CHAPTER IV

THE QUEST FOR COMPLETENESS: DAS'S FORAY INTO PAINTING

“God created nude bodies. So I’m imitating God. Trying to do a perfect imitation. To some nudity is obscene. Which artist can go through life without drawing nudes?” (Das, Personal—2, )

It is often said that ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ and it is true in the case of an artist like Kamala Das who has used both the mediums rather lavishly for her expression and communication. Probably, in India there has been no writer like Das who articulates her female experience and perception of the male ego with such startling frankness and honesty. Her simple style accompanied by frankness and liberty has made her language delightful to read. Yet as a creative person she feels the inadequacy of language to express all her experiences and feelings. She says: “I feel that inadequacy everyday, every moment when I feel I should express myself freely” (Kaur, Poetry 158).

Das is an unusual artist who is highly individualistic. There are no records of any of her ancestors being painters although her niece Anuradha has taken to painting in the recent past. Das’s art classes began when she was fifteen. Her art tutor
was “twenty nine, pale-complexioned and tall” (My Story 50). She started her artwork with a drawing of Kala Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth of art—an auspicious beginning. Her tutor saw the talent in her and encouraged her although her mind was totally engrossed in watching him—his personal features and his movements. She was at an impressionable age when the attraction towards the opposite sex was just beginning to reveal itself and she paid the least importance to her class preferring to attract his attention. Das’s parents realized this and immediately put an end to her art classes. Much later, an artist couple, Kamala and Pradosh Dasgupta who happened to see her paintings were so impressed with her work that they insisted that she take up art classes once again and even sent her a teacher from Shantiniketan (Femina 59). Das’s early marriage, perhaps, brought her art life to a temporary standstill. However her love for painting can again be found in My Story. Here Das, writing about her life in Bombay, says that she used to paint in the mornings when her children were away at school.

None of her early paintings are available for study as she had either gifted them all away or has almost lost all trace of them. After a long gap, Das took up painting seriously once more, in
what can be called as "a retired life"— at Cochin. Once again she shocked the "polite society" and it was her niece Anuradha, an artist in her own right, and Cyril Jacob, an art connoisseur, who were instrumental in encouraging Das to paint once more. Das has produced some brilliant paintings, using huge canvasses and bright colours—the element of spontaneity in them is breathtaking!

It would be relevant here to look at the general trends in Indian art. Indian art of the last fifty years has been described as otherworldly, lyrical, or literary. This era saw a certain expansion in the horizons of Indian art. After Independence it became easier for artists to travel to other countries and acquaint themselves with the works of their contemporaries abroad. There were also many new books, which introduced the art of the world to the thirsty readers here. It is usual to denigrate the modern phase of Indian art as an "imitation" of the West, though such statements are more misleading than true. India has been open to some influences in art, which are not necessarily harmful. According to Jaya Appasamyy, "influences should not be considered a problem at all but simply acknowledged as a factor common to any creative work especially in periods of youth and change" (51). Das's works reveal the influence of Modigliani, Gauguin and Matisse. Tagore has said, "The sign of greatness in great geniuses is their enormous
capacity for borrowing, very often without their knowing it,...Only mediocrities are ashamed...for they do not know how to pay back their debt in their own coin” (Parimoo 8). On the International art scene of the 19th century, there was a sequence and medley of competing “movements”, each seeking to establish its authority. Each had its own ideology and was subject to displacement in the bewilderingly rapid process of stylistic turnover. Thus we have the Romantics giving way to the Impressionists who, in turn, were overtaken by the Post-Impressionists—to which group Gauguin belonged—who were followed by the Fauves. Matisse was the originator of this movement and then came the Cubists (Paul Cezanne was the most well-known of them) and the Expressionists. After this came the Futuristic, Dada and the Surrealistic movements.

20th century art and artists, including Das, with their contempt for naturalism, their frequent appeals to primeval instincts and belief in the emotional force of colour, are deeply indebted to Gauguin, who was said to be the personification of the artist as rebel against the society (Arasann). Matisse’s influence on Das’s works is seen in the manner in which she simplifies the forms to pure lines, totally excluding tone. This simplification is deceptive in its apparent ease, since the more that is omitted; the more significant becomes that which is retained. The Italian
artist, Amedeo Modigliani, inherited from his homeland something of the Renaissance tradition for classical idealization but he also prescribes a programme of reduction of his forms to the ultimate simplification. Most of Modigliani’s paintings are of solitary individuals, their loneliness emphasized by the stylisation, which gives them an otherworldly, almost Pre-Raphaelite quality. Das resembles Modigliani in the manner in which her human figures are painted from an aerial view, creating a sensual effect and also in the simplicity and compactness of the figures with the dark backgrounds serving to throw the figures into relief and emphasizing the unity of contour configuration. Figs 1, 2, and 3 on the following pages serve as examples of paintings by these artists who have influenced Das’s artwork.
Fig. 1 “What, are You Jealous?” Oil on canvas by Paul Gauguin, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, 1892.
Fig. 2  "Nude" by Matisse, rpt in *Kaleidoscope of Modern Art*, 64.
Fig. 3. Caryatid. Painting by Amedeo Modigliani, rpt in *Kaleidoscope of Modern Art*, 63.
Das's paintings reveal a lack of orthodox training in traditional techniques and pictorial conventions. This compels me to categorise her with the "Naïve artists": "a cult which received belated recognition between 1908 and 1914 on account of Douanier Rousseau" (Osborne 394). They do not constitute a group or school. They usually worked in isolation, both, from each other and also from the orthodox art production around them. Lately there has been a lot of interest directed towards "Naïve paintings". 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. I share the view of Herbert Read who remarks, "Greek vases do confirm to exact geometric laws and that is why their perfection is so cold and lifeless. There is more virility and joy in an unsophisticated peasant painting." (Read.29) 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. "As in her poetry where she is the world around which everything revolves, so also
her paintings are all her” is the crisp manner in which the art critic, Geetha Doctor expressed her opinion on Das’s paintings (Personal Interview). A work of art is in some ways a liberation of the artist’s personality; art is different from sentimentality in the fact that it is not merely a release of emotions but also a healing. Das has said: “Painting gave me some kind of release from tension. I could go a little mad while painting—I could splash paints” (Personal).

Art serves certain basic functions as shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Function</th>
<th>Social Function</th>
<th>Physical Function</th>
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| Psychic expression of various aspects or subjects such as death, love, marriage, sex, woman/man, old age etc. | Here the work is meant to be primarily seen and used collectively by a group of people:  
1) To make a record.  
2) To illustrate  
3) To persuade | To beautify  
To redefine beauty |

Das’s paintings, I shall classify as having a personal function of self-expression and fit it under “Psychic Expression”. The term, though,
in no way refers to her as psychologically inadequate or abnormal, it definitely tells that she had a "need", if not, an urge to record her ideas as a woman. The "need" has been so compelling that she had to paint apart from/after/besides having written quite a lot on the subject. I quote John Fletcher here: "If a writer does not find the stimulus he needs at hand he may well stumble upon it elsewhere ...either in a foreign language or...in another medium" (Arnold, 115).

In order to do a detailed analysis of Das’s paintings, I have chosen ten of her artworks which offers an insight into the nature of her work and also the reason why she took the particular path she took, write what she did and paint what she did. I was looking for her secret of creation and was fairly successful at finding it too.

P.Lal in Virgin Whiteness has this to say of Das’s arrangement of her poems: “Kamala Das’s arrangement of her poems in the collection is uneven, disorderly and one suspects that it is not even chronological. It offers a challenge, at times frustrating to a critic who is interested in appreciating the poet in an unified perspective”(17). As this holds true for most of her collections I have chosen to categorise her paintings which I have taken up for study in the same manner in which I had categorized her poems in the third chapter i.e. in a pattern which would
help me trace her evolution rather than a chronological pattern. The classification is as follows:

1) Paintings dealing with her childhood:
   a) Grandmother with Child.
   b) Grandmother, Maid and Child in a Waiting Room.
   c) Maid at the Bath.

2) Paintings belonging to her confessional period:
   a) Spring.
   b) Nude at Noon.
   c) Nude at Night.

3) Paintings belonging to her philosophical period:
   a) The Sea Nymph.
   b) The Mad Woman Asleep.
   c) The Sleeping Girl.
   d) The Widow.

4) Paintings belonging to her religious phase:
The last category however does not have a single painting to its credit. This is where her incompleteness as a painter remains.

The features common to all her paintings are listed below:

i) Just as in poetry, Das’s focus is less on the male, than it is on the female.

ii) Mark Prent is of the view that Indian artists fall into three categories:
   a) Artists who successfully deal with composition.
   b) Artists who partly deal with it.
   c) Artists who are totally unconcerned about it (Masini.387)

   Das falls into the third category as she follows no rules whatsoever, neither of perspective nor of composition. Technically, her rendering is not of a very high quality, which is not entirely unexpected of a self-taught artist. Das has chosen her subjects from life but they have been rendered with a certain degree of stylisation; they are not naturalistic or documentary as the work of academic painters were.

   iii) Das’s paintings are very focussed, very clear. Sensuality of woman is one of her main themes. The face is not as important for her as the body, in her paintings.

   On this subject it would be relevant to look at the transformations that took place in the figure of woman in Indian art since the very early days. Conventionally, the women’s image in Indian paintings has always been
structured by religious and textual prescriptions. Whether as the central religious icon of the Mother Goddess (Durga or Lakshmi) or as mythic images of love, romance and devotion (as embodied in Radha) the female form was based on the formulation of the ideal type. In Bengal, the post Chaitanya Bhakti movement (15th century AD) gave the nayika image a different symbolism. Bhakti was conceived of, not simply as devotion but as a state of bliss in which the devotee is aware of his complete surrender and merger with his deity. Thus we have the portrayal of Radha as the eternal nayika, the exemplar devotee, the lover of Krishna and the emblem of ideal womanhood. With the coming of the British, the persisting iconography suffered its first sharp disjuncture. They introduced tones and gradations and used the artists merely for the colonial project of documentation of Indian society and environment. The artist now faced the central dilemma of identity. The solution came in the form of recreation of the lost ideal of the nayika of the past by investing it with nationalist values. The Indian woman became the representative of the inner, private, spiritual identity of the East.

iv) Das’s paintings reveal the influence of Indian miniature paintings too, however they are more universal than regional.

There is a close association of poetry and painting in the art of Kangra. In no other art form does one see such a successful and
harmonious association of literary and pictorial ideas. These paintings are actually love-lyrics translated into line and colour. Some of the stylistic characteristics of this folk art can be seen in Das's paintings too. For example,

a) The preference for simple outline, choice of typically representative lines and rejection of accessory elements.

b) A simplification of colours and values in such a way that shading is eliminated.

c) Generally painting is done in flat areas with strong lines tensely delineating the form.

d) Most often there is no background or environment.

v) Das's paintings have a narrative effect. One can almost visualise 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.

Analysis of individual paintings:

For an analysis of Das's works of art, the various technicalities such as rhythm of line, massing of forms, space, light and shade, colour,
materials used and so on, will be looked into. Then I will attempt an interpretation of the painting and a comparison with her poetry to discover the link between the two.

1) Paintings dealing with her childhood

a) Grandmother with Child: (Fig.4. Page 120)

Visual facts:

It is a larger-than-life size oil painting of a lady with a protective hand on the child’s head. The lady is attired in clothes of a traditional Christian matriarch with a full-sleeved long blouse and a shawl thrown over one shoulder. She wears huge earrings on the upper part of her ear lobes too. The background is black with red streaks.

Materials and technique:

The painting has been done in oils. The figures fill the canvas. There are hardly any accessories to distract the viewer – a distinctive feature in all her paintings. Paint has been slapped on creating a rough texture. This is probably what she means when she says: “I like slapping paint like a child. In my work there is grain, leaf and twig, one can feel it beneath the hand. Even the blind can feel it” (Personal). Dark colours predominate in her painting. The colours are used straight away without
blending or mixing, a style reminiscent of the Impressionistic painter Vincent Van Gogh.

Evaluation of the painting:

The painting has been done on a huge canvas. The figures are also big but the most interesting thing is that there are two figures but only one silhouette. The outline of the girl is contained within the larger one of her grandmother. As revealed in Das’s poems her grandmother had been her ideal and in her paintings too one is able to perceive her intimacy with her grandmother. The protective hand of the grandmother resting on the child’s head is a feature seen in a few other paintings belonging to this category.

It is indicative of the love and protection she received from her grandmother. It could also signify Das’s concern for the girl-child and the protection she feels a girl requires. The painting is rendered in a simple manner without much symbolism or suggestion. Das reveals all, she has no secrets, no hypocrisy—exactly as she is in her poetry. Her rendering of the figures is in no way amateur. Das is able to convey the characteristics of the subjects in an expert manner. The eyes of the
Fig. 4. Grandmother with Child

(Oil on canvas, From the original. Courtesy – The Palette People)
lady are rendered especially well. They are the all-knowing eyes of a mature woman, which is in total contrast to the wide-open innocent eyes of the child. Das also shows her artistry in the manner in which she has used red streaks to reduce the heaviness of the black background. This serves to push the figures to the foreground.

Comparison with her poetry:

This particular painting could almost be an illustration for the following lines of Das’s poetry:

“Eighteen years have passed since my grandmother’s death
I wonder why the ache still persists. Was She buried, bones and all in the loose red Soil of my heart ..................

.............................. I think
Of her, of the warmth she took away,

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

..............................no longer was
There someone to put an arm around my Shoulders without a purpose.......”

("The Millionaires at Marine Drive", Soul 68)
The following lines from "My Grandmother’s House also carry the same idea:

There is a house now far away where once
I received love .........................
...........................................

.................. You cannot believe darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud and loved............... (Soul 119)

In “Captive” Das writes:

............My grandmother’s, she was
the first I loved................. (Soul 91)

Das’s grandmother’s love which led her to protect, to shield her from all dangers is revealed in the following lines of the poem “Blood”, where Das writes of her grandmother and their close bonds:

My great grandmother

Touched my cheeks and smiled

She was really simple

Fed on God for years

All her feasts were monotonous

For the only dish served was always God

And the rest were condiments.
She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and I. (Soul 72)

b) Grandmother, Maid and Child in a Waiting Room: (Fig. 5. Page 125)

Here again the grandmother is at the centre of her work. The lady with the child appears too young to be a grandmother but Das insisted that it was a grandmother with the child (Personal). The reason could be that she had never been able to associate the emotion of love with her mother – it had always been her grandmother who loved her.

Visual facts:

A lady and a child, obviously belonging to a well-to-do family are seated on a red seat while a maid sits on the floor.

Materials and technique:

The painting has been worked in oils. Paint has been applied directly creating textures, most obvious in the child’s frock and the lady’s saree. The jarring discrepancy can be seen in the fact that the seat has no legs. Symmetrical balance in the composition has been achieved by seating the lady and the maid on either side of the child. Das has used
only primary colours in this painting. The background is blue with white paint applied on it reducing the intensity of the dark background. The red upholstery with a slight darkening on one side provides a slight depth, which is not generally seen in her paintings. The vanity bag on the floor is done in a darker shade of green perhaps to differentiate it from the green floor. The manner in which the painting has been done is reminiscent of the Expressionists in its bold, vigorous brushwork, emphatic lines and bright colours. The figure of the lady is distorted and reminds one of paintings by Paul Cezanne, who is known for distorting and rearranging natural forms which go unnoticed in landscapes but disturbs the viewer in paintings of human figures (Gardner,703). The manner in which the painting has been done is reminiscent of the Expressionists in its bold, vigorous brushwork, emphatic lines and bright colours. Cezanne’s distortions are not accidental. What Cezanne does is to rearrange the parts of the figure, to shorten and to lengthen them in such away as to make a pattern of their representation in two dimension confirm to the proportions of the picture surface.
Fig. 5. Grandmother, Maid and Child in a Waiting Room. Oil on canvas.

(Courtesy, Palette People’s brochure on Das’s first art exhibition. Series titled “The Unfinished Women” 1993.)
For example, in the painting “The Boy in a Red Vest” the disproportionately long left arm is obvious. In Das’s painting the lady’s head is disproportionately large and the left hand seems to be too short with regard to the rest of the body structure.

Evaluation of the painting:

The feelings conveyed by the painting are varied. The woman obviously loves the child; the hand placed on the child’s head is an assertion of the grandmother’s care and protection and appears to be totally engrossed in the child. The little girl meanwhile sits demurely and securely close to her grandmother, safe in her security, eyes wide open in innocence. The maid assumes her humble position on the floor; the downcast eyes depict her subservience. The hand on the child’s head is almost a symbolic device in Das’s paintings emphasising her concern for the girl child. The manner in which the work has been rendered indicates her familiarity with such a situation — a secure childhood surrounded by her loving grandmother and loyal maids.

Comparison with her poetry:

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. In the poem “An Introduction” she grumbles:

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife, they cried.

Be embroiderer, cook or quarreler with servants.

(Best 12,13)

And again in “Suicide”:

I must pose

I must pretend

I must act the role of happy woman

Happy wife (Best 27)

The painting reveals that she has compromised to a certain extent. She has accepted the duality. Women today have this problem— the clash between the abandon of the mind and the tradition, which restricts them. This painting reveals a woman who doesn’t rebel; she accepts tradition, she accepts the role though she questions the lack of freedom, but she doesn’t advocate running away from any role, which has to be played.

c) Maid at the Bath: (Fig. 6. Page 129)

Das has said—“I used to watch the women bathing at the tanks of Kerala. I used to admire them; they were very attractive. Our maids at Nalapat were very beautiful” (Personal). In a wave of nostalgia Das pays tribute to one of her maids at her ancestral Nalapat house in this painting.
Visual facts:

What we see in this painting is a young, naked girl in a country style bathroom with a window and half-wall partition. On the ledge formed by the partition are a big jug, a soap case, a basin of water and a mug. Das’s capacity for observation can be seen in the way in which she has even included the clothesline with a few pieces of cloth hanging on it. The maid is portrayed as a full-length nude figure with long black hair. She stands with one hand resting on the half wall as if striking a pose.

Materials and technique:

The painting is done in oils. It is not totally flat however, as the half wall, which moves into the picture, creates a certain amount of depth—something rather rare in Das’s paintings. The dark colour of the wall in the background contrasts with the lighter red of the foreground, differentiating areas of light and darkness. Das has also succeeded in bringing out the contrast between a sunny day with blossoms, outside the window and the dark interior of the old-fashioned bathroom. Once more we see the lavish use of primary colours—red, yellow and blue. The brick wall has been rendered especially well.
Fig. 6. Maid at the Bath.

(Oil Painting, rpt in Femina 23 Aug 1996, 59)
The body is painted flatly in a bright yellow ochre tone with hardly any modelling at all. The unassuming simplicity of the maiden has been captured well.

Comparison with her poetry:

The maid seems to have resemblance to the “Nani” of Das’s poetry. The insignificance of the woman who has been a loyal maid in a large household is expressed in these lines:

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
in the privy one day................

Another year or two and I asked my grandmother
One day, don’t you remember Nani?
Grandmother shifted the reading glasses on her nose
and stared at me. “Nani?”, she asked “Who is she?”
With that question ended Nani. (Soul 76)

2) Paintings belonging to her confessional period:

The next category includes those paintings, which could be classified as belonging to the confessional mode. Roger Philips’ remarks on the nature and motif of confessional art holds true for Das. He said: “All confessional art, whether poetry or not is a means of killing the
beasts which are within us, the dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered and exposed in order to be destroyed” (2).

a) The Nude at Noon: (Fig. 7. Page. 132)

Visual facts:

The painting is of a nude figure reclining against a bolster cushion. It appears to be a self-portrait. Anyone visiting Kamala Das at Cochin can see the cushion, which she seems to be fond of.

Materials and technique:

This is an oil painting of a reclining nude looking out at the world. Das had a fondness for yellow colour, especially sunshine yellow and this painting bears evidence, as it has been rendered in seven shades of yellow. Other than yellow very few colours are used here. The background is light green and the lady is seated on a dark green seat. A slight shading of anatomy gives the body a rounded effect.

Comparison with her poetry:

This painting reveals the narcissism in her. The glorious body of the woman is depicted in a state of waiting for the ideal lover.
Fig. 7. **Nude at Noon**. (Oil on canvas. Courtesy: The Palette People’s brochure on Das’s art exhibition of the series titled “Unfinished Women”)}
Perhaps it is a portrayal of Radha. In many of Das’s poems the frustration or disillusionment at not finding the ideal lover is expressed. “Loud Posters” metaphorically brings out this opposition between idealism and 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. (Soul 51)

Both, a negative awareness of the limitations of the body and an awareness of an unembodied state play an equally important role in Das’s writings. The body in Das’s poems is an intoxicant because of the pleasure and bliss it can give. At the same time the intoxication is a limitation as well, when a different consciousness sweeps through the poet. One has to look into Das’s understanding of the physical in the spiritual quest. In her poems the physical and spiritual are inextricably linked. It can be seen from the "Annamalai Poems" how a state of being in the transphysical realm makes the poet not oblivious of the physical but inclusive of it in the total domain of the transphysical. The very reference to the state of the physical well being in the state of the transphysical illustrates the point that the body is accepted in the role
that it has to play. The transphysical and the physical are two distinct principles in Das’s poetry that are engaged in a constant symbiosis. This symbiosis often gives one the identity of the other and vice-versa. The duality of body and soul is best illustrated in the poem “Cask of Nothing”:

The nothing that resides
as an ache within
the only content
the human cask can contain (Best 108)

The soul is the essence of the human being. The body is merely the outer covering or the cask, which houses the soul. In another poem “Ghanshyam” Das uses almost identical imagery when speaking of body and soul:

But if he is you and I am you
Who is loving who
Who is the husk who the kernel
Where is the body where is the soul. (Soul 94)

Further proof of the symbiosis between the physical and the transphysical when the poet is in a transphysical state can be seen in “The Doubt”:

When a man is dead or a woman
We call the corpse not he
Or she but it, Does it
Not mean that we believe
That only souls have sex and that
Sex is invisible.

By attributing to the soul, which is a spiritual entity, sex, which is a physical marker the poet once again illustrates how the symbiosis is so effective that it results in blurring the individual quality of both the body and soul. Lakshmi Raghunandan in “Contemporary Indian Writing in English” condenses the same idea when she writes that in the poem “Doubt”, Das attempts to understand the soul in physical terms.

b) The Nude at Night: (Fig. 8. Page 136)

Visual Facts:

This is a painting of a young woman, nude waist upwards, looking at the world calmly. Her body has soft contours and her fair anatomy is of a very smooth texture. Her arms are cut off at the border, a rather distinctive feature in most of Das’s paintings. According to some critics this indicates a continuance.
Fig. 8. The Nude at Night.

(Oil on canvas, rpt in Femina 1 July 1999).
Materials and technique:

This picture is rendered in oils. The background is dark with highlights. The figures are therefore pushed into the foreground.

Evaluation of the painting:

This work is very similar to the work titled “The Nude at Noon”. Here the woman appears to be fully conscious of herself and her body as she offers herself to the man she loves. Das’s search for her ideal lover is revealed here. The utmost for a woman is love and in her quest for it she gives all of herself, body and soul to the man who came along. The model for the painting is supposed to have been one of the maids at Nalapat house but it could well be a portrait of Das herself, as she becomes “every woman” in search of the perfect lover. Das’s poetry and painting is very close to what Adrienne Rich advocates for achieving in “Of Woman Born”. She says:

Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specification ............................................................

In order to live a fully human life, we require not only to conquer our bodies.....

We must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of intelligence. (Rich 62)
Comparison with her poetry:

Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Women. (Soul 55)

These are lines from “The Looking Glass” which is a passionate poem full of the love of a woman for her man. The helplessness of a woman in the hands of the exploiting male is expressed in “After the Party”:

...........................................shuddered in
Fear and took her leave with a smile, a joke, a banter
And going down the lift saw in its cold mirror
With apathetic eyes the fullness of a body,
Tamed by will and practice,
Taught never to make demands. (Soul 71)

The poem “Gino” has lines, which Das has admitted she is proud of. The painting could even be an illustration for these lines:

I shall serve myself in bedroom mirrors,
Dark fruit on silver platter ("Gino", Soul 92)

And in “Descendants” the ecstasy of the lovers enjoyed by the woman who feels that she has found her perfect lover is seen:

We were the yielders
Yielding ourselves to everything. (Soul 80)
Das is no hypocrite, she is able to understand women's minds better than anyone else, and her poem "Vrindavan" is testimony of her honest down-to-earth poetry:

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind
And the flute luring her
from home and her husband. (Soul 101)

Das relentlessly concentrates on the female human figure for her expressive purpose. For her the female forms are the most beautiful and she portrays it in its most simple, elemental aspect in the nude or simply dressed with no background or ornamental embellishment. Vincent O’Sullivan interprets her references to the nude bodies thus: "Nakedness, in other words is loss of self...and ultimate expose is the final escape, for there is nothing possible then but redefinition" (Sullivan.182). She is quite critical of the response she received at her art exhibition. She has remarked that there was so much of negative criticism that she gave her nudes dresses and gifted them away. Das associates nudity with innocence. She says:

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 (Personal).

However to a public brought upon to expect a picture to tell a story, or point a moral or at the very best leave the spectator in doubt as to what it was about, the paintings of Das came as a shock though it appealed to people who “came from far” (Personal). This painting as well as most other nudes done by Das is always represented in poses, which presuppose an audience.

c) Spring: (Fig. 9. Page 141)

Visual facts:

Two young girls are portrayed here seated at two levels on the ground. The figures are nude with a slight variation in skin colour. The background is rendered in three shades of green. It is rendered flatly pushing the figures to the surface of the canvas. There are white flowers strewn all around and some are seen on the girls’ hair too. There is absolutely no depth in the picture and the figures are placed one above
Fig. 9. Spring. (Oil on canvas. Courtesy: The Palette People's brochure on Das's art exhibition of the series titled "Unfinished Women")
the other in a primitive manner. The white flowers serve to break the monotony of the picture and give the scene a serene air of innocence.

Materials and technique:

The painting is done in oils. Once again we see the contrast in the rendering of the smooth texture of the bodies and the background. There are hardly any visual symbols or devices in Das’s artwork. The rendering of the anatomy reveals Das’s talent. The long limbs and smooth contours have been painted deftly with hardly any modelling. The figures are pushed right into the foreground and once again we see the use of primary colours and the stippled brushwork, which is very effective in creating an impression of freshness. This painting bears a very close resemblance to Gauguin’s painting of the “Two Tahiti Women”.

The innocence of young days, a nostalgia, which is reminiscent of the themes of many of her poems, is depicted in this painting also. On the surface though, it is only a painting of two nude girls on the grass—a picture of gay, youthful femininity.

Evaluation of the painting:

The most obvious inference is that the scene is from the life of Das herself. It probably belongs to the times of which Das writes in this manner:
I had a house in Malabar
and a pale green pond, I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months
I swam about and floated,
And dived into the cold and green
I lay speckled green and gold
In all the hours of the sun. ("The Suicide", Soul 87)

Another way of looking at the painting would be to see the figure of the girls as none other than Radha, the ideal prototype of a woman in love. Das writes in her poetry of an eternal quest for the ideal lover. She has used the Radha-Krishna theme very often to express her feelings on this theme. Radha stands for all women who are on the search for an ideal lover. In this painting too one can detect the longing on the faces of the women combined with a certain amount of anticipation. The painting brings to mind the Indian miniatures (See Fig.10 page145). The legend of Krishna who was loved by the Gopis, chief among them being Radha, was very popular and details of the story are often presented very erotically in early Indian paintings, especially in the genre of miniature painting. M.S.Randhava points out, “The Krishna legend in Pahari paintings” of the Gopis with Krishna “is not a historical reality, but an eternal event located in the human heart.” (Randhawa ,n.p.)
As pointed out earlier, there is a close association of poetry and painting in the art of Kangra. In no other art does one see such a successful and harmonious association of literary and pictorial ideas. These paintings are actually love lyrics translated into line and colour.

Sudhir Kakar opines:

What disturbs me most is the Indian woman's fantasy....

Her imagination seems propelled by the longing for a single two-person universe... The longing is for an idealised phallus which will serve as a transitional object in the consolidation of her feminine identity (144).

Comparison with her poetry:

The following lines taken from Das's poem "Afterwards" are full of nostalgia similar to what can be experienced on looking at the painting:

Just a while ago, this place

Was ours. You should have seen us race, fly

Thread-wise across the turquoise sky
Fig. 10. Detail of Indian Miniature Painting. Champa c.AD 1790, rpt in folio of Miniature Paintings in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.
And talk of love, music, science
And beauty. (Soul 137)

She also takes a dig at the present day world and the prevailing lack of humanity:

And it was normal for a girl to sigh
Over a dying bird; we learnt kindness
As we learnt our books. (Soul 137)

As paintings do not speak, they are open to interpretation. One way of seeing the painting would be that it is an illustration to these lines in “Farewell to Bombay” where she writes:

Give them your sad-eyed courtesans

With tinsel and jasmine in their hair. (Soul 38)

3) Paintings relating to her philosophical period:

a) The Sea Nymph

b) The Beggar woman asleep

c) Small girl asleep

d) The widow

Shyam Asnani observes: “Das’s life philosophy is based on the Vedantic concept of Thou art me (Twame Vaham). Her own experience
becomes everybody’s experience and everyone else’s experience becomes her own” (76). This is reflected in her poem “An Introduction”:

Who are you, I ask each and everyone
The answer is, it is I, anywhere and
Everywhere I see him who calls himself
I ;...... (Soul 96)

a) The Sea Nymph: (Fig. 11. Page 148)

Visual Facts:

The painting is of a woman nude waist upwards. The portrayal reveals a sound knowledge of anatomy. There is a subtle delineation of parts using shading. The face is longish and features are oriental. The white towel stands out starkly against the dark background. The background itself is sharply divided into two; the upper part is dark blue in colour with a rough texture made by paint laid on heavily. The lower half is rendered in a light blue, which has been painted in a smoother manner. The figure of the woman is placed on one side of the painting
Fig. 11. The Sea Nymph.

(Oil on Canvas. From the original. Courtesy: The Palette People)
revealing a total disregard of the rules and traditions of conventional painting.

Materials and technique:

The painting has been done in oils. The paint has been applied in a very slipshod manner. White paint has been slashed on thickly in the background providing the highlights. The body especially the skin has been rendered in a smooth manner contrasting totally with the rough texture of the background. Evaluation of the painting:

The woman wears a white headgear and once again we find that the figure has been cut off, above and below.

Das’s love for the sea is reflected in many of her poems. Sea imagery plays a prominent role in some of her best poems. What we see in the painting is a young woman, a sea nymph, with the sea in the background. The woman though delicate, appears to be totally in control of herself. She has put the rough patches of her life behind her and looks out at the world, all set to take on the world. The dark colour of the sea in the background seems to suppress the frothy silvery water, which is probably symbolic of the desire within her. She has the sea within her but she puts it aside, it becomes her background and she faces the world blandly without any kind of emotion. The white turban serves to emphasize her eyes. The body has been cut off at bust level. This cutting
off above and below is a regular feature in most of her works and it is one, which is not seen in the works of trained artists. The sea-nymph faces forward, looking straight, not challenging but merely looking. The figure looms large and the sea in the background indicates where she belonged. She reaches out from there; she cannot be confined. There is a background and context and a philosophic wisdom that she can tackle the world. She accepts and contentment comes in. Women today are faced with the problem of the acceptance of the dual. A woman is totally uninhibited in her mind, she enjoys total abandon of the mind, but this is not accepted by the world and she is restricted--by tradition! Das doesn’t rebel, she accepts the role of women though she questions the nature of the freedom a woman supposedly has.

Das’s paintings and poems reveal her as a typical combination of the urban woman who is also tradition-bound. Tradition gives her anchorage. In the slush of tradition she is the lotus with her roots embedded. She is able to come up and look around and because of her strong roots she doesn’t drift.

Comparison with her poetry:

The sea appears throughout her poetry as a close friend and confidante and she often addressed it intimately. She says:

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. ("The Suicide", Soul 87)

The sea in the painting is behind her, her constant companion. In the poem "The Suicide" the poetess appears to be almost envious of the sea.

How simple your duties are
How simple
Only roar a hungry roar
Leap forward
And retreat
You swing and you swing
O Sea you play a child's game
But
I must pose...... (Best 27)

In this huge painting we have this young lady portrayed against the waves, which are "swinging and roaring"— Das was able to create this effect by working in an Impressionistic manner, laying on paint thickly. Impressionistic influence can be seen in the lighter palette, stippled brushwork and the distinctive impressionistic sense of airiness. Das,
however, does not share the Impressionists' interest in humbler aspects of everyday life as subjects of painting.

Das had an obsession with the sea. The sea has been her refuge and its ceaseless movement has served as an inner strength for her—something she can always fall back on. It has been with her throughout her life. In the beginning it did not seem important at all to her, as it was only “the ceaseless whisper in a shell” (Composition, Soul 21). During her childhood her grandmother provided her with a sense of security she had and lying beside her she could hear “at night the surf breaking on the shore” (21). The sea was very close to her then though she did not realise it. Then as she grew, she moved away from the sea and she was busy with her life “but, /there was off and on a seascape/in my dreams/and the water/sloshing up/and sliding down” (22). Now she has returned and she says, “All I want now is to take a long walk into the sea and lie there resting, completely uninvolved.” (26) Her almost complete identification with the sea is revealed in her poem “A Half Day’s Bewitchment”:

I am also the sea that roars behind

the house, roars out

its 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.....

(Soul 81)

b) Beggar woman asleep: (Fig.12. Page 155)

Visual facts

A nude figure of a voluptuous woman, well past her youth is portrayed here, fast asleep. The skin tone is of a darker shade compared to what Das usually uses. The figure is not totally flat but has certain roundedness as Das has attempted to model the figure with dark and light areas. This painting of Das is different from others in the manner in which she has rendered the body. A rougher technique has been adopted
in contrast to the smooth style used so far. Distortion of the body is evident in this painting too. The hand in the foreground is disproportionately long, once more bringing to mind the work of Cezanne.

Materials and techniques:

This is again an oil painting. The sensuality of the woman is brought out by portraying a view from above in a manner similar to that of Amadeo Modigliani. The face is not important, as here it is the body that speaks. Das’s opinion regarding her nude paintings is rather interesting. According to her, “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” (Personal). When Das paints women who belong to a different level in society, we find that she tends to put away her private experiences and portrays a larger panorama of experience, which transcends her personal feelings and moods. According to Das, a woman is herself when she is nude, robed neither by clothes nor by tradition.

Comparison with her poetry:

Das’s identification with all women and even with all mankind is seen in the manner in which she feels and becomes the woman in this painting. This capacity of hers to completely identify with others,
Fig. 12. Beggar Woman Asleep.

(Oil on Canvas. From the original. Courtesy: The Palette People)
especially the traumatised, is revealed in her poem “Somebody else’s Song”:

I am a million, million people... (Best 40)

and again in “Forest Fire”:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
to take in with greed, like a forest fire
that.................................................................

Consumes. (Soul 134)

“She imagines herself as a forest fire, which envelops into its fold everything, rendering it brighter and more charming than what it was before, through her poetic craft. Kamala Das takes all her experience to be the domain of her poetry” (Dhar 21). In such poetry she is able to identify with the bald baby, the slim lovers, the eunuchs and even the dying mother. This is probably what she refers to when she speaks of her favourite poet Walt Whitman. She is full of admiration for his majesty and grandeur and the way in which he embraces everything “like a God” (Personal). She believes that a poet should not confine himself to one particular area. In fact she believes that all the people — the lunatic, the teacher have to be included in the sweep; only then is creation possible. In this particular painting she becomes one with the
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madwoman. A similar feeling is generated in the following lines of her poem "In Introduction":

Who are you, I ask each and everyone
The answer is, it is I, Anywhere

and everywhere. (Soul. 96)

Das’s aim in such paintings and poetry seems to be to transcend the private voice and reach universality through empathy.

The two facets of Das’s love poetry according to Mohan Lal Sharma (Dwivedi 1984) are —

a) the search for the ideal lover in defiance of social convention

b) her powerful articulation of the victimisation of woman in physical relationships.

In her paintings too Das continues her scathing attack against the injustices meted out to women. As Gloria Steiner points out, “women of every race are the only discriminated group, with no territory, no country of their own, not even a neighbourhood. In 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” (Steiner, quoted from Mohanty 45). Das’s poetry, while expressing indignation at the exploitation in society, also expresses a resolute wish to move out of the system. This aspect of her
poetry has been linked by the critic S.K. Sharma to the voice of Mary Wollstonecraft who fought for the right of women in England and Europe. Critics like A.N. Dwivedi (31) have accused Das of being obscene and vulgar. She has had to put up with a lot of harsh criticism after her painting exhibitions too; “Because I was a woman nobody liked it”, she says. (Personal). Abhilash N.V. defends her saying that “Das overlooks the victimisation of women at all levels. The poet is not being salacious but frank in expressing what she experiences from men, be it love or merely lust. As both love and lust involve physical relationship, the poet’s use of explicitly sexual imagery to highlight her bliss or revulsion should be viewed not as an obscenity but as a poetic, and perhaps an artistic necessity.”

For Das then, the face is not important, it is the body, which is. She paints woman as she is- covered neither by clothes nor by tradition. She does not glorify or make them seem beautiful. Her women are pictured having strong thighs and shoulders; she is also adept at rendering the flabbiness of the stomach and the pendulous bosom—both stressing the aspect of mother and lover. Thus from her writings and paintings “one gets ample proof of her dependence on the female body...for the sake of imagery which help to express the female psyche.” (Mohanty 55). These aspects, which can be noticed in her
painting, could not be developed by her through her poetic imagination. That, probably, prompted her to take up the brush.

There is a narrative aspect to this painting. One can almost visualise the event, the time when the picture was painted. The body naked seems to be the best of her works – it is a bold rendering and the events seem to be the aftermath of lovemaking – the eyes closed with the self, turning inward. This immediately takes us to her poem “Substitute” where she says:

Our bodies after lovemaking

Turned away rejecting…

Yes, I was thinking, lying beside him

That I loved, and was much loved

It is a physical thing (Soul 53)

And again in “The Swamp”:

Again and again this tragic sport that has made us its addicts he undressing my soul effortlessly

blindly reaching the locus of anguish but still I shake my head I leave

unsatisfied for what does he bare me on the bed in his study except
his well-tanned body. (*Soul* 28)

Das almost appears to accept the role of women in society, e.g. in “My Story” when her husband complains that she has not read the “prestigious report of the Rural Credit Survey Committee” – i.e. she has not given him due respect, she answers “but I let you make love to me every night...isn’t that good enough?” (114). Shirley-Geok-Lin lim points out that here the protagonist has learned to balance what is “due” to her husband in terms of sexual availability and understands that the exchange of her sexual self in the economy of the marriage is a kind of market exchange, “a good sufficient for the shelter and the material security he provides” (102). She is not rebellious. She accepts the role but at the same time, within her is the desperate need for freedom

c) A Small Girl Asleep: (Fig.13. Page 161)

Visual facts:

This is another painting, which can be classified into the same genre as the earlier one. But here the rendering is much smoother and the execution very simple. Despite the limitations of the schematic method by which Das renders the figures, it shows her mastery over human anatomy. Quoting Das on this painting- “It’s a small girl, about ten to thirteen years old, sleeping ...the world though, sees her as a sex object.
Fig. 13. A Small Girl Asleep. (Oil on Canvas. rpt. *Femina*, 23 Aug. 1996.

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She is sleeping like a young pup with the secure thought that its master is with it… Now these girls are not safe"(Personal).

Materials and technique:

This is once again a painting done in oil on canvas. Only the nude is featured on the flat surface of the canvas. All details have been eliminated but the girl’s hair has been elaborately depicted, almost wound around her neck like a hood. It reminds one of Matisse’s words: “Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter’s disposal for the expression of his feelings… All that is not useful in the picture is detrimental.” (Gardner 401,45)

Very few colours have been used and what are used are mainly primary colours. The blue background has been lightened by the addition of white. Once again we see the white outlining of the body and a slight distortion of the limbs.

Comparison with her poetry:

This very same idea is reflected in her poem “In Love”:

Now that I love you

Curled like an old mongrel

My life lies, content

In you. (Soul 89)
Das's sympathies have always been with the unfortunate ones, especially the little girls. In the "Dalit Panther" she says:

The rag picker, eleven years old, curled to

Foetus shape on the pavement, sleep on (Soul 37)

The manner in which the girl is lying, reveals once more the longing of Das to retreat into the womb- to become a foetus once again. Her longing echoes the sentiment expressed by Adrienne Rich in "Of Woman Born"— "To return to one's mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her"(218). Suguna Ramanathan observes that the images in Kamala Das's poem "Composition" makes clear her longing for the maternal womb (28). Anais Nin, the most dynamic writer of the 20th century referred to the time in the womb as "the paradise of non being" (37).

d) A Widow: (Fig.14. Page 164)

I have torn to shreds the tarot cards of my fate

I walk the highway alone

He was a sunshade, he was my home

Now I walk naked as a babe (Soul 125)
Fig. 14. A Widow. (Acrylic on Canvas. From the original. Courtesy: The Palette People)
Visual facts:

This is one more painting of a woman, a widow and given the recent happenings in Das’s life (her embracement of Islam) one is tempted to see this painting as being one alluding to the social custom of “purdah” or veil worn by Muslim women. Here a woman has been painted, cocooned in a white shroud. The rendering of the shroud makes it appear like a plaster cast, hard and impenetrable. This serves to emphasize the rigid rules of the society. However, the seclusion may even be self-imposed. It is probable that the woman prefers to wrap herself up. Another way of looking at the painting is to see the shroud as being a widow’s garb, in which case the woman behind is considered by the society to be almost non-existent. If the seclusion is self-imposed then she reveals only what she wants to show to the world — a pair of wide-open eyes. The huge eyes, which look out at the world, are not desperate; instead one perceives an innocence and also a slight fear arising out of uncertainty. There is also a hint of expectation, a looking forward accompanied by a fear of the future. The glint in the eye expresses a slight excitement.

Materials and technique:
This painting has been rendered in acrylic. It is different from Das's other paintings in the fact that one does not see any clear or bold outlines neither for the figure nor with regard to the details. In fact, two smears of black serve to indicate the eyebrows. Das does not use black for the eyes or the lashes. In contrast to the white of the eyes she has used the blue colour of the sea for the pupils, which creates a haunting effect. The hair framing her face is a festooning, almost celebrating the eyes. Perhaps it was not done consciously. It is a very positive statement that she makes in rendering the eyes in such a manner. The hair is an indication of the lushness of the Indian women and Das has always admired the human form, she has said that she found the female form especially beautiful (Personal). The skin however is painted a cadaverous blue, a murky blue, which brings to mind morbid ideas of death and widowhood.

Comparison with her poetry:

Das had a very loving husband in spite of their difference in age and ideas. His death came as a big blow to her and she has written a number of poignant poems on her sorry state as a widow.

A man to love is easy, but living
without him afterward may have to be
faced. A living without life when you move
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
His last voice calling out your name and your
Body which under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.

(“The Looking Glass”, Soul 55)

Her illness too made her very unhappy and she wrote:

My illness wove for me a great shroud,
Within the wrap
Like a blighted seed I moulted
rotting to the core (“I Shall Not Forget”, Soul 62)

As the years go by, Das begins to feel her age and her loneliness starts
threatening to overpower her.

At my age there are no longer
Any homecomings ...........

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

My mind sleeps, I watch the rear lights
Of vehicles move on the dark
Looms of night like women’s shuttles. (Soul 84)

A link can be perceived between the use of words like ‘shuttle’
and ‘loom’ and the coarse cotton shroud covering the woman in this
painting. The bluish-green of the face probably symbolises fear within her. In fact, Das has given loneliness a blue colour in her poem “The Stranger and I”:

your loneliness

blue as a birthmark on your face (Soul 39)

Das identifies herself with all women and more especially with Radha, the prototype of the Indian woman questing for the ideal lover. In the poem “The Cobwebs” Das writes about Radha whose beloved Krishna has left her all alone and grief-stricken. This poem could very easily be about herself after the death of her husband:

Do not look into Radha’s eyes, O friend

For her soul lies dead inside

As cobwebs block the doorways, unused,

Grief now mars her lonely eyes

He has been gone for years, that Krishna who

Once was hers alone. Perhaps

Another holds him now, a lovelier and

More fortunate one. And yet

Poor Radha must live on, for life is long. (Soul 123)
Das feels the need for protection of young girls especially if they had been widowed. A girl without a husband or father is considered to be a susceptible prey. Das despises the way in which men take advantage of a helpless woman. She has written in one of her columns (Rediff on the net, Lifestyle) of the manner in which a certain person used to drop into her house and stay there till she asked him to leave, taking advantage of the fact that her husband was no more. In a “Widow’s Lament” Das elaborates on this:

Make of my tears, so long unshed,

and of trembling of nerves, unseen

a raiment for your widowed daughter

a thick veil to shelter under

while packs of wolves howl and howl

around the ramparts of her night (Soul 125)

Having made an analysis of Das’s selected paintings and poetry, I have come to the conclusion that Das’s paintings are a “spillover” or a reaffirmation of her poetry. In fact some of her poems are virtual pictures. I would like to quote one such word-picture from her poem “The Music Party”:

Music in Front. A Pale

Girl in pink beside the
Harmonium. Behind
Me, your stillness, nothing
Else. (Qtd. in Raghunandan, 71)

Das’s forms are, according to Harrex, "direct expressions of an autobiographical voice. But that individual voice also asks to be read representatively or symbolically”(165). Parthasarathy remarked that “Kamala Das impresses by being very much herself in her poems”(22) so too she impresses in her paintings. Her works are "dramatic”, evokes another person and makes him turn inward activating “a dialogue of one”(Crabbe 223).

The feeling of inadequacy of a particular medium has been felt by quite a few creative people. I will be examining the works of some more painter-poets in the following chapter and also Das’s place amongst them. The switchover of mediums by creative people brings to mind the case of a well-known flautist, Shriram Gangadhar, who felt compelled to shift to vocal music as he felt that his flute was not picking up all the music that was flowing in him. He was not bothered by the fact that he could not reach great heights as a singer, the way he could as a flautist. He had to sing, however, in order to achieve a feeling of wholeness. In a similar manner Das directed her creative talents towards painting after having conquered the written word.
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