

**KAMALA DAS'S 'SMOKE IN COLOMBO' AND 'THE SEA AT
GALLE FACE GREEN': POEMS OF VIVID WITNESS**

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Abstract

Carolyn Force's anthology Against Forgetting: 20th Century Poetry of Witness is the first great anthology of witness poetry. Witness poetry transforms its readers into witness. It is a way of presenting in poetry the unrepresentable loss and Seamus Heaney says in an interview that poetry gives true peace only if horror is satisfactorily rendered. A poet's responsibility is to render the horror of barbarism in the poetic work without complicity. Kamala Das is not a writer of witness poetry proper. Rather what we find in the majority of her volumes is lyric expressivity and confessional mode. But her Colombo Poems bear witness to the anti – Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. Her Colombo poems faithfully record the ethnic disturbances caused by the prolonged strife in Sri Lanka between the Tamils and the Sri Lankan army – a strife that took the form of a civil war. Poems such as 'The sea of Galle Face Green', 'Smoke in Colombo', 'A Certain Defect in Blood', 'After July', 'Shopper at Cornell's', 'Colombo' and 'Fear' bear witness to that history of shame – history glossed over in the annals but faithfully recorded in literature.

Key Words: *Holocaust Literature, rendering horror, Other, evidentiary, problematizing history, carnage, Anti- Tamil riots, dark-skinned Dravidian.*

KAMALA DAS'S 'SMOKE IN COLOMBO' AND 'THE SEA AT GALLE FACE GREEN': POEMS OF VIVID WITNESS

- Dr. DEBDAS ROY

IT is in the 1980s and early 1990s that witness poetry proper came into being. Carolyn Force in his ground breaking anthology *Against Forgetting: 20th Century Poetry of Witness* has itemized the wars and turmoil of the 20th century. It is the "first great anthology of witness poetry" (Ahmed 2).

According to the *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature* witness poetry is the kind of poetry that transforms its readers into witness. To read the poem is to be implicated by it. It is a kind of poetry that bears witness to the atrocities unleashed against a race or a section of people. In his essay 'Second War and Post- modern Memory' Charles Bernstein says 'poetry is a necessary way to register the unrepresentable loss' (qtd. in Ahmed 2) and Seamus Heaney says in an interview that 'poetry gives true peace only if horror is satisfactorily rendered. If the eyes are not averted from it' (4). A poet's responsibility is to render the horror of barbarism in the poetic work without complicity.

Witness poetry is a way of internalizing the other – a complete identification with the Other. It is not a question of sympathy. It is a question of empathy. It calls us from the other side of a situation of extremity. Seamus Heaney terms it as 'poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, and the underprivileged' (5). The witness is any figure in whom the truth –telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes an integral part of the act of writing itself.

Witness poetry does not bother about the question of illusion of reality or truth to life. We cannot verify the truth stated in the poem because the poem itself is a trace of an occurrence. The poem exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. For example, if someone comes across the ghastly sight of a man being butchered mercilessly and if there is none around to help him

except the sole poet-onlooker who chanced to come there, then the poet-onlooker's account is the only evidence that the incident took place. Likewise, witness poetry is evidentiary rather than representational in nature.

It is more authentic than history because history is sometimes silenced or distorted by the dominant ideology. Witness poetry never silences the political history. Rather it problematizes the relationship between poetry and politics. The word politics is often applied pejoratively as a contaminant of a serious literary work. The poets are usually relegated to hermetic sphere of lyric expressivity and linguistic art. They are expected to remain untarnished by historical, political and social forces. But is it possible to imagine a writer who would profess to be without politics? Second World War veteran and pacifist Lawrence Ferlinghetti's manifesto poem 'Insurgent Art' offers a belief that poetry has political agency. 'The state of the world calls out for poetry to save it' says Ferlinghetti (qtd. in Ahmed 5). According to Lawrence Ferlinghetti poetry has political agency and 'words can save you where guns can't' (5). While commenting upon Maya Angelou's poetry, Zofia Burr says, 'The function of the poet as check on power is both analogous to that of the press of the Fourth Estate' (qtd. in Ahmed 5)

Thus witness poetry signals an important change in our attitude to the reading and writings of poetry. Needless to say, that the change dawned after the World Wars. The important question was – what should be the role of poetry in the public sphere? Much earlier Keats said that he hated poetry that had a 'palpable design' (43) upon the readers. Shelley imbibed radical political thought, but ended in being an 'ineffectual angel beating his luminous wings in the void' (Arnold). Tennyson, the representative Victorian, fled from the besetting problems. So did Arnold. It was D.H Lawrence who spoke of the poetry of 'stark, directness without a shadow of a lie'. 'This stark, bare, rocky directness of statement makes poetry today' says Lawrence in one of his letters (503). But Pound-Eliot 'High Modernism' proved stronger than Lawrence's 'directness'. Pound and Eliot are held responsible for the alienation of poetry from the public sphere on grounds of accessibility and

social utility.

It is after the First World War that we witness an altered poetic sensibility. Two things changed Owen – trench experience and meeting with Sassoon. Auden had unequivocal socio – political commitments. In his famous elegy on the death of W.B. Yeats Auden asserted –

Poetry makes nothing happen

After the holocaust of the Second World War, the general feeling was that silencing the political history in poetry would be a grave crime. German thinker Theodore Adorno witnessed the carnage at Auschwitz. Six million Jews were wiped out. An equal number of other marginalized sections of the society were obliterated. In his 1949 essay entitled 'Cultural Criticism and Society' Adorno made an infamous statement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Qtd. in Ahmed 6). One should not write lyric poetry after the holocaust. The poems of Seamus Heaney, Choman Hardi, Paul Celan, Carolyn Forché, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael Palmer, Jerome Rothenberg, Maya Angelou, Eliot Weinberger, Kamala Das and others bear proof to this assertion.

Kamala Das is not a writer of witness poetry proper. Rather what we find in the majority of her volumes is lyric expressivity and confessional mode. But her Colombo Poems bear witness to the anti – Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. Terrible violence against the Tamils was unleashed in Colombo and her Colombo poems faithfully record the ethnic disturbances caused by the prolonged strife in Sri Lanka between the Tamils and the Sri Lankan army – a strife that took the form of a civil war. Poems such as 'The sea of Galle Face Green', 'Smoke in Colombo', 'A Certain Defect in Blood', 'After July', 'Shopper at Cornell's', 'Colombo' and 'Fear' bear witness to that history of shame – history glossed over in the annals but faithfully recorded in literature. Here she registers her own 'poetic resistance to the ideology of hatred that foments them' (Bhattacharya 1). Born as a dark-skinned Dravidian, Das in her long life keenly felt the divisive role of race. In 'An Introduction' also we come

across her consciousness of racial identity –

I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar. . . (4-5)

It is an assertion of her Dravidian identity. The expression 'very brown' is a pointer to her Dravidian color consciousness as well as her consciousness of 'race'. The place name Malabar is not simply the poet's birth place. It is reminiscent of the social conflict beginning with the battle of Calicut. Her sojourn in Sri Lanka during the prolonged Sinhala–Tamil 'racial conflict' intensified her racial consciousness. Race, as an element of social stratification, has often vitiated the atmosphere of peaceful co-existence by dividing and categorizing communities on the basis of ancestry and physical features, and by spreading the culture of intolerance and hatred (Bhattacharya 1). Sometimes the concept of 'race' is used by shrewd state leaders as a social construct to assert and 'legitimize the superiority of particular groups of people over others' (Thieme 213). It is used as a means of keeping people 'engaged' in strife with a view to averting their attention from serious issues of national and international interest. Nurturing 'differences' and social hierarchies and preserving 'categories' (Scott and Marshall 544) is one of the vicious designs of the arbiters of the politics of race. Ashcroft et al. have also agreed that the concept of race is being used as a 'Socio-political expedient' to differentiate the 'superior' from the 'inferior' (Ashcroft et al. 199). The Colombo Poems of Kamala Das bear witness to a gory internecine strife. It made her aware of the need to resist racial discriminations in poetry. She saw the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots with her own eyes and the Colombo poems owe their genesis to that 'experience'. In fact 'there were occasions when Das too was misconstrued and threatened as a Tamil owing to her south Indian Physical features and bark complexion' says Amit Bhattacharya (2).

Like a true witness the poem 'Smoke in Colombo' begins abruptly. It makes us feel that the poet is standing in the midst of what she is relating –

On that last ride home we had the smoke
Following us, along the silenced

Streets, lingering on, though the fire
Was dead then in the rubble and the ruins, (Ll. 1-4)

The pronoun 'that' is suggestive of the poet's firsthand experience and it jolts the readers into an awareness of something alarming the poet once chanced to come across. Another noteworthy aspect of this line as well as of the entire poem is the use of first person plurals 'we' and 'us'. Instead of 'I' which is taken to be the hallmark [e.g. 'I am sinner,/I am saint. I am the beloved and the /Betrayed'. (An Introduction) or, 'I am million, million people' (Someone Else's Song)] of a confessional poet like Das, we find a representative 'we' which stands in direct opposition to and confrontation with 'they'. It is 'they' who are killing 'us'. Das sees herself as one of the 'expatriates' whose ethnic identity is being seriously endangered. The word 'smoke' is suggestive of 'military' operation. Military persons blast smoke-bomb to camouflage themselves during operation. It is also suggestive of the houses being set ablaze. The streets are not merely 'silent', but are 'silenced'. It implies coercion, carnage and intimidation and is suggestive of the active-passive, subject-object, oppressor-oppressed, majority-minority relation between two races of people. The expression 'the rubble and the ruins' creates a sense of immediacy (so important in a witness poem) by drawing our attention to the fact that the buildings have been reduced to small pieces of brick and stone by bombing.

In the next four lines the poet makes use of two gruesome similes which, true to the 'designs' of a witness poem, sends shivers through our spine and conveys the disastrous consequence of the holocaust, first in the animal world and then, in the human world –

Lingering on as milk lingers on
In udders after the calves are buried,
Lingering on as grief lingers on
Within women rocking emptied cradles (Ll. 5-8)

It is remarkable that Das, who usually loves metaphors to convey her smouldering feelings, takes resort to similes here. Metaphors are implicit and

hidden and are lies, whereas similes are explicit and direct and hence are appropriate for a poem bearing witness to the ravages caused by ethnic strife. When calves are buried, cows also give in to the huge pressure of milk which causes intolerable pain and ultimately, death. While introducing the deeply moving image of a mother rocking 'emptied cradles' (emphasis mine), Das once again draws the attention of her readers to the active-passive relation between two races of people. Up to this point the poem is about the effect of the military attack upon 'us'. It voices the poet's apprehensions.

The next six lines record a change of tone from apprehension to threat of imminent danger –

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. (Ll. 9-14)

The expression 'somnambulistic daze' is suggestive of many things – the effects of insomnia in the eyes of the 'paid' soldiers, their obliviousness of the crime they are committing, the inertia in their dazed conscience and their pitiable and blind surrender to some 'powers' which prefer to perpetuate racial strife to keep people 'engaged' so that they (People) do not take note of some significant 'failures' of those in 'power'. The word 'daze' implies lack of consciousness. It is suggestive of the fact that the gunmen are not properly implicated in what they are doing. It reminds us of the 'doomed' soldiers in Wilfred Owen's 'The Send-off' who boarded the train without knowing where they were being taken to –

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.
They were not ours:
We never heard to which front these were sent. (11-13)

The expression 'too fatigued to feel fear' is also reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's

'The Strange Meeting' where the supposedly dead soldier says –

I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . (40-42)

'They are stupid killers unable to feel properly the imbecile will of the Aryan zealots trying to terrorize the Dravidian Tamils' says Amit Bhattacharya (2).

A poignant question usually asked by an 'outsider' taken aback by the 'hostility' of the 'host' is at the heart of the poem entitled 'The Sea at Galle Face Green'–

Did the Tamils smell so
Different, . . . ? (Ll. 13-14)

Galle Face is a promenade or Sea-front which stretches for a half kilometer along the coast in the heart of the financial and business district of Colombo, Sri Lanka. This 'once splendid' (2) spot in now like 'a half burnt corpse' (1). The images of half-burnt corpse, maimed limbs, smoke-stained sky, boots stomping, gunmen parading, merciless tracking down of kids, windows shut, smouldering corpse turn the entire poem into a vivid witness and a telling commentary upon brutalities inflicted upon the Tamils in Colombo. The words 'half-burnt', 'maimed' and 'smoke' in the first four lines create the impression that the poet is standing at a spot which has witnessed indiscriminate bombing and firing and where people are writhing in pain and are looking for help from above fruitlessly –

Its maimed limbs turned towards
The smoke-stained sky (3-4)

That nature which usually remains indifferent to the pains and vagaries of political history does not approve of this racial hatred is evident from the pathetic fallacy deftly used in the following lines –

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Even the small leaves of
The Katurmuringa
Stopped their joyous tremor
While the sea breezes blew (5-8)

The 'birdsong' in the trees has been replaced by 'stomp of boots' (10). This is reminiscent of Das's favourite image of a swallow forgetting her home and her instinctive urge to fly. It suggests the loss of freedom and identity. It will not be irrelevant here to associate the parade of the soldiers with the repressive nature of the male ego which, here, has been saddled with brutal state power that thrives on racial discrimination. She tacitly criticizes the psychic disorder in the male soldiers of the Sri Lankan army who love to silence the singing 'birds' (which symbolize the natural impulse in human beings) with their virile thumping of boots. The expression 'adolescent gunmen ordered to hate' suggests that frenzy in the adolescents can be immeasurably brutal (as evinced in William Golding's *the Lord of the Flies*) and also that the young gunmen are not properly implicated (note the passive voice in 'ordered to hate') in what they are doing. Then the poet's wailing eventually turns into railings and here the 'muted tongue of her desire' (Of Calcutta) suffers no inertia –

Did the Tamils smell so
Different, what secret
Chemistry let them down? (13-15)

The note of interrogation in the following lines suggests that poet heavily denounces the attempt of the 'gunmen' to track down the little ones and kill them mercilessly –

How did they
Track down the little ones
Who knew not their ethnic
inferiority? (25-28)

It reminds us of Hitler's Concentration Camp where the tender ones and the old ones were mercilessly dispensed with because they were of no use to the

state. Das tries the patience of her readers by comparing the burning of corpses with the roasting of cashew –

As the corpses smouldered,
Fear and a stench sweet as
That of raw cashew nuts,
Roasting. (32-35)

Ethnic strife took the form of a civil war and the following lines bear testimony to that –

The city was grey
And every window was
Shut. (29-31)

Das lived in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Colombo and her Colombo poems also bear witness to her utter dissatisfaction with the inadequacies and brutalities of city life also. The brutalities inflicted upon the Tamils in Colombo might be linked with her favourite theme of spiritual vacuity and heartlessness found in materialistic city life. If her love poems reveal her desire for true love, the Colombo poems reveal her smothered and smouldering 'racial desire' which is in harmony with the poet's abiding love of humanity. Her going to Colombo is a part of her larger search for 'home' and 'security' which incidentally Colombo refuses to give. Like any other male-dominated metropolitan city, the city of Colombo does not allow her as well as the other members of her 'race' to attain 'self-realization as an individual' (Jha 107). Here also she, like any other member of her race, feels persecuted. The poet has no hesitation in identifying herself with the luckless people of her race living in Colombo. In the ethnic strife on the island, she finds intolerance of the majority as a manifestation of the masculine display of power. According to Nair, 'In the plight of persecuted minority she sees part of her own feminine self reflected. This is why she is able to identify with their displacement so deeply.' (101) I would like to conclude with her own view expressed in an interview taken by P.P. Raveendran. It not only justifies the writing of the Colombo poems but also supports the view that a writer bears witness to what happens in the socio-political arena around him/her –

'Colombo I had to write because I was there those two years when things were going wrong. I had watched people being killed. . . . I am also a chronicler. A writer is not merely a lyrical poet, but is a chronicler of events that happen around her'.

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