CHAPTER VI

"THE SUMMING UP": AN INTERVIEW WITH DAS

Before doing a summing up of this study I would like to include the second interview that I had with Das.

Interview with Kamala Das

Date: 9 Nov. 2000

Venue: Royal Stadium Apartments, Kochi

(The answers to some questions not relevant to my thesis have been deleted in this text. Some of her answers were in Malayalam and these have been translated into English)

Q) Some writers and artists feel a sense of incompleteness in their chosen area of work and this leads them to shift to another medium. Did you feel any sense of incompleteness in your life?

A) I believe in leaving a poem incomplete. There’s some kind of beauty, which comes only to a product, something constructed and left incomplete because it is meant for audience participation. It is completed in the reader’s mind. Deliberately I’ve left my poems, stories and paintings incomplete. I think, that is its strength. Otherwise where
can the reader come in? How can the reader be involved? I want people to interpret my poetry in their own way. Interpretation varies from reader to reader. Some people call this misinterpretation but nothing is really a misinterpretation of art and literature because the vision differs. Sometimes people ask me why I stick to writing poetry in English—Malayalam would sound better, as it has a lot of stress words and so on. But what I say is that, my poetry, though it may sound like prose generates in each reader a particular song that he has heard in his youth or childhood. It is not as if the words have to be supplied by me. The song is generated and the mood is created.

Q) I was referring to the feeling of a sense of incompleteness on the whole.

A) I am a very incomplete person. Thank God for that! I am growing, changing, altering. It is as if I have a hundred janmas before me.

Q) Was it because of this that you started writing poetry initially?

A) Everything. Because I change and I give a clue to the people around me of the change and so I write something. It is because I am forever changing and I quite like it—changing, changing all the time!
Q) Do you think that you took up painting at a time when you had almost stopped writing poems?
A) Not really, there's never been any stoppage as such. I started at the age of fourteen. I am going to start again. Cyril had prompted me to work the last time and now he has come again and asked me to start painting again. I have started writing again too.

Q) In Malayalam?
A) Yes, I am writing in Malayalam, not much, though. Poetry doesn't come that easily. So I've been writing just a little. I have to put in a lot of effort. I've been doing a bit of translation, some experimentation and so on. As it is kind of inhibited here, I don't write much but when I go abroad—recently I spent six weeks at Canada—then I write.

Q) So you feel that the society here restricts...
A) You can't say "society" for this, this is a Thadavara. There's intrusion everywhere. There is this neighbour of mine, a nice lady who comes to me often. Two young men were going around from door to door hoping to convert me to Christianity. They were wearing torn shirts and I gave them two good shirts, after all that, they went upstairs and told this lady that I looked like a shaitaan, attired in black. It's so unfair,
you know. I am perhaps the only one who's showed them so much love. I can't understand this. For me love has a totally different meaning—I couldn't call anyone a *shaitaan*. I can't adjust at all. I can't adjust to this place at all. When I say this, some people ask why I don't go and settle down in some other place. Where can I go? Do I have so much money? I may love to live in London, but is it possible? I will be broke in a week's time. Really I'm a very mal-adjusted human being.

Q) Most of us are!
A) Well, I'm admitting it. Sometimes...I don't know—Anything I say is wrong. Anything I say has a new interpretation. Mostly very uncharitable. That's the problem.

Q) Why do you allow yourself to be affected by this?
A) I'm not so affected now. Sometime back when my husband was alive, I used to be very affected, I used to cry. There was someone to comfort me then. Now there's no one, so I bear it with a smile and let it go.
Q) Regarding the incompleteness in poetry—did you try to get a sense of completeness in your painting?

A) It is deliberate. I know how to write from A to Z, but then the attraction is gone. Pritish Nandy and Mallika Sarabhai have written a love-poem together. It was complete in itself so it found no buyers. If I were writing something like that it would have only my voice, then some man will feel that I’m addressing him and then he will buy it. (Since I couldn’t get a definite answer I repeated the question again)

Q) Didn’t you start painting as you felt the incompleteness in your poetry?

A) I’ve always been painting. I learnt painting when I was fourteen. The person who prompted me to paint was back yesterday saying that I should begin again. I don’t mind, though I can’t see quite well now. I had done quite a few sketches when I was at Canada. There everyone likes them. Here I can’t draw nudes. If I do they’ll throw me out. Let them. If they want to excommunicate me, they can, if they get a kick out of it. Now these things don’t matter much to me. Caste and religion are not so important to me. I don’t attach much importance to it. Is it possible to live without sketching?
Q) Were you able to say something more in your painting than you could in poetry?

A) It's not like that. I've covered an extensive area in poetry. Painting, I've only just started. It's like the prickly heat, which comes up in summer—something seasonal. Poetry is permanent.

Q) You are the best Indian woman writer writing poetry in English. You have reached the zenith, so to say. What about your painting?

A) In painting I'm very inferior. It is not possible for me to perfect my painting because I haven't been taught a single brushstroke—the technicalities. I love drawing and after that when someone tells me that they are no good, I just stop. Recently an artist told me so. He also found my statement in a magazine saying that I paint for the money, a vulgar statement! He felt that art was not something to be sold. I'm not a rich lady who can relax and do whatever I want. When I write a column or a poem I always think of the money that it might bring in. After all, a lot of effort goes into it—I can hardly see—and I would weep if I were sent a mere pittance for something I've laboured on. I've another eye operation coming up. I would prefer to get it done at a nearby hospital but my children want to go to a bigger hospital. I believe that you cannot fight destiny. If I have to lose my eye I will lose it no matter where I go.
Accidents happen with big doctors and posh hospitals too. Who is the better doctor? Who is the better writer? No one knows. There is a lot of ignorance.

I used to pray for the sick people—I used to chant the *Durga kavacham*. Prayer probably has more to do with sound vibration than anything else.

Sincerity is something I don’t lack. To pray or not to pray is all the same. So also to live is the same as not living. To exist. Existence needs no movements or dialogues in the mind to make one aware of it. These plants exist in stillness—they exist. So also I exist in stillness, nourished by silence. Though there is hardly much stillness here. People even come barging into my bedroom asking if I am asleep.

Q) Isn’t that because you’ve given them so much freedom?
A) I haven’t given them the freedom. They just assume that they have the freedom. How can I give them that when I haven’t given freedom to myself?
Q) At any moment in your life, perhaps when you were composing a poem did you feel that brush would have suited your purpose better than a pen or vice-versa?

A) The brush shows a kind of exuberance because of the colour. Words can’t be so colourful. To splash colour and paint the woman gives me a thrill—that’s all. I’ve written so much. Now I write with more caution, I weigh every word I write. Now I’m a critic too, earlier I was only a writer. This makes it more difficult for me now. But I can definitely write better now.

Q) Are you writing now?

A) Yes, I am.

Q) In Malayalam?

A) Yes, in Malayalam, though I did write a bit in English when I was at Canada.

Q) There was something in the papers about you writing in Urdu. Is it true?

A) Actually, I was learning Arabic. The teacher had to give up, however.
Q) Are you painting now?
A) I painted at Canada, charcoal sketches. I gave away two to each of my hosts, so that they could sell one and keep one. They don’t let me return without painting. They supply the material too.

Q) Did you feel that there was any western influence in your work?
A) Hmm...I don’t think there is any...

Q) Influence of miniature paintings?
A) Hmm...I can’t see them too well—always been shortsighted.

Q) One particular painting of yours, *Spring* resembles the miniature paintings, I feel.
A) Really? These flowers? Oh, these flowers—my grandmother used to draw them. They are white and have four petals. These are the *nirmathala* flowers. These flowers used to carpet the ground at Nalapat when the tree was in bloom. I used to buy *kumkuma* flowers at Bombay (*nirmathala* wasn’t available) and strew my carpet to recreate the atmosphere at Nalapat but now it’s all gone. Nalapat is for sale and I can’t even go there!
(Here we see the close link between Das’s painting and writing—

*Nirmathalam pootha kalam* (The time when the *nirmathalam* bloomed)
is the title of one of her popular autobiographical works in Malayalam.)

Q) Why have you always worked on huge canvasses?
A) Because I am shortsighted and can’t paint the details.

Q) What is your reason for leaving the backgrounds blank?
A) As I haven’t studied.

Q) What is the reason for cutting off of the figures in your paintings at bust level, or the hands or at times even the headgear!
A) If the canvasses were big enough, I wouldn’t cut anything. I would paint everything.

Q) These canvasses are huge, aren’t they?
A) No, I hope one day a rich person will give me a huge canvas and ask me to paint. It’ll be a delight.

Q) I suppose you’d still cut off the figures.
A) No, I wouldn’t.
(The answer to this question had a charming air of innocence that is typical of “naive” painters. It is obvious that she had not thought about this fact at all. She painted what she wanted to and did not bother with the technicalities)

Q) Would the subject of the painting be “woman” again?
A) What else do I know to draw? Perhaps I’ll draw a lot of trees — Gauguin drew that way, didn’t he?

Q) I had asked earlier if Gauguin had influenced your work?
A) Don’t insult Gauguin by comparing my work to his. I only have humble talent in this — art.

Q) Could you please give your comments with regard to specific paintings? (The paintings were shown to Das one by one and her comments were recorded.)

a) Grandmother and Child. (Fig 4)
Q) Was there any particular reason for choosing a Christian woman?
A) I had probably seen them going to church. This is not my grandmother. She was very fair. I love that relationship.
Q) Is it because you felt that the girl is not so important that you've cut off her figure and concentrated on that of the grandmother who has always been your ideal, in poetry too?

A) No, not really. Oh, I don’t know... But it’s open to interpretation.

Q) What about the hand? It appears in this position in another painting too. Does it have any special relevance?

A) This indicates a blessing. It is a Hindu gesture. I’ve got used to it. I do the same for my granddaughter. When people visit I place my hand on their head and bless them.

b) Grandmother, Child and Maid at a Waiting Room (Fig.5)

Q) Are these figures drawn purely from imagination?

A) I may have seen them somewhere, perhaps at the railway station.

c) Maid at the Bath (Fig.6)

Q) Is this the Nani of your poetry?

A) No, she was dark and stocky. This painting has gone to Los Angeles.
d) Nude at Noon (Fig. 7)

Q) Any Comments?
A) These are beautiful. Not vulgar at all. Some say they are. For them nudity is obscene. If that is so, God created nude bodies. So I'm imitating God. Trying to do a perfect imitation. People simply say things. Which artist can go through life without drawing nudes?

Q) Is this a self-portrait?
A) I hope not!

Q) The face perhaps?
A) This is a full face. No, I don't think it is!

(The answer isn't very convincing; I still assume that it is her face that she has painted)

e) Nude at Night (Fig. 8)

Q) Is there anything you would like to say about this painting?
A) I had nailed a girl on a cross here. I had always pictured the marital bed as a cross and the girl nailed to it. One particular Christian lady objected and I have tried to erase it. Let the cross be for Jesus alone. What to do but listen and pay heed?
(This was a revelation for me, as I had not noticed the cross till Das pointed it out, then it was very clear and this immediately reminded me of her lines:

We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not

To crosses but to soft beds

("The Descendants", Best, 43)

f) Spring. (Fig.9)

Q) Would you have anything more to say about this painting?

A) I've always loved these flowers. The tree at Nalapat used to bloom twice a year. Then it was like a festival season. The sound of the bees humming and so on.


g) The Sea Nymph (Fig.11)

Q) Could I have your comments on this painting?

A) I used to be a champion at swimming. Recently when I was at Canada I spent about two and half hours in water. Once you touch water you just can't resist. I have a feeling that I can adjust better in water than I can on earth. Like in an element—a fish in water! I had a stiffness in my legs and needed a wheelchair at the airport when I left for Canada,
but the swimming has cured me, I came back walking! I would love to have a swimming pool here.

h) The Beggar woman asleep (Fig. 12)
Q) The hand appears to be distorted here, isn’t it?
A) Her posture itself is a distorted one.

Q) Was the distortion done on purpose? Like Cezanne, perhaps?
A) I don’t know. O, No! Don’t compare me to a great painter like Cezanne. He’s so far ahead of me. I wouldn’t even try to imitate him.

The people from other countries like my nudes. Distortion is there as if by accident and they love it, but here it is different. The sensibility is so different. I’m tired of acting. I want to tell the truth. We have a responsibility, a duty towards truth as writers. The truth must emerge and we must consciously strive to bring it out. People say, “You need not say anything but don’t say the truth”. Is it right to be like this? Seeing something as a person’s weakness is what people do not like. If that is not said will man be perfect. Isn’t the weakness the perfection?

When I love somebody I love the weaknesses more than I love the perfections. It must be the same for God, isn’t it; after all he’s the Creator. I will speak the truth always. Then there’s no confusion, and
my way is clear. Lies lead you into a maze, which resembles Ravana’s fort. I don’t need a certificate or the position of an actress. All that I want is to be recognised as human being, a woman who has achieved near-completeness. I am a very emotional person. People ask why I don’t visit temples and listen to religious discourses and so on. I won’t get the slightest satisfaction if I went and sat there without any interaction with human beings or without being of any help to anybody. People speak of feeling a sense of “papa bodham” I say then that along with this one should feel a sense of “punyabodham” which is what I feel when I comfort a dying man.

(Das elaborated on what they were doing for the cause of victims of AIDS, with one particular example. She also spoke about the Home for Discarded Mothers that she’s helped to set up—again an example about a particular discarded mother).

i) The Widow (Fig. 14)

Q) Would you like to say something about this painting?

A) Everything is hidden, the eyes alone are revealed. I’ve always loved the purdah, a kind of prachanna vesham (fancy dress, mask?) I am
going to draw women in *purdah* singing, dancing. It will be dramatic. There only be a few colours—White, black and a kind of yellow.

Q) Isn’t your acceptance of the veil going to pull the Muslim women backward?

A) Dress doesn’t matter. Modernity is in the thinking. Nudes aren’t allowed so it is better to drape oneself up. I would have worn granite to please the man I loved. In surrendering to love I am not incomplete like my poems. I surrender completely.

Q) So the reason for this change is purely personal?

A) Initially, yes. Later I fell in love with the religion too. It’s simple fundamentals can be understood by anyone. It is not esoteric like the Upanishads.

Q) I have compared your works with that of other painter-poets. I would like to have your comments in this aspect. Artists like Blake have illustrated their poems. Have you ever thought of doing something like that?

A) I don’t mind illustrating—a book perhaps!
Q) If you did a painting on the birth of a child how would it be different from this (I asked this by pointing to Blake’s painting, *Infant’s Sorrow* (Fig.16)

A) I like these colours—sober. The child is too big—almost a year old!

Q) I find that there are quite a few similarities between your work and that of Tagore....

A) I agree, isn’t it?

j) Widows at Vrindaban (Fig.20)

Q) Arpana Cour has painted Krishna here. Why haven’t you painted any pictures on this theme?

A) Krishna was my playmate. My grandmother had told me that he would marry me. I still talk to him all the time. He’s aware of all that’s happening in my life. When in difficulty it’s still him I call out to, not Allah.

k) Lady Sitting on a Rock (Fig.18)

Q) This is a painting by Jaya Appasamy. Do you notice any similarities with your work?
A) Is it done with charcoal? (it was a black and white copy). I am starting charcoal painting too!

Q) Has anyone else come to you trying to extract information from you on your career as a painter?
A) A few people, researchers.

Q) Indians?
A) No, foreigners. Indians, no! In fact, Indians are not interested in me at all. Let's face it.

Q) Could I have your impression about my work on Kamala Das as a painter poet?
A) I haven't read it. I will get someone to read it for me. As long as there's nothing cruel in it, I approve. Some people are deliberately cruel. There was one lady, Vrinda Nabar who wrote the most uncomplimentary things, which hurt me terribly. She wrote in that way because she did not know the truth. I had heard that Eunice D'Souza did not like me so I invited her to stay with me for a week. At the end of it we were the best of friends. I have found out the best way to settle differences. In the end we'll all be one.
(I totally agree with her comments about Vrinda Nabar. Though I have read her book I've deliberately left her out from my bibliography)

Q) Any comments on the title of my work?
A) Nice, catchy!

To do a summing up of this study on Das, it would be worthwhile to quote a few lines from Das's poem, which is also titled "The Summing Up". Here she says:

................................how can I sum up
this life, this voyage on unchartered
seas, this flight over radar less ports

........................................

..................................do not judge
me harshly, I am your kith and kin

I gathered your laments into a song. (Soul 127)

Das's recent conversion to Islam has come as a shock to her scholars and is, in a way, a disappointment. Islam, as it is practised in India, oppresses women. It is sad to find that after all these years of her fierce fighting for women, through her writing and painting, Das has chosen to take the step which is definitely going to push the Muslim
women two steps backward. The Muslim women have been trying to do away with the *purdah* and other rigid rules imposed on them, when to their consternation, there is Das — the firebrand feminist, opting for the very same things. Why Das did it, is anybody's guess but one thing is for sure, it has helped to keep her in the public eye— which is something she always liked. A few lines from an unpublished letter of Das, though written several years ago, adds to this impression:

Amid all these controversies, I would prefer to see a ray of sunshine. I believe that it is still a feeling of incompleteness with regard to spirituality that is responsible for her conversion and it is definitely going to have a positive effect. Perhaps now, the area of Urdu poetry will benefit. Incompleteness then seems to be an asset for the creative personality of Das, as it was this, which has spurned her on to greater heights of achievement. The feeling of incompleteness as a person, led her to writing poetry, unleashing all the turbulence that was within her—the feeling of incompleteness continued to exist and she resorted to painting. The two creative mediums of painting and poetry complete each other, so that we are able to interpret her opinions not only by what she says (writes) but also by what she does (paints). A vague feeling of incompleteness still remains and hopefully, it will take her to even further heights of creation.
WORKS CITED
