CHAPTER: 1

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS AND THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

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

– Walt Whitman

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

– Bartolt Brecht

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

– Jibanananda Das

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

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

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

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

1. REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. IDENTIFICATION OF MARGINAL VOICES

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

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

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

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

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

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

[...] I've put

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is time to say goodbye to your charms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This has always been

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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