Chapter V
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Conclusion

In the last phase of her life, Das adopted painting as a fruitful medium to exhort her creative faculty. Unlike a trained professional painter, her very own styles of paintings and drawings reveal a different aspect of her life. It is not that she replaced one medium with the other; rather she continued to write and paint simultaneously. Her main focus has always been poetry and compared to her poems her paintings are much less in number. However, her paintings attract considerable interest of critics. Like her poems this medium also reveals the same attitude towards life. Undoubtedly the themes, her paintings explore, reflect the socio-psychological status of women in India. Like her writings, her paintings may also be regarded poetic expressions in shapes and colours. She did not follow any predominating genre of art. She can be categorized among the “naïve artists”. In *The Penguin Dictionary of art and Artists*, “Naïve Art” is defined as which “... is not produced by unsophisticated societies, but by untrained artists in a sophisticated society” (287). It might be a deliberate attempt on Das’s part that she explored this medium with a focused intention. Throughout her life she has kept herself engaged in the documentation and revelation of women’s suffering and tortured self in Indian socio-cultural milieu. Her paintings do not overlook those aspects and like her confessional poems Kamala Das consciously uses her paintings as a strategy to give a powerful expression to the subjugation of womanhood. M. P. Devika, while discussing about the ‘Naïve’ style of painting validates this point:
The interest seems to be linked with the belief that art should be spontaneous and instinctive, unhampered by intellectual rules embodied in tradition, an affair of the imagination rather than reason. There is also a belief that an untrained artist is likely to have a *freshness and directness* of vision that is becoming rare and which may be lost through exposure to academic training and sophisticated art production. (emphasis added 111)

Devika also raises the issue of exposing ‘personal elements’ in these types of paintings:

> What we really expect in a work of art is a certain personal element. We expect the artist to reveal something to us that is original – a *unique and personal vision of the world* and surely enough Das’s paintings are original. (emphasis added 111)

And this mode of self-expression becomes functional to Das in respect of its therapeutic value, “Painting gave me some kind of release from tension. I could go a little mad while painting- I could splash paints” (Das, “Interview” 112). Devika concludes that Das’s paintings, like her literary creations, are able to focus on her honesty in delivering herself:

> Das’s paintings have a narrative effect. One can almost visualize the event, the time of the event and so on. She is extremely honest in her paintings. She is not out to prove that she can paint well. Painting serves as a medium where she is able to express herself as eloquently as does in her writings. (117)

My point here is to show briefly painting as an extension of her poems where she is candid enough in expressing herself. Paintings provide a space, a world of silence, having
an intimate relationship with words. Das is aware of this continuous switching over between ‘words’ and ‘wordlessness’:

    Words are a nuisance, but
    They grow on me like leaves on a tree,
    They never seem to stop their coming
    From a silence, somewhere deep within. (‘Words’ 11-14)

And this might be the reason that when she is bored with the burden of words, she finds shelter in painting. However, her paintings are confessional, too. As we have already seen that she has adopted the method of ‘confession’ as a strategy in her poems, her paintings also show the same approach. The captions of her paintings like “Grandmother with Child”, “Grandmother, Maid and Child in a Waiting Room” and “Maid at the Bath” are indicative of having personal elements.

    Painting, as a medium of art, has a wider scope than literature in communicating with the mass. Through visual presentation, one can reach more people much easily than through the medium of literature. Irrespective of the use of abstract symbolism, the painting has direct access to the viewers. Das has taken recourse to the minimal symbolism in her paintings. And this brings her artworks very close to the presentation of reality which on the other hand, is linked with her private life. Her “Grandmother with Child”(Fig.1), may remind one of her poems like “My Grandmother’s House”, “Evening at the Old Nalapat House”, “Composition “and “Blood”. In this painting the elderly woman labeled as ‘grandmother’ has kept her protective hand on the child’s head. Undoubtedly, this reminds the viewer that Das has very close relationship with her own grandmother. The painting along with its title makes it appear autobiographical. The
warmth of relationship conveyed through these paintings is expressed in many of her poems as in “My Grandmother’s House” she says:

There is a house now far away where once

I received love. That woman died

The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved

Among books. (1-4)

The death of her grandmother caused her immense loss and this loss forced her to curtail her personal space, to curb her freedom. The innocence of love was lost to her:

You cannot believe, darling

Can you, that I lived in such a house and

Was proud, and loved… I who have lost

My way and beg now at stranger’s doors to

Receive love, at least in small change? (12-16).

In “The Millionaires at Marine Drive” she laments the death of her grandmother:

All through the sun-singing

Day, all through the moon-wailing night, I think

Of her, of the warmth that she took away,

Wrapped in funerary white, a fire that

Stayed lit while her blood cooled and there was no

More of it for me, for, no longer was

There someone to put an arm around my

Shoulders without a purpose . . . . (4-11)
In this painting “Grandmother with Child” (Fig.1) she recalls her sole shelter in life. She has always urged for that ‘protective hand’ which had given mental support in the time of psychological destabilization. Her paintings, like her poems, act like a relief, a therapy to provide her irritated self a soothing consolation. Remembrance of loved moments could pacify her inner turmoil. Painting can serve such therapeutic goal. Lindsay Updegrove in “Painting What We See Within: A Look at the Insides of Art Therapy” validates this point:

Many art therapy practitioners agree that it is a good alternative to verbal therapy if the client does not speak English or is shy or frightened about verbalizing his or her feelings and experiences. If the latter is the case, it is often easier or less painful for the client to discuss the image, rather than to discuss him or her self directly. In this way, art therapy is at once both therapeutic and diagnostic. (N.pag.)

Another picture, entitled “Grandmother, Maid and Child in a Waiting Room” (Fig 2), exploits the same mood and manner used in the Fig 1. Again we can see the protective approach used in this painting. The grandmother with her careful hand on the girl’s head gives a sympathetic look to the child. A maid is sitting by them. It is a woman’s world created within a frame. But this content serves dual purpose. While expressing the concern about the girl child, the picture projects the position of women in Indian traditional social system. In the picture of the maid there is a certain sense of melancholy arising out of the inferior status granted to women. Though the grandmother reflects a caressing and caring attitude, the maid is subservient enough in her look. Her eyes are cast downward and her humble appearance should remind the viewers as well as the
readers of Das’s poems a significant poem “Nani” where the poet recounts an episode which took place in her childhood:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself 
In the privy one day. For three long hours 
Until the police came, she was hanging there, 
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew 
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed 
To us who were children then, that Nani 
Was doing, to delight us, a comic 
Dance . . . (1-8)

At that very tender age that gruesome incident was beyond her comprehension. The painting might have been a redemptive recollection of that incident occurred during her early childhood. Like her poem, in her paintings also Das is straightforward enough in pointing out very intimate moments from past. Undoubtedly, the episode haunted her throughout her life and that was why even after narrating that incident in her poem she tried to give expression to that moment of insecurity in her painting. Paintings gave her that extra space. And it’s not surprising that in this painting it is only the little child who dares to look straight to the viewers. The child is still in her world of innocence and her looks confirm that she is yet to enter the world of experience. As in her poems, Das in these paintings deconstructs her personal life and expresses her deep concern regarding the condition of women in our society. M. P. Devika rightly observes:

Though the title of the painting is “Grandmother with Child and Maid in the Waiting Room”, the painting could be seen, as a reference to the role a
woman is required to play in order to appease society. Das hated the traditional roles a woman was assigned and the subservience expected of them. (127)

Another set of paintings contains “Maid at the Bath” (Fig.3), “The Nude at Noon” (Fig. 4), “The Nude at Night” (Fig. 5), “Spring” (Fig.6), and “The Sea Nymph” (Fig.7). These art works depict women in their nudity. Unlike her “grandmother” series of paintings, these pieces are more general in their respective identity. They are every woman, representative of universal womanhood. And at the same time these paintings are extremely womanish. Other than any woman painter these types of paintings could not have taken their present form. A certain sense of feminine approach is inherent in these pictures. In this context we can refer to another female painter “Gogi Saroj Pal” who also has depicted “women” (Fig. 11 and Fig.12) with their vibrant nudity. But what is striking and somewhat expected from Kamala Das is that she has portrayed ‘women’ equally candidly in her poems. As in “Loud Posters” she foregrounds her manifesto:

To spread myself across wide highways

Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster

Was always my desire, but all I

Do is lurk in shadows of a cul-de-sac. (2-5)

The act of confession necessitates the strategy of ‘stripping off’, or “nudity” for free and frank exposure of psychological complexities. However, these nudes, are far from being mere visual delectation. Presentation of woman body in painting by woman artists is a special genre representing typical experience of a female. Das takes it to the level of psycho-social curiosiy where a female artist portrays the body of women as it is gazed
upon by a male. Such paintings may be regarded as a strategic device to combat the male gaze. Robert Philips says in this context:

   All confessional art, whether poetry or not is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, the dreadful dragons of dreams and experience that must be haunted down, cornered and exposed in order to be destroyed. (2)

Side by side these paintings are also a protest against such socio-political environment which regards women as merely objects of male desire. She is forcefully directed by the categorizers to, “Dress in sarees, be girl, / Be Wife…” (“An Introduction” 33-34), and to play the traditional role set up by conventional patriarchs:

   Don’t sit

   On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.

   Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better

   Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to

   Choose a name, a role. (36-40)

She vehemently opposes the role and protests against this tradition displaying the opposite, the ‘nude’ figures of women either in poetry or in paintings.

   “The Sea Nymph” (Fig 7), among these paintings, is an attempt at wish fulfillment. We have already discussed in previous chapters that Das’s poems often show an urge to commit suicide. Her poems have depicted the desire inherent in her mind. She has wanted to take shelter in the depth of sea to protect her from the brutality to which she was subjected by the patriarchal socio-cultural tradition. In this painting we see a young woman, bare from the upper part of body with the sea in the background. It
reminds us of her poem “The Suicide” where she addresses the sea in an impassionate manner:

O sea, I am fed up

I want to be simple

I want to be loved

If love is not to be had

I want to be dead, just dead. (50-54)

The sea appears to her as a caring friend and that might be the reason that Das often engages herself in conversation with the sea. As in “Composition” she wishes for the intense involvement with ‘sea’. The ‘sea’ is like her other self which comes to her rescue when Das is in mental distress. Her obsession with the sea is perhaps a reflection of the fact that she considers the sea as her trusted shelter. She derives an inner strength from the continuous movement of waves on the sea. From time to time in her poems she returns to the sea and her engagement with the sea has been life long. In this painting the sea appears in the backdrop. In other words the woman stands face to face with the world keeping the deep blue sea in the background. The woman has taught herself to face the reality and the vastness of the sea perhaps helped her to accumulate the courage to do so. Her complete identification with the sea is displayed in “A Half-Day’s Bewitchment”:

I am also the sea that roars behind the house, roars out

Its high passion at the high tide hour; but, later the ebb arrives

To tell a different tale. I have, like the sea, some silt

At the core, some junk, the leavings of ships floundered in the night

A few bones, a beer can or two, a compass with needles
Missing. But azure remain our dreams, both the sea’s and mine
And all the experiences worth remembering come
To us only in dreams which we forget when we wake
Face to face with the sun as eternal as truth itself . . . (12-20)
So the title is justified enough to portray her candid relationship with the sea.

The remaining set of paintings moves away from personal territory and encompasses broader socio-cultural perspective. Paintings like “Beggar Woman Asleep”, “A Small Girl Asleep” and “A Widow” touch different issues that have a greater impact on women in particular. It is not surprising that some of these paintings are also portrayed as ‘nude’. Das says in an interview:

I grew up in Christian schools and was nourished on the tales of Adam and Eve. There was this picture of this old man-hoary and old, pointing his finger and sending Adam and Eve out of Heaven. Eve covers herself. It is then that innocence was lost and inhibitions entered. Before the loss of innocence they were nude and they were not ashamed. Nudity is a costume for innocence. (Das, “Interview” 140).

However, these women figures in Fig.8 and Fig.9 are far away from exposing their bare body. Rather their distorted body seems to attract the viewer’s concern. As Das says in this regard:

No one will say that they are women with sex appeal. They are all sad women who have suffered. The body was the cause. If the body wasn’t there the suffering too wouldn’t have been. (Das, “Interview” 154)
Although these are objective representations of women belonging to other sections of society, the pictures obviously embody what Kamala Das as an individual woman faced in her life. Through these pictures Das continues her attacks against the patriarchal dominations imposed on women. Gloria Steinem’s words may be relevant in illustrating Das’s views:

. . . women of every race are the only discriminated group, with no territory, no country of their own, not even a neighbourhood. In a patriarchy a poor man’s house may be his castle but even a rich woman’s body is not her own. Somewhere in our lives each of us needs a free place, a little psychic territory. (qtd. In Devika 154)

As a regular contributor to newspapers as a columnist Das must have been aware of social movements regarding women’s liberation taking place in India in 1970s and 80s. By that time the condition of women in India didn’t have outstanding improvement. The “National Committee on the Status of Women” was set up to investigate the contemporary position of women in India and they published a report “Towards Equality” in 1974, which described the deplorable condition of women in India and stressed the need of establishing gender equality in Indian society.

Undoubtedly the works of Kamala Das reflects her continuous awareness about the plight of women in our society. By raising these issues in her works, she protests against them. In “Someone Else’s Song” she identifies herself with them:

I am a million, million people talking all at once, with voices raised in clamour,
I am a million, million silences
strung like crystal beads
onto someone else’s
song . . . (The Best of Kamala Das 1-3 & 13-16)

Perhaps she felt that her confession through words was not enough and this might be the cause that she took up brush and palette and depicted the anguished women in shapes and colour. Whatever medium she adopts, she never gets detached from the sufferings that she herself felt in her life. In this way her intimate life becomes the mirror of Indian womanhood.

Fig. 8. (“Beggar Woman Asleep”) and Fig.9. (“A Small Girl Asleep”) resemble Das’s poem entitled “The Dalit Panther” which starts with the assertion of a ‘revolt’:

It’s time for a revolution, tumult the secret voices
Of the air, but the rag-picker, eleven years old, curled to
Foetus-shape on the pavement, sleeps on. (1-3)

The figures in the paintings are ‘nudes’ again. They are represented as the utter destitutes who have lost their dignity and self-respect, and were thrown on the road. There is a vague link between her life and their condition. Being maltreated by her husband Das also was left in the same state, though not literally and it afterwards caused her mental breakdown. These works intend to shock the viewers, to disturb the placid middle-class mentality which always tries to protect itself in a comfort zone. Das is not in that sense a social reformist. She is primarily a poet, an artist, but however, her attitude reflected in her works places her, to an extent, among the social activists also.
II

In my discussion I have tried to demonstrate how Das has strategically manoeuvred her personal life in her poems to explore different psycho-sociological perspectives. And undoubtedly she is successful in doing so. In previous chapters I’ve tried to show how the confessional poetry of Kamala Das has tried to focus on two significant aspects, i.e. the mind and the body. But, apart from just these two areas, Das with the presentation of private elements in her poems explores other issues, too. Despite all criticisms that tend to confine her as a poet dealing with mere carnal elements in poetry, her poems successfully display the potential that helps to consider her as a versatile poet.

In all her works she has developed a voice of freedom and a female consciousness which were hitherto unknown to the female writers of Indian English. Protest against the patriarchal society and continuous unmasking of the formal pretentious system became the main target in her writing. Her personal life was behind all these revelations. Though she was a feminist in her own way, it is not justified to compare her with her European counterparts like Adriane Rich, Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, and Anne Sexton. She belongs to Indian culture which is much different from that of European society. Though she had suffered a lot, but nowhere had she wanted to destroy the traditional system of family. As she expresses her opinion in “A Feminist’s Lament”, her concept of male-female interdependence is clear and is without any philosophical theorizing. We can trace it out from her use of Radha-Krishna and Mira-Krishna myths in her love poems. However as a versatile poet she explores plethora of experiences in her poems. As a post-colonial woman poet she journeys through the
poems in search of ‘self-identity’. Poetry became her powerful medium through which she could express her suffered self. And simultaneously, it is the poetry through which she discovers her lost self. One of her poems “Loud Posters” may be helpful in illustrating this point.

“Loud Posters” is a process of self-discovery. The poem was published in *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965. When this first book of poetry was published, she was just in her thirties. But even at this young stage of her life she wanted to look back to take stock of the life she had already lived through. In a confessional way she reveals her very personal secrets. She hides nothing from the readers. In “Loud Posters” one comes across a writer-reader relationship which she promotes in *My Story*, “I had realized by then that the writer has none to love her but the readers” (183). She knew that her family might be embarrassed with her because of her extreme openness in her writings. Whereas readers were very close to her hearts and whatever she had been writing through those years had a direct approach to them. Nothing remained hidden from them. She declares in *My Story*:

> I have no secrets at all. Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time I walked to my lovers’ houses dressed like a bride, my readers have walked with me. I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of an all-seeing god they follow me through the years. (183)

This intense involvement with the reader becomes necessary to Kamala. Without their enthusiastic reception her self-expression wouldn’t have been reproductive. In Christian ritual of confession there is always the presence of the Priest to whom the man makes the
confession. The priest is supposed to be the representative of God. For Kamala Das it is her readers to whom she makes the confession. The word ‘stranger’ does not have the connotation of someone unknown. On the contrary she took them as her soul-mates and delivered her all to them. The lines oscillate between cause and its effect, between the past and its present, between her desire and the reality:

To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in shadows of cul-de-sacs,
Just two eyes showing . . . (2-6)

In the present context she feels that a revelation of personality has placed her in a blind alley from where there is no escape. This may have happened due to the critical reactions from the readers conditioned by patriarchal value system. They could not accept her openness. Her uninhibited life style caused lots of uproar and drew bitter comments. Her protest against the conventional social system and frank exposure of sexuality met with harsh and unsympathetic response. In an interview with Eunice de Souza she said that the impact on her readers was ‘unsettling’ (26). Somewhere she feels a distance in the reception of her perspective. In this sense they seem to be ‘strangers’ to Das. However, some critics, like S. K. Sareen in her discussion on “Loud Posters” in her essay “Layered Experience in Kamala Das’s Poetry: An Epistemological Analysis of Loud Posters” describes the poet herself as stranger. She is addressing no other than her own self. She is in search of her own identity not just as a woman but as a human being also. As she states in this poem she has always wanted to live in a different way. The
significance of a ‘poster’ is that it gives a sort of introduction before the full-fledged performance takes place. Like a poster she has spread herself before the audience. Here she describes ‘nudity’ as two-dimensional – both physical and psychological. The exposure of ‘nudity’ enables her to introduce a different dimension in Indian Writing in English. In this connection the words of Helen Cixous rightly clarifies her stance, “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse” (886).

With the help of this medium Das wants to rebel against the contemporary society. In Toril Moi’s language it was a “struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic” (106). What else Das can use to surpass male ego except her corporeal framework? In this way she gains self-confidence and is able to establish her identity as a poet. Confession of personal life does not make her writings just a store house of carnal pleasures. It is necessary for her to regain the lost womanhood. In “Loud Posters” she has made her interior visible. This visibility seems more vital to her than to her readers. It allows a transparent look into her other self. She discovers the other side of her personality. As a poet she realizes the prophetic truth that the true poet is basically alienated. She knew from the beginning of her career that this process of revelation of intimate secrets might cause her life-long torment and anguish. She sacrifices her family, reputation and self for the sake of creating her own world. But in this poem she says that perhaps her sacrifice has not been able to secure her the end that she expected. It is a ‘sad sacrifice’. She feels that throughout these years she has been putting her private voice away for the sake of a typewriter’s click what is now her only medium of speaking.
Typewriter stands for something mechanical in place of the humane. As if typewriter with its metallic impartiality can properly delineate the details of Das’ life. And this frank delineation of unpleasant truths may be the reason behind the antagonism of her readers. Technology does not possess that flexibility which can mould a harsh reality into an agreeable one. So some readers appear as ‘strangers’ to Das. Because “Loud Posters” ends with, “I/ click-click, click-click tiresomely into your /Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of /Me, I go on and on, not knowing why. . .” (13-16). Despite the unfavourable attitude of some of her readers she has not discontinued her style of writing. The candid confession of her existence with all its drawbacks, faults and weaknesses establish her as a true poet. As a true poet she has to “go on and on, not knowing why …” (“Loud Posters” 16)

‘Loud Posters” is not a poem written in the traditional confessional tone. Though the impact of the first person pronoun ‘I’ is unavoidably felt, still those autobiographical elements like explorations of emotional and physical moments are missing. S. C. Harrex points out:

A characteristic strategy of autobiography in Das’ poetry is to combine centrifugal with centripetal revelation, as we see in the statements “I am today a creature turned inside /out” and “I’ve / spent long years trying to locate my mind / Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath / The bone”. (166)

Simultaneous presence of these two types of experiences turns the poem into an open ended project with the repetition of dots at the end of the last line. Within the ambit of mere sixteen lines Das explores the limitless possibilities of ‘private voice’.
‘Feminine writing’ is a necessary corollary of contemporary Feminist Movement. As the phrase suggests it is easy to comprehend that writings by women are actually a challenge against the phallocentric tradition of writing. At the same time it is through this process that a woman can establish her ‘identity’. Kamala Das through out her whole career has been trying to achieve that identity, though she knew that the categorizers would obviously mark her as a freak, “Don’t play pretending games. / Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a /Nympho” (“An Introduction” 40-42). Her very feminine confessions in the poems are ‘reasonably’ true which the male authority have always tried to convert into a crazy, disgruntled discourse and resentful gibberish. Deborah Pope has perfectly exposed the motif behind this type of isolation in women’s poetry:

Similarly, in modern confessional poetry, as an extension of the Adamic tradition, the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience, he is simultaneously relaying the social fabric of his world. Yet for the female confessional poet, there is not the same extension. She is not everyman and hardly Everywoman. Her experience only serves to reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. She cannot even believe in a solidarity or community with other woman. Although in a very real sense male confessional poets do bespeak trauma of their times, poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton remain individual ‘crazy women’. (6-7)
The same attitude is also partially true in respect of Kamala Das as a poet. But she is able to fight successfully such ostracization and proved herself as ‘everywoman’. Though she was temporarily subjugated to the monstrous male ego and was trapped in the traditional roles of house-wife, mother and daughter-in-law, she couldn’t stop herself from protesting against the conventional definition of ordinary womanhood. Constantly she has tried to destroy this stereotyped notion of a woman. She abhors the politics of ‘fitting in’: “I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape” (My Story 103). That’s why her poetry is not a ‘continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’. It is instead a search for selfhood, a powerful tool to unmask herself.

From the above discussion it may be concluded that the intimate details that the poet reveals in her poems is neither spilling the beans for titillating her readers, nor telling something to take a revenge on her husband. Kamala Das’s confessions in her poems might not have acted as a cure all for her, but certainly they rescued her from the edge. For Das it is no “falling upon the thorns of life” and bleeding self pity, rather through her strategic disclosure of truths about herself she is able to achieve the dual purpose of purgation and protest. The speaker in these poems disrobes her psyche but at the same time the “I” in these poems is the languaged self, not necessarily the poet herself. This “I” strategically allows her reader to enter an inaccessible space, a hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty where voice for the first time has replaced silence.
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