', 'nimble fingertips', and lecherous motive of unleashing the 'Skin's lazy hungers'(Rahman: 1981, 9). In respect of semantic specification, 'mouth' and 'hand' are '+ human' while 'cavern' and 'stalactites' are not only '- human' but also '- animate'. The linguistic ploy of suspending the 'he' between '+ human' and '- human' features, along with the artful condemnation implied therein, amounts to an overt denial of the male-figure's individuality. Subsequently, this ploy provides the speaker with the necessary background against which she can then assert her own 'individuality' and 'identity'. The comparison between the 'heart' and the 'cistern' and the loaded use the verb 'fills' signify 'mechanization' of physical responses and total loss of feelings that indulgence in or rather surrender to 'the / Skin's lazy hungers' has caused in the woman-speaker. On another level, they may refer to a feminine strategy of countering sexual exploitation by substracting her 'self' from the sexual act.

The appearance of the first person pronoun, 'I', at the fag end of the poem, as the subject of the assertive sentence ('I am a freak'), gives the speaker both the space

and the pretext to stride over the 'he' (the male partner) who has been left in his insubstantial disfigured state. The female-speaker, on the contrary, emerges as a woman capable of realizing her own marginalized status and patriarchal domination, and of asserting her own human identity through both the choice and the claim of being 'a freak', since it suggests the woman-speaker's decision as well as determination to face the situation rather than flinch from it. As Santosh Chakraborti has explicated, "What she seeks to convey in her love poems [like 'The Freaks'] is a fervent clamour for space for the woman – the Indian Woman – emotionally tyrannized and sexually marginalized in the socio-familial set-up in which she lives" (Chakraborti in Kundu: 2003, 182).

The companion piece of 'The Freaks', 'In Love' at once deals with, elaborates on, and deviates from the themes and concerns expressed in the former poem. The critical dissensus regarding the poem's merits (or otherwise) can be pointed out if we refer to the opinions of Linda Hess who calls the poem 'a superb example of poetic talent making it one of the excellent pieces in *Summer in Calcutta*' (Hess: 1977, 40), and Vrinda Nabar, according to whom 'it lacks the tautness of "The Freaks" and is characterized by the tendency to indulge in some trivial questions' (Nabar: 1994, 24). I. G. Ahmed has put forward one possible reason for this dissensus, by pointing up the presence of heteroglossia in this poem, whereby Kamala Das blends 'dissimilar discourses' of 'death' and 'sensuality'. In fact, Ahmed has highlighted the simultaneous occurrence of 'Bol Hari Bol', the auditory image that 'lends a native hue to the poem and its context', and the 'pleasure' with 'deliberate gaiety', that provides the poem with 'the overall cultural framework' (Ahmed: 2005, 89). Needless to say, at first sight, the two seem utterly incompatible with each other. So, Linda Hess' praise and Vrinda Nabar's censor of 'In Love' may have resulted from their readiness (or the lack of it) to accommodate and appreciate this heteroglossia in the poem.

The poem begins with the 'burning mouth of the sun', reminding the female-speaker of 'his mouth' and 'his limbs':

Of what does the burning mouth

Of sun, burning in today's
Sky reminds me... oh, yes, his
Mouth, and... his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust. [...] (*SC* 14)

Obviously, the point of comparison is 'burning'. But, instead of warmth and life that the sun's 'burning' encapsulates, the lover's 'burning mouth' stands for the fire of carnal desire which makes 'his limbs' like 'pale and carnivorous plants', and, by describing them as 'reaching out' for her, the woman-speaker highlights the uncontrollable intensity of the male's sexual urges, and its killing ('carnivorous') effects on her. Significantly, the lust-laden 'limbs' reach out not only for her but also for some kind of reciprocity ('my unending lust'). But, her 'unending lust' is a 'sad lie' – at once 'sad' (causing unhappiness/regrettable) and a 'lie' (falsehood/wrong impression deliberately created). In fact, the woman is forced to keep up the show of an unending lust to save her face. On the contrary, K. P. Saradhi asserts, "The lover, whose mouth is like 'the burning mouth of the sun' spreads his limbs like 'carnivorous plants reaching out' for her and draws her up in embraces which are like a finished jigsaw" (Saradhi: 1974, 34). Of course, where 'lust' reigns supreme, there is no 'room', 'excuse', or 'need' for 'love'. Consequently, 'each embrace' becomes a 'complete thing' or a 'finished jigsaw':

[...] Where
Is room, excuse or even
Need for love, for, isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a
Finished jigsaw, [...] (*SC* 14)

In this sexual encounter between the active/willing male and the passive/reluctant female, the active male folds up the speaker in his embrace, considering it to be a

'complete thing' or a 'finished jigsaw'. 'Complete' and 'finished' while qualifying 'thing' and 'jigsaw' respectively hint at purposive action, undertaken by the male who considers 'lust' as an end in itself, and for whom there is no 'need' for 'love'. As the female has to keep in time with his beat, she is left with no 'room' (space or chance) and no 'excuse' (pretext for love).

In keeping with her decision and determination to face the situation rather than flinching from it, as expressed in 'The Freaks', the woman-lover has to carry on with this dreaded sexual acrobatics in spite of herself:

> [...] when mouth on
> Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor
> Moody mind, while pleasure
> With deliberate gaiety
> Trumpets harshly into the
> Silence of the room. [...] (*SC* 14)

The immediate context of embrace and coitus necessitates her lying with the male 'mouth on mouth'. But, she can bring herself to do it only at the cost of ignoring her 'moody mind'. That she 'lies' (sleeps with) as also 'lies' (tells a lie) because she has to, at once causes and ignores her moodiness. The sexual 'pleasure' arising out of this self-denial ('the sad lie of my unending lust') helps her feign 'gaiety'. But, if the woman has to participate in the sexual encounter to save her face, then 'gaiety' can only be 'deliberate' ('forced', and then, therefore, a 'false' state of feeling). The 'pleasure' with 'deliberate gaiety' trumpets 'harshly' to break the 'silence of the room'. So, whose pleasure and whose silence become the conundrum. The action 'trumpets' and its manner 'harshly' suggest intrusion, violence, and violation that the male can subject the female-speaker to. Here, we must remember that for the female-speaker, lying 'mouth on mouth' with her lover/husband and 'ignoring my moody mind', takes place simultaneously. So, N.V. Raveendran's contention that 'she reflects on an ecstatic union

with her lover and *then* evaluates its impact on her' (italics mine), proves logically untenable (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 49).

Since the whole poem is an extended rumination on the speaker's experiences and emotions, she now goes on to deal with temporal adverbials such as 'at noon' and 'at night'. At 'noon' she sees 'sleek crows' whom she likens to 'poison on wings', and at 'night' she hears the corpse-bearers who register their (and by implication death's) presence through their cries of 'Bol Hari Bol' as 'a strange lacing / For moonless nights'. Moonless 'nights', in this context, take on some of the death-like associations in view of the close affinity between death and darkness. Here, the speaker's description of 'Bol Hari Bol' as 'a strange lacing' for 'her' 'moonless nights' remind us of the owl's cry in Edward Thomas' poem 'The Owl' (Thomas in Palgrave: 2000, 441-442). In both cases, 'strange' as they are, the respective cries foreground death and decay and break in on the unsuspecting listeners:

> [...] At noon
> I watch the sleek crows flying
> Like poison on wings - and at
> Night, from behind the Burdwan
> Road, the corpse-bearers cry
> 'Bol Hari Bol', a strange lacing
> For moonless nights, while I walk
> The veranda, sleepless, a
> Million questions awake in
> Me, and all about him, and
> This skin-communicated
> Thing that I dare not yet in
> His presence calls our love. (*SC* 14)

The female-speaker of this poem hears the 'cry' while walking 'the veranda sleepless'. Subsequently, 'a million questions' 'awake' in her 'all about him' and this 'skin

communicated thing' ('the skin's lazy hungers'). That the 'questions' awakening in her are all concerned with 'him' (the male) and the 'skin communicated thing' (that this man unleashes), suggest her awareness of the reduction of 'love' into mere physical union as well as its cause (i.e. the sexual obsession of the 'him'). The questions that assail her require immediate answers, and the answer that she finds is that real love goes far beyond this 'skin communicated thing' and aims at the sublimation of 'unending lust' into eternal fulfilment through death. But, one problem which still remains is that she dares not call 'it' 'our love' in 'His presence'. If on the one hand, it suggests the male's stubborn refusal to accept the extra-physical dimensions of love, on the other hand. It also highlights the marginal status of the female-speaker who is forbidden to share her sights and insights with 'him' (the agent of patriarchy).

The ironic title of the poem, 'In Love', is at once a realistic commentary on how a patriarchal society palms 'lust' off as 'love' and on the proximity of Eros and Thanatos in the perceiver's psyche. Who is 'in love' (?), is s/he really 'in love' (?), and what does it mean to be 'in love' (?) – these questions are all left either unanswered or ambiguously answered. Since the woman is a prey to the 'carnivorous plants' of the lover's 'limbs', after the sexual encounter she feels physically and spiritually routed. This feeling, at a later stage, makes her identify with both the dead and death. The 'sleek crows' (scavenger birds) and the 'corpse-bearers' (the announcers of death) can both be projected as exteriorizations of her mental state, whereby even indulgence in this 'skin communicated thing' causes a virtual death of her soul.

This theme of spiritual annihilation is carried forward in 'The Stone Age', in which the husband's might and mindlessness turns the sensitive woman-speaker into 'a bird of stone', 'a granite dove'. In fact, Kamala Das' simultaneous awareness of the woman-speaker's marginal status, and attempts at de-marginalizing herself and her ilk, informs the poem 'The Stone Age'. As S.C. Harrex has pointed out, the poem 'objectifies subjective experience' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 166), and in so doing, it at once reveals what I.G. Ahmed has called 'familial colonization' (Ahmed: 2005, 58) and Gajendra Kumar has termed a sensitive feminine soul's quest for 'freedom and

redemption' (Kumar in Dodiya: 2000, 146). The role and rigour of patriarchy in subjugating woman has been brilliantly shown in this poem through the portrayal of the female-speaker whose acceptability depends on her acceptance of domesticity. The moment she revolts against the social/cultural constriction with a view to asserting her identity, she has to pay the price of ostracism to attain her bliss.

The poem begins with the female-speaker addressing her husband in ambiguous terms, whereby the 'fond' husband is equated first with an 'ancient settler in the mind' and then with an 'old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment':

> Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
> Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
> Be kind. [...] (*OP* 51)

The question as to whether his 'fond'-ness for the wife has been a result of his ancient settlement in the wife's mind does no sooner begin to baffle us than we come across a further identification/comparison of the husband-figure with an 'old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment'. Obviously in our 'bewilderment', we cannot help thinking whether this 'fat'-ness of the spider/husband has been sustained on the 'cowering' of the wife. The settler/colonizer-male conquers the mind of the wife much as the spider gradually increases its territory by weaving its web. Thus, the wife is projected as a helpless victim, caught in the web of familial bonds. So, when she asks for kindness from her husband, this should imply as slackening of his 'fond'-ness (possessive attachment) for her. This interpretation seems all the more plausible when we read the following:

> [...] 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. [...] (*OP* 51)

The husband, the 'you' of the poem, wields the supreme authority over the wife, and that this control is at once mental and physical, becomes clear since the husband is free not only to 'build around me a shabby drawing room' but also to 'stroke my pitted face absentmindedly'. The result of the husband-figure's total domination, and then therefore, the female-speaker's utter bondage is disastrous, as the wife is turned into 'a bird of stone, a granite dove'. The 'bird', with its love of freedom, is stupefied within the narrow confines of the drawing room. No wonder the 'drawing room' seems 'shabby'. Anisur Rahman, in this context, has stressed the 'collocation of opposites', whereby 'innocence and tenderness' get contrasted with 'hardness and granite' (Rahman: 1981, 21). According to Rahman, by identifying herself as a 'granite dove', the female has tried to reveal her predicament, whereby the 'symbol of peace' ('dove') gets juxtaposed with the 'symbol of death' (granite) in her being (Rahman: 1981, 21). Almost in the same vein, N.V. Raveendran has tried to explicate the twin images as indicative of the sorry state of the speaker (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). In Raveendran's view, a 'bird of stone' is a bird curved out of stone for show, and the 'granite dove' which is the stone image of a pretty innocent bird symbolizes the frozen state of beauty and innocence within the institution of marriage (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). I. G. Ahmed, however, draws our attention to a new aspect of these images by stressing the role of the husband in turning the wife into the lifeless bird:

> The animal imagery is functional and 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 strangulate 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 associations (Ahmed: 2005, 59).

At this point, we should recall the title of the poem ('The Stone Age') which with its twin associations ('Stone' and 'Stone Age') links the present condition of the wife

('bird of stone') with the past predicament of her female predecessors (victims of 'ancient settler in the mind'). The term 'ancient settler', as applied to the husband and as contrasted with the present tense of the description, hints at the subjugation/colonization of the female that started in the distant past and still persists unmitigated.

Coming back to the poem proper, the unfeeling cruelty of the husband that led him to turn the wife into 'a bird of stone', with its ocular and tactile implications, gets reinforced by his 'loud talk' that can 'bruise' the wife's 'premorning sleep'. The auditory association of this description shows up the utter unconcern of the husband for the female-speaker's peace or privacy. Her suffering acquires a physical dimension when 'you stick a finger into my dreaming eye'. On one level, his acts of bruising her 'premorning sleep with loud talk' and 'sticking a finger into her dreaming eye' betoken his complete control over her, whereby he can wake the reluctant and sleepy wife up with no qualms. On another level however, words like 'bruise', 'stick', and 'eye' may tempt us to find a veiled reference to marital rape in this description. In N.V. Raveendran's opinion, "The images in these lines show the husband as a loveless and cruel man – loveless in not giving the speaker a blissful experience and cruel in keeping her in confinement" (N.V Raveendran: 2000, 100). That the female-speaker is none too happy with her conjugal life becomes clear when she freely speaks about men who can enamour her:

> [...] And
> Yet on my daydreams strong men cast their shadows, they sink
> Like white suns in the swell of my Dravidian blood;
> Secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities. (*OP* 51)

The use of 'strong men' after the discordant conjunction 'yet' bring into sharp focus the difference of those other men from her husband who, despite his complete control over her mind and body, fails to kindle her desire. Vrinda Nabar has conveniently found in this the poet's 'escapism and darker passions', overlooking in the process the sensitive

feminine soul's dire need and its consequent quest for an identity beyond the granite dove that Gajendra Kumar talked about (Nabar: 1994, 77). The facts that these 'other men' sink like 'white sun' into the swell of the speaker's 'Dravidian blood', and that this process continues 'secretly' as 'secretly flow the drains beneath sacred cities', combine to imply a social/cultural constriction that arbitrarily categorizes cities as 'sacred' and regulates woman's desires beneath the veil of secrecy. The attribution of 'sacred'-ness to cities as well as to women corroborates Harrex's classification of Indian society as one 'whose moral codes maintained feminine sexual propriety by maintaining powerful inhibitions' (Harrex in Das: 1986, 166). The temporary slackening of patriarchal control liberates the 'granite dove' from her frozen exterior, affording her an opportunity to assert her identity:

> When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
> Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
> Noisy steps to knock at another's door. (*OP* 51)

As N.V. Raveendran has rightly pointed out, 'the suppression of the speaker's individuality by her husband becomes an incentive [for her] to celebrate the pleasure of being an individual' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 100). This pleasure, however, is a strategic ploy of the speaker to drown out the heartfelt sorrow to which Rahman has directed our attention; for the car she uses to get away from 'the familiar grooves of love' and to seek peace and tranquillity, is both 'blue' (the colour of sadness) and 'battered' (by her life experiences). Moreover, the 'blue sea' that she drives along 'stands here as an agent of peace, one that incorporates all sorrows'. The slackening of patriarchal control, however, does not entail a complete absence of the panoptic gaze of society. In fact, through the eyes of the neighbours, society watches her 'come and go like rain', presumably to assess and censor.

The rest of the poem deals with the speaker's affair with her lover, the 'he' of the poem. The 'ask me' series explicitly reveals the speaker's responses to her lover through a detailed description of the physical aspects of sex. Evidently, the female-

speaker started this affair with a lot of hope and confidence. But, she is ultimately disillusioned because the lover can offer her nothing more than a temporary 'bliss', and that too at a heavy 'price'. This price that the female-speaker has to pay for attaining the bliss of individuality links the present poem with 'An Introduction'. Significantly, here too, the female-speaker's attempts at reaching out can only bring her ultimate shame and exhaustion. This 'shame', however, is again a social construct like 'sacredness'. So, the speaker records her disappointments flying in the face of social constrictions. As Harrex has pointed out, "Exhibition against inhibition is the name of the game of protest in Kamala Das' poems about love and sexual morality" (Harrex in Das, 1986: 166). To extend the argument further, we can safely say that this exhibitionism informs and creates Das' poetics of resistance against the unmitigated marginalization of women that goes on in our society, sanctioned by the institution of marriage.

If the woman-persona's resistance to her marginal status as wife gets revealed through her full-throated denunciation of her husband, the poet's resistance to the process of marginalization on the basis of gender comes to the fore in her chronicling of the whole situation. The hysterical tone of the speaker may remind us of what Juliet Mitchell has said in this connection, "Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse" (Mitchell in Lodge: 1988, 427). To relate Mitchell's precept to Kamala Das' poetic praxis, we may say that since 'the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism' is virtually impossible either to dismantle or to embrace, the woman-speaker has to subvert it from within, camouflaging her 'refusal' as a kind of acceptance. So, the woman-speaker plunges headlong into the uncharted sea of sensuality to simultaneously fulfil her essentially feminine desires and to repudiate the patriarchal expectations of acceptable femininity, namely domesticity, submission, and service.

In 'The Looking Glass', Kamala Das proceeds pro se to reveal and resolve the tensions arising out of the clash of woman's honesty and patriarchal expectations. The

'Looking Glass' of the title simultaneously refers to the mirror as an object and 'looking' as an ideologically formed and discoursally framed act. As a result, 'who looks', and 'why in the glass', become immediate quarries that complicate the poem's tenor. Since the poem's immediate discoursal space stretches from the female-speaker to the internalized male partner, both of them perform the 'looking' act. By the same token, since their 'looking' is determined by their respective expectations or desires, this 'looking' act culminates in and confines itself within the reflective surface of the mirror. Chris Wallace-Crabbe has highlighted how the first person pronoun has become 'you' 'just as a mirror transforms the not full visible self into another who (or which?) can be scrutinized' (Wallace-Crabbe in Das, 1986: 219). Thus, 'The Looking Glass' provides the poet with the means to fracture oneself into the constitutive 'self' and 'other' to help her find the 'self' in the 'other' and vice versa. Thus, as Wallace-Crabbe explicates, 'the self advises herself' ('you') 'to stand nude before the glass with him' 'so that the lover can see both mirrored bodies in close comparison' (Wallace-Crabbe in Das, 1986: 219). But, what Wallace-Crabbe does not point out, is how the female sees not only herself (her reflected image) but also her male partner (his 'fond' details).

Apparently, the poem begins with the female-speaker thinking aloud about a fact and its proviso. According to S.K. Tripathi and G.A. Ghanshyam, "The poet here [in 'The Looking Glass'] asserts that the physical gratification may become possible in a relation if the woman is 'honest' in her wants, but the emotional fulfilment is hardly possible" (Tripathi and Ghanshyam in Ray and Kundu: 2005, 120). Whether the easy availability of a male lover is contingent on the woman's being 'honest' about her female 'wants' or whether a man's love can only be retained by being 'honest' about female desires – these are factors that enhance the poem's appeal. If we start detecting an instructional tone in the words 'be honest' and 'stand nude', we may easily realize with S.C. Harrex how Das 'subverts' and 'inverts' 'the classical-religious ideals of Indian womanhood' (e.g. Savithri and Sita), by opposing 'a fiction of idealized and contented femininity', by putting forward 'brute facts of sexual experience and female suffering' (Harrex in Das, 1986: 163). Here, being 'honest' about her 'wants' as a

woman and standing 'nude' before the 'looking glass' for a traditional Indian woman run to a rebellion against the socio-cultural constrictions:

> Getting a man to love you is easy
> Only be honest about your wants as
> Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
> So that he sees himself the stronger one
> And believes it so, and you so much more
> Softer, younger, lovelier [...] (*D* 25)

But, standing 'nude' before the 'glass' with 'him' (the easy-to-get male) is motivated not only by the female-speaker's rebelliousness but also by her 'need' and 'wish' to satisfy the male ego. This she hopes to achieve by assuring the male of 'his' strength and control over 'her' as compared to her own softness, youth and loveliness. In other words, she wants to make herself more desirable to her male. Devindra Kohli betrays his own patriarchal bias when he calls 'The Looking Glass' 'another of Kamala Das' hymns to sexual love', and can perceive in it only a 'patronizing' and 'indulgent' tone (Kohli: 1975, 96). But, I.G. Ahmed has alerted us to the poet's 'concealed postcolonial feminist agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality' (Ahmed: 2005, 67).

The next few lines of the poem seem to corroborate Ahmed's contention. The poem, as Bijay Kumar Das points out, 'turns out to be a kind of homily for womankind as how to satisfy their emotional and physical need' (Bijay Kumar Das: 1999, 33). Of course, the strategy suggested by the woman speaker is two-fold – to satisfy the male ego as well as male concupiscence. So, the woman is apparently instructed to admire the 'fond details' of the lover's body and being that would make him feel 'male' and her 'only man'. Similarly, she is told to yield herself completely by gifting 'him' all that makes her 'woman':

> [...] Admit your

Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. [...] (*D* 25)

That it is imperative on her part to convince him about his 'male'-ness and his exclusive access to and control over her sexuality ('your only man') shows the same patriarchal expectations at work to which Ahmed had alluded. Besides, she has to 'gift him' both the coveted female sexual favours and the 'Endless female hungers'. The gifts of the 'scent of long hair', the 'musk of sweat between the breasts', the 'shock of menstrual blood' constitute the quintessential feminine mystique. What the speaker thinks will make the woman more irresistible to the male-lover is the biggest gift of the 'Endless female hungers'. Significantly, the fact that the woman has to 'gift' (and not satisfy) her own 'female hungers' (sexual urges) to the male-lover and make it seem 'endless' betrays her marginal status in the male-dominated society.

That like 'The Descendants', this poem too is a warning to woman against yielding 'too much' becomes clear in the last few lines where, according to N.V. Raveendran, the mood of the poem 'shifts' from the initial 'statement' through the medial 'directions' to the eventual 'prediction' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 59). The 'prediction' that Raveendran refers to is one of separation, whereby too much of sexual satisfaction may lead to the man's loss of sexual interest in the woman, leading to estrangement from or 'living / Without him'. That in spite of all her bold assertions of female 'wants' and 'hungers' she is culturally conditioned to be attached to 'her only man' becomes clear when she defines 'living without him' as 'living without life'.

Moreover, in such an eventuality, she may have to remain bound to the past affair, with her eyes and ears expecting and accepting her 'only man' even after his disappearance from the scene:

> [...] Oh yes, getting
> A man to love is easy, but living
> Without him afterward may have to be
> Faced. A living without life when you move
> Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
> Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
> His last voice calling out your name and your
> Body which once under his touch had gleamed
> Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute. (*D* 25)

In the aftermath of this estrangement, the woman may have to undergo a physical transformation as well, whereby her 'body' that once 'gleamed' like 'burnished brass' under 'his touch' becomes 'drab' and 'destitute'. To the poet, women's attachment to a specific 'face', 'voice', or 'touch' that may cause at once excessive elation (gleam like 'burnished brass') and utter desolation (becoming 'drab' and 'destitute') is a sufficient cause for concern, since it goes against her advice to women like herself to be 'honest' about their 'wants as / Woman'. It is this realization of women's vulnerability to the socio-cultural norms and the passive acceptance of suffering and silence that prompts Kamala Das to write her life and write her body in this poem in a bid to 'invent' for Indian English poetry a new discourse of l'ecreture feminine, the 'impregnable language', as Hélène Cixous would call it:

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse [...] (Cixous: 1976, 886).

These connected ventures of 'writing the life', 'writing the body' finally refutes Kohli's claim, whereby the tone of the poem is ultimately revealed to us not as 'patronizing' but as 'practical' – not as indulgent but as ironical.

The desire to trample 'unsacred laws' that keep women tied to the 'inherited memory of a touch' and as 'another's country', and such a woman's cultural inhibitions to oppose or trample those laws in real life, constitute the thematic tension of the poem 'Gino'. Strongly refuting the views of myopic critics like Vimala Rao who can only find in this poem 'a medley of sexual images thrown in together' for the sake of 'cheap' 'effect' (Rao: 1980, 94), 'Gino', in Sunanda P Chavan's opinion, adds 'a psychoanalytical dimension to the theme of love' by dealing with the 'dreams which form a part of the feminine psychic's obsession with love in terms of sex' (Chavan: 1984, 66).

According to Anisur Rahman, the poem begins with a powerful expression of the 'terror of sex', 'its attraction' and 'revulsion' (Rahman: 1981, 16). In fact, the 'he' or the husband-figure warns the woman-persona of an inevitable annihilation if she is kissed by the second 'he' (the lover-figure). By comparing the 'kiss' of the lover with Krait's bite, 'he' tries to connect sex with death. The circumstantial evidence of a 'July' 'full of rain', however, soon negates the thanatonic associations of sex by foregrounding the scope for rejuvenation and rebirth. The cursed essence is thereby cleansed to become the sap of life:

> You will perish from his kiss, he said, as one must
> Surely die, when bitten by a krait that fills
> The bloodstream with its accursed essence. I was quiet,
> For once, my tongue had fainted in my mouth.
> It was July, a July full of rain, and darkness
> Trapped like smoke, in the hollows of the sky, and
> That lewd, steamy smell of rot, rising out of earth. (*OP* 13)

The tempest of feeling raging in the woman-persona creates for her a dilemma of choice. She, as a result, is torn between a strong desire to enjoy this potentially poisonous 'love' and equally strong inhibition arising out of her 'inherent memory of a touch':

> He walked one step ahead of me, the west wind leaking
> Through his hair. And, I thought, if I could only want
> Really, really want his love, we shall ride happiness,
> Great white steed, trampler of unsacred laws,
> If I could only dislodge the inherited
> Memory of a touch, I shall serve myself in
> Bedroom-mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,
> While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another's
> Country, I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes.
> And in jealous moods, after bitter words and rage,
> I shall wail in his nerves, as homeless cats wail
> From the rubble of a storm. [...] (*OP* 13)

She is well aware of the fact that by accepting 'this love' she stands to gain both the freedom of choice and the fulfilment of so many 'female hungers'. She, however, fails to forget her past attachment to another male – the 'man of substance' who owns her body as his 'country'. The fair conqueror (her present lover) is, therefore, kept waiting, and her love for this other man remains an unfulfilled dream.

Presenting a hypnotic situation that reflects her unfulfilled desire, she talks of serving herself in 'bedroom mirrors' as 'dark fruit on silver platter'. Dorothy Jones, in this connection, observes how the woman presents herself as 'an object for her lover's delectation' (Jones in Das, 1986: 207). Jones is of the view that this situation is reinforced here by the fact that 'the man is European not Indian' (Jones in Das, 1986: 207). The word 'fair', on which Jones bases her observation, may problematize her inference on account of its second meaning (i.e. just); for the woman who has already

been another's 'country' may as well be conquered by still someone else. Thus, the 'fair' skin of the 'fair conqueror' cannot be proved 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

The woman-persona's imaginative wish fulfilments continue with a make-belief catalogue of her possible activities in love – polishing the moody panes of her lover's eyes, having a tiff with him, and her subsequent whining – all presenting the dependant and marginal status of women in love. Here, her comparison of herself with 'homeless cats' becomes quite instructive. Like the cat, the woman-persona too is 'homeless' or bereft of any emotional anchor and dependant on her master.

Though it is in the middle of the poem's first stanza, we can perceive here a change of thought and approach on the part of the poet-speaker. She is well aware of the fact that one gets the life one deserves and dreams only such dreams that are comprehensible as well as acceptable to the 'old soul'. The use of 'old' to qualify her soul leads us to believe that it is a slew of old customs and conventions that has taken possession of her inner being, determining thereby not only what she does or says but also what she 'dreams'. As a result, there appears a big chasm between what she should be dreaming, faced with this opportunity of accepting another man's love, and what she dreams in reality, based on her prior experiences and previous memory:

> [...] But one only gets
> The life one deserves, and dreams only such dreams as
> The old soul can comprehend. I dream of obscene hands
> Striding up my limbs and of morgues where the night lights
> Glow on faces shuttered by the soul's exit. And
> Of ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors
> To the X-ray room's dark interior.
> O, the clatter of the trolleys, with the dead on them,
> As loud as untimely laughter. And, of aeroplanes
> Bursting red in the sky... I should be dreaming his
> Peerless dreams, his dreams of sunlit villa and of fat

Half-caste children, lovelier than Gods and of
Drinking wine in verandas, he and I, ageing
And at peace, all disguise gone from us. (*OP* 13-14)

The woman-persona cannot forget the masquerade of lust as love, whereby her encounters with the man of substance, owning her body, only meant 'obscene hands / Striding up my [her] limbs' and never any emotional attachment with him. Moreover, frequent bouts of illness turn her dreams nightmarish, setting forth 'morgues' and 'dead bodies', 'X-ray room's dark interior', and 'the clatter of trolleys', and 'aeroplanes / Bursting red in the sky, in the war torn country'. She is not averse to the happiness of realizing her lover's 'peerless dreams', pertaining to 'sunlit villae', 'fat half-caste children' 'drinking wine in verandas', and 'ageing in peace' with him. But, since his dreams are devoid of any contact with reality her old soul cannot comprehend them and she, as a result, does not deserve the life exhibited in them.

The woman-persona realizes that her life will certainly take a different course and come to a different end. So, she reluctantly, yet firmly, rejects this option of loving another man, choosing instead to satisfy herself with the reverie of a dream-life and dream children:

But I shall end differently, I know, our bloods'
Tributaries never merging. It is
A dream-river, keep it so, the children are
Dream-children. Real ones never bear such splendent eyes.
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. (*OP* 14)

With the memory of 'obscene hands / Striding up her limbs', she suspects that her body will either 'wither battling with my darling's [her husband's] impersonal lust' or 'reach large proportions' before its end. True, this expected end is at a far remove from the prospect of 'ageing in peace' with her lover. But, the marginalized woman-speaker is forbidden as well as unable to aspire to break the patriarchal norm. She, as a result, will have to 'wear' 'this body' 'without joy'. Since she is little more than a 'slender toy', owned by a man of substance, her body has to bear the burden of 'lenience'. Here, her response is formed and framed by her knowledge, 'every wife is her one man's whore, / Earns her bread easing him pubic bliss' ('Effusions V', *Symposium*: 48). Her slenderness (inconsequentiality), as contrasted with her man's substantiality, renders her little more than another's country, and shows up Das' poetics of resistance at work.

In her imaginary avatar as a 'fat-kneed hag' in the long bus-queue, she stands to be reduced to an object of ridicule; for from her shopping bag 'the mean potato [must surely] roll across the road'. Z.F. Molvi has rightly found in this 'the banality of her common life' (Molvi in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 96). The second possibility visualized by the woman-persona is that she may become a hospital patient, 'lying in drugged slumber and dreaming of home'. The prospect, in this case, is very bleak, as 'drugged slumber' indicates a lack of natural sleep whereas the dream of home is precipitated by a removal from/loss of it ('home'). The third possibility envisaged by the apprehensive speaker is of becoming a grandmother, 'willing away her belongings'. That the objects she proposes to will away (i.e. 'the scraps' and 'the trinkets') are meant to outlast her bones subtly introduce the theme of imminent death. The transformation of 'dark fruit on silver platter' into brittle 'bones' reinforces the themes of transience and mortality. On another level, however, it points up the marginalized woman-persona's inability to bequeath something more substantial than the mere 'scrapes and trinkets'.

The last words of the poem at once carry forward and complicate this theme of mortality, because the poem which began with an apprehension of death ends on the same note as well:

[...] Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent. (*OP* 14)

Of course, the woman-persona will die and the womb of death will begin to convulse before letting in this 'legitimate entrant'. Her legitimacy (socio-culturally determined) will be judged even at the point of death, approved at the cost of her discontent. In other words, it is only by performing her socially sanctioned duties and roles as wife, mother, and grandmother, and suppressing her personal desires, that the marginalized woman-speaker can hope to gain a posthumous legitimacy.

That these expectations of acceptable femininity when accepted by the woman-speaker may lead to disastrous consequences is brilliantly brought out in the poem, 'The Old Playhouse'. Considered by Kamala Das as her best poem (in an interview with Atma Ram: 1977, 42), 'The Old Playhouse' gives us a horrendous picture of suppression which countless number of women are subjected to all over the world. Written in a characteristically colloquial style, this poem is a virtual dialogue between an astounded 'I' and an absent 'you'. The 'I' being the poet-speaker, the possible identity of the 'you' has become a bone of contention between critics like Vrinda Nabar (Nabar: 1994, 63) and Dorothy Jones (Jones in Das, 1986: 200) on the one hand, and other critics like I.G. Ahmed (Ahmed 2005, 139) and N.V. Raveendran (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 94) on the other. Conveniently forgetting the half line 'you called me wife' and over-emphasizing the statement 'It is not to gather knowledge / Of yet another man that I came to you', both Nabar and Jones have confused Das the person with Das the poet, and inferred that the addressee of the poem is the lover-figure and not the husband of the persona. As a result, the victimization of the woman gets somewhat downplayed, and questions of adultery or promiscuity rear their heads.

It is unfortunate to see perceptive critics like Nabar and Jones failing to fix their critical priorities, and this problem of mistaken priorities in dealing with Kamala Das'

poetry often give rise to popular misconceptions. R. Raphael's article, "Kamala Das: The Pity of it" (Raphael: 1979, 127-137) which includes a discussion of 'The Old Playhouse' can be cited as a representative case in point. Generally dismissive of Das' poetic talents, Raphael finds her use of 'love' as 'an euphemism for sex'. However, a close reading of the poem under discussion may easily discredit Raphael's contention. He interprets Das' coming to the 'you' after being close to other men as indicative of her promiscuity, and her desires to grow in contact with the male-figure as a selfish desire for egotism (Raphael: 1979, 135). But, the following section of the poem may also be interpreted as a woman's quest for self-actualization in/through love:

> [...] It was not to gather knowledge
> Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
> What I was and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
> Lesson you gave was about yourself. [...] (*OP* 1)

In fact, this excerpt should be interpreted retrospectively to comprehend the woman-persona's intention and expectation in view of the response it evoked from the male 'you'. As Sunanda P. Chavan has pointed out, she came to him to attain self-knowledge through 'a meaningful sexual relationship' (Chavan: 1984, 63) as well as emotional and intellectual companionship. She, however, was averse to the suppression/loss of her individuality. Her desire was thwarted by the overbearing personality of the male who 'planned' to 'tame' a 'swallow' (the referent for the 'I'). The sinister motive of the male is to wheedle the woman-persona into forgetting not only her past freedom but also her freedom-loving nature:

> You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
> In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
> Not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but
> Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
> Pathways of the sky. [...] (*OP* 1)

This brief discussion may open our eyes to Raphael's myopic view which may make us impervious to the marginalization of the woman-persona at the hands of patriarchy as well as that of a woman-poet at the hands of her predominantly male-critics. To maintain our critical neutrality, we may, therefore, follow Saleem Peeradina in being moved by the woman-persona's 'ultimate resilience in the face of any relationship that threatens to devastate her vital and potential self' (Peeradina: 1972, 86).

The lessons learnt by the persona were all given by the husband-figure who not only called her 'wife' but also colonized her body:

> [...] You were pleased
> With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
> Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
> Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
> My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. [...] (*OP* 1)

Significantly, it was 'you' who became 'pleased' with the woman's frame and its 'responses', 'dribbled' 'spittle' (semen) into 'my mouth', and 'poured / yourself into every nook and cranny'. The woman's 'poor lust' (normal sexual desires) was 'embalmed' (artificially preserved for future enjoyment) by the husband-figure with 'bitter sweet juices'. True 'he did not beat' her but her 'sad woman body' felt so beaten ('An Introduction', *SC* 59).

The colonization of the woman, however, did not stop at her physical territory and extended to her mental realm as well. She had to pay the price for being called the 'wife'. Being 'taught' by heteropatriarchy of which the husband was the microcosmic figure-head, she learned to break 'saccharine' into the husband's 'tea' and offer him the 'vitamins' at the prescribed hour. As Nandini Sahu has observed, "In nourishing the male with vitamins, the female persona succumbs into a weakling [...]" (Sahu in Ray and Kundu: 2005, 39). The 'monstrous ego' of the husband forced her to cower

'beneath' it and eat 'the magic loaf' of do's and don'ts. As a result, she became a 'psycho-pathological dwarf', to borrow a phrase from I.G. Ahmad (Ahmad: 2005, 80).

Faced with this fierce attack on body and mind, she 'lost' her 'will', and by and by, not only her logical faculty, but her power of articulation as well:

> [...] I lost my will and reason, to all your
> Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. [...] (*OP* 1)

But, old habits die hard. So, giving the lie to all the male attempts at inducing amnesia, the swallow-like woman-persona still remembers 'the ruder breezes of the fall' as well as the smell of the 'burning leaves'. And the 'long summer of your love' begins to 'pall' (grow wearisome):

> [...] The summer
> Begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes
> Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is
> Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
> Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
> All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
> In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. [...] (*OP* 1)

These bits of tactile and olfactory memory seem at a far remove from, and then therefore, much more desirable than the regulated cooling of the 'air-conditioner', the 'all pervasive male scent' of 'your breath' and 'human sweat'. Niranjan Mohanty, in this context, has remarked, "Her [the speaker's] female ego is invulnerable to the male-dominance. So, she raises a voice of protest, sharply defining the chasm between the two worlds – one masculine, the other female [...]" (Mohanty in Kaur: 1995[a] 56).

Desirable that memory might be, the woman-persona is fully aware of its unattainability. This realization, therefore, breeds a sense of dejection the expression of which is almost matchless even in Kamala Das' poetry:

> [...] There is
> No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old
> Playhouse with all its lights put out. [...] (*OP* 1)

The beauty and striking originality of this metaphor has led even such a sceptic as Vrinda Nabar to praise Das, 'Nothing could more effectively convey the collapse of her psyche, of her essential vitality, than this image of derelict, and abandoned place of entertainment' (Nabar: 1994, 65). We may add that the 'playhouse' whose dereliction the persona mourns is not only a place of entertainment (performance) but a place for applause (praise) as well. In fact, as Sharada Iyer avers, "Her quest for self-knowledge only leads her to the painful realization that is an 'Old Playhouse with all its lights put out'" (Iyer in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 120).

It is her subservience to her 'strong man' (husband) and awareness of the same reality in many other marital relationships such as that of her parents that makes the persona pessimistic about her future prospects in life. The strong men who 'serve' their 'love' in 'lethal doses' ultimately try to expropriate even the emotion of love. Their love, therefore, is at once selfish and self-seeking. Enamoured of themselves à la Narcissus, they are always haunted by the 'lonely face' of love sans compassion and understanding. But, the resilient woman-persona is bent on reclaiming love – love of identity and love for freedom. So, she must embark on the last quest for 'a pure, total freedom' even at the cost of self-annihilation.

In 'Luminol', this quest for freedom leads the woman-speaker to the lap of 'sleep' and its attendant forgetfulness. As a matter of fact, the succinct expression of women's wretched condition within the institution of marriage and their urge for withdrawal from the daily confrontations and conflicts makes it one of Das' most

effective poems. According to Eunice De Souza, this poem 'records' the profound loneliness of the neurotic persona, longing for the cessation of conflict, however temporary this cessation may be (De Souza: 1977, 44). On the paraphrasable level, the poem seems to be an advice to a fellow woman proffered by the persona. In fact, the addressee who is categorized as being 'love-lorn' is urged to surrender to 'sleep' and allow it to 'make holes in memory'. As I.G. Ahmed points out, 'The moody sea of memory "thumps" against the shore of her consciousness in an unwelcome manner' (Ahmed: 2005, 101). The painful nature of this memory makes it intrusive in character. So, the only way to ward it off is to let 'sleep' and oblivion take hold of her mind. Even if this 'sleep' is not naturally obtained but artificially induced, it seems much more desirable than the violated privacy of a tortured wakeful state:

Love-lorn,
It is only
Wise at times, to let steep
Make holes in memory, even
If it
Be the cold and
Luminous sleep banked in
The heart of pills, for he shall not
Enter,
Your ruthless one,
Being human, clumsy
With noise and movement, the soul's mute
Arena,
That silent sleep inside your sleep. (*D* 11)

Even the 'cold and luminous sleep', 'banked in the heart of pills' (tranquilizers), is preferable, since it can dissuade the male-lover ('your ruthless one') from entering the 'soul's mute arena'. His absence 'at times' is surely preferable to the clumsiness, noise, and movement with which he disturbs her wakeful hours. Vrinda Nabar perceives a note

of authenticity in this poem. According to her, "Though ostensibly addressed to another, the poem is undoubtedly about the poet herself" (Nabar: 1994, 46). But, it is this note of authenticity that forces the poet to point out the temporary and contingent nature of the woman's escape into the realm of sleep, because she knows and shows it in 'The Stone Age' that the 'ruthless one' can 'bruise' her 'premorning sleep' with 'loud talk' and 'stick' a finger into her 'dreaming eye' (*OP* 51). She, as a result, is hell-bent on making the most of her limited access to privacy and oblivion, be it the wine-induced oblivion of 'Summer in Calcutta' (*SC* 48) or the sleep-induced 'holes in memory' of this poem. Be it what it may, Das' poems admirably express the agonies of an over-taxed mind led to despair by the utter unconcern shown by society.

Close to the heart of a writer whose negotiations with the dialectics of interiority and exteriority at once encourages 'the steepest / descent' into the self and instigates the same self to 'gatecrash into the precincts of others' dreams', the 'Anamalai Poems', in the words of P.P. Raveendran, enact an intense 'interior drama' (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 48). I.G. Ahmed has reminded us that this 'sequence of poems' was written or rather spoken 'into a taperecorder' 'during her [Das'] sojourn in the Anamalai hills of Tamil Nadu following her crushing defeat in the parliamentary election of 1984' (Ahmed: 2005, 141). Of the twenty-seven poems that Kamala Das was reported to have written for this series (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 47), eleven, including 'The Anamalai Hills', were published in *The Best of Kamala Das* (149-158) whereas six other poems (12-17) have been published in *Literature and Criticism* (156-157).

According to P.P. Raveendran, 'The Anamalai Hills' which though not a part of the Anamalai poems in the strict sense of the term serves as the 'prologue' to the series (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 49). This poem immediately establishes a deep bond between the lonely silent hills and the lonely woman-walker. On account of a paradigmatic interchangeability, both the object and the observer can perceive an inner affinity as regards their shared loneliness and silence:

[...] I hear the mountain

speak: I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone...
with the languor of queen's enciente, the fog ascends
the stairways of the sky. Anamalai stands undisturbed.
Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals, the woman walks alone
no longer seeking comfort in human speech. The mountain
seems deaf-mute, but the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh,
and, her silence, despite the tumult in her blood, its destined
hush. (*BKD* 149)

On the biographical level, it may seem that the woman, 'Wrapped in the shrouds of betrayals' and 'no longer seeking comfort in human speech', is a poetic presentation of Kamala Das after her election-debacle. On the textual level, however, she can be any 'woman', betrayed and displaced as and for being woman, a gendered being. As a result, she too can empathize with the 'mountains' when it exclaims, 'I was alone, I am alone, I will be alone'. Loneliness naturally creates silence, but, by characterizing that 'silence' or 'hush' as being 'destined', the poet-speaker subtly refers to their state as being externally imposed on them. The woman no longer seeks 'comfort' in 'human speech' presumably because 'human speech' has only given her dis*comfort* and 'betrayal'.

That the 'woman' referred to in 'The Anamalai Hills' can be conceived of as the poet-speaker herself is made clear in the first of the Anamalai Poems (*BKD* 153). Here, he poet-speaker goes on to point out a deep attachment that she feels for these 'hills' and 'mountain paths', because walking these 'winding roads' she can be free to lay aside her 'poor body' and become 'an unbodied joy', to borrow an expression from Shelley (Shelley: 1994, 374). By calling the body 'poor', and suggesting that it may have 'no home', 'no territory to call its own', the woman-persona carries forward the theme of betrayal mentioned above.

In the second poem, the persona enumerates her reasons for loving this loneliness and shunning human speech (human company) (*BKD* 153). Continuing with

the theme of a split between body and soul – the public self and the private self – she remembers 'nights' when her 'own voice' (a hyponym of her body) awoke her (presumably her soul) out of her 'dreams'. It is perhaps a realization of her or an imputation from others that dubs her 'a misfit' when 'awake'. It is perhaps this 'misfit'-status that expels her from 'warm human love' in the wakeful hours. Hence this love of dreams and lonely mountains.

The third poem proffers to the persona an alternative to the dream world of infrequent excursions by reminding her of her writings (*BKD* 154). Thanks to her writing faculty, she can 'write away' her 'loneliness' and 'grief' 'on sheets of weeklies, monthlies / Quarterlies' ('Loud Posters', *SC* 23). Though unable to mitigate her real life 'loneliness' and 'grief', this talent has helped her release those disappointments and create poetry out of them.

Giving the lie to the popular misconception of Das as a sex-obsessed woman-poet, the fourth of the 'Anamalai Poems' advocates the need to look 'beyond the / chilling flesh' (*BKD* 154). Das traces our fear of death back to an 'obsession' with 'physicality', implying thereby her own sense of ease with the prospect of dying.

Das' woman-persona who introduces herself as a poet in the fifth poem betrays an inner struggle between her personal desire 'to hide behind' her 'dreams' and her poetic achievement of 'gatecrash'-ing 'into the precincts of others' dreams' (*BKD* 155). In personal life, it is her realization of having let down herself that takes away her capacity to 'look the day in the face' 'with gumption'. But, in poetry at least, the same experiences are so adequately recorded as to make her readers stir in their sleep and sigh.

In the sixth poem of the group, the poet-speaker tries to cut herself adrift from 'those' she had once loved. Aware of her unwanted status and the possibility of 'betrayal' and deeply saddened by the loss (death/absence) of those who did really love her (e.g. her grandmother), the woman-persona cries out:

No, not for me the beguiling promise of
domestic bliss, the goodnight kiss, the weekly
letter that begins with the word dearest,
not for me the hollowness of marital
vows and the loneliness of a double bed
where someone lies dreaming of another mate
a woman perhaps lustier than his own. (*BKD* 156)

Her aversion to 'the beguiling promise of / domestic bliss' or 'the hollowness of marital / vows' stems from her sense of betrayal, because she has experienced 'the loneliness of a double bed' where 'someone [presumably her husband] lies dreaming of another mate / a woman perhaps lustier than his own'. As revealed in *My Story*, such an episode really took place in Kamala Das' life when her husband hurt her womanhood by talking of women sexier than her (*MS* 87). Thus, the marginalized status of women in a male-dominated world and within a sex-dominated marital relationship is adequately highlighted in the poem mentioned above.

The seventh poem brings to the fore the speaker's love of the 'kind night's embrace' with its 'genial dreams' as well as her sense of unease with the 'sorrowful day' and the real world (*BKD* 156). As a result, in the next poem, she finds sufficient motivation to embark on a journey of self-discovery that would end in the 'steepest / descent'.

In the ninth poem, the woman-speaker finds herself 'trapped' in the middle phase of human life when marriage and the duties of domesticity deprives one of the 'true meaning' of life, revealed only in 'early youth' or 'weary / age'. As a result, she has to make do with only 'the outer / rind of human pain' and 'the seeds / of mirthless laughter' (*BKD* 157). This compromise, however, is not sustainable for any length of time. This is why in the tenth poem the persona compares her simultaneous awareness of 'existence' and 'non-existence'. According to N.V. Raveendran, in this poem 'the

dominant thought is about that "superior love" which enables a being to dissolve into the spirit of the universe' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 154). Of course, this 'greater' love is death that can not only release the care-worn and body-bound being from the anxieties of 'the random caress' and the 'languor' resulting therefrom, but renew the soul in the form of 'restructured perfection'.

With a view to relieving her own languor and loneliness gifted by human company, the poet-speaker in the twelfth poem expresses her desire to be one with the natural world of birds and the hills. She claims to have forgotten love, but surely remembers the 'musty'-ness of 'the human habitations'. So, she wishes to make the 'sky' her 'roof' and the 'hills' her 'walls', and to stay still to let the weary birds 'come' and 'roost' in her hair at dusk (*Literature and Criticism*, 156).

The neglect an aged mother gets from her grown-up children, is poignantly revealed in the thirteenth poem of the sequence. The speaker enters the room where her grown-up children are sitting, 'cold' and in search of the 'warmth of human love'. But, they remain impervious to both her presence in the room and her emotional needs for love and care. In the seventeenth poem, the reader bears witness to how the utter neglect of the persona by her loved ones and her resultant loneliness has turned her 'skin' so 'cold'. In fact, her 'skin' (a hyponym of her being) has become so cold that she welcomes even 'fear' to be 'her nightgown' just for a 'change'.

The 'Anamalai Poems' are certainly amenable to both feminist and postcolonial readings that can release the silenced subaltern voices of both a woman and a woman-writer, caught in the crucible of male domination and rigid social norms. Battered by life, disowned and neglected by the loved ones, and unsure of her identity, the woman-poet is seen to grope through the mountain mist as it were to reach the peak of self-actualization in the way of which the sun of male 'logos' proves to be the chief impediment.

The attainment of this self-actualization in spite of all impediments is the main theme in 'Composition'. The poem is a very ambitious and multifaceted work, giving a panoramic view of her personal and poetic selves. In fact, Das' candid and comprehensive presentation of her life in the poem has led S.C. Harrex to categorize it as 'her [Das'] own life-history' poem (Harrex in Das: 1986, 173). The poem is positively multifaceted, dealing with subjects such as the woman-speaker's childhood, adulthood, marriage, sexuality, the therapeutic value of poetry, and the mystic quest to attain selfhood. The present discussion, however, will aim at analyzing only those aspects and sections of the poem that deal with the marginal status of the woman-persona and Das' presentation of the same in and through the poetics of resistance.

As is often the case with Kamala Das, her poetry does flummox some critics while fascinating many others. Eunice De Souza, for example, considers 'Composition' 'a totally formless stream of unhappy consciousness' that has 'marred' *The Descendants*, her second book (De Souza: 1977, 46). Almost in the same vein, Vrinda Nabar suggests that 'in actual fact' 'there is little organized development' in the poem, and the poet merely covers ground she had already explored ad infinitum (Nabar: 1994, 46). On the other hand, Anisur Rahman has pointed out, 'in the course of the circular movement of the poem is enumerated the wages she has paid for her existence' (Rahman; 1981, 19). Similarly, Iqbal Kaur has detected in this poem Das' brilliant exposé of sexual politics that at once unmakes a female to make a woman (Kaur in Kaur: 1995 [b], 143, 166 & 169).

The poem begins with an air of finality that brings the poet face to face with the sea. On the spatial level, this may imply a Byronic contiguity with the vast expanse of the sea, pointing out thereby the paltriness of man and his empty vaunts. On the symbolic plane, however, it may refer either to Arnold's sea of faith or to Tennyson's equanimous approach to the sea of final reckoning. Be that what it may, Das seems to suggest the onset of maturity that transcends the mere auditory reconstruction of the sea of her childhood, 'In the beginning / the sea was only the wind's / ceaseless whisper in a shell' (*D* 29), or the mere visual remake of her adult life:

In the years that followed
I was busy growing,
I had then
no time at all for the sea,
But,
there was off and on a seascape
in my dreams,
and the water sloshing up
and sliding down. (*D* 29)

In the childhood of the woman-persona, she could peacefully dream about the sea under the loving care of her grandmother. But, then time came and took her love away, 'the old woman died', 'the red house that had / stood for innocence / crumbled', and, in a description redolent of her poem 'Blood', 'the skin / intent on survival / learnt lessons of self-betrayal' (*D* 29).

The lessons of 'self-betrayal' taught her that in her 'heart' she had 'replaced love with guilt', and that both 'love' and 'hate' were 'involvements'. That this knowledge 'signifies' 'growth' has led in her case to the 'tragedy of life', making her realize that 'friendship / cannot endure', 'blood ties do not satisfy', people grow 'old and useless', and more than 'love' (often the other name for 'lust') tenderness is to be desired.

In fact, as revealed earlier in 'An Introduction', a girl's growth into woman is often more physical than intellectual. As a result, when she got married she sought in her husband a substitute for her grandmother who, as O.J. Thomas has pointed up, could understand, look after, correct, and advise her (Thomas in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 41). Naturally, when he decreed 'you may have freedom / as much as you want' (*D* 30) her 'soul balked at this diet of ash' (*D* 30). That even this 'freedom' was an imposition, administered and regulated by patriarchy, becomes clear from the reaction

of the persona:

> Freedom became my dancing shoe,
> how well I danced,
> and danced without rest,
> until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
> and I began to have doubts. (*D* 30)

As, revealed in the quoted excerpt, 'freedom' (a desirable state) 'became' (came to be) the woman-speaker's 'dancing shoe' (a means to help her entertain the male-inspectors), losing thereby the element of desirability. This dance, performed to the tune of patriarchy, was evaluated as 'well', and was continued 'without rest' to the dancer. As a result, it felt uncomfortable ('turned grimy on my feet'). But, by that time, the woman-persona had 'learnt lessons of self-betrayal', and could arrive at, if not realization, at least, 'doubts'. Faced with a virtual *freedom*-phobia and sexual disinclination, she asked her husband:

> I asked my husband,
> Am I hetero
> am I lesbian
> or am I just plain frigid? (*D* 30)

The answer, however, was quite predictable. The laugh of the husband showed to her the urgent need for seeking her answers from 'within'. Having sought and found those answers within, the marginalized woman-speaker comes to the realization that it is only by whipping up a 'froth of desire' for 'a man' (any man) and not 'the man' (her husband) and by letting off her steam in mental striptease that she can hope to regain her 'self'. In this connection, Vincent O'Sullivan observes, in her society where ossified conventions keep women in check, a 'normal' or 'traditional' woman has to be 'dismantled' – broken into pieces – to be 'frank' with herself and her readers (O'Sullivan in Das: 1986, 182). It is this frankness that allows her to reveal her essential

loneliness and woe at losing her grandmother, and cautions her readers against making any improper advances:

> Reader,
> you may say,
> now here is a girl with vast
> sexual hungers,
> a bitch after my own heart.
> But,
> I am not yours for the asking.
> Grovel at my feet,
> remove your monkey-suits and dance,
> sing Erato Erato Erato,
> Yet I shall be indifferent.
> Not because of morality
> but because
> I do not feel the need. (*D* 31)

The woman-persona's disgust at the lack of male self-restraint in matters of sex that Kaur has so rightly indicated (Kaur in Kaur: 1995 [b], 166) stems from the awareness that what she can offer can as well be rightfully offered by the man's wife and that 'we are all alike / we women / in our wrappings of hairless skin' (*D* 31). If Jyoti Rane finds in the above excerpt women's realization of male dominance and exploitation (Rane in Dodiya: 2000, 168), then I.K. Sharma discovers in Das a new Mary Wollstonecraft, vindicating 'the rights and the voice of women' (Sharma in O.P. Bhatnagar: 1981, 39).

Aware of the therapeutic value of woman's self-expression that Hélène Cixous has called attention to (Cixous 1976, 187), we can make a just reappraisal of Das' claim:

> I also know that by confessing

by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
to the bone's
supreme indifference. (*D* 32-3)

Das also knows:

What I narrate are the ordinary
events of an
ordinary life. (*D* 33)

That the first school she had gone to has now been turned into a brothel shows her the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society where the concern for teaching them to be self-reliant comes a distant second to the need for exploiting them to make them 'toys / fit for the roaring nights' (*D* 33).

Anisur Rahman has pointed out that the 'consistently fatigued tone' and 'ironic overtones' dominate the poem's structure (Rahman: 1981, 19). In fact, the 'consistently fatigued tone' of the speaker is an outcome of the harsh treatment she has received from life whereas the 'ironic overtones' highlight her simultaneous awareness of and disagreement with the imbalance that characterizes the man-woman relationship. Her prayer to 'all women to kneel down before the male ego', for example, is marked with irony, since she cannot forget that this unequal status has been implicit in and perpetuated by the institution of marriage that is 'arranged' in the 'most humorous heaven'.

Reminding a lover of poetry of Shakespeare's sonnet no. LXXIII (Shakespeare: 1991, 1116-1117), Das now refers to her age and uselessness. Even though biographical criticism may hasten to point out that both Shakespeare (b. 1564) and Kamala Das (b. 1934) wrote these poems in question in their thirties, on closer reading, it seems that

their respective 'age' and 'uselessness' are socially demarcated on classist or sexist grounds. That she decides to forgive friend and foe alike and give her 'foe' a patient hearing, point at her attainment of maturity which in turn can prepare her to face the sea. In fact, this maturity is to be attributed to her realization of the inevitability of marginalization that awaits women as well as the aged. Her ultimate desire is to 'take a long walk / into the sea', to 'lie' in rest there, and to 'discompose' – crumbling, dissolving and retaining 'in other things / the potent fragments / of oneself' (*D* 35). The problem of over ingenuity, affecting otherwise perceptive critics is clearly revealed by Anne Brewster' confusion of the two verbs i.e. 'to discompose' and 'to decompose' (Brewster: 1980, 98-107). By substituting 'decompose' ('to destroy') for 'discompose' ('to quicken a new birth'), Brewster wilfully distorts Das' intended message, and nominally refers to the presence and significance of the sea in the poem, "'Composition' [...] opens with a reference to the sea, whose melancholy movement rolls throughout the poem and sweeps it on to its conclusion" (Brewster: 1980, 102). On the verbal level, the sea makes a re-entry towards the end of the poem when the woman-speaker expresses her desire to 'take a long walk into the sea' and 'lie there resting' forever. But, on the symbolic plane, the sea remains a looming presence throughout the poem showing the persona adrift in the sea of life, rudderless and battle-worn. Thus, Vrinda Nabar's charge that the 'sea' is given a subsidiary position in the poem (Nabar: 1994, 50) does not seem to hold true.

If the title 'Composition' refers to the 'composition' (shaping) of life by the forces of society and circumstance, it, on another level, surely signifies the 'composition' (making) of a poet and her poetry. The verb 'to discompose', therefore, rather than being 'strangely at odds with the title', as Vrinda Nabar would have us believe (Nabar: 1994, 53), actually refers to the continuation of the very process of composition by retaining 'in other things / the potent fragments / of oneself' (*D* 35).

If on the 'vital' level, it indicates the preservation of the stream of life through and with the death and dissolution of the 'perishable body', as I.G. Ahmed has pointed out (Ahmed: 2005, 91), then on the 'literary' level, it stands for the woman-poet's

bequeathal to posterity of the 'potent fragments' (poetry) of herself (the poet) that will surely outlast her.

Along with 'Composition' and 'Advice to a Fellow Swimmer', 'Suicide' constitutes the series of Kamala Das' poems dealing with the sea and the associated things of temporality and perenniality. As Anisur Rahman asserts, the poem moves on a pattern of 'dialogues' (with the sea) and 'reflections' (in isolation) (Rahman: 1981, 18). The sea here embodies a symbol of eternity and incorporates all. The poem begins with the dejected and confused woman-persona, offering the sea the right to choose between her soul and her body, with the sad realization that she is not qualified enough to make the choice herself. The answer of the sea, when it comes, is more decisive and forceful than the originary question. The sea accepts the soul instead of the body, because it is the 'smell' of the body (its perishability) that seems unbearable to the sea.

On the linguistic level, this poem illustrates Das' poetics of resistance. As N.V. Raveendran has observed, talking to a non-human entity (sea) which is a cardinal feature of the poem is a 'violation' of a 'selectional restriction' stipulating that the 'object of direct address must be human or animate or human like' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 135). Das circumvents this stipulation by presenting the 'address' as an 'apostrophe' as well as by presenting an instance of 'personification' to characterize the 'addressee'. On the emotional plane, her choice of the addressee is determined by an internal affinity that only connects the 'soul' with the 'sea' in view of their shared perennially.

This affinity notwithstanding, the woman-persona is shocked to perceive the remarkable difference and dissimilarity in their respective duties. The sea merely plays a 'child's game', roaring 'a hungry roar', and constantly leaps 'forward' and 'retreats'. Its duty, therefore, seems at once 'easy' and 'simple'. The woman-persona, on the other hand, is tied to her assigned roles – socially assigned and not self-determined. She has to 'pose' and 'pretend', acting to perfection the roles of 'happy woman' and 'happy wife'. Evidently, both these roles are assigned by patriarchy, and she has to perform

them willy-nilly. Vincent O'Sullivan calls attention to the fact that as with many performances the motive here is survival (O'Sullivan in Das: 1986: 186), with the awareness that non-performance may invite both censor and sanction. So, she 'must' maintain her station in life, keeping safe 'distance' from both 'the high' and 'the low':

> But,
> I must pose.
> I must pretend,
> I must act the role
> Of happy woman,
> Happy wife.
> I must keep the right distance
> Between me and the low. (*D* 2)

The absurdity of the whole stipulation comes to the fore from Das' repeated use of the modal auxiliary 'must' to pinpoint her obligation to perform the roles assigned to her. Significantly, she has to pretend happiness even if she positively lacks it in terms of her gender-status (woman) as well as marital-status (wife). So, Iqbal Kaur has reminded us "She [the woman-persona] must 'pretend'. She must 'act' her satisfaction with her position as the 'inessential', the 'accidental', the 'object', the 'other'" (Kaur in Kaur: 2005 [b], 147).

The woman-speaker's feeling of a deep unease at this constant role-playing induces in her the thanatonic desire. But, the old inhibitions and prohibitions again come in her way. So, she confides in the sea that though she can muster enough courage to die, she cannot take the plunge after all. In Fact, she is not courageous enough to disobey him (her husband) who had forbidden her to die and, in so doing, succeeded in hurting her. Engaged in a constant struggle to extricate herself from the drudgeries of her ordinary life, the persona gets fed up. She wants to be 'simple' and wants 'to be loved'. But, if 'love' proves unattainable, then she would rather court death than cling to a drab life. I.G. Ahmed, in this context, has demonstrated how 'the failure of her

search for love very often releases her contrary urge to embrace death' (Ahmed: 2005, 89).

If the persona is ultimately enabled to 'disobey' 'him', she clearly wants to surrender her soul to the sea. As Anisur Rahman has pointed up, 'The poet yearns to go deep into the bed of the sea and negate all drudgery arising out of her emotional displacement' (Rahman: 1981, 18). In fact, in such an eventuality, she will go 'deeper' and gleefully discover that the 'sea's hostile cold / is after all skin deep' and the 'sea's inner chambers are all very warm'. Life, there, will be free from the patriarchal impositions, and then therefore, blessed with unblemished happiness. Once under the sea's protection, the life-weary woman hopes to re-discover her natural movement of swimming; for it will remind her of an idyllic childhood in Malabar when she was free and happy and 'swam about' in a pale green pond. In carefree abandon she could lie 'speckled' green and gold' and do all her 'growing' there. But, then came the hour of reckoning as she was taught 'The tragedy of life / is not death but growth' (*D* 29); for all of a sudden her grandmother 'cried', 'Darling you must stop this bathing now / you are much too big to play / naked in the pond' ('Suicide'). According to I.G. Ahmed, 'the unselfconscious adolescent is forced to take note of the change coming over her' (Ahmed: 2005, 81).

An alternative course of action for the woman-persona is suggested at this juncture by the introduction of a 'white man' who 'offers' to induce forgetfulness and 'offers' himself as a 'stiff drink'. This white man, unlike her husband, gives her the choice and allows her to escape her marital roles. But, she cannot forget 'the only man who hurts' (*D* 3) and, as a result, fails to 'dislodge' the 'inherited memory of a touch' ('Gino').

Not knowing 'what else to ask for', Das' personae often ask for love. But, in 'Suicide' the persona recalls 'what the bliss and what its price'. To get him to love her was difficult enough, and when he did love he served his love in lethal doses'. Consequently, her woman-body felt 'so beaten' as to make her 'sob like a fool'. Her

apparent realization, at this juncture, is that, like the sea, she too is a flop, because they are both excessively sentimental. But, this so-called sentimentality, associated as it is with her love of the soul that alone knows how to sing, is, in reality, an exposé of the way of the male-dominated world. So, her requests to the sea to 'toss back' her 'body' and take in her 'naked soul' are inspired by a kind of revenge motive, because 'he' (the husband) knew how to 'love the body' and 'embalm' her 'poor lust' with his 'bitter sweet juices' as well as how to 'hurt' her 'soul' by taming a 'swallow' (the symbolic equivalent of the female-speaker) and making her 'forget' the 'endless pathways of the sky'.

The woman-speaker's distaste for the body and persistent death-wish are motivated by her experiences of suppression in the male-dominated society as also within the sex-obsessed institution of marriage. The erosion of her personality meant that she was fated only to play the 'other', as Iqbal Kaur had pointed out (Kaur in Kaur: [b] 1995, 159). Unable to choose or change her destiny, she is relegated to the subordinate positions of a slave or an idol or as she had mourned in 'An Introduction':

> [...] I am sinner,
> I am saint. I am the beloved and the
> Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
> Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (*SC* 60)

In the face of an all pervasive male domination, Das' poetic personae, like the women in Raji Narasimhan's novels, can only find solace in female bonding. In 'The Millionaires at Marine Drive', for example, the poet-speaker remembers the 'warmth' that she could receive only from her dead grandmother who could 'put an arm around' her 'shoulders without a purpose'. Her male-partners, on the contrary, had 'The great brown thieving hands' that 'groped' beneath her 'clothes', since 'their fire was that of an arsonist's, warmth was not their aim' ('The Millionaires at Marine Drive').

I.G. Ahmed has characterized 'Millionaires at Marine Drive' as a poem of 'strong binaries and contrastive features' in which 'past derives its meaning from its opposition to the present' (Ahmed: 2005, 36). The poem begins with a psychic projection, whereby a bygone time ('eighteen years' ago) wells up inside the poet-speaker who can perceive a mobile concurrency of past with its remembered happiness and security, and present with its suffered humiliation and ennui:

> Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother's death;
> I wonder why the ache still persists. Was
> She buried, bones and all, in the loose red
> Soil of my heart? All through the sun-singing
> Day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think
> Of her, of the warmth that she took away, (*CP* 97)

In the above excerpt, the poet-speaker shows her partiality for the past (her childhood) which comes to haunt her in the form of her dead grandmother. Here, Devindra Kohli opines, 'It is perhaps consistent with the matrilinear [sic.] tradition to which she traces her ancestry and with her general criticism of men for their failure to give her tenderness and warmth, that the only figure whom she presents as ideal is her great-grandmother' (Kohli: 1976, 183). Of course, it is the present that forces her to seek sanctuary in the memories of an idyllic past in the old Nalapat House and under the loving care of her great grandmother whom she has presented in her poems as 'grandmother' ('My Grandmother's House', 'The Millionaires at Marine Drive', 'Blood', etc.). Now that her 'grandmother' is no more, the poet-speaker thinks of her all through the 'sun singing day' and all through the 'moon wailing night', since, in lieu of the warmth that her grandmother could offer, she has to make do with the 'skin's lazy hungers' (*SC* 10) or the fire of sexual passion that burnt her 'cities down'. As a result, in place of the life sustaining 'blood', only the corrosive acid could flow through her arteries, hastening her 'autumn years' and an unwanted freedom of unconcern:

> [...] no longer was

There someone to put an arm around my
Shoulders without a purpose, all the hands,
The great brown thieving hands, groped beneath my
Clothes, their fire was that of an arsonist's,
Warmth was not their aim, they burnt my cities
Down, it was not blood but acid that flowed
Through my arteries and in autumn years
I yellowed, sickened like the leaves on trees,
Gained a freedom I never once had asked for. (*CP* 97)

This 'unwanted freedom' took a heavy toll on the female-speaker whose 'laughter' became 'crazed with pain' and whose hedonistic excesses led to the eventual feeling of remorse:

The millionaires at Marine Drive scattered
Grain to feed the early rising doves,
Like the fluttering of their wings was laughter,
Crazed with pain. Oh, why did I mix my
Pleasures like I mixed my drinks to pass out
So soon on the velvet couch of life? [...] (*CP* 97)

This clearly exemplifies what women expect out of marriage and what they get, to borrow the title of one of Das' articles (*WWEMWTG* 20-21). This freedom was appointed to her in place of the loving identity with her husband that she had asked for. In fact, paired with an insensate husband she was made into a social butterfly, a party animal whose ignorance and unwitting mistakes were caused by the marginal status of woman and the abusive guile of patriarchy as personified by the 'guests' who 'only change their painted masks'. The trapped female is fated to 'see' 'the fog of their hate', 'hear' their 'off key' songs, and satisfy their 'lust'. Having turned 'old', 'frigid', and 'grey haired', she can only crave for reciprocity in love that she had never received:

[...] I have turned old, frigid, grey haired, but
Surely somewhere lovers still cling with wet
Limbs, wet eyes, near doorways at parting hour? (*CP* 97)

Thus, in this poem, we are made privy to the poet-speaker's kaleidoscopic consciousness that leads her to substitute present disappointment with the male-figures with reminiscence of a virtually pre-lapserian childhood and pine for what is not – understanding and respect from a male-lover (the husband-figure of Das' poetry).

Disillusionment with the present state of lovelessness in an unfeeling urban world, often leads Kamala Das to take an imaginary flight to a person who did once love and protect her (her grandmother), and a place where she was loved and cared for (the Old Nalapat House). In 'My Grandmother's House', as reflected in the title itself, the person and the place are brought together to give vent to the time that was. As Harish Raizada has opined, the Old Nalapat House and its 'presiding deity', her grandmother, 'symbolize' for the poet-speaker 'love', 'innocence', 'respectability' and 'traditional values' that are her sore needs at her present condition of rootlessness (Raizada in Prasad: 1983, 118).

The poem is thematically divided into three sections. In the first section, by describing a definite event in the past (the grandmother's death) that occurred in a far off place (the Old Nalapat House), the poet-speaker foregrounds the idea of remoteness and its therapeutic value for the speaker in distress. In the second section, by expressing an oft-felt desire to revisit that far off place and relive the past experience of loving warmth and security, the unfulfillability of her present desire is clearly revealed. In the third and the final section, by presenting her past glory of being 'loved' and 'proud' as incredible, her present love-lorn status is thrown into a sharp relief.

The poem shows us how in Das' 'automythology' as Shirley Geok-lin Lim has pointed out 'the maternal home' becomes 'the trope for the condition of proud and loving freedom', 'a condition that the poem raises as absent in the degraded woman's

life' (Lim in Kaur: 1995 [b], 94). Of course, the 'house' acquires this 'trope'-status thanks to its associations with the poet-speaker's now-dead grandmother ('That woman') whom N.V. Raveendran has identified as 'the mother substitute', the poet-speaker feels the urge to be 'near to her' and 'under her loving care'. The frustration of this urge creates the thematic tension of the present poem, positing in dialectical contrast 'the fullness of the distant [the house] and the absent [the grandmother] and the emptiness of the near [her urban abode] and the present [her love-lorn state]' (N.V.Ravendran: 2000, 148). In fact, as Miss A. Selvalakshmi observes, in this poem we get to see 'the woman-persona' both in the past and in the present, whereby these two separate worlds 'flash' before our eyes. In the world that was hers, she was the 'proud recipient' of her grandmother's love; whereas the world in which she now lives, she has to pine for love 'at least in small change' (Selvalakshmi in Balachandran: 2004, 62).

The poem begins with the poet-speaker's remembrances of things past, whereby her beloved Nalapat House and 'my grandmother' get distanced into 'far away' and 'That woman' respectively. As 'That woman' 'died' and as 'The house' 'withdrew into silence', the possibility of the female-speaker's receiving love was set to naught. So, she was left in a loveless world and her 'blood turned cold like the moon':

> There is a house now far away where once
> I received love.... That woman died,
> The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
> Among books I was then too young
> To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon. (*SC* 15)

Faced with this loveless existence in which even her memory of having received love is distrusted by the husband-figure, the poet-speaker loses all hopes and expectations from the present:

> [...] you cannot believe, darling,

Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change? (*SC* 15)

In her case, this forlorn condition accentuates the need of taking a 'pastward flight', as I.G. Ahmed has put it (Ahmed: 2005, 39) that may alleviate her emotional woes:

How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog [...] (*SC* 15)

Of course, the acts of peering 'through the blind eyes of windows' or listening to the 'frozen air' may in Anisur Rahman's words signify 'a sentient peep into her past'(Rahman: 1981, 56).

That the poet-speaker wants to 'pick an armful of / Darkness' and 'bring it here' at once highlights her 'wild despair' and her efforts at alleviating that 'despair'. The 'armful of / Darkness', when brought 'here' to 'lie behind' her 'bedroom door' like 'a brooding dog', brings out her sense of 'lack' as regards the pre-natal darkness/ innocence of the womb and the canine fidelity of happy memories. This 'lack' may have stemmed from a desire to be one with the mother separation from whose womb, according to Martin Heidegger, subjects the self to 'uncanniness' or the affective state in which the self finds itself in its encounter with the world. In this alien 'world', it finds itself to be all alone and 'discovers the sheer fact of existing' (Heidegger: 1962, 233).

Thus, in 'My Grandmother's House', the poet-speaker dispassionately analyzes her present in terms of her past and vice versa, and comes to think of herself as a 'victim' who, once 'loved' and 'proud', is now forced to 'beg' at 'strangers' doors' to 'receive love' in spite of the presence of her 'darling' (husband-figure). His inability/refusal to 'love' her makes the speaker's nostalgic yearning for her grandmother and her grandmother's house all the more intense and poignant. In fact, the poem's appeal is enhanced and universalized, thanks to the poet's ability, as K.V. Surendran indicates, to 'transform her intense personal experience into a general truth' (Surendran in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 135). Any other woman living under similar circumstances and aware of her own marginal status in this male-dominated and love-denying society, may easily identify with the experiences and desires expressed by the woman-persona in this poem.

Kamala Das' 'performance' of all the 'gender roles' of 'daughter', 'sister', 'wife' and 'mother' has made her aware of the different strategies adopted by heteropatriarchy to marginalize women and make them accept that marginalization as their lot. She seems to concur with Griselda Pollock:

> Patriarchy does not refer to the static, oppressive domination by one sex over another, but to a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable (Pollock: 1988, 33).

Similarly, she seems to be agreeable to Hélène Cixous' statement:

> But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their [women's] individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is

inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible (Cixous: 1976, 876).

It is this gender-consciousness that Kamala Das seeks to propagate through her poetry. As I.G. Ahmed has commented, "She talks more about women because they are more oppressed than men" (Ahmed: 2005, 133). But, she is alive to the fact that neither patriarchy nor femininity can be straightjacketed as monoliths. According to Pollock, in the context of the construction of gender, these processes of representation that at once reflect and mediate a gendered reality operate 'by means of winning our identification with the versions of masculinity and femininity which are represented to us', 'binding us into a particular – but always unstable – regime of sexual difference' (Pollock: 1988, 33).

The poet who has both experienced and witnessed the sinister aspect of this 'sexual difference' tries to highlight a more fundamental human similarity, 'I too call myself I' ('An Introduction'), or rationalize the naturalness as well as desirability of this 'difference':

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier... ('The Looking Glass')

But, when she perceives the reluctance of the male to accept gender equality or tolerate 'difference', she lashes out at them:

Men are worthless, to trap them
Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
Love, which in a woman must mean tears
And a silence in the blood. ('A Losing Battle')

Or, boldly declares, 'I no longer care whom / I hurt with love and often without?' ('Glass'). Disillusioned with the present and the male, she goes down the memory lane and remembers her grandmother who could 'put an arm around my / Shoulders without a purpose' ('The Millionaires at Marine Drive'), but her rueful realization, 'That woman died' ('My Grandmother's House') or 'every wife is her one man's whore, / Earns her bread easing a pubic bliss' ('Effusions V') makes her exclaim:

> All I want now
> is to take a long walk
> into the sea
> and lie there, resting,
> completely uninvolved. ('Composition')

CHAPTER: 3

THE GROUND BENEATH: CLASS AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

"We plough and sow – we're very low,
That we delve in the dirty clay,
Till we bless the plain with the golden grain,
And the vale with the fragrant hay.
Our place we know – we're so very low,
'Tis down at the landlord's feet:
We're not too low – the bread to grow
But too low the bread to eat."

– Ernest Jones

"A curse to the king who's a rich man's lord,
Who with poor men's misery is merely bored,
Who collects his taxes from hovels and bogs,
And has us shot down in the streets like dogs.
We're weaving and weaving!"

– Heinrich Heine

"O, the world is overburdened
With the idle and the rich!
They bask up in the sunshine
While we plod in the ditch;
But, zounds! we'll put some mettle
In their fingers and their thumbs,
For we'll turn things upside down, my lads,
When the Revolution comes!"

– J. Bruce Glasier

Of all the marginalizing factors, 'class' along with 'gender' seems to be the most potent. Conceived of as a socio-economic descriptor of any 'category of people', having a 'common' or a 'shared' relation to the 'means of production', 'class' is perceived to have constructed specific 'class cultures' whose unique 'social actions' and 'class practices' decide their respective quiddity. The economic dimension of this concept (i.e. 'class'), as motivated by exclusive 'class interests' and as revealed in specific 'class practices', have historically determined both the presence and the proliferance of 'class conflicts', and brought the 'contending classes' to face each other for the attainment of 'power' and 'privilege'. The most natural outcome of such a situation has been the birth of discrimination and exploitation that at once creates and perpetuates a hierarchy of domination. It is this 'hierarchy of domination' in any age or society, that in the words of Erik Olin Wright, corresponds to 'a terrain of social relations that determine objective material interests of actors' and creates 'class structures' relevant to that condition (Wright: 1985, 7). This vertical class structure is produced by uneven and unequal access to resources and employment that according to John Black creates 'inequality of income' and maintains 'differences' in earnings between 'individuals or families, or between different groups, areas, or countries' (Black: 2002, 234). As a matter of fact, such structured class divisions evolve from and take into account other determining factors like 'ethnicity', 'culture', 'gender', etc.. So, according to Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Classes are not homogenous ethnically, culturally or in terms of gender in most cases but class fractions may constitute some kind of homogeneity' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis in Lovell: 1990, 107)

Kamala Das, the meliorist, is painfully aware of the ever-widening chasm between the rich and the poor and the wanton exploitation of the latter by the former. As M Dasan points out, 'in the widening of her social consciousness', 'a significant part' is played by poems that express her 'personal sympathy with the marginalized *others* seen around her house in the village [...]' (Dasan in Dodiya: 2000, 123). However, the poet also shows her intimate knowledge of the crippling poverty affecting a large section of our urban population. What irritates the poet all the more is her perception of the abject poverty of the many that accentuates the obscene opulence of

the few. In her prose article, "A Poet at the Hustings", Das has railed against this kind of inequality:

> In India as in other parts of the world the rich and the poor behave as if they were denizens of two dissimilar planets. The poor are all-pervasive. They lie in the pavements or sit under trees eating banana peel. At times in the gutters they squat, ferreting out edible offal. But the rich ones do not see them, just as the poor do not see the rich. There is no meeting-place for the rich and the poor (*PH* 48).

Das' consciousness of the rich-poor divide has its roots in her Nair heritage to which M. Elias has called attention to in his article "Kamala Das and Nayar Heritage" (Elias: 1978, 15-24). Coming from a family of the landed gentry she had seen the exploitation of the poor as well as the ease and affluence of the rich. Moreover, the lopsidedness that has characterized the economic development of independent India, and to which Das has remained a witness, has meant that large sections of the population have remained hard up while the rich have grown richer. So, in poems like 'A Hot Noon in Malabar', 'Sepia', 'The Flag', 'The House Builders', 'Yvonne', etc. she has described the marginal status of the poor as well as the marginalizing efforts of the rich.

In 'A Hot Noon in Malabar', the poet-speaker describes a typical summer noon in her native Malabar. Much like Shelley's poem 'To a Skylark' (Shelley: 1994, 374-376), the indefinite article 'A' in the title of the present poem makes the picture represent any one of the typical summer days in Malabar instead of a specific one. In this connection, N. V. Raveendran comments, the 'time – the noon – at which the speaker reflects her past experiences when at her home in Malabar in similar afternoons and what might be happening there presently is given emphasis by the repetition of "this"' (N. V. Raveendran: 2000, 143).

That she is 'here' ('so far away') and not 'there' ('at my / Home in Malabar'), gives her the added urgency and incentive to indulge in this imaginative exercise. The

reality of such a 'hot noon' in Malabar differs widely within 'my home' and 'outside'. Whereas the inside of the house is protected against the intense light and heat by the 'window-drapes', and the house itself can boast of a 'cool black floor' and 'shadowy rooms', the road outside is sun-scorched, giving the strangers 'hot eyes / Brimming with sun', and making them look 'So yearningly at the brick-ledged well':

> This is a noon for beggars with whining
> Voices, a noon for men who come from hills
> With parrots in a cage and fortune-cards,
> All stained with time, for brown Kurava girls
> With old eyes, who read palms in light singsong
> Voices, for bangle-sellers who spread
> On the cool black floor those red and green and blue
> Bangles, all covered with the dust of roads,
> For all of them, whose feet, devouring rough
> Miles, grow cracks on the heels, so that when they
> Clambered up our porch, the noise was grating,
> Strange... This is a noon for strangers who part
> The window-drapes and peer in, their hot eyes
> Brimming with sun, not seeing a thing in
> Shadowy rooms and turn away and look
> So yearningly at the brick-ledged well. (*SC* 47)

In the poem these strangers/outsiders are clearly categorized into the baggers with 'whining voices', the tribal fortune-tellers with caged 'parrots and cards', the palm-reading Kurava girls, the bangles-sellers, and the pedestrians – all exhausted under the summer sun, and looking for a 'well'. Needless to say, these 'outsiders' give to the poem the typical colour of the villages in Kerala. Going beyond the expression of her own dismay at displacement, Das here depicts the sad plight of the vagrant and deprived people, making, as S. Murali points out, 'a poignant gesture of affection and sympathy' towards the 'other lives glimpsed under the bright sun of imagination' (Murali in Kaur

1995 [a], 118). In fact, the stranger-inmate dichotomy with an obvious implication of economic disparity, gives the poet a lot to think about.

Significantly, the beggars and the fortune-tellers are all 'stained with time' and covered with the 'dust' of the roads. Their feet, 'devouring rough miles', have grown 'cracks on the heels'. Yet they have to come down from the 'hills' and go from house to house in search of alms or livelihood. Their poverty and their dependence on the inmates of the rich houses are thus exposed by the sensitive poet who herself craves for her 'home' in Malabar remembering those 'wild men' (strangers), indulging in 'wild thoughts' (a return to Malabar), and being sad about 'wild love' (for the place left behind). The dark ones are silent, yet their footsteps make a 'grating' and 'strange' noise, and when they speak 'their voices/ Run wild like jungle-voices'. Moreover, their 'wild' feet stir up 'the dust' – the 'dust' of roads and of oblivion due to absence:

> [...] This
> Is a noon for strangers with mistrust in
> Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
> At all, so that when they speak, their voices
> Run wild, like jungle-voices. Yes, this is
> A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love. To
> Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet
> Stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my
> Home in Malabar, and I so far away [...] (*SC* 47-48)

The word 'wild', when associated with the 'strangers', performs a specific thematic function. As a matter of fact, the strangers, though poor, are not hemmed in by the constrictive culture of the rich and are free to choose their own destination. On the contrary, the poet-speaker has to remain far away from her home in Malabar and satisfy herself by mixing memory and desire in the absence of any means of visiting her beloved home.

The human craving for the 'far away' (home) has an allied desire for the 'long ago'. The second part of this 'lack'-set is filled in by the poet in the next poem of the group ('The Field Hand'). In fact, 'The Filed Hand' is an unpublished poem of Kamala Das, which I have quoted and discussed here, thanks to my supervisor, I.G. Ahmed who has shared with me two of Das' hitherto unpublished poems, 'The Field Hand' and 'A Paradox', by permission of the poet. It brilliantly describes the sad plight of the rural poor and their vulnerability to economic exploitation, wasting disease, and early death. When at her 'long leisure' of a 'useless age' the poet-speaker summons up remembrances of things past, the figure of Velappan looms up in her mind from across the temporal divide. The goodness of this now-deceased field hand, despite his wretched financial condition, and the utter unconcern that the poet's family had treated him with, cause her (the sensitive poet) a great deal of shame and chagrin.

The long first sentence of the poem that neatly describes the remembered field hand firmly etches him on our memory:

> Seasoned by sun and rain,
> toughened by less food than one
> needs to live and less rest
> than need the aching limbs and
> killed by a wasting disease
> that at least was kind....
> Velappan still peeps at us through
> the window of time.

The poet's telling use of words such as 'seasoned', 'toughened', and 'killed' relates the story of a very ordinary life, prematurely snuffed out by the inequitable distribution of wealth. Ironically, the sun and the rain that are alleged to have 'seasoned' (readied for use), and malnutrition and over work that are said to have 'toughened' (strengthened) Velappan only hastened the 'wasting disease' that killed him. Naturally, even death was preferable to such a hellish life, and when it came, seemed 'kind'. Since this incident is

remembered from a very impressionable age of the poet, 'Velappan still peeps at us through / the widow of time'.

In the poet-speaker's mind Velappan remains a kind figure. When other elders considered the child-poet and her peers as 'useless', Velappan at least was 'good' (kind) to them. His wretched financial condition could not dampen his high spirits. Hence, though ill-fed, ill-paid, a drunkard, and given to a compulsive lust, his eyes retained a cheerful twinkle:

> He was good to us
> useless children then, glorying
> in his unlettered eyes that had
> a cheerful twinkle though his
> stomach was emptying fast,
> his wages poorer than his
> produce, his wife beaten up by
> the guzzled liquor and
> his robust lust.

His fast-emptying stomach is caused by the insufficient intake of food ('less food than one / needs to live'), and his poor pay is a pointer to the exploitative character of the agrarian economic system. The 'guzzled liquor' and his 'robust lust' prompt the otherwise 'good' human being to beat up and sexually torment his wife, and this irregular lifestyle makes him susceptible to the 'wasting disease' that would ultimately kill him. In fact, his drinking habit and sexual excesses may be reviewed as his preferred means to chill out after the wretched days he always encountered.

The sudden shift in 'tense' in the one-line stanza (from past to present) is indicative of a paradigm shift, 'How soon time passes'. In fact, this passage of time is invariably present-oriented in view of its universality as much in the life of Velappan as in that of the poet-speaker. Its breath-taking swiftness at once amazes and exasperates

the speaker whose journey from useless childhood to the useless old age is well-documented in this poem.

As if to corroborate time's swift passage, Velappan, the strong man, 'thinned' very much. By going back to the past tense the poet-speaker at once signals her own remembrance of things past, and constricts the terms of her reference to the specifics of Velappan's life. If the 'thinning' of the field hand's body was the first symptom of his 'wasting disease', his prostrate condition and his ceaseless 'cough'-ing were indicative of his worsening health that culminated in the 'soul's exit':

> The strong man thinned so much,
> lying on the soil he had tilled, he
> coughed coughed his lungs out and
> then showed a face shuttered
> by the soul's exit

Velappan's last recumbence on the soil he had tilled and coughing his 'lungs out' indicate not only his own physical deterioration, but also the degradation of a socio-economic arrangement whose feasibility depended on the well being of the labourers (e.g. the filed hands).

The poem's temporal frame shifts from the 'narrated time' to the 'narrating time' to allow the poet recount her childhood experience. That the intervening period in the speaker's life has been pretty hectic when she was useful to others and did not get any leisure for herself, is suggestively brought out in the following three lines:

> at my long leisure, at
> this useless age, I
> can think of him ....

The striking association of 'long leisure' with 'useless age' tells a tragic tale of the

woman-speaker's life so brilliantly described in poems such as 'The Widow's Lament', 'Seven Ages of Woman' etc.. The long leisure and the consequent remembrance of Velappan bring the poet-speaker face-to-face with some difficult questions. In fact, the mature speaker is forced to realize how Velappan's misery, starvation, wife-beating and premature death – in short Velappan's marginality – was caused and aggravated not only by the 'inequitable distribution' of wealth but also by the cruel indifference of the upper class people like her family to the woes and worries of the indigent strata of the society:

> We did waste food stuff,
> did have some old clothes
> and some
> care to spare.
> But our trusted
> field hand ....

Their wastage of 'food-stuff', 'old clothes', and 'care' (kindness) is contrasted with Velappan's lack of them. This difference of lifestyle and fate between the rich and the poor, as revealed in the poem, makes it almost a rural counterpart (along with 'The Hot Noon in Malabar') of the urban poem 'The Flag'. So, the last unfinished sentence ('But our trusted / field hand') remains a blot on the poet-speaker's conscience, pointing thereby at what 'might have been', had the rich been a little more considerate towards the plight of the poor.

The 'stranger-inmate' or the 'land lord – field hand' dichotomy, as mentioned earlier, has a marked economic implication that is presented on a larger urban scale in the poem 'Sepia'. Accusing a particular section of society of having had 'enough of everything', Kamala Das in 'Sepia' sentences them to death by scorching. According to Eunice De Souza, this poem tries to express 'social awareness' by denouncing the 'Indian rich' (De Souza: 1977, 42). The sympathies of the poet-speaker are evidently with the timing millions who, unlike the rich few, never had enough of anything.

The poem begins at once with a reminder and with a command, expressing both the need for and the opportunity of initiating change. That this change can only be brought about with the help of fire and destruction points at its revolutionary nature. The target of the speaker's censor is 'This sad-mouthed human / Race'. By qualifying the 'human race' with the determiner 'this', its terms of reference gets narrowed down to denote, in N.V. Raveendran's words, 'a segment of humanity' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 167). Similarly, by calling them 'sad-mouthed' (in lines 5 and 6), and alluding to their 'open hunger' (in line 7), the poet-speaker underlines that the 'mouths' of the rich which often reveal their insatiable hunger may make the poor 'sad' (sorrowful). That the addressee of the commands – 'hold anger / Like a living sun', 'Scorch to the very marrow', 'Dehydrate this open hunger', and 'Clog the dry, tangled veins' – is the same (the dispossessed) imparts great immediacy and intensity to the poem's imperatives:

> It's time to hold anger
> Like a living sun
> And scorch,
> Scorch to the very marrow
> This sad-mouthed human
> Race.
> Dehydrate this open hunger,
> Clog the dry, tangled veins
> With what else,
> But moss. (*SC* 24)

Evidently, the dreams of the rich are 'flat' (unimaginative), whereby they can only crave for 'limbs' (sex) and 'limousines' (luxurious cars) or mere creature comforts. Timid and incredulous, they are all alike ('faceless'), numerous ('many cousined'), and irritable ('sulk in private').

Apprehensive of and averse to change, they only hate the newspapers, fatten

their wallets with ill-gotten money, sample beverage ('morning tea'), and indulge in routine sex ('tired lust'). It is this smug complacency of the rich that turns the poet-speaker against them, and makes her question their claims to distinction, 'Are they the distinguished / Human race?'. Harish Raizada suggests that the poet-speaker through this query 'expresses her disgust and anger against' the rich who are often 'falsely described' as the 'distinguished' ones (Raizada in Prasad: 1983, 116).

A sensitive artist that she is, Das cannot remain impervious to the sorrow and suffering of the poor that have been precipitated by the leisure and luxury of the rich. As related in other poems, it is this callousness and concupiscence of the rich that makes the poor men 'cough cough their lungs out' ('The Flag'), 'the cabaret girls cavort' ('Forest Fire'), and 'the rag-picker eleven years old curled to / Foetus-shape on the pavement sleeps on' ('The Dalit Panther'). She, as a result, cries foul over their misdeeds, and decrees that 'the anger of the suffering multitude, like the burning sun should burn those sepia [the rich] down and march ahead' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 168).

If 'Sepia' shows the righteous indignation of Kamala Das at the callous excesses of the urban rich, then poems like The Flag', 'The House Builders', 'Yvonne', etc. reveal the other side of the meliorist poet in and through her graphic portrayal of the urban poor and their many hardships. In fact, the contrast between the rich with 'enough of everything' and the poor who, according to the poet, should initiate their destruction, is only implied in 'Sepia'. But, in the poems of the latter group that contrast is clearly brought out.

Transporting the rich-poor divide, so effectively portrayed in 'The Hot Noon in Malabar' and 'The Field Hand', from the rural to the urban setting, 'The Flag' is at once an encryption and an indictment of the culture/identity interface on the classist paradigm. The eponymous 'flag', the 'you' of the poem is an emblem of a culture of promise hoisted and kept fluttering in the wind of aspiration in the sky of scope. On the contrary, India, 'the ground beneath', of which the flag is the symbol, remains

'emaciated':

> The orange stands for fire, for fire that eats
> Us all in the end...
> The white stands for purity that we dream of and
> Never find
> The green stands for pastures of Paradise
> Where even the poor
> May have a place. The wheel in the centre,
> Stationary, stands
> For what else but time, arrested falsely
> By human hands? [...] (*SC* 21)

Significantly, the question that concludes the excerpt implies both manipulation and misappropriation of the flag's promise by the 'few' human hands at the cost of the 'many'. It is for those shrewd, and then therefore, successful 'few' that 'the neons wink', 'the harlots walk, swaying / Their wasted hips', and 'the poor, old men' 'lie / On wet pavements and / Cough, cough their lungs out', determining thereby the dispossessed identity of the indigent strata of society:

> [...] Dear
> Flag, look, beneath you, the scarred limbs of this
> City sprawl, scarred, so
> Emaciated... and yet how grandly
> The ornaments gleam!
> The neons wink, the harlots walk, swaying
> Their wasted hips, the
> Rich men dance with one another's wives and
> Eke out a shabby,
> Secret ecstasy, and poor old men lie
> On wet pavements and

Cough, cough their lungs out. Yet, there is whiskey
On the breath of winds
And Channel Number Five, and the cooking's
Smell. [...] (*SC* 21-22)

Since the 'hips' that 'the harlots' sway are 'wasted' (used up), and since the sputum that 'the poor old man' cough out is 'lungs' (blood), their abuse at the hands of the consumerist culture is well documented. Similarly well documented is the life of grandeur and 'shabby / Secret ecstasy' led by the rich men. Utterly unconcerned about the plight of the 'harlots' and the 'poor old men', these 'rich' ones are free to 'dance' with 'each other's wives', drink 'whisky', watch the 'Channel Number Five', and have delicious food. So, in a fit of vexed anguish, the poet reminds the tricolour:

[...] Poor flag, dear one,
Your pride is lost, it is time to leave the sky
And fall, fall and hide
Your shame beneath this blood-drenched Indian soil
And lie there and rot
As those poor babies who die of hunger
And are buried, rot...
It is time to say goodbye to your charms
Dear flag, to your old,
Meaningless pride, to your crude postures of
Honour, to the lies
Your colours tell, to the false hopes you did
Extend, to your old
Macabre dance in the blueness of our sky.... (*SC* 22)

The poet's entry into the poem's narration in the last line, by claiming the 'sky' to be 'our', greatly enhances its appeal and intensity, because it forces the observer to participate in and partake of the inequity of our economic system.

If 'The Flag' describes the utter destitution of the urban poor on a generalized macro level, then the next two poems in the group, namely, 'The House Builders' and 'Yvonne', present detailed 'case studies' of particular sections of the indigent world. Whereas in 'The House Builders' we are introduced to the homeless construction workers, building houses for the 'alien rich', in 'Yvonne' we are made to bear witness to the trials and tribulations of a prostitute who can (is forced to) 'give' sexual favours 'so cheaply'.

As revealed in *My Story*, the poet has seen some of the real life house builders (migrant labourers from Andhra Pradesh) from very close quarters (*MS* 129). So, her sensitive portrayal of their predicament always smacks of authenticity. In place of the combative activism of 'Sepia', in 'The House Builders' is seen a graphic delineation of the rich-poor divide in India, and the essential humanity of the poor labourers who, according to Z.F. Molvi, 'amidst the squalor of the city' desperately 'hold on to life in their collective effort' (Molvi in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 89). Like 'Honour' and 'The Inheritance', the title of the present poem, too, is marked with irony and insinuation. In actuality, the 'House Builders' of the title are themselves deprived of a proper roof on their heads, and, as revealed in *My Story*, have to make do with 'make-shift huts made of corrugated iron' (*MS* 129).

The poem begins with an extremely evocative image. By presenting 'Cicadas' naturally 'concave' in 'brambled foliage', the poet-speaker goes on to limn the house builders of the title who 'crawl up the cogged scaffoldings' to build 'houses' for the 'alien rich'. The point of comparison is evidently their shared concavity. But, as N.V. Raveendran has pointed out, whereas the 'cicadas' are 'concave' 'naturally', these house builders become 'concave' 'not naturally but due to hard work' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 171):

> The cicadas in brambled foliage
> Naturally concave. So also these

Men who crawl up the cogged scaffoldings
Building houses for the alien rich. (*CP* 1)

These poor labourers build houses for the rich who are psychospatially so remote as to be termed 'alien'(s) or 'denizens' of a dissimilar planet.

In the next section of the poem, the description of these labourers gets a temporal frame, 'On some days'. A spatial frame is also hinted at here because, 'the hot sky flings at us scrapes / Of Telegu songs'. This suggests that the singers (house builders) are evidently perched atop some building under construction. The indignant poet, who in 'Sepia' called on the poor to strive for some change in their wretched condition, listens 'intently' for the 'harsh / Message of the lowly'. But, in lieu of combativeness, she gets geniality from them:

On some days the hot sky flings at us scraps
Of Telegu songs and we intently
Listen, but we wait in vain for the harsh
Message of the lowly. In merry tunes
Their voices break, but just a little, as
Though the hero's happiness is too big
A burden on their breath, too big a lie
For their throats to swallow, [...] (*CP* 1)

The *harsh* message that the poet wants to hear, turns out to be 'merry tunes', though the breaks in their voice imply an undercurrent of sadness and fatigue; for the 'scrapes of Telegu songs' that they sing are mostly about the lives of the 'alien rich' or the great fits of some hero from the silver screen. Since their poor lives are at a far remove from those celebrated in their songs, their rendition of the 'scrapes' seem unconvincing and laboured.

The hot sky that actually stands for the 'hot noon', and then therefore, for their

working hours, ultimately cools down in the evening, and freed from the back-breaking work-load, they concentrate on making the most of their hard-earned leisure. As a result, their 'jests sound ribald' and their 'lusts seem robust'. As N.V. Raveendran has observed, 'earthly life', for those house builders, is 'but an endless stretch of hard work, ribald and procreative acts' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 173).

Compared to the tall buildings they build, these house builders seem 'puny'. Having to carry mortar all day long, they become mere 'toymen of dust' – 'toymen' because, as I.G. Ahmed has pointed out, 'they are just use-and-throw commodities to the rich' (Ahmed: 2005, 74). That they father only 'light / Dust children' may signify that amidst this squalor and 'want' their children become 'light' (white) with 'dust' or 'light weight' because of malnutrition. Easily disposable that they are these /toymen of dust/ continually risk their lives to give the rich secure shelters:

> [...] but their hands like the withered boughs
> Of some mythic hoodoo tree cast only
> Cool shadows and with native grace bestow
> Even on unbelievers, vast shelters. (*CP* 1)

Their hands are 'withered' (disfigured) but have a 'native grace'. Similarly, their hearts, though burdened with poverty and hardship, have the magnanimity of giving. The rich may not have any faith in their usefulness because, as revealed in 'Sepia', 'they have not / learnt to believe / in things they do not see / or hear' (*SC* 24). But these poor labourers can bestow 'vast shelters' on their class-rivals. Z.F. Molvi has commented, "'withered' suggests exploitation but 'cool shadows' is a pointer to the humanity they retain" (Molvi in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 90). The 'cool shadows', provided by the house builders, are infinitely more comfortable than the 'hot sky' at noon that they have to endure. But their toil and their troubles are lost sight of by the rich who conveniently mythisize these toilers into hoodoo trees whose existence can then be doubted.

Even if the presence and problems of the house builders can be lost sight of after houses are built for and handed over to the 'alien rich', the ever-presence or rather the continuance of the oldest profession cannot be forgotten likewise. To prove this contention as it were, 'Yvonne' reveals the complex nature of the process of marginalization on economic grounds by exposing how the economic imperative forces a girl into the oldest profession and how imbibed notions force her to spurn the advances of a beggar. The harlots of 'The Flag' as well as the night-girls of 'The Wild Bougainvillea' are no where to be seen. In their place is presented a sophisticated prostitute in a Calcutta bar who has to wait on the male gaze and the arousal of the male lust.

The poem begins by showing Yvonne 'clad in red' and sitting in a Calcutta bar. Her inability to attract male attention is revealed by the poet's use of the word 'lonely'. By calling her a 'red stain on the window glass', the poet-speaker reveals society's hypercritical attitude towards the sex-workers because we are immediately reminded of the disparaging implications of the word 'stain':

> Yvonne in red, lonely at her table, a
> Red stain on the window-glass, while cars speed by
> No one looking, no one wanting what Yvonne,
> So cheaply can give... (*The Telegraph* 81)

Contrary to her expectations, cars 'speed by', no one looks at or lusts after her. In fact, there is none to avail of her 'cheap' sexual services. Unfortunately for Yvonne, even the 'heavy coiffure', 'pink face', and 'mascara' fail to make her attractive. And the drink brought by the waiter merely lasts her waiting time:

> Heavy coiffure, pink face and mascara. A
> Waiter brings a drink which lasts her waiting
> Time. Ah, Yvonne, so lonely at eight P.M.
> In a Calcutta bar... (*The Telegraph* 81)

That, like the waiter, she too has to wait on the customer for her sustenance, shows up the wretched status of women in a capitalist society where fierce competition in any calling ensures a mad hurry to sell products and services.

That this development instils economic insecurity in this sex-worker is revealed by her subsequent action:

> She dips into bag the rolled gold
> Compact, she studies face; a face she knows is not hers.
>
> (*The Telegraph* 81)

Her inspection of the 'face' in the 'compact'-mirror is motivated by anxiety about any mark of deterioration as well as about any scope for improvement. Already hidden under the pink-paint and the mascara, her face has ceased to be hers, and yet it is one of her most important advertisement props. Hence care seems a must. The strong hold of cultural inhibitions that can still cling to desperate minds is revealed by her responses towards the lustful beggar whose advances and financial lure is given a cold shoulder on account of an ill-founded cultural inhibition:

> The bigger, rotted in teeth, black and
> Old, pause near the glass
> And stares and smiles and gestures. The meaning is so clear.
> Ah, Yvonne, lonely at eight P.M.
> Why turn your face away? He shows his palm with
> Notes on it-five, ten,
> Twenty, even thirty, he wants what you can
> So cheaply give. She chills him with a look. He
> Fumes. Isn't his money as good as others, he
> Wants to know...ah,
> Yvonne, so lonely at her table, all clad

In red, hides her face with hands and sobs,
She seems afraid...afraid of what, does anyone know,
Can anyone tell? (*The Telegraph* 81)

Yvonne is capable of giving sexual favours at a 'cheap' rate. She is at present in need of and yet neglected by prospective male customers. The beggar, though 'rotted in teeth black and / Old', has enough money to buy her services. But Yvonne is averse to the prospect of having sex with a beggar on account of some unknowable and unmentionable horror or hesitance.

Corroborating the Marxian concept that all our relationships are essentially governed by economic necessities and exigencies, there are certain poems by Das which show the processual presence of marginalization that is aggravated and complicated by class conflicts as well as financial constraints. In 'The Wild Bougainvillea', for instance, the poet-speaker describes a common urban scene:

[...] I walked on streets where the night-girls with sham
Obtrusive breasts sauntered
And under yellow lamps, up-and-down wondered
Beaming their sickly smiles
At men. [...] (*SC* 16)

The night-girls with 'sham / Obtrusive breasts' had to saunter 'up-and-down' and beam their 'sickly smiles / At men' because they are forced to do so for financial reasons. Certainly, they are the same as or similar to the harlots whom Das had presented in 'The Flag'. The sickly smiles of these night girls are reminiscent of the 'wasted hips' swayed by the harlots ('The Flag'), and highlight the brutal abuse they have to put up with to earn their bread.

In 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' (*SC* 9), Kamala Das shows these 'half-burnt logs' (Eunuchs) dancing 'till they bled' and 'writhing in vacant ecstasy' to celebrate the

birth of children that they themselves can never have. Their joyless histrionics reveal their destitution that greatly saddens the sensitive poet. If eunuchs belong to an oppressed group, so do the working class peasants and low caste Dalits whose exploitation at the hands of their upper class and upper caste masters give the poet a sufficient cause for concern.

In 'Evening at the Old Nalapat House', the poet describes the sufferings of the peasants (field hands) with tender sympathy and understanding:

> [...] The field hands,
> Returning home with baskets on their heads,
> Hear that sigh and speed, their thin legs crushing
> The weeds the shrubs, their ankles bruised by
> Thorns, their insides bruised by memories... (*CP* 38)

The 'baskets' on their heads and their thorn-bruised 'thin legs' are indicative of overwork, on the one hand, and malnutrition, on the other. That the baskets they carry are full of food-grains that they grow but cannot keep for themselves makes their condition doubly wretched.

In 'Honour' (*CP* 47), the poet's Nair ancestors are remembered and denounced by the indignant poet for having molested and killed the 'little nieces' of their low caste tenants. But the fact that these young girls were related to 'serfs', who were themselves dependant on and in debt to those Nair 'ancestors', highlights the evil role played by class in aggravating the casteist and classist marginalization of those girls. In 'Nani' (*OP* 40), the low caste maid servant who came to the Nair household of the poet was driven to take this action under financial constraints. The facts that Nani was later seduced, and once in the family way, driven to commit suicide, can certainly owe their origin to the marginalization of the have-nots by haves.

In 'The Dalit Panther' (*Mid-day*, N. pag.), the filth and the squalor in the lives of

the urban poor get an excellent poetic treatment by Kamala Das. The 'eleven years old' rag-picker, the beaten up young man, and even the dead have been marginalized and deprived of their dues by the 'rich' who 'Roost in warm beds like microbes in pus'. In fact, it is the microbial (polluting) nature of the rich that has putrefied the social system in which the poor become soft targets for exploitation. The process of marginalization as well as the state of marginality, however, may give rise to a centripetal counter-discourse of re-centring, whereby the subalterns become not only aware of their subaltern status but also take it upon themselves to set it right. As a result, the 'harsh / Message of the lowly' can be heard by the poet-seer if not here and now at least in the distance.

Thus, the above poems clearly show Das' poetics of resistance at work in her efforts to develop a revolutionary class-consciousness among the poor which, according to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, can cause 'the transition from a *class in itself* (a category of people having a common relation to the means of production) to a *class for itself* (a stratum organized in active pursuit of its own interests)' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 73).

CHAPTER: 4

DOWN WITH THY DIFFERENCE: ETHNICITY AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

"Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons in exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child."

– Rudyard Kipling

"There's no harm in a cat sitting by and eating right beside you, but if certain men so much as enter the room, the food has to be thrown away! How can one not condemn the caste system which has resulted in this contempt and insult of man by man? If that is not unrighteous, I do not know what is. Those who can despise their fellow-men so terribly can never rise to greatness; for them, in turn, shall be reserved the contempt of others."

– Rabindranath Tagore

"Often in history we see that religion, which was meant to raise us and make us better and nobler, has made people behave like beasts. Instead of bringing enlightenment of them, it has often tried to keep them in the dark; instead of broadening their minds it has frequently made them narrow-minded and intolerant of others."

– Jawaharlal Nehru

Born into a traditionally stratified Keralian society as a dark-skinned Dravidian, and a witness to the Partition riots as well as the Babri Masjid demolition crisis, Kamala Das in her long life has keenly felt the divisive role of ethnicity. In many of her poems, as a result, she expresses her disagreement with and disapproval of man's irrational concern for this negative determinant. The term 'ethnicity' derives from late Middle English 'ethnic' (denoting a person not of the Christian or Jewish faith): via ecclesiastical Latin from Greek 'ethnikos' (heathen), from 'ethnos' (nation). Current senses of the term date from the 19th century (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM).

In the context of colonialism, as Ashcroft et al. put it, 'ethnicity' referred to 'heathen' or 'colonized' nations that were 'not the mainstream', and were 'not traditionally identified with the dominant national mythology' whereas the predominantly European colonizers were never considered to constitute 'an ethnic group', because their ethnicity 'constructed the mythology of national identity' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 82).

In his pioneering study, "Definitions of Ethnicity", W.W. Isajaw has defined an ethnic group as 'a group or category of persons who have a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood and of group belonging, [...] and have either minority or majority status within a larger society' (Isajaw: 1974, 118). In his paper, Isajaw deals with twenty-seven definitions of ethnicity in the United States alone, showing that every ethnic group does not necessarily posses the totality of possible defining traits, but all groups display various combinations to varying degrees. As Isajaw's study points up, ten of the definitions include the trait 'religion', whereas nine include 'race or physical characteristic' (Isajaw: 1974, 118). Thus, to follow Isajaw, issues such as 'race' and 'religion' fall under the purview of 'ethnicity'.

Anthony Giddens has defined the concept of 'caste' as 'a form of stratification in which an individual's social position is fixed at birth and can not be changed' (Giddens: 2001, 684). In view of the semantic compatibility between both Giddens' definition of 'caste' and Isajaw's definition of 'ethnicity', we may justifiably

incorporate the former hyponym as another of the possible components of the latter hypernym. As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have indicated:

> Ethnic groups involve the positing of boundaries in relation to who can and cannot belong according to certain parameters which are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from the credentials of birth to being born in the right place, conforming to cultural or other symbolic practices, language, and very centrally behaving in sexually appropriate ways (Anthias and Yuval-Davis: 1992, 4).

Needless to say, on the basis of the impermeability of an ethnic group's 'borders' by an outsider (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 83), and the subjects own 'affiliative identification' (Thieme: 2003, 86), individuals and groups have often been set apart and discriminated against. This act of 'social exclusion' is motivated by 'ethnocentricism', a term defined by John Scott and Gordon Marshall as the 'practice' of 'studying and making judgements about other societies in terms of one's own cultural assumptions or bias' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 198). It is this subjective assessment of others that, according to Ashcroft et al., produces 'ethnocentrism' and causes marginalization of those 'others' by its adherents (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 135). The mutually exclusive agenda of the dominant groups to 'marginalize' or to 'homogenize', and of the victims to resist discrimination and to create conditions for survival or self-empowerment, have frequently resulted in ethnic strife and bloodshed.

In many of her poems, Kamala Das has described momentous ethnic disturbances of the past and the present, registering her own poetic resistance to the ideology of hatred that foments them. So, in this chapter, a few representative poems like 'Wood Ash', the Colombo group of poems, 'Honour', 'Nani', 'The Dalit Panther', 'The Inheritance', 'Summer 1980', 'Delhi 1984' will be mentioned and discussed to show Das' awareness of the issue of 'ethnicity' in its diverse incarnations as 'race', 'caste', and 'religion'.

'Race', as an element of social stratification has often vitiated the atmosphere of peaceful coexistence by dividing and categorizing communities on the basis of ancestry and physical features, and by spreading the culture of intolerance and hatred. The word 'race' (denoting a group of persons with common features) derived from early 16th century via French from Italian 'razza', of unknown ultimate origin (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). Based on this etymology of the term, 'race' may be broadly defined as a family, tribe, people or nation sharing a set of common interests, beliefs, habits or physical characteristics. In fact, man is racially categorized on the basis of either 'genealogy' or 'biology'. Whereas the genealogical approach plays up concepts of 'origin' and 'heritage', the biological approach highlights anatomical and corporeal distinctions. This is why, W.E.B. Du Bois has averred, 'race would seem to be a dynamic and not a static conception, and the typical races are continually changing and developing, amalgamating and differentiating' (Du Bois in Bernasconi: 2001, 4). As if in continuation of this 'differentiating' function of racism, John Thieme has reminded us, "Today the concept of 'race' is widely viewed as a discursive construction, which continues to be used to assert the superiority of particular groups of people over others or to legitimize stereotypical representations of 'alterity'" (Thieme: 2003, 213).

The pseudo-scientific pretensions of this concept notwithstanding, the phenomenon of race has led to 'racialization' which, according to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, refers to a 'social process by which a population group is categorized as a race' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). Scott and Marshall have further indicated that 'racialization' of such a section of the population precipitates 'racialism' that, in its turn, leads to 'the unequal treatment' of such a group 'purely because of its possession of physical or other characteristics socially defined as denoting a particular race' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). The 'deterministic belief-system' that sustains 'racialism' by 'linking these characteristics with negatively valuated social, psychological, or physical traits' is called 'racism' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). According to David Theo Goldberg, "Racism as a discursive object has been variously analyzed as rationalizations for psycho-sexual fear [concerning racial purity and its pollution by racial outsiders]; for economic or social disparities; for cultural exclusions; or for

political entitlements" (Goldberg: 1993, 42). In this context, Thieme has pointed out, "While racism has long historical origins, the term dates from the 1930s, when Facist attempts to assert the superiority of an Aryan master race led to the development of a complex hierarchical classification of ethnic groups" (Thieme: 2003, 214). Ashcroft et al. have, however, dated the rise of racism to be much earlier and as coeval with 'the rise of colonialism'. They have further reminded us, "Racism can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups" (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 199).

Ashcroft et al. have argued that in the context of imperialism, 'racism' rather than being a 'product' of the concept of 'race', becomes its raison d'être. In fact, 'without the underlined desire for hierarchical categorization implicit in racism, "race" could not exist' (Ashcroft et al.: 2000, 199). Thieme, on the other hand, has opined that 'race' remains 'a potent force' in popular belief and as a socio-political expedient. As such, it is often 'invoked to sanction [condone] the practice of various forms of rac*ism*, which base discrimination on the ascription of stereotypical qualities to particular ethnic groups' (Thieme: 2003, 213).

If the above discussion has presented 'race' as a predominantly divisive socio-political phenomenon, the same phenomenon of race can also work as a galvanizing force that can, on genealogical and/or biological grounds, unite particular ethnic groups to further 'group interests'. John Rex, in this context, has observed:

> On the one hand they [race and race relations] seem to suggest biologistic, or at least culturalist, exploitations of social and institutional phenomena. On the other hand they seem to refer to forms of social bonding in political contexts which compete with those which arise from class formations (Rex in Bottomore: 2000, 456).

Hailing from a colonized country as a dark Dravidian, Kamala Das grew up with the consciousness of this racial categorization of humanity into Aryans and non-Aryans. Her sojourn in Sri Lanka during the prolonged Sinhala-Tamil racial conflict further intensified this consciousness, making her aware of the need to resist racial discrimination through her poetry. Poems like 'Wood Ash', 'Fear', 'The Sea at Galle Face Green', 'Smoke in Colombo', 'After July', 'A Certain Defect in the Blood', 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo', 'The New Sinhala Films', etc. manifest Das' poetic opposition to racial discrimination and racial conflict, thanks to her egalitarian concerns and meliorist vision.

Any discussion of how 'race' may precipitate the marginalization of individuals and groups may begin with an analysis of Kamala Das' poem 'Wood Ash'. Replete with the speaker's temporal excursions between past and present, as shown by a bold intermingling of tenses, this poem presents to us a Janus-faced speaker who at once minds and finds the hurt and anger of the past and the disharmony and anguish of the present. She enjoins upon her addressee to listen to her message 'differently' (attentively) with the expectation and the desire to communicate with both the addressee and his/her descendants:

> In this new world I lack coherence listen differently for what
> I have to tell
> let your blood listen and from within your descendants shall hear me
> (*CP* 49)

The speaker then narrates a story of ancient India, fragmented and disturbed, when and where the 'wild fire' of the Aryans' imperial greed used to break the land up as @'the wild fire burnt itself down'. The sylvan specification of the ransacked land at once specifies it as the Aryan civilization's periphery and its inhabitants as the vanquished Dravidians. The ambers of the gutted land 'lay cooling' in the blood of the inhabitants:

[...] and in the blood of my
ancestors the embers lay cooling
on those days of flux the mixed fragrance of wood ash and
smoke surface with the flow (*CP* 49)

Here, the poet-speaker's calling them 'my ancestors' at once frames her subaltern perspective and registers the dynamics of descent that has induced this narration. Having thus proffered a background, the speaker proceeds to fill in the foreground:

the dravidian king raised a loud war cry the beasts in their dens
cowered in fear
but when he fell he cried in surprise oh amma I die (*CP* 49)

The Dravidian king's war cry necessitated, as it was, by the 'wild fire of Aryan invasion' (Dasan in Dodiya: 2000, 129) also testifies to his heroic resistance. That he is finally defeated by the superior military might and strategy of his Aryan adversaries, rather than diminishing his heroism, elevates it to the new heights of tragic grandeur. The king's surprise and his curt remark, 'amma I die', further increase his patriarchal and pragmatic credentials. The fate of the land after the king's fall is delineated through the storm image that is categorized as fierce and described as having clawed the country's face. It was not unnatural then to understand why 'the pagans danced round the flames in ritual gloom'.

Here, the temporal distance between the king's death and its commemoration through mourning make the gloom of their mind increasingly more 'ritual' than 'real'. The 'anger' they felt is signified by the word 'ambers' that lay cooling in their blood through successive years and generations. This gradual ritualization of a once-felt gloom as well as the cooling of the ambers of anger points at a processual result induced by the passage of time. The degenerative effect of a hero's death is dexterously brought out by the next line where, in a marked contrast to the heroic laying down of life by the Dravidian king, we bear witness to the asinine 'bartering away' of kingdoms by

chieftains only for 'trinkets'. The trinkets in question may denote cheap ornaments or insignificant jewels. They may also stand for women who might have worn them and of whom those chieftains might have been enamoured. When reverting to the first person mode, the speaker says:

> [...] I have
> learnt to listen to the thump of blood in my ear
> I have learnt its brief language of sea moans..... (*CP* 49)

She again harps back to the same idea of 'cooling' of anger over the years, because the expression, 'have learnt', presupposes conscious effort that alone can convert the thump of blood in the speaker's ear to any meaningful message. The message that is encapsulated in the language is brief, since it is borne by the 'sea moans' of time.

The 'sea moans' of time are heard again in the Colombo group of poems (viz. 'Fear', 'The Sea at Galle Face Green', 'Smoke in Colombo', 'After July', 'A Certain Defect in the Blood' and 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo'), written as a response to the prolonged Sinhalese-Tamil conflict of 1983. In fact, Das was an eyewitness to the carnage of the Tamils during her stay in Sri Lanka with her husband who was there as an F.A.O. consultant. There were occasions when the poet too was construed as a Tamil, owing to her South Indian physical features ('nut-brown skin'), and found herself exposed to the same threat. In fact, while talking to P.P. Raveendran, Kamala Das had observed:

> Colombo I had to write because I was there those two years when things were going wrong. I had watched people being killed so that those poems had to be written, certainly and that was the time when I felt that I must write about what I saw around me. I'm also a chronicler. A writer is not merely a lyrical poet but is a chronicler of events that happen around her. I was a witness to the event when a neighbour was done to death (P.P. Raveendran with Das: 1993, 152).

In these poems, Das expresses her first hand experience of terror. Racial discrimination, thirst for power, attempt to subjugate the human spirit, assertion of ethno-national identity, and a free reign of violence — constitute the thematic canvas of these poems. A poet as she is, Das' 'resistance' to these negative determinants is ideational and not physical. Vocalized through the Colombo Poems, it gives rise to the *poetics of resistance*. Chronicling the genocide in all its ugliness and brutality, Das 'resists' any possible attempt by its perpetrators or supporters to gloss over the carnage, and in so doing she also tries to prevent future recurrence of such events. Needless to say, the poet's basic concerns in writing these poems are humanitarian, and she has her own unique way of articulating her distaste for racial discrimination, giving a rather absurdist turn to the whole question of human obsession with race. In order to establish the historicity of these poems, it is necessary to look into the historical circumstances that inspired their creation. My approach to history is to regard it as composed of disparate yet interconnected and interdependent streams of experience.

The history of the post-independence Sri Lanka has been marred by the twin menace of economic underdevelopment and political instability. The presence of the contending ethnic groups - a dominant Sinhala Buddhist majority (74.6 %) and a sizeable Tamil Hindu minority (Sri Lankan Tamils 12.6 % + Indian Tamils 5.5% = 18.1%) – further complicated the situation (Sunil Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 291). In the Sri Lankan context, therefore, the contending ethnic groups (the *Aryan* and *Buddhist Sinhalese* vis-à-vis the *non-Aryan* and *Hindu Tamils*) became doubly different. Induced by this sense of *religio-racial difference*, the Sinhalese Community began to have a feeling of being imposed upon by the settlers whereas the Tamils fostered an equally strong feeling of being discriminated against by the aborigines. As if trying to theorize about this historical phenomenon, John Rex has elsewhere pointed out, 'Race relations and racial conflict [sic.] are necessarily structured by political and economic factors of a more generalized sort' (Rex in Bottomore: 2000, 458). The result was the simultaneous rise of Sinhalese chauvinism on the one hand, and Tamil militancy on the other. On 23rd July 1983, the Tamil Liberation Tigers, who were already waging a war against the state

for the creation of a separate Tamil Eelam (homeland) in the northern and eastern parts of the country, ambushed and killed thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers. This act triggered a large scale retaliative attack on the Tamils by both the military and the thugs which soon degenerated into an ethnic riot.

Sri Lanka had already seen ethnic strife between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in 1958, 1977 and 1981. But, the riots in 1983 were unprecedented in their scale of violence and brutality. Although they were directed primarily against Tamils living in South Sri Lanka, the riots left the entire Tamil population of the country insecure and uncertain of their future. According to Valli Kanapathipillai, 'it brought home to them (Tamils) the painful fact that regardless of their political ideology they were identified as Tamils and not as Sri Lankans' (Kanapathipillai in Veena Das: 1992, 321). The Sri Lankan Government showed its extreme brutality in suppressing any Tamil dissent, and termed the riot 'a legitimate expression of anger by the Sinhala Buddhist majority' (Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 302). Sunil Bastian has identified two factors associated with the ethnic conflict of July 1983 namely 'the organized nature of the riots' and 'the distribution of the victims — they belonged primarily to Tamil minority groups and were not equally distributed among both contending groups' that made him call these riots 'a pogrom' — a term which he defines as 'an organized form of violence by one group against the other' (Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 287). The poet watched this irrational blood-bath in utmost horror, as the myth of a monolithic Nation-State began to crumble under the weight of an internecine civil conflict. This bit of history finds poetic transmutation in the poems under discussion.

The first poem in the Colombo group, 'Fear' serves the dual function of creating a suitable atmosphere and of describing a violent act. In other words, this poem presents to the discerning reader both the background and the foreground of the July'83 ethnic riots. The word-weary first line of the poem succinctly encapsulates within the concretized abstraction of a mental state, 'fear', the key-note of this poem in particular as well that of the Colombo poems in general. That this 'fear' makes the 'eye' 'lidless' (wide open) testifies to its immediacy. In a bid to delineate the chaotic situation, the

poet sees and shows an interminable 'day' with no 'night' in between to replenish or pacify. The word 'bellowing', with all its accumulated implications of pain and rage, aptly illustrates the situation of the land as also the mental state of both the perpetrators of this violence and its prey. It is no surprise then that 'a noonday sun', with all its full complement of scorching heat and blinding light, comes to stay in the strife-torn island:

> Fear,
> A lidless eye,
> Day bellowing into day
> Without a night between,
> A noonday sun come at last
> To stay... (*CP* 11)

The 'substance' of such mayhem is at once a loss of poise and sleep. That this 'substance' (meaning) is 'Bereft of shadow' quietly leads to a minimalistic description of the poem's event that of 'a neighbour done to death'. The indeterminacy, involved in the next two lines as regards the causal sequence of the 'scream' and of the 'swift knife-gleam', at once corroborates the chaos and enhances the poem's multivalence:

> Substance,
> Bereft of shadow,
> A scream
> -a swift knife-gleam-
> Deafens the unwarned
> Human ear... (*CP* 11)

The uncertainty of whether the 'scream' initiates or follows the 'knife-gleam' (stabbing) does, in no way, weaken the poem's metaphoriticity. The 'scream' deafens the 'human ear' because the 'human ear' is 'unwarned' of and, therefore, unprepared for such an event. The rather indifferent and fragmented syntax of the poem operates as an 'objective correlative' to the state of delirium and disarray that came to grip this nation

in crisis. The poem, with its generalized portrayal of one/any killing, acts as an overture to the rest of the Colombo cacophony in which the leitmotifs of fear and violence may then go on recurring with an ever-increasing frequency.

In 'The Sea at Galle Face Green', the transformation of the beautiful island nation virtually into a necropolis is brought out by an extremely evocative simile with which the poem begins:

> Like a half-burnt corpse was
> That once splendent city. (*CP* 12)

It strikes the key-note of the poems of the Colombo group. Destruction here is presented in grisly human terms. The present is desolate with the ennui of a graveyard and splendour belongs only to a distant past. Das displays her great artistic acumen in the spatial polarity that she is able to create between the tenor of this simile 'that once-splendent city' and its vehicle 'a half-burnt corpse'. Thus, the city is likened to a half-burnt corpse whose 'limbs' are 'maimed'. But they are 'turned' towards the sky as silent pointers to the collective guilt of human race, blinded by inane ethnic pride that too often leads to genocide. The fact that the 'corpse'-like 'city' is 'half-burnt' greatly intensifies the sense of horror, since it makes the destruction both grotesque and macabre. The 'smoke' that can only stain the 'sky' is a visual reminder of 'what man has made of man', the ugly crimes that humanity is capable of:

> Its maimed limbs turned towards
> The smoke-stained sky [...] (*CP* 12)

The poet purports to foreground the spill-over effect of human iniquity. It is a 'stain' on human civilization. The word 'stain' carries a sense of cosmic defilement. 'The sky' also symbolizes the sacred realm of freedom, and its ignoble desecration is signified by the smoke that stains it like the 'incarnadined' 'virgin whiteness' in her poem 'The Fear of the Year'. The paralyzing horror steals life even out of Nature. Das projects a

Shakespearean type of breach in Nature, as even the 'sea breezes' can no longer stir the 'small leaves of the Katurmuringa' to 'joyous tremor':

> Even the small leaves of
> The Katurmuringa
> Stopped their joyous tremor
> While the sea breezes blew. (*CP* 12)

But, unlike in Shakespeare, Nature in Das is often mechanical, dispassionate, and indifferent to the human situation:

> As the corpses smouldered,
> Fear and a stench sweet as
> That of raw cashew nuts,
> Roasting. The sea did its
> Duty as usual at
> The Galle Face Green, without
> A sign of fear, without
> A sign of shock or pain
> It patrolled the empty shore. (*CP* 13)

Cessation of movement of the leaves is a sign of inflicted death that reaches even preterhuman spheres. In a way, it is redolent of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner':

> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean (Coleridge: 1945, 190-191)

Significantly, in Coleridge's poem too, the cessation of the ship's movement was caused by the wanton killing of an innocent Albatross. The transfixed 'small leaves'

also parallel the state of the little children who, too, are not spared by the chauvinistic ethno-nationalists and in sheer disgust the poet-speaker asks:

> [...] But how did they track
> Down the little ones whose
> Voices rose each morning
> With the National Flag
> And its betrayed lion,
> An affectionate beast
> A king of kings, let down
> By his son. How did they
> Track down the little ones
> Who knew not their ethnic
> Inferiority? (*CP* 12-13)

The 'National Flag' and its 'betrayed lion' obviously stand for the Sri Lankan nation. By stressing the lion's 'affectionate' and 'king'-like nature, the poet tries to foreground the inclusive and benevolent ideal that led to the liberation of this multi-ethnic country. The 'lion' is 'let down' by 'his son' (his representative). Evidently, the target of Das' strictures is Junius R. Jayewardene, the then president of Sri Lanka. In fact, Das wants to remind us of the nefarious role played by President Jayewardene, who condoned the 'pogrom' by calling it 'a legitimate expression of anger by the Sinhala Buddhist majority'. Fanned by an irrational xenophobia and abated by the state's 'conspiracy not to see', the violence against the Tamils was unprecedented in its scale and brutality. Thus, its effect becomes one of petrifaction, because 'fear has warped us all'. And again,

> The city was grey
> And every window was
> Shut. Fear was in the air (*CP* 13)

Quite often Das creates the desired impact by juxtaposing opposites. The transition from 'birdsong' to 'stomp of boots' is highly suggestive and recounts the tale of a dying glory:

> No birdsong in the trees
> Only the stamp of boots (*CP* 13)

The transition typifies the ethnic disturbance, in that, the soothing 'bird song' with its assurances of creative joy and peace is drowned out by the harsh 'stomp of boots' with portents of destructive fury and violence. Preterit grandeur, too, therefore, seems an obvious desideratum. This lyrical diatribe is not directed at individuals but at state-sponsored violence. The young 'adolescents' only carry out an arbitrary order 'to hate'. The indoctrination of the youth has conditioned them in such a way that they have no emotion of their own. Their hate is only an expression of an 'imbecile will' of the state that uses them as puppets.

'Smoke in Colombo' presents a more subtle perception of violence and terror. The tone of the poem is more personal and is created by the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we'/'us'. The number is plural, because the poet sees herself as one of the 'expatriates' and feels the need to speak representatively:

> On that last ride home we had the smoke
> Following us, along the silenced
> Streets [...] (*CP* 14)

What is significant here, is that, the streets are not silent but 'silenced'. The de-verbal adjectives like 'silenced' and 'emptied' are used strategically to suggest that these conditions of death and desolation are created by none but the human beings themselves. I.G. Ahmed observes that it is 'apotheosized maternalism' that the poem upholds (Ahmed 2005, 145). And this it does through a pair of suggestive similes that

are pivotal to the poem. In the first, the post-arson lingering smoke is likened to milk that lingers on in udders after the burial of the dead calves:

> [...] lingering on, though the fire
> Was dead then in the rubble and the ruins,
> Lingering on as milk lingers on
> In udders after the calves are buried [...] (*CP* 14)

While in the second simile, there is a startling equation of the same smoke with lingering grief in a mother's heart and the state of derangement following the killing of her child, expressed through her mechanical behaviour of rocking the '*emptied*' cradle:

> Lingering on as grief lingers on
> Within women rocking emptied cradles (*CP* 14)

'He [the poet]', says Rimbaud, 'is responsible for humanity, even for the animals' (Rimbaud in Ellmann and Feidleson: 1965, 204). The fact that the vehicle in the first simile (milk in udders) is a synecdoche for *cow*, symbolizing the vulnerable animal world, is noteworthy. The obvious implication is that violence to animals is equally bad, perhaps even worse as they are utterly defenceless. The animal simile thus precedes the human. The expression, 'Emptied Cradles', thematically links the present poem with the preceding ('The Sea at Galle Face Green') which describes the Tamil 'little ones' tracked down and killed by the Sinhala Ethno-nationalists because of their 'ethnic inferiority'.

The second part of the poem takes the reader to the more personalized world of the speaker, showing the impact of the situation on her and those she represents:

> They stopped us, a somnambulistic
> Daze was in their eyes, there was no space
> Between us and their guns, but we were

Too fatigued to feel fear, or resist
The abrupt moves
Of an imbecilic will. (*CP* 14)

It is in an encounter with the same 'adolescent gunmen, ordered to hate', whose 'stomp of boots' supplant the 'birdsong in the tree' in 'The Sea at Galle Face Green'. Stupefied as they are, they have been transformed from commiserating, discerning individuals into killing automatons, operating only in 'a somnambulistic daze'. The youth are mere intellectual somnambulists under the spell of indoctrination, unaware of the results of their own acts. The 'pogrom' has virtually benumbed the 'victims' senses, making them impervious even to 'fear'. Thus, they are abandoned at the same time in a pitiful posture of helpless resignation:

[...] but we were
Too fatigued to feel fear, or resist
The abrupt moves
Of an imbecilic Will. (*CP* 14)

In fact, the 'imbecilic will' of the authoritarian regime cannot easily be resisted by the victims of power. It, however, can certainly give rise to a poetics of resistance as is the case with Das; for in these lines, the poet ideates her resistance to the de trop violation of amity in the multi-ethnic island-nation of Sri Lanka. To the poet, the 'will' of the state seems 'imbecilic', because no violence whatsoever can subjugate the 'eternal spirit of the chainless mind'. The streets can be silenced, but not the voice of liberty. With her obvious sympathy for the minority Tamils, Das too sees herself as a prey to the state's resolve to subjugate the other. In fact, 'the abrupt moves' of the government are designed to thwart the basic interests of the Tamils by all means what Kalinga Tudor Silva identifies as 'militant ethno-nationalism driven by grassroots-level organizations engaged in [...] ethnic activism within a framework of competitive struggle for access to state power' (Silva in Sharma and Oommen: 2000, 202).

'After July' (alternative title 'The Return of Hitler') limns the effects of the 'July 1983 riots' on the Tamil community with all its paralysing horror and stifling tension. As in 'The Sea at Galle Face green', in 'After July', too, the narrative shifts to the third person. Here, the poet projects herself as a detached observer/commentator. The first five lines of the poem indicate a disruption of normalcy in the lives of the cornered Tamils. The suggestive bits of information 'No Tamils in sight', 'no arangetrams held in the halls', 'no flower-seller' coming 'to the door with strings of jasmine to perfume the ladies' hair — all contribute to the building up of an atmosphere of insecurity and apprehension:

> After July, in Colombo there were
> No Tamils in sight, no arangetrams
> Came again to the door with strings
> Of jasmine to perfume the ladies' hair, (*CP* 15)

The stress in this poem shifts to a self-inflicted loss of visibility of the Tamils as a temporary survival mechanism. This fear-driven withdrawal is suggested by the simile, 'Like rodents they were all holed up in fear', preceded by, 'After July, in Colombo there were / No Tamils in sight', and followed by:

> They were the hunted; they cowered behind
> Doors; in the murky twilight of their rooms,
> The whites of their eyes, glimmering like pearls. (*CP* 15)

The use of words like 'rodents', 'rats', 'holed up' and 'hunted' signify utter insignificance, vulnerability, and loss of territory of the expatriates, owing to their non-Aryan 'blood'. That 'Their smell began to resemble the rats, / A mixture of dung, copper and potash' is a clear pointer to the dehumanizing effect of this 'pogrom' on the victims. In fact, this *stench* is at a far remove from the usual *fragrance* of *Jasmine*, alluded to at the beginning of the present poem, as also in 'The Sea at Galle Face Green':

Did the Tamils smell so
Different, what secret
Chemistry let them down?
Was there a faint scent of
Jasmine in their women's
Hair? [...] (*CP* 15)

'Hitler', here, becomes a powerful metonym for 'pogrom' when Das says:

Hitler rose from the dead, he demanded
Yet another round of applause; he hailed
The robust Aryan blood, the sinister
Brew that absolves a man of his sins and
Gives him the right to kill his former friends. (*CP* 15)

As John McLeod has pointed out, 'one of the effects of racist ideologies is to produce a sense of national identity gained through the exclusion and denigration of others' (McLeod: 2007, 112). Besides, Etienne Balibar has indicated:

> [...] racism always tends to operate in an inverted fashion [...] the racial-cultural identity of 'true nationals' remains invisible, but it can be inferred (and is ensured) *a contrario* by the alleged, quasi-hallucinatory visibility of 'false nationals': the Jews, 'wogs', immigrants, 'Pakis', natives, Blacks (Balibar: 1991, 60).

The poem ends with a poignant description of a 'dark Dravidian' whose paternal instincts make him try to insulate his three year old child from this grave situation:

The dark Dravidian laid his three year old child
On his lap. Little mother, he cried, close your eyes and sleep...(*CP* 15)

The notion of 'racial purity' has a historical basis of which Das is certainly aware. Her reference to 'a defect in the blood' is coterminous with non-Aryan blood. The concept of the supposed superiority of the Aryan race developed in the 19th century. It was later abused by Hitler and the Nazis to justify their 'ethnic cleansing' and extermination of Jews and Gypsies and other 'non-Aryans'.

In the Colombo Poems, the poet fiercely interrogates the revival of the notion of the superiority of the Aryan race by the Sri Lankan government to use it as a basis for the discrimination against the Dravidian Tamils. K. Satchidanandan comes up with a revealing observation on this thematic aspect of the Colombo poems:

> There is more to these lines (from 'After July') than meets the eye. for it also 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) that comes up again and again in her poems as references to her 'nut-brown skin' (Shopper at the Cornels, Colombo) or a defect in the blood [...] (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 15).

The title of the poem, 'A Certain Defect in the Blood', bears the mocking irony of ethnic discrimination. The 'defect' in the 'blood' in the poem's title, which is dimmed 'a certain', signifies that the 'defect' is unspecified and that it must have been concocted by its perceivers. 'Blood', by virtue of its colour and its composition, is a primordial symbol of the oneness of humanity. It is the common life-force that runs through all. But, the eroding intellect of man (the Aryans in these poems) can go even to the extent of seeing 'a defect' in the blood and attributing it to a particular ethnic group. In fact, these fanatical ethno-nationalists denounce it down right and seek to exterminate the Tamils on its basis. The poem is thus a subtle invalidation of the notion of ethnic superiority. The rejection of a so-called 'superior' blood can be seen from Das' earliest stage of poetic development as evident from her poem 'Blood', written in

her adolescence. In this poem, she makes fun of her great grandmother for her feeling of superiority over others due to her supposedly 'fine' and 'oldest' blood:

> She told us
> That we had the oldest blood,
> My brother and she and I,
> The oldest blood in the world,
> A blood thin and clear and fine
> While in the veins of the always poor
> And in the veins
> Of the new-rich ones
> Flowed a blood thick as gruel
> And muddy as a ditch (*CP* 5)

This verse narrative may be contrasted with a similar passage on blood from the poem under discussion:

> [...] It was a defect
> In our blood that made us the land's inferiors,
> A certain muddiness in the usual red,
> Revealing our non-Aryan descent. [...] (*CP* 17)

The great grandmother's sense of a 'superior blood' resulted from her sheer naiveté and blissful ignorance, lending her a sense of complacency. 'Blood', to her, signified ancestry, of which she felt proud. Her feeling of 'the oldest' blood was a source of joy to her in her little private world, her doxa, limited to the speaker/poet, her brother and 'she' ('My brother and she and I'). Hence, it was both innocuous and inconsequential. In 'A Certain Defect in the Blood', however, the same notion assumes a sinister implication of potential bloodshed. The poet reveals the pogromist's mindset when she writes:

[...] It was a defect
In our blood that made us the land's inferiors, (*CP* 17)

There is an ironic shift in the narrative position here as the poet takes upon herself the burden of affirming a fiction that she herself has always rejected. This is also the utterance of those whose minds are paralyzed by fear:

Fear had warped our movements. Like spiders exposed
To a water jet we curled ourselves into
Tight balls, (*CP* 17)

In an atmosphere surcharged with terror and apprehension, the victims are hypnotized into helplessly conceding the *defect*. The spider simile is highly functional. As the spider remains safe from the other insects within its web, during the riots, the Tamils too had to confine themselves within their close knit community, 'tight balls'. 'Water jet', in this context, may remind us of a fusillade or firing of bullets from a machine gun. The same fear-driven withdrawal of the cornered Tamils may also signify a possible hardening of their resolve to hit back, bearing thereby a distinct griffin of a violent backlash against the perpetrators of this genocide.

The speaker's preparation to escape into 'sleep and its wide freedoms of the soul' is highly suggestive, because 'sleep' induces forgetfulness of evil. In this context, the adult speaker's conscious 'silence', counterpointed by the children's 'undeterred' and constant questions, become emblematic of the innocence-experience dichotomy.

The sudden 'whirring of the planes' offers a sense of optimism, making the elders among us think about rescue from this abysmal situation of ethnic strife and a safe passage to a 'kinder country', where their 'stigma' of an apparently 'defective' blood 'might stay unrecognized'. In this context, N. V. Raveendran points out, 'the Tamils foolishly believed that the Russians might save them' (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 176). But, this optimism is short-lived and undercut by the time span 'for a moment or

two', since no such Russian intervention did ever take place. The strong desire of the Tamils for safe passage to a kinder country is coeval with an equally strong desire for the blurring of unhappy memories:

> Perhaps in a kinder country their stigma
> Might stay unrecognized and the children might
> Play again under the benign skies of
> Summer months, the memories of July '83
> Growing fainter and fainter as the smoke that
> Stains the firmament in the wake of a gunshot must. (*CP* 17)

The synchronous nature of these two desires stems from the fact that after the 'pogrom' what the victims need is not only 'physical rescue' but 'psychological rehabilitation' as well. Here, the poet's reference to 'July '83' as also in the preceding poem 'After July' adds a new dimension of temporal specificity to her portrayal of the malignance of those who subject others to cruelty under the spell of ethnic prejudice.

This *ethnic prejudice*, however, does not remain confined to politicians alone. This is a virus that slowly infects the minds of even the commoners, and this is what the poet deplores in 'Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo'. This is the only poem in this group in which Das returns to her characteristic first person singular narrative. It often helps her create a sense of intimacy but here it serves an entirely different purpose — that of indicating the social ostracism suffered by the poet-speaker because of her 'non-Aryan descent' evidenced by her 'nut brown skin'. It makes her empathize with the cornered Tamils and speak out on their behalf; for an unbreakable barrier of hatred and prejudice has been programmed into the minds of the Sinhalese majority against their Tamil compatriots:

> Shopping at the Cornells in red slacks and shirt, my hair
> Tied up in a bandanna, my Indianness
> Concealed, I merge well with the expatriates,

Pushing their food laden carts in silence,
Despite my nut brown skin, but when at last
I reach the cashier's counter, the salesgirls
See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed
When they make attempts to stab me with a smile. (*CP* 17)

The speaker's sense of insecurity, because of her nut-brown skin is revealed by her attempt at concealing her 'Indianness'. This adoption of anonymity is a common survival tactic for the minority communities in times of crisis. The blood that is shed all around is now located in the 'cruel mouths' of the 'salesgirls' whose 'smile', though a professional compulsion, is mechanical, as well as hate-prompted. Hence, the speaker feels 'stabbed' with their smile and all human bonds are severed.

Though not a poem of the Colombo group in the strict sense of the term, 'The New Sinhala Films' was written in response to the anti-Tamil riots. As such, it can very well act as an envoy to the Colombo poems, since it both continues and completes the chronicle of the Cannibal times. The title of the poem, 'The New Sinhala Films', coupled with the escapist desire of the poet's Sinhalese friends to talk only of the 'new cinema', hint at a strategic and selective amnesia that at once expects and accepts only the selective memory of 'apolitical reel life' at the cost of the 'chaotic real life' of this island-nation. This strategy is imitated by the Sinhalese friends who willy-nilly belong with the perpetrators of this 'pogrom'. The poet, on the contrary, stands for and sympathizes with the victimized community, 'creatures of / Indian origin, Tamils or cousins of / Tamils' (*The Heritage* 35).

The poet-speaker has to adopt the same strategy for the sake of intellectual survival. Having prioritized survival over integrity, the poet-speaker, like many of the other victims of this 'pogrom', knowingly exposes herself to the odium of cowardice:

Yes, indeed cowards have common sense, they place
Stepladders under the secret slats in ceilings,

Once meant only for the yearly cleaning up,
Arrange their passport, visa and wedding ring
In a bundle alone with a first-aid kit
To make the getaway as easy as it
Even can be, [...] (*The Heritage* 35)

That their 'must-tote' contains the bare minimums of 'passport', 'visa', the 'wedding ring' and a 'first-aid kit' testifies to the immediacy and extent of the danger they find themselves in that may occasion their gate away at a 'moment's notice'. So, the poet is careful to stress that the getaway from the house where one has stayed for so long as to need 'the yearly cleaning up' can never be 'easy'. It can, however, be made 'as easy as it ever can be'. The poet then goes on to present the 'circumstances' that may occasion the above discussed getaway:

[...] under the most distressing
Circumstances of their being creatures of
Indian origin, Tamils or cousins of
Tamils, during this season of legalised
Hate. [...] (*The Heritage* 35)

During this season of legalized hate, it is certainly dangerous to be 'creatures of / Indian origin Tamils of cousins of Tamils', and the poet-speaker has seen ample evidence of this danger, being a witness to the stabbing of a neighbour ('Fear') being stopped at gunpoint ('Smoke in Colombo') or being stabbed by the smile of a salesgirl ('Shopper at the Cornells Colombo'). It is the dirty politics of ethnocentrism that has 'legalized hate' and dried up emotions, necessitating thereby the adoption of cowardice and common sense that at once tells the Sinhalese friends of the poet to visit her only after dark and the poet to 'close' the windows at six and 'sit facing' the T.V. stand. The collective mortification after the pogrom gives them the twin gifts of wisdom and resignation at the cost of integrity, peace, and freedom. As a result, they can only show

this wisdom by talking about the 'new Sinhala films' deliberately forgetting or pretending to forget the reality of the riots:

> The close friends I have among the Sinhalese
> Wait till dusk to visit me and they wisely
> Talk only of the new cinema as though
> Nothing has happened in the recent past but films.
> But the stench of burning flesh is still within
> Our nostrils, the silence of the curfew hours
> Still hums in our ears and so good-naturedly
> Smiling becomes a difficult feat although
> Resignation came easy enough to us,
> Born revolutionaries, the erstwhile addicts
> Of freedom. [...] (*The Heritage* 35)

That the poet's attempts at insulating herself from the chaotic world outside are foredoomed to failure becomes clear in and through her nightmare of incineration:

> [...] At night in
> Bruised sleep the Sinhalese pour gasoline
> On our heads to burn us down, and as corpses
> Devoid of the power to scream we wake with open
> Mouths, trembling uncontrollably in those long
> Pre-dawn hours, dipped in the milk of waxing moons.
> (*The Heritage* 35)

But life must go on, and the persona has to go out leaving the safer confines of her house to brave 'the speeding army-truck' and the 'accidental shot'. So, half inapprehension and half in expectancy, the poet-speaker decides that in the eventuality of her returning home again and meeting the friends, she will try to forget the 'disgusts of the past', and talk only about the 'new Sinhala films':

When at last we return, if at all we do,
Dodging the speeding army-truck or perhaps
The accidental shot, we shall not ever
Discuss the disgusts of the past but shall only
Talk brilliantly of Dharmasiri Bandaranayake's
Thunveni Yamaya and Arukgoda's Monarateuna...
(*The Heritage* 35)

That this resolution is forced upon her by the tyranny of circumstances becomes clear from the tone of self-mockery that pervades the whole poem. The insensitivity of the Sinhalese cognoscenti is strategically foregrounded by showing how they find no other meaningful pastime than talking of the films, in the full knowledge and utter denial of the genocide. The need to dodge 'the speeding army truck' or 'the accidental shot' ironically refutes the 'accidental' nature of the 'shot', pointing the finger of blame at the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) let loose on the Tamils by the racist government of the then Sri Lanka. The verb, to 'dodge' with its implications of evasion and survival does, however, hint at a never-say-die attitude. This resilience may, in reality, help the victims to fight on and, in poetry, inspire the poet to formulate her poetics of resistance against the diabolical project of ethno-nationalism to subjugate the racialized 'other'.

In fact, in the Colombo poems, Das has thought up what may be termed 'poetry of witness', depicting a grave human situation in relation to history. The poet focuses on the complexities of this connection, revealing how poetry begins from a political, social and cultural situation, capturing and interpreting this situation, and thereby registering the 'authenticity' of historical and imaginative truth. These poems, just like 'Wood Ash', derive their enduring appeal by transcending the merely topical or local, and by blending the 'documentary' with the 'artistic'. The violent intrusion into the Dravidian territory by the Aryans ('Wood Ash') and the violence in Sri Lanka against the Tamils (the Colombo Poems), therefore, become extended metaphors for the violence of every kind.

'Caste', like 'race', is another of the determinants of social stratification that has often led to 'discrimination against' as well as 'denial of basic rights to' certain sections of the society on the basis of their perceived social rank and status. The issue of 'caste' is endemic to Indian society, referring to a rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation. André Béteille defines 'caste' as 'a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life'. According to him, it 'sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchal system, based on concepts of purity and pollution' (Béteille: 1965, 23).

The above definition shows us how the concept of 'caste' allows little mobility beyond the position to which a person is born. The term, as John Thieme points out, is often applied to the 'hierarchically arranged system of social stratification based on heredity, particularly as found in conservative Hinduism' (Thieme: 2003, 45). First used by 16th-century Portuguese traders, the word 'caste' derives from mid 16th century (in the general sense race, breed): from Spanish and Portuguese 'casta' (lineage, race, breed), feminine of 'casto' (pure, unmixed), from Latin 'castus' (chaste) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). Thieme has reminded us:

> Caste is believed to have evolved in ancient India from the earlier *varna* system, which came into being around 1000 BC and has been seen as the bedrock of social philosophy underpinning Hinduism's emphasis on purity and pollution (Thieme: 2003, 45).

According to the ancient sacred literature of India, the Aryan priests stratified society into a basic caste system which was later rigidified and standardized in the *Manu Smriti*, or Law of Manu sometime between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. In this treatise, the Aryan priest-lawmakers created the four great hereditary divisions of society still surviving today: i) *Brahmins* (the priestly class), ii) *Kshatriyas* (the

warriors), iii) *Vaisyas* (the farmers and merchants), iv) *Sudras* (the labourers). Far lower than the *Sudras* – in fact, entirely outside the social order and limited to doing the most menial and unappealing tasks – were those people of no caste, formerly known as *Asprishyas* or Untouchables. John Scott and Gordon Marshall have indicated:

> Within each *varna* there are myriad *jati*, which are small endogamous groups, tied to a defining occupation, based in a village or group of villages, and which provide for the element of mobility within a system where otherwise birth determines social ranks (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 55).

In fact, the Untouchables were the Dravidians and the aboriginal inhabitants of India. To their ranks, from time to time, were added the pariahs, or outcasts, people expelled for religious or social sins from the castes into which they had been born. Thus instituted by the priests, the caste system was made a part of Hindu religious law that was fortified by the claim of divine revelation. Ecclesiastical schisms like the rise of Buddhism that was itself a reaction to and protest against the intolerable bondage of the caste hierarchy have frequently burst the system from within. Thus, like 'race' again, 'caste' too has been a dynamic and unstable signifier whose meaning and characteristics have changed with time.

Since the caste system has been associated with bindings of profession, it has often been vitiated by financial considerations. People from the lower caste who are nearly always economically weak as well have been marginalized and discriminated against by people from the upper caste. Though some attempts have been made by rulers (governments in the 'pre' and the 'post' independence era) and reformers (like M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar) to eradicate caste discrimination and improve the plight of the lower caste people, these sections of our society, many of whom now prefer to be called *Dalit* (oppressed people), are still subjected to frequent cases of social exclusion. This wide-spread discrimination has indirectly fostered the phenomenon of caste consolidation and led to its twin incarnations of social activism

and politico-economic pressure groups to achieve empowerment and equality. A socially conscious poet, Kamala Das can hardly remain impervious to this problem, and her poems like 'Honour', 'Nani', 'The Dalit Panther' etc. foreground the social injustice perpetrated in the name of caste.

In the poem 'Honour', the poet turns her lynx-eyed gaze at her own feudal Nair ancestors and accuses them of being lecherous killers. Liberated from and hateful to her 'ancestors' she is alive to her poetic responsibility to reveal the grim truth of/from the Nair past, and expiate thereby the sins they had committed to the low caste subalterns:

> [...] Others talk through my mouth today.
> Who can muzzle me [...] (*CP* 47)

So, in the words of M. Dasan, the poem becomes 'a powerful expression of unmuzzled wrath and righteous indignation at the cruelties that have been heaped upon the depressed class people (Dalit panthers of the poem) by the feudal system' (Dasan in Dodiya: 2000, 124).

The title of the poem is a double edged signifier, making dents on the readers' consciousness with both irony and sarcasm. 'Honour', here, is a hollow word – an edifice of sham and swank, built by the feudal Nairs upon the bedrock of exploitation, both sexual and economic. The poet claims descent from 'that uneasy soil, nourished / By sweat, semen, blood, the juices of the placenta and the / Strangled babe' on which her Nair ancestors led an apparently respectable but actually lustful life. In fact, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, they too led double lives. Throughout the day they played the protector of family honour and personal integrity but at night they forced their low caste tenants to satisfy their carnal desires by supplying 'little nieces'. Once with child, these 'young toys' were murdered and thrown into pools and wells:

> Honour was a plant my ancestor watered
> In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres. At night their serfs

Let them take to bed their little nieces, and pregnancy,
A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and ponds
From which they rose like lotuses and water lilies, each with
A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel (*CP* 47)

In fact, Das here reveals her ancestors' lechery and opportunism through which they could change their low caste tenants into virtual procurers and 'their little nieces' into mere 'toys'. The innocence of these little girls who failed to solve the 'puzzle' of 'pregnancy' makes their fate all the more terrible. The poet's use of the word 'confess' in the line 'The dead confess their brutal games and they guffaw through my mouth' (*CP* 47) is highly suggestive. In effect, the 'dead' girls confess as if on behalf of the rapists and the murderers and their 'brutal game'. Since they, after their death, are unable to get either any compensation or an apology from their exploiters. the sensitive poet takes it upon herself to champion their cause. In fact, it is their spirit that inspires the poet to laugh at discriminatory laws that 'punished no rich, only the poor'. The economic aspect of their suppression is revealed by the poet in the following lines:

The dead confess their brutal games and they guffaw through my mouth
Today, they laugh at laws that punished no rich, only the poor
Were ravished, strangled, drowned, buried at midnight behind
snakeshrines
Cheated of their land, their huts and hearts (*CP* 47)

As a matter of fact, 'on the lush lush stage of that / Feudal age' the poor seemed mere 'comedians' or 'laugh raisers' pleasing the feudal lords with their lands and ladies.

The fact that even long after the expiry of that 'feudal age' sexual exploitation of the low caste women are still kept on is revealed and railed at in the following excerpt:

how we laughed, how we held our stomachs and laughed when

The poor Moplah, young and newlywed, was handcuffed and dragged off
To Chowghat on a charge of murder, even dead and rotting
The wench was alluring, we took only one short look at her,
Cover her with a cloth, we told the police, honour,
Honour, the dearest word of all in the Nayar dictionary... (*CP* 47)

The poet's inclusion of herself in the hypernym 'we' suggests her awareness of the collective responsibility which being a Nair woman she cannot shirk. The unholy nexus between the police and the Nairs is brought to the fore in the rape and murder of the Moplah wench framed by police on a false charge of murder. The fact that even the dead and rotting naked body of the woman seemed 'alluring' to her 'honour-conscious' Nair observers again bring to the surface both their hypocrisy and their concupiscence.

It is this awareness of the past and present crimes perpetrated by her upper caste Nair community that at once forms and frames her response to the Dalit panther activist who comes to visit her and seek her blessings:

The Dalit Panther came to seek my blessings, God knows why, and
Wearing a rude skullcap to hide his scarring wound, a bandage
Round his arm. What could I tell him that was not hypocrisy?
Silence, benevolently misinterpreted, aided me,
It is the only way I know to fool the world, my silence
Is the cloth on the conjurer's table, the bluewhite sea where
Floats the canoe of a wand. [...] (*CP* 47)

This visit by the Dalit Panther activist places Das in a spot of bother. An Indian woman that she is she cannot completely free herself from her own caste allegiance and caste consciousness. However, being a sensitive poet, she cannot condone the crimes of her ancestors either. She is, therefore, left with the only option of keeping a studied silence; for anything she may say runs the risk of being hypocritical. In this context, we may do

well to remember that the poet's 'silence' is not self-motivated but enforced from outside. In fact, it is an off-shoot of her multilayered social constrictions (family, community, caste and class) and, therefore, indicative of her own subaltern status. So, we may safely second the following statement by I.G. Ahmed, 'It ['Honour'] embodies powerful social criticism contrary to the allegation that Das' poetry lacks social concern' (Ahmed: 2005, 121).

By revealing the general drift of caste discrimination witnessed by the poet in her native Kerala, 'Honour' prepares the stage for Das' poetic treatment of specific instances of casteism in the next two poems. Whereas in 'Nani' it is the sexual exploitation of a low caste housemaid that receives her trenchant denunciation, in 'The Dalit Panther' it is the economic aspect of this discrimination that comes under the poetic scanner.

A companion piece of 'Honour', 'Nani' deals with a specific instance of exploitation of a low caste house maid, based on an incident from Kamala Das' childhood. Within the brief compass of twenty-eight lines, the poet does a virtuoso act of narrating a story, reviewing it from the vantage point of experience as well as awareness, and drawing an inductive lesson about human nature and societal indifferent attitude to casteist injustice. In the words of Vrinda Nabar, the 'theme' of the poem is 'the tragic suicide of a young, pregnant, unmarried maid who was seduced and betrayed' (Nabar: 1994, 69).

N.V. Raveendran has called attention to the fact that 'the time of the action' in the first eighteen lines of this poem is set in the 'past' when the poet was a child (N.V. Raveendran: 2000, 156), whereas the rest of the poem is about the poet-speaker's remembrance of things past from an egalitarian perspective. According to Nabar, "The start of the poem has a pendulum-like movement, which is in keeping with the turning-rope at the end of which Nani swung till the police claimed her corpse" (Nabar: 1994, 69). To put Nabar's comment into its proper perspective, we must quote the first eight lines of the poem:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there,
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance [...] (*OP* 40)

That the pregnant maid had to commit suicide by hanging herself, fearful of ostracism and social strangulation, while her unidentified seducer could live on undetected and uncensored, highlights women's victim-status in a male-dominated society. Moreover, the fact that she was an unlettered house maid coming from a lower caste background highlights the marginalization of individuals on the basis of 'caste'. She was truly 'a clumsy puppet' – a 'puppet' for her presumably upper caste seducer, and 'clumsy' (awkward and tactless) in protecting herself against male concupiscence. In fact, when alive, she had to 'entertain' the adults by granting sexual favours. Even after her death, she could not transcend this 'puppet'-status, having to 'entertain' the children by seeming to perform a 'comic dance'. It is for this reason, as I.G. Ahmed points out, that the children 'cannot see through her grim acrobatics' (Ahmed: 2005, 122). The privy in which Nani committed suicide is 'abandoned' by the poet's family, and as time passes is slowly adorned by nature:

[...] The shrubs grew fast. Before the summer's end
The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway
And the walls. The privy, so abandoned,
Became an altar then, a sunny shrine
For a goddess who was dead. [...] (*OP* 40)

This loving response of nature to the low caste maid is in marked contrast to the harsh

treatment meted out to her by a casteist society.

In fact, the inhumanity of the social system is further exemplified by the response of the poet's grandmother when, after 'another / Year or two', the poet asks her if she remembered 'Nani, the dark / Plump one who bathed me near the well'. The grandmother takes a while to formulate her 'designed deafness'. So she shifts 'the reading glasses on her nose' and it is only then that she hurls a counter-question at the poet-speaker, 'Nani, she asked, who is she?'

The poet-speaker realizes the sinister motive behind her grandmother's response, because by her denial of Nani's existence and identity the hapless maid is consigned to the black hole of oblivion, ending thereby even the slender hope of her posthumous rehabilitation. M. Dasan has detected in the grandmother's response the workings of 'conventional feudal structure and values' (Dasan in Dodiya: 2000, 124). The poet-speaker is thus initiated into the murky world of a constrictive social space that teaches her the art of chocking 'each truth' 'with a query'. According to K. Satchidanandan, it is this 'designed deafness' of the poet's upper caste grandmother that makes the poem 'an indictment of the amnesiac aristocracy that can ruin a poor woman's honour, force her to end her life and within days sentence her to the second death of oblivion' (Satchidanandan in Das: 1996, 14). But, as C.V. Venugopal has pointed out, "The point is Kamala Das cannot reconcile with the 'soft indefinite' and, after asking questions, cannot 'move on before the answers come'" (Venugopal in Prasad: 1989, 147). In this context Maithreyi Krishnaraj's comment on the gender/caste intersection is quite revelatory:

> Upper caste women may face gender oppression but they also gain the privileges of belonging to a higher caste and will defend those privileges. Caste is extraordinarily successful in dividing women, in erasing a possibility of sisterhood (Krishnaraj in Chakravarti: 2003, xii).

As revealed earlier in 'Honour', in this poem too, the poet-speaker does not spare either

her upper caste ancestors/relatives or herself for cultivating this 'designed deafness'. She suggests that only 'wise' ones like her Nair ancestors who could ravish low caste house maids like Nani, and her grandmother who would condone their villainy and cover it up, stood any chance to attain the 'clotted peace' in their 'blue silent zone' of hypocritical smugness. By calling those ones 'lucky' who would ask questions and move on before getting answers, the poet actually subjects them to subtle insinuations, for willy-nilly answers have to be sought found and acted upon by the sensitive ones in order to stop such oppression of the underprivileged.

It was the economic imperative of earning her bread (and may be that of her family as well) that brought Nani to the virtual slaughter house of the Nairs where she was exposed to the male concupiscence and driven to end her accursed existence. This fact links 'Nani' to the next poem 'The Dalit Panther'.

The poem gives us a full account of the oppression meted out to the low caste Dalits as well as the resistive/rectificative measures that may or may not be taken by them. The title, 'The Dalit Panther', recalls a revolutionary moment for the rights of the untouchables and low castes that emerged in 1970s. Kamala Das' reference to this movement in both 'Honour' and the present poem shows not only her awareness of but also her deference to its ideology.

The poem begins with a presumably portentous air, 'It's time for a revolution, tumult the secret voices / Of the air,' (*Mid-day*, N. pag.). The 'secret voices' of 'the air' obviously stand for a conspiracy. The interesting use of 'tumult' as a verb adds to the description a new dimension of confused excitement that truly becomes 'the time for a revolution'. But, the element of 'noise' implied in 'tumult' seems to betray the 'secrecy' of the preparatory stage for the revolution. Why 'it' is (the present time) 'the [suitable/appropriate] time for a revolution is revealed in the remainder of the poem. In a description reminiscent of 'The Flag', Das proceeds to present a divergent picture of urban setting caught in the temporal frame of 'night'. An 'eleven years old' rag-picker is seen and shown 'curled to / Foetus-shape on the pavement'. Lacking any interest to

hear the 'night air sing' (evidently both the *song* and its *theme*) he sleeps on. Presumably the rag-picker has had to face enough of toil and trouble during the day. Similar is the case with the 'carcasses' of the 'poor' who 'rest now in warm safety vaults of the earth'; for 'they have had / Enough of the cold outside'. Significantly, both the 'rag-picker' who 'doesn't care' and the 'carcasses of the poor' who are not to be discussed remain beyond the reach of the *night air*'s message. But, the 'young man', hiding his 'wounds' in the skull cap who was once beaten by the police for speaking against the gods (the rich), cannot remain impervious to the call for 'revolution'. In fact, it is the economic disparity whereby the 'rich' can 'roost' in 'warm beds' eat the gourmet fare, watch 'old films / On their T.V. sets' and afford to shed tears for the simulated misfortune of heroines, that instigated the young man's invectives against them. That the rich are the products of an unjust and corrupt system is revealed by the extra-digetic speaker who compares them with 'microbes in pus':

> [...] The rich
> Roost in warm beds like microbes in pus. They eat the gourmet fare
> Advertised in evening papers, and watch old films
> On their T.V. sets, the heroine's unrequited love makes
> Them reach out for handkerchiefs. [...] (*Mid-day*, N. pag.)

The young man in skull cap whom we had met once before in 'Honour' is the Dalit panther. His presence ensures that the revolution or the 'overturning' may still have some hope for the rag-picker. But, the 'carcasses of the poor' will have nothing to do with it:

> [...] they shall not rise again to come
> Out that flag-flying day, now not so far away,
> To claim lost chances, lost lives, lost beauty. (*Mid-day*, N. pag.)

The 'lost chances', 'lost lives' and 'lost beauty' that the 'flag-flying day' stands for at once exposes the present state of chaos and injustice, and highlights the need for Dalit activism.

The three poems on the caste issue discussed above form a distinct group despite their publication at different times. It is certainly not without significance that this group of poems is begun and ended with descriptions of the Dalit panther (the young man in 'skull cap') as the 'only living', involved and active, representative of the low caste. As such, this young man is burdened with the responsibility to make the upper caste society accountable for the inhuman atrocities like seduction, rape, and murder to which they have subjected the Dalits.

Like 'race' and 'caste', 'religion' too has often pushed humanity to the periphery. The word religion derives from Middle English (originally in the sense life under monastic vows): from Old French, or from Latin 'religio (n-)' (obligation, bond, reverence), perhaps based on Latin 'religare' (to bind) (*OALDCE* 2005, CD-ROM). Thus, from the etymological perspective, 'religion' denotes both earnest observance of ritual obligations and an inward spirit of reverence. According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, the term 'religion' refers to the 'set of beliefs, symbols, and practices (for example rituals), which is based on the idea of the sacred, and which unites believers into a socio-religious community' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 560). In modern usage, however, it encompasses a wide spectrum of meanings, reflecting the immense variety of ways the term can be expounded. Talking of religion, William E. Paden comments:

> At one extreme, many committed believers recognize only their own tradition as a religion, understanding expressions such as *worship* and *prayer* to refer exclusively to the practices of their tradition. Although many believers stop short of claiming an exclusive status for their tradition, they may nevertheless use vague or idealizing terms in defining religion – for example, "true love of God," or "the path of

> enlightenment." At the other extreme, religion may be equated with ignorance, fanaticism, or wishful thinking (Paden in *Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe* 2004, CD-ROM).

Sticking to the above definition, it is noted that 'religion' thrives on a contrast between the 'sacred' (to be worshipped) and the 'profane' (to be denounced). It, as a result, becomes at once prescriptive and restrictive stipulating in Gerhard Lenski's opinion 'orthodoxy' (or belief), 'association' (or religious attendance), 'devotion' (dealing with such aspects as prayer), and 'communality' (the degree of segregation of the religious group) (Lenski: 1961, 37). If the prescriptive aspect of 'religion' manifests itself in its constant bid to maintain the 'purity' of the specific religious group, then its restrictive aspect is revealed in the attempt at warding off 'pollution' from outside. As a result, religion is often perceived to spawn fanaticism and propagate the ideology of hatred. In a multi-religious society, this may lead to religious intolerance as well as religious conflict.

Swami Vivekananda had observed, "To the other nations of the world, religion is one among the many occupations of life. [...] But here, in India, religion is the one and the only occupation of life" (Swami Vivekananda: 1948, 107). Vivekananda was himself aware of the ramifications of 'religion', being and becoming 'the one and the only occupation of life' in India. These may refer to the rise of 'extreme spirituality' on the one hand, and 'religious fanaticism' on the other. While talking to Eunice De Souza, Kamala Das pointed out:

> I've moved away from temples and religions. No edifice can contain God. Religions have an expiry date. If you move away from religion, you go closer to God. The myths are like costumes. You don't need them. Religion is not relevant (De Souza with Das: 1999, 37).

As revealed in the above excerpt, by stressing the 'expiry date' and the *irrelevance* of religion, the meliorist Das strongly seeks to condemn religious fanaticism of all kinds.

So, religion-prompted carnage occasions some of her boldest poetic outbursts such as 'The Inheritance', 'Summer 1980' and 'Delhi 1984'.

Das' credentials as a chronicler of the Indian reality, rather realities, are impeccable. If 'An Introduction' shows her negotiations with the Indian scene from the perspective of 'a nut-brown' Indian woman daring to write poetry in English, and 'The Flag' reveals her horror and disgust at the rich/poor divide, 'The Inheritance' lays bare her annoyance at and antagonism towards religious fanaticism and intolerance. Devindra Kohli has categorized 'The Inheritance' as 'a protest poem' which, in his words, is 'bitter, ironical, but not cynical' (Kohli: 1975, 106). Prompted by her memories of the partition riots of 1947 and her knowledge of the Biafran War of Nigeria in the 1960s, as revealed in an unpublished interview with I.G. Ahmed, the sensitive artist shudders to realize that religious hatred is 'our only inheritance'. It is, therefore, called the 'ancient virus' that has been nurtured in the 'soul'. Obviously, the result has been catastrophic as the true meaning of religion has been lost on man. So, the professed teaching has degenerated from 'love' to 'hate', and in lieu of 'wisdom' we have been left with 'babble':

> This then was our only inheritance. this ancient
> Virus that we nurtured in the soul so
> That when at sundown, the Muezzin's high wail sounded from
> The mosque, the chapel-bells announced the angelus, and
> From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, we
> Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate, illogical,
> And chose not to believe – what we perhaps vaguely sensed –
> That it was only our fathers' lunacy speaking,
> In three different tones, babbling [...] (*OP* 20)

The use of the word 'then' in the first line undercuts the positive associations (expectations) of the key-word 'Inheritance' with the negative implications that the context of the poem has determined.

Vrinda Nabar tells us that since zealotry is 'our only [exclusive] inheritance', it gets 'assimilated willy-nilly into our collective unconscious' (Nabar: 1994, 71). That this 'zealotry' is not confined to any particular religion further exacerbates the situation. The 'Muezzin's high wail', the 'chapel-bells', and the 'Brahmin's assonant chant' are all ambiguously referential on account of their past roots in 'love' and present message of 'hate'. The speaker's stance is equally ambiguous in being hate-laden, in choosing 'not to believe' in what could probably be 'sensed'. What could perhaps be 'sensed', but was positively ignored, was that the cacophony of religious prayers was indicative of 'our father's lunacy', and then therefore, became both 'illogical' and murderous:

> [...] Slay them who do not
> Believe, or better still, disembowel their young ones
> And scatter on the streets the meagre innards. [...] (*OP* 20)

The three acts that this cacophony from the seats of religion urges the 'believers' to perform – namely, slaying the 'unbelievers', disembowelling 'their young ones', and scattering the 'meagre innards' on the 'streets' – gradually worsen in exhibiting both cruelty and callousness.

Significantly, the present poem, which consists of two distinct thematic movements, undergoes a perceptible change of tenor at this point. After vaguely sensing yet choosing 'not to believe' in this 'religious' 'lunacy', the poet-speaker shakes off all her vacillations and takes on a reverential tone and an optative mood that is reminiscent of either the Muezzin or the Vicar or the Brahmin:

> [...] Oh God,
> Blessed be your fair name, blessed be the religion
> Purified in the unbelievers' blood, blessed be
> Our sacred city, blessed be its incarnadined glory. [...] (*OP* 20)

By choosing not to disclose her own religious leanings yet extolling 'God' and His 'name', the poet plays a linguistic game of apparent homage and subtle insinuations. As a result, 'God', who happens to be placed at the centre of religious extremism, gets 'a fair name' by turning a blind eye to the unfair carnage of the 'unbelievers'. The 'religion' gets 'purified' not by the holy water but by the 'unbelievers' blood'. Besides, 'our sacred city' gets its glory and sacredness by being 'incarnadined' (blood-drenched). The poet-speaker playfully fabricates the facade of reverence to religion only to undercut the same by pointing up how religions have 'an expiry date' and how she has 'moved away from temples and religion'.

If 'The Inheritance' describes the ills of zealotry in the generalized Indian context, 'Summer 1980' and 'Delhi 1984' concretize the handiwork of the zealots on particular occasions in recent history in India. If in 'Summer 1980' Das shows the sacred ideals of Sikhism being degraded by some of its 'dry-eyed adherents', then in 'Delhi 1984' she presents the Sikh community at the receiving end of religious violence, perpetrated by some misguided Hindu fundamentalists.

In 'Summer 1980' (to be discussed in detail in the seventh chapter of this dissertation), Das depicts the intolerance shown by the Sikhs and the Nirankaris on account of their mutual religious difference. The cry, 'kill, kill', seems to be an extension of 'our fathers' lunacy', 'babblings' in 'different tones' ('The Inheritance'). The 'city air' implies as much a spatial particularity as an attitude to life. In both cases, however, man becomes the ultimate loser, being cut off from the life-sustaining sap of the rural India. The 'alchemy', therefore, becomes 'malevolent' inverting the original process of turning 'lead' or other baser metals into the 'gold' of the Golden Temple to that of turning 'gold' into the 'lead' of bullets. In this climate of hatred, all that had seemed 'so dear' and 'so beautiful' 'till a while ago' were brutally snuffed out. The familiar 'caressing hands' that were supposed to bless and nurtured life swiftly changed their activities to form 'a death-head'. The worship of love and life, therefore, became the invocation of death and 'The scriptural / chant sounded like a lunatic's guffaw' ('Delhi 1984').

Just like 'Summer 1980', 'Delhi 1984' too is a critique of religious violence. The spatial marker ('Delhi') in the later poem, like the temporal marker ('Summer') in the former, firmly situates the event within the contextual boundary of 1984. In fact, as P.P. Raveendran has pointed out, the 'carnage against the members of the Sikh community' of Delhi in 1984, 'following the assassination of Indira Gandhi', receives a severe condemnation in her poem 'Delhi 1984' (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 50). On the pretext of the deluded action of few persons, the whole community of the Sikhs was put to the sword by the Hindu extremists, who had themselves been misguided by the power-hungry politicians. The culture of fanaticism exhibited by the irate mob sought to crush the Sikh identity. What problematizes the case, here, is that the oppressive culture of the majority is itself formed and framed by its Hindu identity. Hence, the discursive site gets drowned out by the clamouring voices. The poem graphically records how innocent men were brutally done to death and helpless women gang-raped as peaceful suburbs were ransacked. The poet's description seems almost photographic when she writes:

> The turbans were unwound, the long limbs
> broken and bunched to seem like faggots
> so that when such bundles were gifted
> to their respective homes the women
> swooned as their eyes lighted on a scarred
> knee or a tattooed arm. [...] (*BKD* 120)

And again:

> [...] No breast was left
> unfondled, no ripe cunt overlooked,
> as terror, fleet of foot, did rampage
> the sedate suburbs, while in the queen's
> funeral pyre the embers lay cooling. (*BKD* 120)

In the words of Raveendran, these lines 'evoke the ruthless manner in which Sikhs were massacred in the communal riots of 1984, the political turbulence shattering the presence of "home" as an example of domestic calm' (P.P. Raveendran: 1994, 51). That Das has no quarrel with the essence of true religion is clearly revealed when she states:

> [...] any God worth his name would hasten
> to disown these dry-eyed adherents
> of the newest cult. [...] (*BKD* 120)

But, unfortunately, religious fanaticism and blind fury unleashed by irate mobs and orchestrated by power-mongers defile the sacred spirit of true religion while claiming at the same time the 'sanction of the scriptures' (Ahmed: 2005, 129). So, the 'scriptural chant' kept up by the zealots 'sounded' to the indignant poet 'like a lunatic's guffaw'.

A new historicist interest in the transverse connection between discourses might tempt us to compare Das' poem to Ashish Banerjee's sociological account of the violent backlash against the Sikh community. Here is an excerpt from Banerjee's paper "'Comparative Curfew': Changing Dimensions of Communal Politics in India" that deals with the Delhi 1984 riots:

> However, the most successful act of communalization was the assassination of Mrs Gandhi in November 1984. Her assassination unleashed a massive reprisal against the Sikh population in Delhi. I was witness to the lynching and burning of Sikhs on that day. Sikh gurdwaras in Delhi went up in flames. Shops belonging to Sikhs were robbed and burnt, their homes looted. Some Congress leaders of Delhi are alleged to have incited riots which took their worst toll in the next days in poor and working-class localities on the fringes of Delhi. Sikhs reported to First Aid centres and dispensaries with massive sword injuries, burn wounds and all manner of other serious injuries. This was not so much a Hindu-

> Sikh riot as an organized attack by Hindus on Sikhs to vent their pent-up anger. To the extent that Sikhs could resist, they did. And that might qualify these incidents to be called riots [...] (Banerjee in Veena Das 1992, 49-50).

Needless to say, the operations of 'power' or 'powerlessness' in the poem are further revealed if we give a perceptive reading of the above passage. Both Das on the metonymic plane and Banerjee on the illustrative plane expose the workings of the Hindu fundamentalists with irony and insinuation.

In the poems discussed above, 'ethnicity', with all its constituent elements of 'race', 'caste' and 'religion', is seen to create as well as cry out against difference between man and man. The racial difference between the Aryans and the Dravidians (e.g. 'Wood Ash', the 'Colombo Poems', and 'The New Sinhala Films'), and the caste difference between the *varna* Hindus and the Dalits (e.g. 'Honour', 'Nani', and 'The Dalit Panther') are inevitable off shoots of these negative determinants ('race' and 'caste'). But, when 'religion' that is supposed to be a uniting and ennobling force is seen to divide and degrade its adherents (e.g. 'The Inheritance', 'Summer 1980', and 'Delhi 1984'), it can only be called a perversion. In all these poems, the poet-speaker decries the common message of the extremists that seems to be, **DOWN WITH THY DIFFERENCE**.

CHAPTER: 5

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. Needles 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 riots 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 awarenes 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) by 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 chromatist 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 chromatist 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 gibers' 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 safely. 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 mush 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 Maharastra, 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. 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 chromatist 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.

CHAPTER: 6

AUTUMN LEAVES: AGE AND MARGINALITY IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

"Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
If need be occupy a throne.
Where nobody can call *you* a crone."

– Robert Frost

"Forgive me, mother,
that I left you
a life-long widow
old alone.

It was to kill or die
and you got me anyway;
The blood congeals at lover's touch.
The guts dissolve in shit.

I was never young.
Now I'm old, alone.

In dreams
I hack you."

– Eunice De Souza

A woman's frame, a long life, and the changing times have ensured that Kamala Das has had to bear witness to and put up with the abominable treatment meted out to the *ageing* and the *aged* by a *productivity*-driven and *youth*-oriented society. Sociologists have used the term 'ageism' to define this 'discrimination against people on grounds of age' (Giddens: 2001, 683). Society operates on the basis of 'age-sets' or 'age-grades'. According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, these 'broad age-bands' indicate the 'social status', 'assigned and permitted roles', and 'activities' of individuals or groups belonging to them (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 8). Transitions from one of such grades into the next are always marked by rites of passage, changes in societal expectations and perceptions, and changes in both physical and mental abilities.

These changes associated with the phenomenon of ageing lead to 'age-stratification', a term defined as a 'system of inequalities' linked to 'age-sets', whereby both the young and the old are treated as 'relatively incompetent' and 'excluded' from 'much social life' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 8). In fact, the physiological process of ageing has important socio-cultural ramifications. Since 'age' is not only a 'biological inevitability' but also a 'cultural category', its meaning, significance, and traits are seen to vary with time and across cultures (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 9). In our industrialized and capitalist system, the retirement from external production at a certain age means that the aged are viewed as unproductive and a burden. The concept of the nuclear family entails a perceived 'uselessness' and 'undesirability' of the elderly. In the case of women, the fact of ageing with its attendant certainty of the menopause, leads to a further physical impairment. Besides, in most cases, older women's financial dependence on their children makes them vulnerable to neglect and abandonment.

Ethel Shanas et al. have criticized the acquiescent functionalism under whose influence society is often seen to legitimate ageism by excluding the elderly from the labour market and other significant social roles (Shanas et al.: 1968, 26). In such a society, therefore, the advancing years entail a consequent loss of 'productivity', both financial and reproductive. In this context, Julie McMullin has suggested, "The productive and reproductive lives of the younger people are the ideal against which

older people are judged" (McMullin in Arber and Ginn: 1995, 32). As a result, the aged are often found wanting on these scores.

In many of her poems and prose articles, Kamala Das has tackled the issue of ageing and its consequent degradation as well as discrimination that lead the aged to the accursed fate of 'structured dependency'. I.G. Ahmed, in this connection, observes, 'As a Third World Feminist Das exposes the agony of alienation of the aged [...]' (Ahmed: 2005, 143). It is quite revealing that poems written mainly in and after her mid-forties (the average age of the menopause) reflect this concern of the poet. In poems such as the 'Anamalai Poems', 'A Short Trip', 'At Chiangi Airport', 'Stock Taking', 'A Widow's Lament', 'Middle Age', 'Home is a Concept', 'My Sons', 'Effusions' etc. the poet presents a rather bleak picture of individuals who find themselves progressively marginalized by their dear ones because of their age.

In fact, alienation, ill-health, nostalgia, and a love-hate relationship with death constitute their thematic range. These poems can be seen as truly 'autobiographical' as the 'mask' is finally abandoned, merging the man who suffers with the mind which creates. The subdued melancholy, characteristic of them, results from the ingratitude of children and youngsters who ruthlessly abandon their parents and the elderly, since the aged can no longer be of any use to them.

If one of the factors responsible for this progressive marginalization happens to be the failing strength and ability of the aged, then the other factor certainly turns out to be the increasing self-reliance and self dependence of the young ones. In the familial context, this fact is clearly brought out in a poem like 'Middle Age'. In fact, 'Middle Age' gives us a poignant description of a mother who is too old to day-dream and too young perhaps to 'find / comfort of meaning' in old memories (Anamalai Poems XVI, *Literature and Criticism* 157). Her children who were once dependant on and attached to her now become self-dependant and assert their personal opinions with an utter unconcern for her feelings. I.N. Agrawal, in this context, has commented, "Middle Age is a poem of illusion and disenchantment. It is a poem about a middle-aged mother – all

mothers in general – whose children have gown up and now they don't need her for the daily task of life or for her guidance" (Agrawal: 1984, 47).

In keeping with Agrawal's opinion mentioned above, the poem begins by showing a perceptible change in the attitude of the children towards the woman-speaker who happens to be a mother as well:

> Middle age is when your children are no longer
> Friends but critics, stern of face and severe with their tongue
> It's the time when like pupae they burst their cocoons and
> Emerge in harsh adult glory, and they no longer
> Need you expect for serving tea and for pressing
> Clothes, [...] (*Symphony*, 26)

The fact that the mother's entry into her middle age coincides with the children's entry into their youth means that the generation gap begins to widen. As a result, her children who were once 'friends' become 'critics' as revealed by their stern 'faces' and harsh words. The bursting of cocoons and the emergence of the children in harsh adult glory pushed the mother to the precincts of the family. Having grown out of needs and out of arms, the children make her almost redundant to their needs, asking of her only to serve them tea or press their clothes.

This sudden demotion of the mother and diminution of her usefulness are, however, very difficult to accept, since the mother's needs for her children rather then diminishing in fact increases with her greying hair:

> [....] but you need them all the same, and badly too, so
> That when left alone, you touch their books and things, and
> Weep a little secretly.... (*Symphony*, 26)

The mother's marginal status is clearly revealed by her secret tears while touching the children's 'books and things' at their absence. Harish Raizada, in this context, calls attention to the mother's loss of her identity as a 'feeling woman' in the eyes of her children and their treatment of her as a mere commodity of their utility (Raizada in Prasad: 1983, 124).

As if to prove the ever-widening generation gap between the mother and her son, whereby the views of the older generation seem preposterous to the younger ones, we now get to hear a fierce rebuttal of the mother's life-philosophy by her son:

> Middle age is when your son to whom you sent,
> Once open a time, the squirrels' invitation to their
> Jungle-feast, writing in golden ink and posting
> It at night, turns round in disgust, crying, you have lived
> In a dream world all your life, it's time to wake up, Mother,
> You are no longer so young you know. (*Symphony*, 26)

The son's argument that the mother has lived all her life in a dream that she should wake up from those dreams now and that she is no longer so young as to day dream reinforce his undeniable ageism. He seems to forget the fact that his own youth and authority will not last forever either. Moreover, his rude reminder to his mother that she is not the young woman any more seems unduly harsh.

It seems that the poet's motive in writing this poem is to prepare ageing mothers like her to face the banalities of the inevitable 'middle age'. Thus, as K.V. Surendran points out, "'Middle Age' is a poem which surveys the little unnoticed pangs of mothers who are already on the 'wrong side of the forties'" (Surendran in Mittapalli and Piciucco: 2000, 133).

If 'Middle Age' shows us the poet's concern with the fate of the ageing mothers, then 'Home is a Concept' gives us Das' take on the condition of the aged fathers. That

the fathers described in this poem are a little bit more advanced in years is shown by their desperate attempts to 'find / comfort of meaning' in old memories (Anamalai Poems XVI, *Literature and Criticism* 157).

Among all the poems of Kamala Das on the subject of old age, 'Home is a Concept' has a special place, because in this poem the poet-speaker remains extra-digetic, sympathizing or rather empathizing with the aged male-figures described in the poem. The mental picture that the poet helps us conjure up is that of a busy airport with its luggage-toting air-travelers waiting for aeroplanes. For practical reasons, they are required to tote their 'luggage' even if it feels 'heavy'. Similarly, for emotional reasons, they are bound to bear the burden of their past (e.g. photographs of laughing children) even if the only reward they can expect is 'pain':

> The unwanted wait here and there for aeroplanes
> clutching at heavy briefcases that hold
> the papers to be read at seminars,
> passports, visas and photographs of laughing
> children. The unwanted carry heavy bags
> and overcoats but the heaviest luggage
> they tote is pain. [...] (*BKD* 117)

Evidently, the poet is writing about ageing persons whom she has termed 'the unwanted'. They have to bear this pain because they want to cling to 'photographs of their laughing children'. But, their children no longer want them; for children grow into adults and 'grow out of needs' ('Composition').

In the next section of the poem, the poet presents 'home' not as a physical entity but as a concept (love) or in terms of its inmates or family members (a group prepared to love). In fact, the aged are seen to be craving only for love but to no avail:

> [...] If home is a concept

they shall not know it, if home is a group
prepared to love, the traveller has not known that
group and never shall. [...] (*BKD* 117)

It is the inability of the travellers to know the concepts of home and homey that has caused them the 'pain'. As a result, their worldly accomplishments like seminar papers, passports, and visas all seem utterly meaningless to them.

In order to hide this pain and their feeling of nullity, these aged persons try in vain to engage in loud talk and excessive work:

[...] The unwanted speak in
strident voices. Silence holds terrors for them.
When they speak of the need for a Centre
to promote Commonwealth Literature or of
the Nuclear Holocaust they are merely
crying out to you, love me, I am not so
different from the ones seem to love. (*BKD* 117)

The strident voice adopted by these men is only a means of self-deception, because their loud talks on divergent subjects like Commonwealth Literature and the Nuclear Holocaust are mere empty words, concealing their only-too-human need to be loved. Just like 'An Introduction', this poem too ends with the speaker's tentative attempt at pointing up human similarity and human solidarity, because just like the fact 'I too call myself I' ('An Introduction'), here too the speaker suggests, 'they are merely / crying out to you, love me, I am not so / different from the ones you seem to love'. The marginalization of the aged with an utter disregard for their previous centrality within the family betrays the ingratitude of 'children' whose laughing photographs still accompany and haunt them. That the laughing children are captured in photographs, and then therefore, taken out of the stream of time can justify their durability as a sentient

image of the past whose real-life growth in and with time these aged persons have failed to come to terms with.

Retaining the setting of the airport and yet returning to her characteristic singular narrative ('I'/'Me'), 'At Chiangi Airport' acts as a companion piece of the pervious poem. The poem begins and ends with the desire as well as the desirability of 'forgetting', and yet the middle part of the poem betrays the speaker's inability to do the same. The alternative title of this poem, 'In Transit at Chiangi', highlights the temporary story that the speaker must have had at the airport (Das in Paniker: 2004, 51-52). Moreover, it includes both the suggestions of 'in transit' and 'transit', indicating thereby the act of being transported from one place to another and the transition or passage from a 'fifty and two' year old life to 'death's lustrous chambers'.

The poem begins at Singapore with the speaker's auto-suggestions of 'travelling light' and of 'forgetting' (presumably her past). But, the fact that she is unable to do so having been burdened by memory is made clear just a few lines later in the poem:

> [...] Each evening I had
> asked the reception-desk, any message for me,
> any mail? I had watched the younger ones pick up
> their mail, had heard them swagger up the stairs humming
> pop tunes. The old have no mail. A displaced generation
> must find its comfort in tea; fifty and two is
> not a nice age to be. [...] (*BKD* 114)

In this excerpt, the aged speaker gives vent to her feelings of loneliness and abandonment. It is obvious that the speaker belongs to this 'displaced generation', which is why 'each evening' 'she has to ask for 'any message' or 'any mail'. She is left only to watch the younger ones pick up their mail. Hence the rueful realization, 'fifty and two is / not a nice age to be'.

A few things should be clarified in this context if we are to fathom out the speaker's mental state. Reviewed from her ultimate realization about the seamy side of being old, her decision/desire to 'travel light' seems to have been determined by her unwanted status. The absence of 'any mail' or 'any message' for her proves this contention beyond any reasonable doubt. However, her act of asking the reception desk for the non-existent mail or message, and that too 'each evening', points up her own 'urge for communion and reintrigration' that I.G. Ahmed has alluded to (Ahmed: 2005, 143). Her lack of the coveted mails and the young ones' stack of them not only place them (the speaker and the young ones) at the two extremes of alienation and acceptance, it also alerts the sensitive poet to the same fate that awaits those 'young ones' in future. Thus, her agony is not only self-centred but also tinged with her sympathies for the young ones. In fact, she cannot forget that the 'displaced generation' of which she is a present member and to which by implication the young ones will have to enter 'must find its comfort in tea'. Das here seems to second Osip Mandelstamm in looking back on days gone by:

> The buds will swell again,
> And the sprouts will burst.
> But your spine has been shattered,
> My beautiful, pitiful age.
> And you look back, cruel and weak,
> With a senseless smile,
> like a beast that was once supple,
> at the tracks of your own paws.
>
> ('My Age'. Mandelstamm in Bold, 1970, 146)

Just like 'Middle Age', 'My Sons' is another of Kamala Das' poems that describes the peripheral existence of the aged in general and the aged mother in particular. Needless to say, the aged mother described here belongs to the 'displaced generation' ('At Chiangi Airport'), and has tried unsuccessfully to 'find' and 'know' home as 'a group prepared to love' ('Home is a Concept'). Though the title of the poem

suggests a possible description of her sons, it is chiefly about the mother-figure with occasional and topical allusions to her children.

The poem begins with a rueful statement from the poet-speaker about the non-existence or at any rate the non-availability of love as an ennobling emotion even in spite of her sincere attempts at finding and praising the same:

> No, there is nothing like love. I used up
> My blood as ink to praise its worth, [...] (*OSKHS* 47)

By mentioning her 'use' of 'blood' as 'ink' to praise the 'worth of love' the speaker subtly hints at the act of poetic creation. This literary act is later on used to implicate the act of procreation or writing the 'unborn generation' on the book of life. The hurry of that unborn generation to see the light of the day resulted in anger at the mother's delay. But, since procreation is a joint responsibility, the would-be father too was hauled up for that delay:

> [...] it was
> The unborn generation rattling in
> My pen, angry at my delay, and his. (*OSKHS* 47)

The mention of the husband-figure rather the father-figure in this context reminds the mother of him. The fact that he is no more and no more is the smell of his skin and his words deeply sadden the speaker.

From the remembrance of things past, she is brought back to the world of the present by the perceived transformation of the once-unborn generation into her own adult sons:

> [...] My sons are old enough to take
> Their own women, old enough to forget

The lullabies I sang and the prayers
Recited near their beds when they were ill. (*OSKHS* 47)

Since her sons have now grown out of needs and out of arms to have taken their own women, they have managed to forget the love and anxiety with which their mother had reared them up. This fact, along with the earlier exclamation that no body remembers him (her husband) or the father of these sons, highlights the marginalization of the aged in and by a youth-oriented society. In fact, the same idea is expressed by Das (Suraiya) in one of her columns 'Geriatrics, Geriatrics', "The Old are losers all the time" (*PC* 39). The speaker goes on to describe her sons in ironic and insinuative terms as 'users of vulgar words and of jeans' and as creatures impotent to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with the women of their tribe. But, life has tutored the mother sufficiently enough to make her realize the inevitable transience of their enjoyment. So, she remembers to caution her sons of the imminent arrival of another generation that may similarly marginalize them in the future:

Users of vulgar words and of jeans that
Chafe desire to a hot flame, they swing
Round and round with the females of their tribe.
Yet another generation awaits
At the closed doors behind their faded jeans... (*OSKHS* 47)

While in 'Middle Age' the emphasis was on preparing the ageing mothers to face their inevitable fate of neglect and mockery, in 'My Sons' the poet-speaker focuses on cautioning the younger generation about the inevitability of their own ageing . In this respect, it can be read as a virtual extension of 'At Chiangi Airport' where 'fifty and two' is considered 'not a nice age to be', as much for the aged speaker as for the 'swagger'-ing 'young ones' who can very easily be likened to her sons.

The Anamalai Poems also tell us the sad story of a 'not-so-nice age' of 'fifty and two' from the perspective of lived experience. In fact, along with the gender question

discussed earlier in the chapter on gender and marginality, the Anamalai Poems also deal with the issue of 'ageing' as well as the resultant marginalization. Since these poems have a woman-persona, the issues of gender and ageing are seen to overlap in them. As discussed earlier in the present chapter, this is especially true for women whose advancing years entail a loss of productivity and value, at once financial and reproductive.

Even though throughout the Anamalai Poems we bear witness to the woman-speaker's increasing disillusionment with family and domesticity, it is in the latter group of the Anamalai Poems (nos. XII to XVII) that we get to see Das' sustained treatment of the question of age.

In the thirteenth poem of the series, the woman-persona lays bare her marginal status as an aged mother at the hands of her unfeeling grown up children. Feeling the chill of neglect and desirous of getting the warmth of human love, the woman-speaker enters the room where her grown up children are seated. The use of the word 'sidle' to describe the woman-speaker's entry into the room betrays her feelings of uncertainty and apprehension. Assailed by the same doubt, she does 'unobtrusively' 'settle' herself 'a distance away'. That she has rightly taken such precautions becomes clear, since her children take no notice of her:

> The talk goes on
> The banter and the laugh
> But the language seems to me so alien so strange
>
> (*Literature and Criticism* 156)

The fact that the 'talk', the 'banter' and the 'laugh' are continued without a pause greatly alienates the mother whose feeling of 'strange'-ness makes her uncertain about her biological connections (as a mother) with her impudent children:

> Did my womb really spawn these raucous crows

I ask myself amazed
Did I grant them this strident voice
The indignity of their stare
The cunning jest? (*Literature and Criticism* 156)

In fact, their 'strident voice', the 'indignity of their stare' and the 'cunning jest' dehumanize them in her eyes, making them mere 'raucous crows'.

The mother's realization that her only gifts to the world have been 'these raucous crows', when she has received much joy and happiness from it, makes her ashamed of herself. But, beneath this surface feeling of shame, runs a strong undercurrent of sorrow, because the aged mother cannot totally suppress her own need for 'the warmth of human love' that these children could easily have given her.

The fourteenth poem of the Anamalai poems clearly shows up what may befall an aged mother in the eventuality of her being neglected by her children:

Yes, this humble me without a doubt
The empty mailbag, the silent phone
And my lying around for the past
Several days like a parcel left unclaimed.
(*Literature and Criticism* 157)

What humbles the speaker is the lack of concern shown to her by her children. Evidently, she too is a representative of the 'displaced generation' who in an ageist society is fated to lie around for 'several days' like a 'parcel left unclaimed'. The 'empty mailbag' and the 'silent phone' clearly reveal to the speaker 'What love was worth / In the end' ('A Request', *D* 5).

The experience of 'lying around' like 'a parcel left unclaimed' teaches the aged speaker the necessity as well as the desirability of vacating 'the earthly seat' and leaving

in her own good time. It is this realization that finds poetic expression in the fifteenth poem of the series:

> For after all I am a mere guest although
> The decanters are still half full and the long
> Candles still burn on, not for a moment must
> I overstay; other guests are expected
> Yes, I must vacate my earthly seat and leave.
>
> (*Literature and Criticism* 157)

This realization of the speaker is accentuated by the perception that the decanters are already half empty and the candles 'burn on' only because they are 'long'. She, being a mere guest, naturally remembers the possibility of other guests' arriving. The fact that both she, as a guest, and the other would-be guests are under the obligation to leave sooner or later makes her self-conscious and sad about the fateful hour.

The sixteenth poem of the sequence shuns the philosophical aspects of ageing and death to dwell upon the practical problems of the ageing woman-speaker:

> The insects have a better time than I do now
> They exult so in the winter sun. I sit behind
> The window pane, the black shawl hiding my greying hair
> Too old to daydream and too young perhaps to find
> Comfort of meaning in old memories.
>
> (*Literature and Criticism* 157)

Her inability to 'exalt' in 'the winter sun' and the compulsion to 'sit behind' the 'window panes', covering her 'grey hair' (and perhaps warding off the chill) in the 'black shawl', betray her advancing years. But, her 'middle age' poses the intractable problem of being 'Too old to daydream' and 'too young perhaps to find / Comfort or meaning in old memories'.

The last poem of the group presents the speaker's loneliness which becomes so acute as to warrant the donning of 'fear' as her nightgown (companion at night):

> And if fear is my nightgown tonight
> What of it? I still welcome the change.
> It is not as cold to my skin as
> What I wore on countless nights the blue
> Wrap of loneliness. Yes if fear is
> My nightgown tonight I shall welcome the change.
>
> (*Literature and Criticism* 157)

Bereft of both the warmth of the 'winter sun' and the warmth of 'human love', her 'skin' has become so 'cold' that even being frightened seems a welcome change to her than being lonely.

The Anamalai poems record the depressed feelings of a disturbed psyche with the characteristic candour and the minimum amount of literary frills. Das' perception of her ageing self, the lukewarm response of her grown up children, and the sensitive awareness of her impending death to their ageing mother make the Anamalai poems a true document of her marginality due to age.

What was an awareness of her impending death in the Anamalai Poems, gave way to a grim experience of her husband's death in 'Stock Taking'. In fact, it is her husband's death coupled with the onset of her own old age and ill health that gives her an added incentive to take the 'stock' of her own life this far.

What was implied in 'My Sons' in the exclamation about the fates of oblivion suffered by 'him' (the speaker's husband), is made explicit in the poem 'Stock Taking'. As the title suggests, it is the time when the speaker needs and wants to 'take stock of all' and this need has been accentuated by her inability to get over her bereavement. In

fact, one factor usually associated with the experience of *ageing* is the awareness of mortality. This awareness acts in two ways to dampen the spirit of the aged (here the woman-speaker) – by snatching away a loved one as also by making her/him aware of the approaching end. The resultant senses of loss and loneliness cause a depression which, for want of a better term, may be called 'natural marginalization'.

The poet-speaker begins with a vivid account of her husband's death that has resulted in her utter unconcern with any 'promise of immortal love':

> Do not beguile me with a promise
> of immortal love
> for, I have seen the glaze in a dying
> husband's eye and have lost faith in all
> Do not promise great moments
> of self-realization
> or serener incarnations
> I have seen terror twist
> my husband's face and have heard
> the awesome rattle of his final breath
> Do not talk to me of beauties
> still to be envisaged, for I have
> seen the waxy pallor of a dead man's
> skin and I do not care now
> to see more. (*OSKHS* 120)

The memory of 'the glaze in a dying / husband's eye', his 'terror'-twisted face, 'the awesome rattle of his final breath', and 'the waxy pallor of a dead man's skin' have turned her cynical about any 'serener incarnations' of love and beauty. In fact, the death of her husband has opened her eyes to the inevitability of physical decay, whereby 'beauties / still to be envisaged' are also destined to end in the 'awesome rattle' of the 'last breath'.

The above realization forces the speaker to lose any interest in the wisdom of the scriptures or in the peace of the philosophers. Both the enjoyment of the pleasures of sex and the sense of fulfilment inherent in child-care have proved inadequate in neutralizing her thanatonic consciousness:

> Do not thrust upon me
> the scriptures compiled by sages
> wise and celibate
> or pacifying philosophies.
> I have held a man
> between my legs and have
> brought forth goodnatured sons
> If there is a God somewhere
> despite the distance he kept
> between himself and me
> please heed my request today
> I need a lull in this living
> a pause to take stock of all. (*OSKHS* 120)

The speaker's sense and sensibility ultimately induce a prayer to the God if any. That she is sceptical about His existence is proved by the decapitalizing of the letter 'h' in 'he' and 'himself'. In spite of the providential indifference she has previously experienced, she begs of 'God' to grant her 'a lull in this living', 'a pause to take stock of all'. The implication may be a death wish as a possible escape from the tyrannies of the flesh.

The death of Das' husband revealed to her the 'tyrannies of the flesh' and the overswaying power of 'sad mortality'. Divested of the care and protection (even if overbearing) of her husband and fed up with the 'cold-platters of faces / heaped with mushy sympathy', the widow is left only to lament her fate. As has previously been

discussed in the first chapter of the present dissertation, 'A Widow's Lament' records an old woman's rough passage from a life of domestic centrality to that of senile superfluity. In fact, it is a dossier that outlines women's marginal status in the patriarchal set-up. The poem begins with an extended question of the now-widowed speaker, regarding her present status and future prospects:

> Is the soul too,
> now autumned,
> rusted in the awful recollection
> of spilt blood,
> readying itself for the fall? (*OSKHS* 125)

Her doubts regarding the soul seem strikingly original, going as it does, against the Hindu concept of the eternal soul:

> *na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin*
> *nā 'yam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ*
> *ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yam purāṇo*
> *na hanyate hanyamāne śarire*
>
> (He is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having [once] come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.)
>
> (The Bhagavadgita, ch. II. sloka. 20 1993, 107)

The word 'rusted' with its undeniably physical association brings in the added import of decay. The awful recollection of spilt blood with its elemental association with rust and iron may hint at a post-menopausal existence of the speaker who has no other preoccupation than 'readying' herself for the 'fall' (death). The lamenting widow who can gain her identity only in relation to a now-dead male (her husband) has so long led a subservient and dependent life as a wife. As a natural corollary to wifehood, she had

also been made a mother. In her dual roles as wife and mother she was at least granted a useful existence even though she had to pay the heavy price of tearing to shreds, the tarot cards of her fate to attain this 'bliss'. After the death of her husband and the growth into adulthood of her sons, she loses even the prop of domestic importance. Her realization of this loss snatches away from her even the purpose of existence in 'this' 'someone else's world'. Mushy sympathy and cold platters of faces that remain her only provisions can cause fear and trembling; for there is sadly no prospect of any God's putting forth 'a wrinkled hand to wipe my brow'. The wolves of worry and loneliness are not going to spare her, since with the death or departure of her male relatives the old woman has to walk the 'high way' 'alone' and 'naked' (unprotected and hapless) as a 'babe'.

The old woman's rough passage from the life of domestic centrality to that of senile superfluity is neatly encapsulated in her act of walking 'the high way alone'. This journey motif is deftly continued in the poem 'A Short Trip'. The nuclear family, an invention of an ungrateful age, and the old-age home, the socio-economically imposed substitute for home – these factors not only aggravate the marginalization of the aged but cause in them a deep sense of dejection. Kamala Das' poem 'A Short Trip' encapsulates the psycho-spatial polarity between the centrality of youth and home, and the marginality of 'age' and the old age home. It is indeed a 'short trip' from youth to age and from home to old-age home. But, the psychological 'trip' that one has to take in a bid to arrive at the latter from the former is certainly quite long and arduous; for it is the trip of experience and realization.

At the beginning of the poem, the woman-speaker who in the ninth line of the poem expresses her gendered identity by using the feminine pronoun 'her' equates a 'short trip' from 'home' presumably to an old-age home with 'a kind of death'. The recent reality of domestic importance and love and the present realization of brutal displacement at the hands of her ungrateful offsprings seem to the woman-speaker infinitely dissimilar:

Even a short trip from home is
a kind of death for one who till recent
times believed that one reaped only what one
had sown, and the discovery that one
might reap what another had sown was sad,
and jolting, as though while plucking flowers
one gathered with them a squirming snake. [...] (*OSKHS* 105)

In fact, the poet-speaker's earlier belief that one 'reaped only what one / had sown' had given her hope of receiving a humane treatment from her offsprings, because she had showed only love and affection on them. But, her unpleasant discovery that one 'might reap what another had sown' ensures an eventual othering of the aged even though it is based upon an 'illogical hatred'. The expectation of flowers and the reality of the squirming snake adequately encapsulate what the aged expect out of life and what they get.

If the displacement of the aged mother-figure from the centre of domesticity is tantamount to 'some kind of death' for her, it also connotes a kind of change and severance of ties with the past. Though the young offsprings in their foolish conceit dish out hatred to the aged, this hatred is grounded in illogicality and, therefore, destined to be self-defeating:

[...] Yes
even a trip is a kind of death and
the traveller by her brief absence lifts
from others left behind the domestic
inhibitions that plague human beings
who have learnt to hate illogically
although both the hated and the hater
cannot ever hope to explain why. (*OSKHS* 105)

The reality of a home where the offsprings have become impatient with or indifferent to the aged mother ('Middle Age'), as contrasted with the reality of an old age home to which the aged mother is shifted against her will ('A Short Trip'), presents the confused and aggrieved poet-speaker with the dilemma of choice. The only possible resolution of this 'dilemma', therefore, is to seek a 'lull in this living' ('Stock Taking') or vacation of her 'earthly seat' ('Anamalai Poem XV').

A witness as well as a victim to the process of ageing in her dual specificity as a human being and as a woman, Kamala Das reveals the physical, the psychological and the social aspects associated with this virtual 'tragedy of life'. In 'Lines Addressed to a Husband', she discovers the reality of her 'ageing flesh'. In 'Middle Age', she is reminded by her sons of 'a new found ugliness'. In 'Home is a Concept', by observing the pitiable condition of the aged 'traveller', she realizes the futility of seeking love as and for the aged. The Chiangi airport makes her aware of her generational 'displacement' that leads to the agony of alienation. Looking at her aged mother she shudders at the real possibility that her 'childhood fear' of losing her mother to death will come true sooner rather than later ('My Mother at Sixty Six', *BKD* 148). The death of her husband and the departure of her sons for 'other homes' and 'other loves' leave her alone and under compulsion to fend for herself ('A Widow's Lament'). Thus, she reaches the seventh age of woman, aware of the loss of her past importance, remembering youth as a photograph ('Youth is a Photograph'), and readying herself like the autumn leaves for the 'fall' ('Autumn Leaves' *BKD*, 75).

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

Taken out and shot, [...] (*CP* 62)

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 vermillion 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 glided report card' adds to and corroborates the girl's educational accomplishments. In this context, the use of the word 'glided' 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' and
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.

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