CHAPTER: 3

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

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

– Ernest Jones

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

– Heinrich Heine

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

– J. Bruce Glasier

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'emaciated':

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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