

Damned for difference: Re-reading Kamala Das's Critique of Racism

Amit Bhattacharya

Born into a traditionally stratified Keralian society as a dark-skinned Dravidian, and a witness to the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka, Kamala Das in her long life has keenly felt the divisive role of race. As a result, she often expresses her disagreement with and disapproval of man's irrational concern for this negative determinant in both her poetry and prose works. In fact, in many of her poems, Das has described momentous ethnic disturbances of past and present, registering her own poetic resistance to the ideology of hatred that foments them. In this paper, a few of Das's poems will be discussed to show her awareness of the issue of 'race' and 'racism'.

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

The pseudo-scientific pretensions of this concept notwithstanding, the phenomenon of race has led to 'racialization' which, according to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, refers to a 'social process by which a population group is categorized as a race' (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). Scott and Marshall have further indicated that 'racialization' of such a section of the

population precipitates ‘racialism’ that, in its turn, leads to ‘the unequal treatment’ of such a group ‘purely because of its possession of physical or other characteristics socially defined as denoting a particular race’ (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). The ‘deterministic belief-system’ that sustains ‘racialism’ by ‘linking these characteristics with negatively valuated social, psychological, or physical traits’ is called ‘racism’ (Scott and Marshall: 1994, 544). According to David Theo Goldberg, “Racism as a discursive object has been variously analyzed as rationalizations for psycho-sexual fear [concerning racial purity and its pollution by racial outsiders]; for economic or social disparities; for cultural exclusions; or for political entitlements” (Goldberg: 1993, 42).

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this new world I lack coherence listen differently for what

I have to tell

let your blood listen and from within your descendants shall hear me (*CP* 49)

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

[...] and in the blood of my

ancestors the embers lay cooling

on those days of flux the mixed fragrance of wood ash and

smoke surface with the flow (*CP* 49)

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

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

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

Here, the temporal distance between the king's death and its commemoration through mourning make the gloom of their mind increasingly more 'ritual' than 'real'. The 'anger' they felt is signified by the word 'ambers' that lay cooling in their blood through successive years and generations. This gradual ritualization of a once-felt gloom as well as the cooling of the ambers of anger points at a processual result induced by the passage of time. The degenerative effect of a hero's death is dexterously brought out by the next line where, in a marked contrast to the heroic laying down of life by the Dravidian king, we bear witness to the asinine 'bartering away' of kingdoms by chieftains only for 'trinkets'. The trinkets in question may denote cheap ornaments or insignificant jewels. They may also stand for women who might have worn them and of whom those chieftains might have been enamoured. When reverting to the first person mode, the speaker says:

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

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

The ‘sea moans’ of time are heard again in the Colombo poems (viz. ‘Fear’, ‘The Sea at Galle Face Green’, ‘Smoke in Colombo’, ‘After July’, ‘A Certain Defect in the Blood’ and ‘Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo’). In and after July 1983, the island nation of Sri Lanka witnessed a prolonged and bloody civil war between the LTTE and the Sinhala State. The Tamil Ultras who were waging a guerrilla war against the state for the creation of a Tamil Homeland (Eelam) in the northern and eastern parts of the country succeeded in destabilizing the government as well as in polarizing the public opinion of the majority Sinhala community against the Tamils. During her sojourn in Sri Lanka, there were occasions when Das too was misconstrued and threatened as a Tamil, owing to her South Indian physical features and dark complexion. In fact, while talking to P.P. Raveendran, Das had observed:

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

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

The history of the post-independence Sri Lanka has been marred by the twin menace of economic underdevelopment and political instability. The presence of the contending ethnic groups - a dominant Sinhala Buddhist majority and a sizeable Tamil Hindu minority – further

complicated the situation (Sunil Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 291). In the Sri Lankan context, therefore, the contending ethnic groups became doubly different. Induced by this sense of *religio-racial difference*, the Sinhalese Community began to have a feeling of being imposed upon by the settlers whereas the Tamils fostered an equally strong feeling of being discriminated against by the aborigines.

As if trying to theorize about this historical phenomenon, John Rex has elsewhere pointed out, ‘Race relations and racial conflict [sic.] are necessarily structured by political and economic factors of a more generalized sort’ (Rex in Bottomore: 2000, 458). The result was the simultaneous rise of Sinhalese chauvinism on the one hand, and Tamil militancy on the other. On 23rd July 1983, the Tamil Liberation Tigers ambushed and killed thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers. This act triggered a large scale retaliative attack on the Tamils by both the military and the thugs which soon degenerated into an ethnic riot.

Sri Lanka had already seen ethnic strife between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in 1958, 1977 and 1981. But, the riots in 1983 were unprecedented in their scale of violence and brutality. Although they were directed primarily against Tamils living in South Sri Lanka, the riots left the entire Tamil population of the country insecure and uncertain of their future. According to Valli Kanapathipillai, ‘it brought home to them (Tamils) the painful fact that regardless of their political ideology they were identified as Tamils and not as Sri Lankans’ (Kanapathipillai in Veena Das: 1992, 321). The Sri Lankan Government showed its extreme brutality in suppressing any Tamil dissent, and termed the riot ‘a legitimate expression of anger by the Sinhala Buddhist majority’ (Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 302).

Sunil Bastian has identified two factors associated with the ethnic conflict of July 1983 namely ‘the organized nature of the riots’ and ‘the distribution of the victims — they belonged primarily to Tamil minority groups and were not equally distributed among both contending groups’ that made him call these riots ‘a pogrom’ — a term which he defines as ‘an organized form of violence by one group against the other’ (Bastian in Veena Das: 1992, 287). The poet watched this irrational blood-bath in utmost horror, as the myth of a monolithic Nation-State began to crumble under the weight of an internecine civil conflict. This bit of history finds poetic transmutation in the poems under discussion.

The first poem of the group ‘Fear’ encapsulates the theme of the Colombo poems in its graphic yet minimalistic description of a land in crisis and a particular section of its inhabitants (the Tamils) in the grip of violence and fear:

Fear,
A lidless eye,
Day bellowing into day
Without a night between,
A noonday sun come at last
To stay...
Substance,
Bereft of shadow,
A scream
-a swift knife-gleam-
Deafens the unwarned
Human ear... (CP 11)

We are textually empowered to assume that it is the reign of terror ('Fear') that causes both the 'eye' to be 'lidless' (wide open), the land to be 'bereft of shadow', and the 'day' to be without 'a night between'. The 'fear' is unleashed by the enforcers of the majority Sinhala culture, the 'lidless eye' is that of the minority Tamils, and it is the atmosphere of fear and apprehension that deprives the land (Sri Lanka) of its 'night'-time sleep and replenishment.

At the fag end of the poem, from a symbolic presentation of a land in crisis, the poet graduates to a graphic portrayal of that 'crisis'. A 'scream' and a 'swift knife-gleam' constitute the entire action of the poem, whereas the result is revealed by the deafening of the 'unwarned human ear'. That the eyes, dazzled by the 'swift knife-gleam', and the 'unwarned human ear', deafened by the 'scream' both belong to the poet-speaker reinforces her status as an eyewitness to the stabbing (murder). The act of killing referred to in this poem acts as an overture to the poetization of the genocide of the minority Tamils in that strife-torn country.

In 'The Sea at Galle Face Green' 'the adolescent Gunmen' (the Sinhala youths) are 'ordered' to 'hate', turn 'that once splendid city' into a virtual 'necropolis', and massacre the Tamils. They are the enforcers of the racist culture of the Sinhala ethno-nationalists. Under the

spell of indoctrination, these youths are degraded from commiserating individuals into killing automatons, bent on subjugating the Tamils – their ethnic ‘others’. The Tamils are killed and cornered because of their alleged ethnic inferiority. So relentless is the blind fury of the power-hungry zealots, that they do not spare even the Tamil children making the poet exclaim:

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

In ‘Smoke in Colombo’, the poet-speaker feels the need to speak representatively since she sees herself as one of the ‘expatriates’ whose ethnic identity has been put under the cosh. So, the poem is narrated using the first person plural pronoun ‘we’/‘us’ placed in direct opposition to and confrontation with the third person plural pronoun ‘they’. The first portion of the poem describes a ‘ride home’ ‘along the silenced streets’:

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

That the ‘streets’ are ‘silenced’ and not ‘silent’, implying arson and carnage, becomes clear from a pair of revealing similes that Das employs to liken the lingering smoke to:

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

Transforming the feeling of apprehension to that of immediate threat of danger, the speaker is met and stopped by a group of ‘Gunmen’:

They stopped us, a somnambulistic
Daze was in their eyes, there was no space
Between us and their guns, but we were
Too fatigued to feel fear, or resist
The abrupt moves
Of an imbecilic will. (CP 14)

It is an encounter with the same ‘adolescent / Gunmen, ordered to hate’, whose ‘stomp of boots’ supplanted the ‘birdsong in the tree’ in ‘The Sea at Galle Face Green’. The ‘somnambulistic daze’ in their eyes is reflective of the ‘imbecilic will’ of the Aryan zealots trying to terrorize the Dravidian Tamils.

‘After July’ (alternative title ‘The Return of Hitler’) limns the effects of the July 1983 riots on the Tamil community with all its paralyzing horror and stifling tension:

After July, in Colombo there were
No Tamils in sight, no arangetrams
Were held in the halls, no flower-seller
Came again to the door with strings
Of jasmine to perfume the ladies’ hair, (CP 15)

The culture of killing coerces the minority Tamils into adopting self-inflicted loss of visibility as a temporary survival mechanism. It shows how a hostile racist culture can force the members of an ethnic minority to suppress any show of their identity. Significantly, the Tamil individual identity gets subsumed under a more inclusive Tamil ethnic identity that is both defined and constricted by a specific ethnic culture. The poet's allusion to the rise of 'Hitler' and his demand for another round of applause – all add up to a metonymic representation of the arm-twisting Aryan state:

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

The poem ends with a poignant description of a dark Dravidian trying frantically to insulate his 'three-year old daughter' from this situation of danger:

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

Here, the poet strategically refers to the Aryan blood – 'the sinister / Brew that absolves a man [presumably from the Sinhala community] of his sins and / Gives him the right to kill his former friends [the Tamils]' (*CP 15*) – to link by way of contrast this poem with the next poem of the group, 'A Certain Defect in the Blood'.

The title of the poem, 'A Certain Defect in the Blood', bears the mocking irony of ethnic discrimination. The 'defect' in the 'blood' in the poem's title, which is dimmed 'a certain', signifies that the 'defect' is unspecified and that it must have been concocted by its perceivers. 'Blood', by virtue of its colour and its composition, is a primordial symbol of the oneness of humanity. It is the common life-force that runs through all. But, the eroding intellect of man (the Aryans in these poems) can go even to the extent of seeing 'a defect' in the blood and attributing it to a particular ethnic group. In fact, these fanatical ethno-nationalists denounce it down right

and seek to exterminate the Tamils on its basis. Whereas the ‘robust’ Aryan blood gives the Sinhala community, with the full backing of their racist culture, the right ‘to kill’, ‘a certain defect in the blood’ which is alleged and not actual forces the non-Aryan Tamils to retreat into the narrow confines of their community, ‘Like spiders exposed / To a water jet we curled ourselves into / Tight balls’ (*CP* 17). The poem with its ironic title cleverly invalidates the notion of a superior blood, harboured and propagated by a racist society.

In ‘Shopper at the Cornells, Colombo’, the racist culture practised by the Sinhala ethno-nationalists and promoted by the Sri Lankan government is betrayed through the hate-laden ‘smiles’ of the Sinhalese (Aryan) ‘salesgirls’ with which they try to stab the Dravidian speaker:

Shopping at the Cornells in red slacks and shirt, my hair

Tied up in a bandanna, my Indianness

Concealed, I merge well with the expatriates,

Pushing their food laden carts in silence,

Despite my nut brown skin, but when at last

I reach the cashier’s counter, the salesgirls

See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed

When they make attempts to stab me with a smile. (*CP* 16)

Faced with the threat of physical danger, the persecuted speaker is forced to hide her identity. Here, the behaviour of the ordinary ‘salesgirls’ reveals the wide reach of the racist Aryan culture. The ‘blood’ that has been shed all around is now located in their ‘cruel mouths’ that ‘bleed’ while smiling at the Dravidian speaker ‘I’ who can only try to hide, if she can, her ‘Indianness’ and her ‘nut-brown skin’ that indicate her ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ identities respectively. Here, the different reactions of the ethnically privileged Sinhalese Salesgirls and the Tamil lookalike deterritorialized speaker corroborate Peter du Preez’s statement, “Politics [...] is centrally concerned with maintaining or imposing an identity system. It is concerned with the consolidation of interlocking symbols which give a sense of integrity and continuity to action” (du Preez: 1980, 1).

Though not a poem of the Colombo group in the strict sense of the term, ‘The New Sinhala Films’ was written in response to the anti-Tamil riots. As such, it can very well act as an envoy to the Colombo poems, since it both continues and completes the chronicle of the Cannibal times. The title of the poem, ‘The New Sinhala Films’, coupled with the escapist desire of the poet’s Sinhalese friends to talk only of the ‘new cinema’, hint at a strategic and selective amnesia that at once expects and accepts only the selective memory of ‘apolitical reel life’ at the cost of the ‘chaotic real life’ of this island-nation. This strategy is imitated by the Sinhalese friends who willy-nilly belong with the perpetrators of this ‘pogrom’. The poet, on the contrary, stands for and sympathizes with the victimized community, ‘creatures of / Indian origin, Tamils or cousins of / Tamils’ (*IEWP* 450).

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

Yes, indeed cowards have common sense, they place
Stepladders under the secret slats in ceilings,
Once meant only for the yearly cleaning up,
Arrange their passport, visa and wedding ring
In a bundle alone with a first-aid kit
To make the getaway as easy as it
Even can be, [...] (*IEWP* 450)

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

[...] under the most distressing
Circumstances of their being creatures of
Indian origin, Tamils or cousins of

Tamils, during this season of legalised

Hate. [...] (*IEWP* 450)

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

The close friends I have among the Sinhalese

Wait till dusk to visit me and they wisely

Talk only of the new cinema as though

Nothing has happened in the recent past but films.

But the stench of burning flesh is still within

Our nostrils, the silence of the curfew hours

Still hums in our ears and so good-naturedly

Smiling becomes a difficult feat although

Resignation came easy enough to us,

Born revolutionaries, the erstwhile addicts

Of freedom. [...] (*IEWP* 450)

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

[...] At night in

Bruised sleep the Sinhalese pour gasoline

On our heads to burn us down, and as corpses

Devoid of the power to scream we wake with open

Mouths, trembling uncontrollably in those long

Pre-dawn hours, dipped in the milk of waxing moons. (*IEWP* 450)

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

When at last we return, if at all we do,

Dodging the speeding army-truck or perhaps

The accidental shot, we shall not ever

Discuss the disgusts of the past but shall only

Talk brilliantly of Dharmasiri Bandaranayake’s

Thunveni Yamaya and Arukgoda’s Monarateuna... (*IEWP* 450-451)

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

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

In the poems discussed above, the concept of ‘race’ is seen to create and complicate difference between man and man. Here, the poet-speaker decries the mindset of the racists that purports to damn their fellow human being only for being ‘different’. In fact, the violence against the Dravidians in ancient India or that against the Tamils in present-day Sri Lanka becomes an extended metaphor for the violence of every kind. These poems testify to the sustained resistance shown by the poet against injustice to as well as intolerance of human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed, and nationality. Kamala Das’s poetic oeuvre presents diverse modes of resistance, but in these poems she adopts the technique of exposure, to hold a mirror up to all that goes on in the name of ‘race’, ‘ideology’ and ‘nationalism’ with the underlying message that man must triumph over all other considerations if s/he has to usher in a more equitable world order.

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About the Author:

Dr. Amit Bhattacharya, Assistant Professor, University of Gour Banga, Kerala
E Mail. amitbhattacharya.in@gmail.com

