Kamala Das can be described as an adventurous woman with the soul of a pilgrim, the hand of an artist and the eye of a poet. In a way, this is an apt introduction to Das, the unique Indian woman painter-poet. She is a multifaceted genius; mother, wife, novelist, short story writer, columnist, poet and painter all rolled into one—perhaps she has few equals. In the words of her own mother, Balamani Amma she has the “power of turning worms into butterflies” (198).

Das is Indian in every sense of the word—she was born in India, her writing reveals her Indianness and her patriotism. She has even contested in the political elections here! The colonization of India by the British had its effect on Indian thought and writing. Like Shakespeare’s Caliban, the natives of the country have mastered the language of their erstwhile rulers and perhaps even overtaken them in its use for their expression. John Crowe Ransom once said, “Some poetry deals with things while some other poetry deals with ideas. The two poetries differ from each other as radically as a thing differs from an idea” (Qtd. in Shivadas, 39). This observation could easily be applied
to the Anglo-Indian poetry of the two generations of the post-colonial period. The earlier poets like Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt generally wrote poetry of ideas. Later, in the post-independent era, the Indo-Anglian poets felt the need for a different idiom. They have chosen different methods to express the Indian spirit in their writing for example, Das often refers to Indian mythology, customs and rituals in her writings—"...I lit one thousand and one lamps at our snakeshrine praying for a mate."(The Swamp, Soul 29) The two distinct concepts of *karma* and *maya*, which are deeply embodied in Indian philosophy, are presented through appropriate lexical items in her work; an example—"...perhaps some womb in that/ Darker world shall convulse, when I finally enter" (Gino, Soul. 92)

Colonization has led to a dualism in linguistics; bilingualism is a significant trend in most of the post-colonial nations. As a woman bilingual writer in a post-colonial society, Das marks her protest through a strong resistance to authoritarian orthodoxy, and deliberately demolishes all conventional, structures existing in narration and language. This situation leads her to her effort to "write the body" as Helene Cixous puts it (245). Das's subjective self thus enters her poetry and painting. The body serves as a catalyst for the imagery that governs her text. Das, like other woman poets uses a language that is more frank,
more pervasive than that of male writers. Wallace-Crabbe observes that Das's poetry "fights against and is to some extent, a product of multiple displacement" (220). Firstly, there is the displacement felt by most modern writers over the loss of "tradition". Secondly there is the displacement felt, as the language she felt the need to write in, was foreign and there was bound to be an inevitable, awkward distance from it. The third factor was the displacement she experiences on account of being a woman.

Das attempts to hold on to tradition with the help of her memory, which goes back to her childhood. Das had a cloistered existence as a child surrounded by loving relatives and loyal servants. Her mother Balamani Amma is a well-known Malayalam poet and Jnanpeeth award winner. Das spent most of her childhood at her ancestral Nalapat house. In her autobiographical book in Malayalam Balyakalasmaranakal she recreates her childhood experiences. Here she writes about her grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon, who used to have a number of literary personalities visiting him. Their talk and discussions were extremely interesting for the young Das. She also recalls the time when her uncle gave her Walt Whitman's collection of poems and Victor Hugo's Les Miserables to read. It is therefore not surprising that Das became a famous writer. However, what is surprising was that she has been
writing in English and that too in a frank and open manner about issues not generally discussed in a ‘polite’ society. Her autobiographical/ fictional work in English My Story is “a document expressing the writer’s own ambiguity as a woman asserting subjective power in the traditional society” according to Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (88). This book not only fascinated readers but also invited severe criticism as her female self completely challenged the conventional socio-cultural perceptions in India.

Das is a ‘woman’ in the true sense of the word as defined by Cixous—“the woman in her inevitable struggle against the conventional man and the universal subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.” (Medusa, 880) Das’s writings are also akin to the writings of the feminists all over the world who acknowledge that much of their strength is the derived strength of women passed on from generation to generation. It is significant that some well-known feminist writers refer to this fact often in their work. Adrienne Rich mentions both her grandmothers in her dedication, in her landmark book Of Woman Born. Black American writers Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor specifically talk about this aspect. Walker says:

They were women then/my mama's generation

Husky of voice—stout of step
With fists as well as hands
How they battered down/Doors

A place for us/How they knew what we/must know
Without knowing a page /of it / themselves.

( Qtd. in Parmar, 75. )

Walker pays tribute to their grit, temerity and the tenderness in these lines and this is the same kind of strength that Das says she derived from her grandmother, the subject of much of her writing and painting, as will be seen in the following chapters.

Das has a sensibility that is fiercely feminine and she is able to articulate her wounded experience undergone in this insensitive, male-dominated world. Her personal experience has shown her how weak females are when confronted by dominating men. In an unpublished letter to her sister she writes about how helpless she felt when her father found a husband for her and fixed her marriage without any consideration for her feelings:

...I was persuaded to marry and I had no courage to refuse to do what evening father wanted me to do.
Das has the ability to delve deep into her consciousness and to create female images, which are at once her and that of the other woman. She does not project a single personal experience in her poems, autobiography or her paintings that is also not a collective experience. This accounts for much of the contradictions and ambiguities of her statements and writings. As she uses her personal voice to speak on behalf of others, it results in the identification of her person with the persona in her writing. This is the cause for a lot of misunderstanding and it even brought her a fair measure of notoriety. In spite of all this adverse publicity, her family has stood by her through thick and thin. The love they shared is evident in the following poem “To My
Daughter” written by Das’s mother, Balamani Amma when Das was hospitalised:

Far, far away in a hospital, daughter

Lying on a snow-white bed

Are you, with pain’s dark threads

Weaving midnight into day?

Do not be too depressed

When we, too full of life, rush over much and need rest

The Goddess of Creation offers a sick bed

Lie, be refreshed, and get new vigour

How many the pedestals yet unclimbed!

In this dew-wet courtyard, reading your poems

I wonder, did your spirit, which causes life to flower

Hurt you more than the body, which grew in me, like a blossom.

These cocoons you formed to put to sleep

The worms gnawing at your core, burst open

And wings, rising, fluttering and jostling
Swarm my mind.

Your mind may grow restless with sad thoughts
Your body may be weary of household tasks
But about you I hold no fear
Your power of turning worms into butterflies
Comforts me. (198)

Das has been ill for a greater part of her life — mentally and physically. She has suffered from heart problems, depressions and various other illnesses, but she has rallied back each time and continued creating—poetry, short stories, novels and paintings.

Women writers all over the world have had to face a number of obstacles before they could prove themselves in any way. Linda Hu elaborates on this in her book, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman*. She says that women authors have been hearing for a long time that by publishing, they are guilty of self-display. That by aspiring to art, instead of inspiring an artist, they invite comparisons with Narcissus and warnings that they would do better to remember their sex (11). If this was the case in America it must have been worse for a woman writer in India, where the society is more orthodox and critical. Tillie Olsen (80) has a point when she says that woman writers fear reprisal from the
publishing and critical arenas and this becomes a looming obstacle preventing woman from coming into her own authentic voice. There is a peculiar fear among the female writers and many women prefer to please and be safe in the literary realm as power is still in the hands of men— power of validation, publication and approval reputation. Das however never gave in or let herself be cowed down by such factors. She narrated an extremely interesting incident during a personal interview (22 Aug.'97), which is relevant in this context. Here she spoke of the time when she was invited to speak at a foreign university. She was apprehensive about talking in front of a highly educated, distinguished audience, as she was, in her own words, an uneducated, old woman. Added to this, her friend who had invited her there, had warned her that a number of words in her poetry, especially in the poems “Composition” were “politically incorrect” and such words were not generally accepted. When it was her turn to speak, Das introduced herself and told the audience that they were free to leave if they did not like the way she spoke. She then told them about her friend's warning but she also added that there was no way she could change the way she wrote and it was their fault for inviting a 'politically incorrect' person to speak. Das recounted how surprised she was to see that no one had left their seats and were, in fact, listening to her with rapt attention. This did
wonders for her confidence and was able to help her overcome her complex—about being uneducated—to a certain extent. What Das is probably not aware of is that it is the very fact that she doesn't have a formal education that makes her poetry so brilliant and spontaneous. The third chapter of this study is devoted to her poems, which are lyrical outbursts of unpremeditated thoughts and feelings.

Das did not have any formal training in art either. Untrained artists unfamiliar with the historical art and the orthodox art are becoming very rare. These artists have a freshness and directness of vision that may be lost through exposure to academic and sophisticated art production. Das's paintings too have the freshness and vigour seen in the paintings of artists like Blake and Turner. An analysis of her paintings is the subject of the fourth chapter of this dissertation. One looks for something more from art besides being merely refuges, such as the landscape paintings of the English artists Constable and Gainsborough. The courage and vision that is seen in the works of Turner and Blake is missing here. Read points out that the fault was not with the artists but, instead, it was the age that was at fault, and it was at fault because it was led by "a silly, selfish and complacent society that had no better use for great artists than to make them mirror its own vanity and self-satisfaction"(118). Going by the fact that this age has
had artists and painter-poets like Tagore and Das, contemporary society deserves praise, for it has provided an environment, conducive for experimenting and exploring areas and techniques. A few painter-poets and their works have been taken up for consideration and comparison with Das in the fifth chapter.

The personality of Das is like that of a precious stone, every cut increasing its splendour and its value. The faceting of the creative personality of Das is, I feel, due to a feeling of being incomplete or in some way less than whole. The reasons and the effects are discussed in the next chapter in detail.

I totally agree with Sharma when he says that Das, like Eliot, Spender, Auden, Hardy, Meredith, and other modern agnostics powerfully feel the scientific impact *ad nauseam* even to the extent of feeling highly pessimistic. Das is well aware of the fact that the only soothing feature for the struggle of mankind is spiritual evolution. She believes that spiritualism alone will provide mankind the essential wherewithal to survive (14). It will be interesting to see her evolution, starting with being a person to becoming a poet and from there to being a painter and continuing from there to become...
WORKS CITED


