CHAPTER V

INCARNADINED GLORY: THE MELIORISTIC VISION

> "He (the poet) is responsible for humanity, even for the animals, he must see to it that his inventions can be smelt, felt, heard"
>
> (Arthur Rimbaud)

Camouflaged in the aura of erotica that surrounds Das lies a robust melioristic literary sensibility that demands greater critical attention. A sustained undercurrent of reform runs through the entire gamut of her poetry and prose. The basic thrust, the underlying unifying spirit is one of amelioration. The poet's melioristic sensibility manifests itself in most cases in the rejection of every form of violence, political, social or sexual. Knowingly or unknowingly, Das initiates a commendable tradition of the "literature of nonviolence". Her "love poetry" in the ultimate analysis, voices her rejection of sexual violence. Her other poems like "Afterwards", "The White flowers", "The Fear of the Year", "The Flag", "Inheritance", "Terror" and the Colombo poems castigate violence that is legitimized in the name of nationalism, patriotism, religion and race. A desire for moral and spiritual edification and for universal brotherhood runs through all these poems. The fervent urge to champion the cause of the oppressed and the underprivileged squares with her oft-asserted egalitarian

principles. Contrary to the prevailing critical opinion, attempts have been made in this chapter to show that whatever Das's themes may appear to be, her sensibility is fundamentally melioristic. The technique adopted for this purpose is one of satiric exposure. This sensibility also embodies the "private voice" of Das that becomes more and more audible with the passing of years.

For further discussion of Das's poetry of nonviolence, the meaning of the word "violence", specially as applicable to Das, needs to be spelt out. The root meaning of violence comes from the Latin *Violentia,* meaning vehemence, a passionate and uncontrolled force, the opposite of a calculated exercise of power. Traditionally, the word meant "to prevent some object, natural or human, from its "natural" course of development" and "to exceed some limit or norm" (*War or Peace? The Search for new Answers,* ed. Thomas Shannon, 1980, 106) even the political theorists of the 18th century—Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu—agreed that violence could not regenerate people or society. They specified in unambiguous terms the limits to the justifiable province of violence. Since Marx, however, there has been a visible tendency to link up revolution with violence. However, as Michael True puts it:

> This is quite understandable, given the proliferation of technological weapons in this century, but this association is not inevitable and deprives us of the tradition prior to Marx, the tradition that radical social

change was possible without resorting to violence, as it was then understood. (1980, 106).

This is exactly what Das's message is: that social change is possible without violence. Too often the message is hidden between the lines and eclipsed by the sexual facade. The latter ranges from "the typewriter's click," the "sad lie/Of my unending lust", "the skin's lazy hunger" to "a grand, flamboyant lust" ("The Freaks"). In other words, the sex roles are to be ascribed to the performing self. Indeed, there is a need to penetrate the layers of the erotica in order to listen to the "private voice" of the poet:

I have put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech; I
Click-click, click-click tiresomely into your
Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of
Me, I go on and on, not knowing why....

("Loud Posters")

This voice of the poet is often rendered inaudible by the "million" voices of the poetic personae. Thus, the poems often express a cosmic human concern. Many of her writings have a very clearly stated agenda to save mankind. This is emphatically stated in one of her interviews to P.P. Raveendran. Supporting the ban on Rusdie's *Satanic Verse,* she said:

> On my list of priorities peace would come first, and literature only second. I would not mind if all the writings that have been produced in this world one day get burnt if it can ensure peace. The ultimate aim of literature and art must be to establish peace on this earth." (*IL 155*, 157).

It is highly significant that Das's first major poem "Afterwards" is a scathing attack on violence. The theme of an unhappy transition from past to present with a foregrounded contrast between the two is to be found in this poem. As ascertained with the help of the poet's biographical details, this is her first major poem that was composed in her early teens and was published in *Asia* PEN magazine in 1948. Even at that tender age Das was a pacifist. She felt the need to expose the rabid nationalism that inevitably resulted in global homicide. This is a poem of topical interest as it has as its subject the first nuclear holocaust of 1945, which marked the end of the Second World War. It was written before Das's marriage and is therefore not addressed to "one of her sons" as Nabar believes. The "son" is in fact imaginary and represents, as Nabar points out and the context reveals, the new generation after the holocaust. Nabar's reading is fairly consistent as far as the context of the poem is concerned. It is, however, a highly complex poem that resists a simplistic approach.

The poem contains obvious ambiguities. The ambiguity results mainly from the poet's excessive use of deictics, particularly

personal pronouns like "I", "we", "you" and "they". There are allusions but the context provides hardly any clue to them. However, the sustained "vagueness" in the poem can also be seen as way of legitimizing the reader's role in the poetic process—from poetic creation to interpretation. This is rather uncharacteristic of Das's poetry as a whole because she quite often tends to spell out the details instead of allowing the situation to speak for itself, mainly when she resorts to the narrative mode in a lyrical situation. The poem "Afterwards" exposes the vanity of the human intellect and questions the very notion of scientific progress. For, after all, the "cleverness" of the human race becomes the cause of its own "doom":

Son of my womb,
Ugly in loneliness,
You walk the world's bleary eye
Like a mote. Your cleverness
Shall not be your doom
As ours was. I will tell you why.
Just a while ago, this place
Was ours....

It is not the usual contrast between past and present as in "The Millionaires At Marine Drive" or "My Grandmother's House". The contrast is between the states of the world before and after the lethal explosion and hence the title of the poem: "Afterwards". The addressee of the poem "You" is that solitary individual who is

constrained to walk the desolate streets of the world alone because the poet imagines the metaphoric "son" to be the only survivor after the devastation. To the Romantic poet the individual was beautiful when alone. His loneliness was a condition of his choice, a state to which he could withdraw in moments of creative introspection. His aloneness was a positive condition that found a spontaneous expression in art: "alone she cuts and binds the grain/And sings a melancholy strain." Imbibing "the bliss of solitude," Wordsworth "wondered lonely as a cloud". In "Afterwards" on the contrary the "son" is "ugly in loneliness" because this loneliness is the result of the destructive intelligence of a race of which he too is a descendant. He is like one of the innocent victims of Original Sin. Hence, this loneliness is a negative condition, a death-in-life situation, which will exact its own bitter price. Since the holocaust was a manifestation of a cosmic hate, the "son" must learn to subscribe to a culture where there will be no love, no companionship:

> You have to be happy now,
> It's easier when alone, go ahead,
> There is no song to break your
> Somnambulistic tread.
> Caught in this yellow disc of light,
> You turn, like a guilty rat,
> And draw your rocky home over you
> Like an irremovable shell.

The image, "yellow disc of light", is a visual presentation of the explosion. The prevalent imbroglio and the state of the world as a mere assembly of intolerant people force on the addressee a cloistered existence signified by the forceful image of a snail-like withdrawal and escape in the last two lines of the above extract. Indeed, the underlying idea is that the world can be made beautiful only by love and human fellowship, by the uncorrupted values, by simplicity and innocence of its inhabitants; and over and above, by keeping the magnificent creation intact:

...You should have seen us race, fly
Thread-wise across the turquoise sky
And talk of love, music, science
And beauty. Lovers held hands
And watched the eagles fly
Too near the sun and fall,
Children were told not to lie
And it was normal for a girl to sigh
Over a dying bird; we learned kindness
As we learned our books, yes.
There was no sign at all of what was
Coming then, the earth was
Sagging heavy, fruits were sweet
And ripe, fishes died on their bait,
And as a little girl, I watched
My brother squat beside a hedge
And slowly blind a beetle

The thorny twig in those little
Hands went quickly red-tipped.
The insect curled its legs and died.
I felt sad, but my tears I tried to hide.
That was what I was, your mother,
Son....

The difference between the pre-explosion and the post-explosion states parallels the difference between the pre-Lapsarian and post-Lapsarian states of man. The ambience of abundance and fullness of these lines sharply contrasts with and highlights the ennui of desolation and emptiness of the earlier lines. The deictic first person pronoun represents several voices and speaks from shifting positions: of a mother who "burns as wick to light" her "children's way" ("Until the Break of Dawn"), the poet, a mediator between the two generations, a contrite representative of the old generation, a chorus-like commentator on the bleak transition, and a detached observer. The "son" as a representative of the human race has been rendered as insignificant as a "mote", a grit because his ancestors' "cleverness" (signifying mechanical intellect) has pernicious consequences. In the lines "...Your cleverness/Shall not be your doom/As ours was..." the "cleverness" of the old generation and that of the new are contrasted because "from us to you was a gigantic leap." In this leap the poet sees a purgation of the intellect that must shed its mechanical layers and evolve into a more constructive faculty, imbued with compassion and love. This kind of "cleverness" shall certainly not be his ("your") "doom". The

"world's bleary eye" refers to that condition of bewilderment and alienation that is the inevitable result of the world's short-sightedness and ill-conceived notion of progress. "Bleary eye" is also an allusion to the lethal dazzle and the gamma ray of the bomb because the eye is made "bleary" by "the yellow disc of light". The poem is full of sensory images of brightness and dazzling light like: "yellow disc of light", "a savage red", "sun-blinded bats", "the harsh yellow moon". These visual images become within the given context metonyms for death and destruction by intense glowing heat, generating what Eliot calls "incandescent terror":

> The dove descending breaks the air
> With flame of incandescent terror;
> Of which the tongues declare
> The one discharge from sin and error.
>
> (Four Quartets)

As is obvious, Eliot's lines were also inspired in a similar way by one of the air-raids during the Second World War, three years before the nuclear explosion. It is not a coincidence that "terror" rhymes with "error" because in both the poems "incandescent terror" is attributed to a deep-seated error in the human intellect. As a result of this error "...we/Wet the poison to our lips, content to be/Curers, we judged the sinners/And killed them...." ("Afterwards") It is also an act of grave "sin" because the unleashed "terror" implies not only homicide but extermination of life as a whole. Ironically all this is done in the name of nationalism.

It is a manifestation of a misdirected sense of idealism and patriotism:

> They ask me, is this the one we died for? We?
> We who made gigantic dreams
> Of peace. We who had whims
> And fancies fit for gods,....

"They" and "We" in the above lines refer to those innocent and often well-meaning individuals, particularly soldiers. They perish as canon-fodder at the hands of cunning politicians who enkindle in them an illusory sense of purpose and martyrdom. As a result of this legacy of gory memory the "son" undergoes a metaphoric desiccation:

> What are you with vacuum in your mind,
> Too dry for growth, just a rind we left behind.
> With no memory to kindle sadness
> In your eyes, no dreams of feminine smiles
> To excite your open-mouthed sleep.

Dazed and disillusioned, shorn of sentiment, passion and dream, he must inherit this decimated earth. He may be just a particle of dust on the boundless canvas of time. But history must move on and he must play his part:

> The earth we nearly killed is yours

Now. The flowers bloom again,
But a savage red; it takes
Time to forget blood or the quick gasps
Of the dying. And the sudden pain.
But the sun came again and rain.

It is a pattern of coexistence and contrast. The lines are arranged in a death-life sequence. The agony of genocide is partly relieved by blooming flowers but their "savage red" takes the reader back to the sanguinary past. Death by poisonous gas of the lethal device is effectively conveyed by "quick gasps of the dying" but at once the horror is eclipsed by the life-giving sun and rain. Left on his own man is powerless, totally incapable of controlling the consequences of his own mindless suicidal acts. Ironically, he must wait for his ultimate solace that can come only from nature.

In Das one does not find elaborate descriptions of nature; she is not a poet of nature in the traditional sense of the term. She nevertheless makes extensive use of nature and natural objects for very different purposes. Firstly, it embodies a silent commentary on the human situation. Nature by its cold indifference and unaffected course vis-à-vis all the upheavals and turmoil in the human world suggests that if at all man's actions have any meaning it is only within his own narrow circumference. On the vast canvas of man and nature these are of no consequence. Indeed, the difference between life and death matters to man but not to nature:

At times

A storm sinks some ships or a quick typhoon devastates a town

But nature aware of life's intent does not care to seek

Anyone's pardon, it sees no difference between the living

And the dead...

("White Man with Whiter Leg")

Secondly, natural growth or vegetation is used to express the passage of time. Both the ideas can be illustrated with the help of the following lines from "Nani": "The shrubs grew fast. Before the summer's end/The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway/And the walls." In the fast growing shrubs and yellow flowers one can also sense a visual representation of the passage of time. Regardless of what goes on in the human world and indifferent to man's acts of violence and destruction, nature never alters its course:

...Fear was in the air

As the corpses smouldered,

Fear and a stench sweet as

That of raw cashewnuts,

Roasting. The sea did its

Duty as usual at

The Galle Face Green, without

A sign of shock or pain

It patrolled the empty shore.

("The Sea At Galle Face Green")

The poem will be taken up for a more detailed discussion in the context of racial violence. The sensory, particularly olfactory, character of the imagery specially stands out in the above lines.

The theme continues in "The White Flowers". The poem is more simply structured and the poetic canvas drastically narrowed down to the drawing-room of the poet. The "baby-son" refers to Das's youngest son Jaisurya. He was born in the year 1965; so the "war" refers to the Indo-Pakistan war of that year:

Today I shall weave white flowers into my baby-son's
hair
For the guests are coming up the stairs
Talking of war, bloodshed and despair.

Today I shall pour no whisky, I shall serve wine.
In glasses cold like dead man's palm
I shall serve blood-red cherry wine.

Imagery is Das's undisputed forte as is evident from these lines. Death and bloodshed are represented this time with the help of visual colour images; one recalls "the savage red" of "Afterwards". "Wine" becomes a metaphoric synonym of "blood" and even the glasses are "cold like a dead man's palm". Violence often

masquerades as patriotism. Which is why nationalism cannot be above humanity:

> They talk of India in strong beautiful voices. With fresh
> Blood they shall love her, I know, most lovingly
> And burn as incense, living flesh.

The macabre presentation of death takes popular nationalism to a point of complete absurdity. The impact is achieved once again by juxtaposing opposites such as fresh blood/love her, incense/living flesh. The horror of the situation is effectively evoked with the help of choice of language. What is the impact of it all? Who are the actual victims?:

> In mud-walled houses far away, old mothers weep
> Who washed their son's khaki uniform and pressed them
> They weep even while they sleep.

The bitter irony lies in the fact that those who plan and are responsible for the massacre, the politicians, remain untouched by it. It is the common innocent people, represented by "the old mothers," who suffer; they are the only losers in every possible respect. Thus, fear is in the air and it lingers on in the depths of the human consciousness; the poet sees no escape from it. This can be seen from the following lines from "The Fear of The Year":

...for fear has wrapped us all; even
In the freedom of our dreams, it
Thrusts its paws to incarnadine
The virgin whiteness,....

Audible in the last two lines of the excerpt is an echo of *Macbeth:*

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine.
Making the green one red.

(Act II, Sc. 2, 60-64)

In both the extracts fear has penetrated the layers of consciousness and settled in the unconscious. In Das's poem the experiencing subject is only a passive victim and hence in his case it is an experience of unalloyed fear. By contrast Macbeth is diabolically active in engineering the source and cause of his fear which is inseparable from guilt. His blood-stained hand, capable of incarnadining even the "multitudinous seas," is an elaborate metaphor for the enormity of his crime. In "The Fear of the Year" the simple individuals on their own are seen as being often uncorrupted and blameless, qualities most powerfully expressed in visual terms by the metaphor "virgin whiteness". It is a metaphor with exceptional suggestive power. There is a brilliant manipulation of colour contrast for the purpose of poetic impact as well as

communication of powerful thought. "Virgin whiteness", along with innocence also suggests a kind of angelic purity, a condition of being undefiled and stainless. Anthropomorphically "fear" is transferred from the abstract plain to signify beast-like human beings who through ingeniously designed modes of violence send around waves of fear among people and destroy their innocence and purity by dragging them into the network of carnage and destruction. Hence, "the virgin whiteness" is "incarnadined"—innocence is devoured by monstrosity. The result of the global hatred and intolerance is described by the poet in very concrete terms. The following description of an air raid and wanton dropping of bombs is in a way reminescent of a similar raid in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It picks up the theme of "Afterwards":

> ... so that we
> Perceive the flying steel hands sow
> Over mellow cities those dark,
> Malevolent seeds and the red,
> Red, mushrooms hotly sprout and grow
> On an earth illogically
> Stilled, and silenced, dead, dead, dead.
>
> ("The Fear Of The Year")

The passage shows a sudden shift from metaphor to metonym. On the whole Das exhibits a greater penchant for metonyms than for metaphors in her poetry. Through a chain of three metonyms: "flying steel hands", "dark malevolent seeds" and "red red

mushroom's" the poet gives a vivid picture of the flying aeroplanes, the lethal device and its explosion with the resultant "incandescent terror" and death. Death becomes all-pervasive; its reverberations fill every corner:

> Summer's catchword was always,
> Always destruction; and this
> Year's, wrapping us like some
> Prickly mantle cried kill, kill,
> All that was, till a while ago,
> So dear, so beautiful, 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-heath.
>
> ("Summer 1980")

It is a fierce irony that so much of destruction and killing goes on in the name of the national flag. This obvious perversion finds one of the bitterest exposures in Das's poem "The Flag". The poem is a scathing attack on hollow patriotism. It exposes the ever-widening gap between the grand ideals associated with the National Flag and its colours on the one hand and ubiquitous bloodshed and sickness, starvation and discrimination on the other:

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 heaps, 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 whisky
On the breath of winds

And channel No. Five, and the cooking's
Smell....

The technique is once again the same: juxtaposition of opposites; operating by contrast but subtle satiric exposure gives way to open statements whose poetic value lies mainly in the deftly handled rhythm and poetic parallelism. The nonviolent strain of the lines consists in the poet's criticism of social inequality that coexists with

bloodshed, perverse sexuality and degeneration and impoverishment of Indian culture. What ails the poet most is the vast chasm between the rich and the poor. This concern permeates a significant body of her writings including the following:

> 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. (*Femina* February 23-March 7, 1985, 48).

It is an outburst of righteous indignation. As a piece of social criticism the poem suggests that human ideals must be tempered by reality. In themselves they are nothing; they are mere abstractions and hence must be abandoned:

> 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.

This is poetry for humanity's sake. The poem is a fierce indictment of callousness and indifference to the problems of others, specially the unprivileged. The poet attributes it to man's pathological obsession with materialism and narcissism. The poet feels that the ideals must be restructured and symbols must be reconstructed. Be it literature, a literary symbol, a concept, a revolution or any kind of human endeavour for meaningful social change, it must have its roots on the earth. This realistic vision is also manifested in the following extract from one of her interviews: "But no revolutions come from above. Only vultures come from above. You know everything should come from the earth. Something healthy, should have roots on the earth, roots into the earth" (*IL* 155, 160). The fact that the flag is always held aloft and its "macabre dance" is confined to the "sky" is suggestive of its complete alienation from the land that it represents. The glaring social polarities could not have been expressed more forcefully than by pitting the scarred, emaciated limbs of the city against gleaming ornaments and ailing pavement-dwellers, dying and rotting babies against the rich men "who dance with one another's wives" "and Channel No. Five". The flag is "poor", that is, in a pitiable state because it is in no way responsible for its isolation; it did not leave the "earth" or forsake reality. It is man who has been distancing himself from its noble ideals of peace, purity and sacrifice. These have traditionally been the

lifeblood of Indian culture and civilization. "The Flag" as a poem of address, an apostrophe, embraces the two parallel territories of violence: that of hypocritical patriotism and social unconcern.

Equally, if not more, rampant than patriotic violence and misdirected nationalism is social violence. It takes the form of exploitation—both economic and sexual—of the deprived and the down-trodden. Although there are many poems which focus on this subject, the discussion will be confined to three of Das's poems: "Honour", "Nani" and "Toys".

"Honour" is a poem of disconcerting revelation about the poet's feudal Nair ancestors. They are imaged as base and bestial, who at night "took to bed the little nieces" of their low caste tenants, ravished and murdered them, then threw them into pools and wells. During the day they watered the hypocritical plant of honour. The poet unveils the ugly secrets of these ancestors whom she holds guilty of the most heinous crime against humanity. They masquerade as protectors of family honour and pass in the eyes of society as "honourable men". Das expresses her disgust for those depraved relatives in a similar tone of bitterness ad revulsion in *My Story:*

> They had grown up as components of the accursed feudal system that prevailed in Malabar until two decades agoand had their own awesome skeletons in the cupboards of the past. Being members of affluent

joint families, they had had ample leisure to nurture their concupiscence, feeding it with the juices of the tender daughters of their serfs and retainers. They feared that I would write of their misdeeds, of the accidental deaths in the locality and of the true immorality which take shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of our society (*MS* 211).

This opening of the corpse-filled Nair cupboard exposes the poet to the wrath of her community and earns her ostracism. The tone of the poem as a whole is bitterly ironical:

Honour was a plant my ancestors watered
In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres. At night their serfs
Let them take to bed little nieces, and pregnancy,
A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and ponds
From which they rose like lotuses and waterlilies, each with
A bruise on her throat and a soft bulge below her navel, yes,
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 snake shrines
Cheated of their land, their huts and hearts, oh the
poor were such
Laugh-raisers, such comedians on the lush, lush stage
of that
Feudal age, how we laughed, how we held our
stomachs and laughed
When the poor Moplah, young and newly wed, was
handcuffed and dragged off
To Choughat on a charge of murder, even dead and
rotting
The wench was alluring,...

Like "The Flag" this is a poem of large polarities which constitute the very structure of the poem. It embodies powerful social criticism contrary to the allegation that Das's poetry lacks social concern. The jolting hypocrisy of the ancestors, the flagrant discrepancy between their appearance and reality, the polarization in their value system, are conveyed with the help of juxtaposed opposites like: plant/pyre, day/night, nieces/toys, thrown into wells and ponds/rose like lotuses and waterlilies, dead/living, laugh/guffaw, rich/poor, lush stage/feudal age, wed/handcuffed, dead and rotting/alluring and by implication, honour/dishonour, laugh/cry, comic/tragic/grin, justice/injustice, appearance/reality. This is Das's oppositional aesthetics. Characteristically, sexuality is closely associated with death and violence, reflected in a highly suggestive diction. In this

poem and in many others, the effect is achieved by choice and clustering together of dynamic verbs like "ravished", "strangled", "drowned", "buried", "dragged", all of which belong to the same semantic field of violence in the context of the poem. The impact is further heightened by the manipulation of jarring consonant clusters and heavily stressed syllabic pattern of the line, bordering on the staccato. The violent nocturnal activities of the Nair ancestors are adequately brought out.

Das's tirade against sexual exploitation and violence continues in another of her poem "Nani". It is based on an episode in the poet's childhood. It is about the tragic suicide of an unmarried pregnant maid of the Nalapat house. The poem strongly resembles "Honour" in theme but differs from it in form and structure. Both are poems of satiric exposure of the poet's feudal ancestry. However, in "Nani" the perpetrator of the crime is not specified as in "Honour." The context clearly suggests that the victim was driven to ending her life by the same Nair ancestors who "ravished", "strangled", "drowned" and "buried" the little nieces of their servants. Both the poems create a grotesque situation by giving a comic twist to death:

> 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....

The success of these lines consists in their power to create a macabre effect. Pathos is combined with a fierce irony. This is the irony of performance. This is one of the most vital and crucial themes of Das's poetry: the woman as a performer, a role player. Das's poetry abounds in images of performance—toys/puppets. Woman has always been treated as a pleasurable object by patriarchy. In Das's poetry as well as in her autobiography the husband's enjoyment of sex is presented as mechanical and selfish: "He was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhilaration." She is conditioned to perform her roles as long as she lives. The poet takes the idea to its bitter extreme by implying that even with death Nani's role as an entertainer does not end. Even her corpse must give some pleasure to the living before it is cleared from the scene. When alive Nani was a puppet to the adult; when dead she becomes a puppet to the children who cannot see through her grim acrobatics. Nani can be seen as an archetypal victim of male tyranny.

The three lines that follow are foregrounded by their rather out-of-the-way religious diction. The dead maid is all of a sudden transformed into a goddess and the privy into a shrine. This is an act of self-redemption on the part of the poet who was a child when Nani died and hence too young to do anything for her. But now in

her poetic world she erects a shrine as tribute to her innocence and purity: "...The privy, so abandoned, /Became an altar then, a lonely shrine /For a goddess who was dead...." When the world distances itself from vital truths, the poet finds herself painfully "abandoned" along with the privy, in a posture of alienation. The "shrine" is of her making; its loneliness is hers too. The sense of martyrdom is ascribed to the dead "goddess" because Nani sacrificed her life for the protection of the family's honour. Conversely the poet's Nair ancestors protected the "honour" of the family by burying at midnight the strangled victims of their concupiscence.

Despite the poet's endeavour to keep Nani alive in memory she cannot prevent her from sinking into oblivion. This time her aspersion falls upon her beloved grandmother. Indeed, the shrine is to be located in memory and with the maid's expulsion from it the shrine becomes "empty":

> Another
> Year or two, and, I asked my grandmother
> One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark
> Plump one who bathed me near the well?
> Grandmother
> Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
> And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?

Kolhi gives a rather literal and simplistic interpretation to the grandmother's reaction when he says: "Time moves on and the

incident is forgotten by the grandmother but not by the poet". This is certainly not the case. The grandmother is guilty of evading the truth because it is unpleasant. This is also the view of Nabar's. The evasion is a direct consequence of the "designed deafness" which implies deliberate sealing of one's senses against unwanted truth, leading to Nani's expulsion even from memory: "With that question ended Nani."...At this point in the poem the narrative mode stops and a reflective turn begins. The poet reflects on the universal human propensity to evade the truth and thereby to evade all responsibility. Indeed, very few human beings possess the courage to set a wrong right. The grandmother is one such representative individual. "...Each truth/Ends thus with a query...." The existence of a truth lies in its being perceived and accepted. It must be pointed out here that the "query" should not be accepted at its face value. In fact it is not a query at all. The grandmother's intention is not to get an answer but to eliminate the poet's question by a counter-question. It is only a verbal strategy in an interrogative form in order to enforce the "designed deafness":

> It is this designed
> Deafness that turns mortality into
> Immortality, the definite into
> The soft indefinite. They are lucky
> Who ask questions and move on before
> The answers come,....

In the context of the poem truth is related to human survival; its recognition is the prerequisite for the protection of humanity. At this stage the poem becomes a critique of escapism and of unconcern for the underprivileged. The shirkers are sarcastically referred to as "wise ones". It is their worldly wisdom that keeps them safe in a world of complacency fortified against queries and doubts. "The blue silent zone" becomes a metaphor for the ambience of complete escape from reality; "...those wise ones who reside/In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubt". They have great potentials but these cannot come to fruition in that "blue silent zone". These latent human capabilities must be nourished by the reality of the human world to which Nani also belonged. As a result peace of some kind will certainly come their way but it will only be "clotted peace":

> For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
> In life, like music in the koel's egg,
> Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree...

To Kolhi the poem ends

> in an abrupt manner with the poet admiring the "clotted peace" of the dead. Perhaps the poet identifies herself with the dead, but paradoxically the imagery which evokes the peace of the dead belongs not to the world of the dead but to the living and continuing

> world of life in the embryo, passion in the veins, and life-blood in the soil. (Kolhi, 1973, 108).

Kolhi's interpretation ignores the context of the poem as a whole. The context of these lines is provided by "the designed deafness" of the human beings with their natural preference for "the blue silent zone" where doubts and queries pose no threat. Kolhi seemingly overlooks the irony in these lines. The poet is speaking in a tone of sarcasm and irony. She is not admiring the "clotted peace" of the dead and she is not identifying herself with them. She belongs to a world where questions must be answered at all costs and the truth of whatever kind must be faced and acted upon. The peace of her quest resembles the smoothly flowing, clear water as opposed to "the clotted peace" that the "wise ones" experience. However great potentials may be, if they are not allowed to manifest themselves, they mean nothing. The "wise ones" in their "blue silent zones" are like "music in the koel's egg." Both must come out in order to become meaningful. Nabar gives a rather balanced interpretation to the concluding lines when she says:

> The music in the koel's egg, the lust in the blood, the sap in the tree, if not allowed to manifest themselves, are really symbols of vitality but of a kind of life-in-death. Hence the peace "the wise ones" experience is "clotted", not smooth or unblemished. (Nabar, 1996, 71).

The theme of decadence of the moral values figures in a number of poems including the much later "Toys". While "Honour" and "Nani" focus on the decay of these values in personal life "toys" exposes through powerful images the degeneration of moral values in both public and personal life. This is a poem of acute social consciousness in which the poet bemoans the death of patriotism and the emergence of the new race of slogan-mongers:

> Doomed is this new race of men who arrive
> With patriotic slogans to sow dead seeds
> Doomed are their empty gestures and, doomed, their
> Proud ancestor who mourns in shame through their
> mouths
> At the ritual's end....

The newfangled patriotism can sow only *dead seeds* because it has nothing better to offer; it has nothing to do with the true spirit of nationalism and love for the nation. The slogans are mere *empty gestures* and the *dead seeds* sown by the self-styled patriots can only generate hatred and violence. They are equally depraved in their personal life. They have no qualms about playing with the lives of innocent women who are to them mere toys. These men make them victims of their lust and then force abortion on them:

> The womb weeps blood
> How much kinder to remove this outdated
> Growth, to bury it inside the earth and let

The maggots breed in its hollow than let it
Remain in the worthless
Body of a toy.

"The womb weeps blood" because abortion is cruelly inflicted on the victim. A mere toy in the hands of these "honourable" men, she has no say in what is done to her own body. The "growth" is "outdated" precisely because these patrician rapists consider all such ideas as caring for the new-born and giving it a chance to live "outdated". The utter helplessness of the victim and the absolute callousness of her debauched victimisers are conveyed through an extremely bitter idiom.

Das's stay in Sri Lanka in the early 80's marks a turning point in her literary career. The spectacle of homicide and arson radically alters the mode of her poetic praxis. For it makes her realise the need to extricate her melioristic sensibility from the web of fantasy and sensuality. Accordingly her poetry of this phase is characterized by freedom from eroticism. In her first three collections— *Summer in Calcutta, The Descendants* and *The Old Playhouse*—the poet's humanistic meliorism is visibly eclipsed by other more sensastionalized strains. As corroborated by her numerous prose writings of this period, Das journeys back to her real, autobiographical self, veiled so far in the mist of fantasy and myth. As an "emotional revolutionary", she now takes upon herself the urgent task of dedicating herself to the cause of humanity. However, her socio-political concerns are restricted mainly to her

prose writings and public speeches in which the Shelleyan dictum "Love of love and hate of hate" becomes her guiding motto. Thus in the writings of this phase one can find the real autobiography of the poet.

Das's righteous indignation stems from the ever-increasing violence and crime perpetrated in the name of race and religion. The altruistic self virtually swoops down upon those responsible for this ubiquitous mutual hatred. This brings us to the Colombo poems expressive of a distinctively philanthropic vision. They are an instance of life transmuted into poetry and of the artistic credo that literature is for humanity's sake. Referring to her experiences on that island and to the poems written during her stay there, she says:

> 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 am also 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.(152).

In these poems Das takes up the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka that becomes for her a metaphor for collective violence. These poems tell of "what man has made of man". Right from her first

poem "Afterwards" through the Colombo poems to the ones written more recently like "Terror", "If Death is Your Wish" and "The Daughter of the Century" one finds the poet growing more and more bitter in her indictment of the wanton misuse of human potentials mainly by the intellect.

The theme of decay of the old and grand monuments has always been common in poetry. "The Sea at Galle Face Green," however, is about the deplorable role of human beings in transforming a resplendent city into the equivalent of a "half-burnt corpse". The poem begins with a consolidated image of arson; the opening simile announces the macabre dance of death generated by ethnic discrimination: "Like a half-burnt corpse was/That splendent city/Its maimed limbs turning towards/The smoke-stained sky...." Nature is often indifferent to the vicissitudes of human beings, as seen in several of her poems including the concluding lines of this poem. However, in the lines that follow, even nature rises in protest as manifested in the cessation of the life-suggesting movement in the natural world:

...and
Even the small leaves of
The katurmuringa
Stopped their joyous tremor
While the sea-breezes blew.
No birdsong in the trees

The atmosphere is characterized by the grimness of a graveyard in which the music of nature is suspended and "only the stomp of boots" is heard. These boots are "Worn" most ironically "by the adolescent/ Gunmen" who are innocent and are only "ordered to hate" the Tamils. Ethnic violence is a vortex into which even the little children are dragged. In a state of exasperation and disgust, the poet 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, laid down
> By his son. How did they
> Track down the little ones
> Who knew not their ethnic
> Inferiority?

As also seen in "Nani" and other poems, Das is fond of asking questions which resist answers of any kind. The questions expose the ignominy and irrationality of war and state-sponsored patriotic violence. In a tone of sarcasm the poet says: "It was a defect/That made us the land's inferiors;/A certain muddiness in the usual red,/Revealing our non-Aryan descent" ("A Certain Defect in

Blood"). In the organizers of this state-sponsored homicide Das sees an image of Hitler and his dire cruelty:

> 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.
> The dark Dravidian laid his three year old child
> On his lap,....
>
> ("After July")

She sees the incarnation of Hitler even in the native salesgirls at the shopping centres in Colombo: "...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" ("Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo"). K. Satchidanandan comes up with a very revealing reading of these poems when he says that the conflict between fair Hitler and the dark Dravidian is a repetition of an earlier mythical war fought in Sri Lanka between fair Rama, who was also an Aryan, and dark Ravana who was a Dravidian. As a matter of fact Das's poems show a deep awareness of this conflict in her obsessive juxtaposition of dark/brown/nut-brown and fair/white.

Her sympathy is not confined just to the Dravidians. She castigates in her poem "Delhi, 1984" in bitterest terms the state-

sponsored terrorism unleashed on the innocent Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984:

> 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....

If such an act enjoys the sanction of the scriptures then the scriptural chant is nothing but a lunatic's guffaw:

> The scriptural
> Chant sounded like a lunatic's guffaw;
> Any God worth his name would hasten
> To disown these dry-eyed adherents
> Of the newest cult....

The adherents of the new cult of terrorism are "dry-eyed" and insensate. The poet mocks them because their vigour lies not in their loins" but in their guns:

> ...and this brand new cult
> Spawned by an uneasy era turns
> Out its own dry-eyed adherents, men whose
> Vigour must repose not in their loins

But in the guns they tote. They shall not
Populate this earth but shall cleave it
Into two....

("If Death Is Your wish")

These "adherents" are mere pawns in the hands of Machiavellian politicians; they are the "paid marauders" and the walking symbols of death and sterility. Thus, terror becomes all-pervasive and is once again conceived in animal terms:

Fear
Is our leader, leading us into
High exitless hills standing tall
As a mountain goat upon the snow, and
All the languages paralysed
On our tongue. We recollect the ones
In jail and envy them their freedom
To be. We wear service masks night and
Day, between their metal and our skin
The sweat stinks of rot and pus....

Fear as a mountain goat suggests the manner in which mankind is hypnotically led by this new cult to a precipice. Das as an uncompromizing pacifist cannot accept the fact that war can solve human problems. To her war itself is a problem and needs an urgent solution that only lies in putting an end to it. These perennial

problems threaten humanity and make her unhappy. She shares her feelings over them with Iqbal Kaur in one of her interviews:

> Once I have accepted unhappiness, it is like a dark ocean seen at midnight. It is a dark ocean within. I have accepted it and it remains within me. I am unhappy because every where people are trying to make others unhappy—not merely the people I knew or touched or talked with but the people who are my cousins in the human race. I am unhappy because of the animals that get slaughtered for no fault of their own. I am unhappy for the human beings who get slaughtered, bombed. We have reached an unhappy stage in life, all of us. It is true, and our country is going to suffer more, I feel. Who has got the right to be happy now knowing that right around the corner this new cult of terrorism is flourishing—a cult which will attract our children. They will not have any other religion. They will gravitate towards terrorism because it means power although short-lived." (*The Tribune*, 19 Jan 1992, 5).

As per Rimbaud's prescription, Das clearly feels responsible not only for humanity but also for animals to such an extent that she begins to relegate imaginative literature to a secondary position. At this point in her life she cannot accept the literature that does not contribute something substantial to society. Which is why every

poem of this phase is highly focused in its communication of ideas, even if at the cost of poetic excellence. There is a remarkable fusion of thought and feeling in these poems. They demonstrate that a "lyrical poet" and a "chronicler of events" may not always be at variance. When some of these poems are compared with her earlier ones one notices a more chiselled style, a greater economy of words and compression of ideas. Furthermore the poems, especially those written after her husband's death, show a mark of sharp decline in poetic vigour and spontaneity.

As a champion of a venerable poetic tradition of nonviolence, Das presents a critique of the hegemonic culture with its retrograde value system. Her instincts militate against every form of oppression and inequality, irrespective of gender and class. In this melioristic vision one may detect the "private voice" of Das, a resonant voice of sanity and love.