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**.