CHAPTER V

KAMALA DAS AMONG OTHER PAINTER-POETS

“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.”(Das, Personal—2.)

In this chapter, the works of a few other renowned painter-poets have been taken up for analysis to see the similarity or otherwise with regard to Das’s work. Leo Tolstoy, one of the most famous of the literary geniuses who also painted, has defined the process of art in these words:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself; then by means of movement, lines, colours, sounds or forms expressed in words so to transmit that feeling, that others experience it too – that is the activity of art.

(Read 185)

This theory is strikingly similar to Wordsworth’s theory of poetry, for example in the common insistence of perfect intelligibility and communicability. Wordsworth’s phrase ‘a man speaking to man’ (186)
is the perfect description of Tolstoy’s ideal artist. However, a practising artist is not usually detached enough to describe his own psychological process. Henry Matisse comments that the real function of art is to express feeling and transmit understanding (189). However, some artists have painted due to certain inner compulsions. Gauguin’s formula was:

Art for art’s sake, why not?
Art for Life’s sake, why not?
Art for pleasure’s sake, why not?
What does it matter, as long as it is Art. (Read, 152)

For many poets art was the vent outside their literary work for impulses and realisations not within the scope of words. Some of them were able to excel in both fields but in some cases we find that one medium triumphed over the other. In Das’s words: “It is a reflection or perhaps a reflection of a reflection, a dream within a dream, never for a moment real enough to quench thirst or heal the unhealed. But it offers hope and an invitation to live on, enduring what may well seem unendurable, loneliness and the loss of love.”(Introducing the Galleria Mareechika, Brochure). A look at the contributions made by the most famous painter-poets in the world will give us an idea about their collective creative attitude.
The works of Michelangelo Buonarotti, William Blake, Rabindranath Tagore and Dante Gabriel Rossetti are considered in detail in this chapter. The works of two contemporary Indian women artists-cum-poets have also been taken up in order to note the resemblance to Das, if any. The women-artists are Jaya Appasamy and Aparna Cour.

Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564)

Michelangelo was a man who was hailed in his lifetime as 'almost divine' and it is said that Popes and princes competed for his services. (Linscott xiv). "Unlike his contemporary, Leonardo Da Vinci, whose immense creative energy was dispersed in many directions, Michelangelo's was always channelled towards art; sculpture if he could; painting and architecture if he must; poetry for what could not be expressed by chisel or brush." (Linscott xivi). Michelangelo Buonarrati was invited to stay at Medici Palace at the age of fourteen where he was trained in other arts too, besides being a sculptor. Girolamo Beniveni was brought in to teach Michelangelo how to write in verse. When Michelangelo protested that he was not a poet, Pico Mirandella advised him by saying, "The structure of a sonnet is as rigorous a discipline as the structure of a marble relief. When Beniveni teaches you to write sonnets he trains your mind in the rules of logic and composition of
thought.” Poliziano, another artist of the time added—“To be a complete artist, it is not enough to be a painter, sculptor, or architect, one must also be a poet, if one is to attain full expression.( Stone,129). At that time, Michelangelo was however very busy at Lorenzo de Medici’s palace, sculpture was his first love and he poured all his creative energy into it. Fra Savonarola’s appearance on the political scene of Florence created a storm of antagonism directed towards art and its patrons and practitioners. The Medici sculpture garden was closed down and Michelangelo was left with no patron, as Lorenzo was very seriously ill. For the first time in his life, Michelangelo was unable to draw or sculpt. It was at this time that his first slumbering lines of poetry was put down. It was addressed to Contessina, Lorenzo’s daughter, whom he had fallen in love with:

Heavenwards I am borne by an enchanting face

Nothing else on Earth can yield me such delight.(182)

and later,

A soul none sees but I

Most exquisite, my spirit sees (189)

Michelangelo later met a Bolognese beauty Clarissa Saffi and fell in love with her. He has written a poem for her too, titled “The Garland and the Girdle”(253). Lorenzo’s death coupled with the unfortunate
events in Rome shook him. He was torn by the reality of Rome at that time; the city was plunged deep into corruption and decadence. Whereas love has inspired his earlier verse, it was now hate as searing an emotion as love, which made him write in the following manner:

Here helmets and swords made of chalices;
The blood of Christ is sold so much the quart;
His cross and thrones are spears and shields;
and short
Must be the time ere even his patience cease. (317)

Michelangelo felt the enormity of the religious problems, the anguish of sin and the sublimity of the Divine; and he foretells the tragic fate of man in his historic painting "The Last Judgement" which was frescoed on a wall of the Sistine chapel (Fig. 15. Page 182). It was much later that Cardinal Guillio di Medici got himself elected as Pope. Pope Clement VII then sent word immediately after his coronation, wanting Michelangelo to resume work on the chapel of the Medici Palace, which had remained as the unfulfilled wish of Lorenzo. Till now Michelangelo’s sculptures of David, Pieta, Moses and others had all been solitary pieces, complete within themselves. Till then his concern had been marble and what he could extract from it. Now his concern strayed to human emotion and what he could portray of the philosophic
meaning of life. He spent a great deal of time in the unfinished sacristy working on the marble blocks of Dawn and Dusk, the Virgin and young Lorenzo. It took him fourteen years to complete the work. He also wrote a lot of poetry during this period. They were mainly on the theme of love. An example is “Love’s Furnace”:

So friendly is the fire to flinty stone
That, struck there from and kindled to a blaze
It burns the stone, and from the ash doth raise,
What lives thenceforward binding stones in one. (631)

Towards the end of his life he was greatly fascinated by the thought of death, in a manner similar to Das:

Death is less hard to him who wearily
bears back to God a harvest fully ripe (666)

He also felt painfully the incapacity of the spirit to reach an authentic religiosity without Divine help. He says:

I love you (O God) with my tongue and then I mourn
that Love does not enter the heart; neither do I know well from where

The door opens to Grace (Berti 27)
Fig. 15. The Last Judgement, Fresco by Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sistine Chapel, Vatican Museums. rpt in Berti Luciano, All the works of Michelangelo. (Italy: Bonechi Editore Firenze, 1968) 83.
His last years at Rome brought a lot of love into his life in the form of Vittoria Colonna of Naples, and the painter Tomasso. Michelangelo’s later poetry are mostly verses written for either one of these two.

The main characteristics of Buonaratti’s poetry are—

1) He used a number of poetic forms, but the chief ones were the sonnet and the madrigal (which has an irregular rhyme scheme and an indefinite number of lines, generally between ten and twenty).

2) He presents his ideas in a shorthand pattern, which is responsible for a certain ambiguity.

3) The philosophy in his poetry is based on Neo-Platonism. Platonic love as understood during the Renaissance was very different from our present view of it. In fact, it was seen as a very difficult ideal which could be reached only in stages, beginning with physical love. "The very object, physically desired must be what is purified into spiritual desire" is how Creighton Gilbert describes it (xivi). Paradox is one of Michelangelo’s much-used literary devices. The relation of love and death is a favourite one. Ice and fire is another—The ice of age destroying passion.

4) In the Platonic fashion Michelangelo believed that the magic produced by the artist’s mind must come from the idea in the mind, the
Idea is the reality that has to be brought forth by genius of the artist. This theory that guided Michelangelo's hand appears in his poetry too:

My eyes longing for beautiful things
Together with my soul longing for salvation
Have no other power
To ascend to heaven than the contemplation of beautiful things. (Gardner, 492)

Having carefully considered Michelangelo's artworks and poetry it is obvious that there are no links between them. He was adept at handling both the mediums expertly. The difference in the ideas expressed through them was probably due to the fact that the artworks were all commissioned by others and he had to express what the patrons required. Though he had brought his individual style into the artworks, there were certain limitations that bound him. In the case of poetry though, it was a totally private affair and he allowed his emotions to take him along. In other words, I would say that in his art, he was guided by his senses but in his poetry he was guided by his emotions. In my opinion, the best of his poetic talent is revealed in the following lines of the "Caudal Sonnet":

Whenever a master keeps a slave in prison
Locked in strong fetters, and entirely hopeless
He grows so much accustomed to his anguish
That he would hardly ask again for freedom.

( Michelangelo 16)

Hardly any resemblance can be discerned in the works of Das and Michelangelo probably because the times and environment that they lived in were very different. But, such a study would be incomplete if Michelangelo, the greatest poet painter of all times was not considered. I also wanted to bring out here the fact that the sense of incompleteness in one creative area is experienced by even a great artist like Michelangelo.

William Blake (1757 – 1827)

As both as a man and an artist, Blake was a visionary whose imaginative world was far more splendid and inspiring than anything he discovered in the real world. He is unique in being almost as great a painter as he was a poet. In fact, the author of “The Prince of the Imagination” says that it is not wrong to say that “For a while he painted his poems and wrote his pictures.” (Cavendish, 200). His artwork mainly comprised of engravings that he did as illustrations to his poems. His _Songs of Innocence_ was his first truly original work not only as a poet and painter, but also as printer. Each copy of _Songs of Innocence_ (1789) turned into a separate work of art. The colours varied and the
copies, which came later, were decorated more elaborately using gold paint. In 1794 he published the Songs of Experience. The illustration for this was done using dark shades and well in keeping with the sober note in these poems. Later on, Blake made a number of illustrations for the works of Shakespeare, Milton and Dante.

Blake was an artist in the "age of mechanical reproduction" and he was in a predicament as "all the world" was opposing his artistic pursuits (Qtd. in Ramachandran, Keynes 828). He even had his moments of self-doubt when he used to ask himself:

O why was I born with a different face?  
Why was I not born like the rest of my race? (828)

Ramachandran .T.K. observes that Blake found himself in a traumatic situation very often in his artistic career because of the compromises that he was forced to make in order to be rid of real problems like poverty and illness (175).

Blake had received training in drawing as a child. He stayed at a drawing school for four years. During this time he also wrote a number of verses, which was later collected and published under the title Poetical Sketches. "The two aspects of Blake’s artistic genius were, for a while, disconnected; the draughtsman and poet drew closer as the years went on until after a period of intermingling, the pictorial artist
triumphed over the literary artist in self-expression.” (Compton and Rickett 304)

Although Blake died a long time before the Art Noveau movement, we can see that he anticipated the trends of that movement in almost all his works. A two-dimensional world, spiritual in nature was his contribution to the art world. Christianity is evident in all his creatures, plants, figures and landscapes just as it is evident in his poems; e.g. lamb, shepherd, father etc. “His paintings have a boneless quality which pulsates with life but not of a superficially recognizable nature; it is much more basic and primeval and bears some resemblance to microbe culture” (Wester 52). The following qualities of his style of painting allowed the blending of words and lines and the illustrated pages took on the appearance of a complete whole rather than two separate entities – illustration and text.

1) Blake drew with very clear outlines – a feature common to most painter-poets. Blake’s inspirations were the visions he saw, for him they were more real than that which could be perceived by the mortal eye.

2) He took Christ’s presence on earth for granted and was able to see eternity in a flower. He had neither natural skill to speak of nor any of the painter’s peculiar sensibility. He rarely reacted to an object in front of him.
3) His subjects were given to him by his imagination and Read says, “The very real emotions that he generated an expressed was not sensuous but intellectual” (120). Blake's paintings have a Gothic quality. He is poorly represented in public collections, so his fame is largely built on his works as a poet.

Blake's work is very different from that of Das. A comparison follows:

1) He had to make compromises in order to earn a living whereas she is the sole judge in the selection of her theme and makes no compromises in her painting.

2) Both of them, however, are highly individualistic and their paintings are in the Art Nouveau style.

3) Another common feature is the drawing of stark outlines to emphasise the shapes of the forms.

4) Their artworks are complementary to their poetry, the unity being more obvious in Blake's work. An example is given. (Fig. 16. Page 189)

The Venetian and Flemish painters practice was to have broken lines, broken masses and broken colours. Blake's practice was to have unbroken lines, unbroken masses and unbroken colours. Their art was to lose form, his was to find form and keep it. According to Blake, "the great and golden rule of art as well of life is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wiry the bonding line, the more perfect the work of art and the
less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imagination, the plagiarism, the bungling..." (Read, 122)

Rabindranath Tagore (1861—1961)

Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry is an imitation of nature but it is more of a mirror of his inner self, according to Ajai Singh. Singh draws our attention to Tagore’s lines in his poem "This I", on the reason for his mind being filled with joy: "I sit in the creative court of the cosmic / I with brush in hand and bowls of paint." (Singh 30)

Though Tagore is a writer who has left an indelible mark on every branch of Bengali literature, the people in the West did not know him; the main reason appears to have been the barrier created by language. He probably realised this too and is reported to have said, “We who have traded in lyrics should know that these will not find acceptance at another time. This is inevitable. So I often think that only painting has a deathless quality” (Chanda 100). Tagore’s artwork began in the form of erasures in his literary work. These erasures linked up to form some sorts of images or forms— they are not technically brilliant, however. The reason could be that:

1) since he had already made a name for himself, he did not feel the need for any new certificates.
2) he was not aiming to be the best— in fact, he had always stated that painting was not his fate.

Tagore's paintings were more in the nature of a psychological unburdening or release. He initially painted monochromes— pen drawings and etchings, mainly. Later on, he started using opaque colours. A bright orange, a brilliant blue or green seemed to prevail. Colours mostly depended on chance combinations. However, in his writings, Tagore uses colours to capture the quintessence of an object. Singh has quoted the following lines of Tagore, which reveal him as a brilliant word painter:

The afternoon light draws on the water
Lines of green and gold and blue
Light and shade shimmer secretly

Tracing the footprints of the passing breeze (48)

Rhythm is the essence of his paintings. We also see the distortion similar to Cezanne's work. Ratan Parimoo (29) has pointed out that Tagore wished to be a painter in his early life and that the imagery in his poetry are painterly. He cites the following example

1) The sun is hidden, the stars are lost
the red lime of the road is merged in the mist of the rain
2) Thou are a glimmer of gold from the dawn of my life’s shore
as dew drops on the first white flower of autumn
Thou art a rainbow from the distant sky bending o’er the dust
a dream of the crescent moon touched with a white cloud. (30)

Some of Tagore’s paintings seem to give visible shape to certain recurrent themes in his writing. K. G. Subramanyan observes that some of them showing a royal personage with a strange visor and hood can be linked to the “Raja”- the remote mysterious man behind the mask who appears in his writings (18). There are also paintings of a stocky male confronting a frail female figure, in quite intimate poses, which too have much in common with the images in his stories and plays.

Tagore was keen that art and artists must grow and expand, defying holy prohibition of prudent critics (Parimoo 61). His view of the relations between art and the artist is noteworthy, he says, "In Art the person in us is sending its answers to the Supreme Person who reveals Himself to us in a world of endless beauty across the lightness world of facts (Tagore 362). Tagore is said to have met the Australian pioneer of Child Art Franz Cizek (Parimoo 35) and perhaps it was this meeting that
made him realise that lack of skill and training was no handicap for expressing oneself through colours and shapes. Tagore created a world of the eerie and the bizarre, the distorted and the dark in his paintings as well as in the poems of his later years. The sense of utter despair is same in his paintings and poems. An example follows:

Black nameless night
Has imprisoned my world. Plunged it
Into nightmare. (Chauduri 233)

An early French commentator has made a thought-provoking observation that “Tagore was a painter while writing poetry and a poet while executing a painting” (Parimoo 87). Tagore has clarified that his paintings have no overt connection with his poems. However he has done one painting (Fig. 17. Page 194), which is a visual counterpart of a poem. It depicts a lamp in the left side of the painting wherein the actual verses are written neatly on the right half.

Evidently, he is not a painter-poet in the sense that the English Romantic writer William Blake was. However, the parallels between the paintings of Das and Tagore are numerous:
Fig. 17. Composition. Pen ink, Watercolour & Waterproof ink on paper. Rabindranath Tagore. (Calcutta: Santiniketan 1932) rpt. in Portfolio No. 3. Drawings and paintings of Rabindranath Tagore. (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1987) XI.
1) Their works are similar with regard to the motive behind the creation—the realisation of the inadequacy of vocabulary and also as a form of relaxation.

2) Both the poets did almost all their paintings in their later years of their life. Both of them had explored the area of writing thoroughly and taken to painting much later.

3) Their paintings are technically not perfect, due to lack of training but this very reason gives the paintings a spontaneity which is refreshingly original.

4) Their paintings can be classified under Child Art or Naïve Art. They adopted the floating free form of the Art Nouveau style.

5) Their paintings reveal the influence of the contemporary art scene of the west as well as primitive art.

6) The backgrounds in their paintings are left empty and untouched.

The differences in their works are listed below:

1) Landscapes constitute a major and constant theme in Tagore's work unlike that of Das's.

2) Das's paintings can be seen as extensions of her poetry whereas Tagore's are rather different from his poetry.
3) "the fact to be noted is that Kamala Das scarcely ever rises to the ne plus ultra of the cosmic divine view of R.N Tagore owing to the powerful impact of Science on her life" (Sharma 11).

Tagore used to refer to his paintings as "sesh boisher priya" (Sarkar 102.) which, if translated would mean "an affair in the evening of life". The public were not responsive to his paintings during his lifetime and preferred to believe that it was just a manifestation of his repressed psyche. There have been various arguments regarding the link between his literary and artistic work. We can be sure of one thing though; that he was an exceptional genius who had a way with words and lines, perhaps the first truly modern creative artist in India.

Dante Gabriel Rosetti (1828- 1882)

Rosetti was the son of an Italian political refugee in London. He had a love for drawing and joined the Drawing Academy in 1842. He was an extraordinary figure. The golden boy of his day, he gathered around him a worshipping circle of friends (Wester 52). In 1848 he met Holman Hunt and John Everette Millias— both academy students and this meeting proved to be the starting point of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The name was in fact, imposed from outside and is related to their dislike of all artists following after Raphael and their approval of
the pure colours of earlier Italian Paintings. They identified themselves artistically with the painters before Raphael, the early Florentines, for example, Giotto and Fra Angelico. The Pre-Raphaelites found a sincerity and individuality in their paintings, which they felt was sadly lacking in that of their successors. Rossetti's dismissal of the realists is seen from his following statement, "there is a man named Manet,... whose pictures are for the most part scrawls, and who seems to be one of the lights of the realist school. Courbet, the head of it is not much better" (Gardner 692). The Pre-Raphaelites found even the crude drawings and faulty perspective of the early Florentines enchanting just as the "naïveté and roughness of old ballads enchant the scholar" (Compton & Rickett 444 ). They wrote poetry and painted pictures in a manner, which was a protest against the practice of young students who were merely reproducing copies of Raphael's work.

There are certain characteristics, which are common to the pictorial and literary side of Rossetti's work:

1) The extreme attention paid to realistic detail. Sometimes, the ultr- opulence serves to weaken the work, as seen in the following lines:

A Superscription

Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been

I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell
Unto there can I hold the dead-sea shell...

( Hayward 362)

and so too, in the painting of "Hamlet and Ophelia" painted by Rosetti (Fig. 18. Page 199). The painting is overcrowded with detail, overwrought and almost claustrophobic. Even the figures have little room for themselves and the spatial relationship is ambiguous. The treatment of perspective is faulty and the distortion of Hamlet's arm creates the effect of a short arm in an awkward posture.

2) Every Pre-Raphaelitic figure is a true portrayal of some living person. They have rendered accessories in the same manner too—visually inspired though themes are often literary.

3) Another feature of Rosetti's paintings is symbolism. This can be seen as Blake's influence over his work. Rosetti had been a great admirer of Blake. He had even purchased a manuscript of Blake when he was a student. Some of his paintings, notably the "Astarte Syriaca", reflect Blake's influence. "The Blessed Damozel" is one of the most beautiful poems written by Rosetti. It has words where one can discern the familiar symbolism of a Medieval colourist:

The blessed Damozel leaned out

from the Gold Bar of heaven
Fig. 18. Hamlet and Ophelia. Dante Gabriel Rosetti rpt. in

*Kaleidoscope of Modern Art*. Wester (Harrap 1968) 62.
She had three lilies on her head
And the stars in her head were seven.

(Compton & Rickett 446)

"A Last Confession" is a remarkable poem and the stamp of the painter-poet is unmistakeable. It tells the story of a murder and here the colour red plays a very important part, as pointed out by Arthur Compton and Rickett. "The colour red gleams through the verse from the very opening, where a man finds the child on the hills and walked into "the great red light", down to the catastrophe when "sea and sky were blood and fire and all the day was one red blindness" (444).

Rosetti, as a person, was very affectionate and generous. He had a good sense of humour too. He is said to have had a tremendous, compelling influence on all who came into contact with him. His most intimate friend Watts-Dunston had this to say in tribute: "Rossetti's magnetic power— the power of shedding quite unconsciously one's personality upon all brought into contact with it ...In Rosetti's presence, it was impossible not to yield to this strange mysterious power..."(443). Rosetti's marriage to Elizabeth Siddal came to a sad end when she died of narcotics; after that, he became a virtual recluse and eventually a chloral addict.
The divided individual interest in poetry and painting had serious practical drawbacks and it is seen that very often in his career Rosetti had to declare that he had given up either one of the mediums. However, the pictorial element is so insistent in Rosetti that Compton-Rickett commented, "He thinks and feels in pigments" (444).

Rosetti's work, poetry as well as painting bears hardly any similarity to Das's work though his ornately patterned, heavily embellished paintings resemble the illuminated manuscripts of the other painter-poet William Blake. In fact, Neville Wester points out that Rosetti virtually rediscovered Blake, who had remained relatively unknown for a quarter of a century (53).

Jaya Appasamy and Arpana Caur have been included in this study as, the comparison of their work with that of Das's is bound to be interesting, given the fact that they are contemporary Indian women painter-poets.

Jaya Appasamy (1918-1984)

Jaya Appasamy was a poet, a painter, an art critic and a collector of art items. In her writings of art she was a model of good writing, of reticence and of a suave, unassuming personality. She was
discreet and never hinted at her own self. Only her poems reveal her other personality. Her essential compassion, softness and charity come to the fore in her poems “Turtles” and “Pieta”. The poems are quiet and reticent with a suffused vision. “Wagah” is a patriotic poem; Wagah being the place of division of the sister countries India and Pakistan. She studied art at Shantiniketan and Peking (Beijing). Her paintings reveal the Chinese influence. She has worked mainly in watercolours and oils. Her themes are mainly landscapes and women. Her mastery over Chinese traditional paintings is astounding. Her paintings are full of happiness and hope. She has received the highest of praise from Chinese painters and connoisseurs. Xu Beihong, a great master of oils and Chinese paintings, has described her paintings as being “vivid as flying butterflies” (Qtd.in Lin 85 ). Being a very private person, Jaya had second thoughts on holding an exhibition of her paintings. She reveals her inner feelings in the following poem, “One Man Show”:

Where shall I hide?
The words of my brush
That are floodlit
They are my witnesses
Innocent, mysterious and totally speechless
The paintings betray
Appasamy has worked in watercolours, most of the time. The themes were simple, there were no pretensions nor did she allow herself to be buffeted around by prevailing sundry currents. An example of her painting is given (Fig. 19. Page 204) it has an "innocence" which is very typical of her style and personality. In both her paintings and her poetry Jaya is more studied and conventional. The intensity that one sees in Das are lacking here. Her education gives her work a polish that masks her genuine feelings. However, similarities are inevitable in paintings done by contemporaries of the same gender and hailing from the same background. Similarity is seen in:

1) The theme and style. The common theme is woman, especially nude women who appear to be waiting for something or someone to turn up.

2) Abundance of body images in her poems and paintings reveal that she shares the strong belief of contemporary women painter-poets in the "uniqueness of womanhood" to borrow Alka Nigam's words (103).

3) The rendering of figures in oil paintings is similar to that of Das's rendering, especially in the massing of forms in a very simplistic manner.
Fig. 19. Lady Sitting on a Rock. Watercolour. 1979. Jaya Appasamy, rpt.
They differ in the following ways:

1) Many of Appasamy's paintings, especially the landscapes are symbolic.

2) Das is yet to produce a poem that can be classified as devotional, whereas Appasamy has penned a devotional poem titled “Hymn to Shiva” (15).

Arpana Cour (1954—)

Cour is a painter and a freelance writer. She has held exhibitions of her paintings at several galleries in India. She has edited The Directory of Indian Women Today. She has contributed poems to The Hindustan Times, Youth Times, National Herald, etc.. Cour paints people most of the time, with surreal, unlined faces. The paintings have people who are dreaming, dancing, drawing. They all have long-fingered hands—a characteristic of Cour herself. The sense of spirituality recurs in her paintings. She says that she used to visit the tombs of Sufi saints and the dargahs too. Perhaps she came under the influence of their poetry. Her poem “My Love” is self-revelatory:

Whatever they say of love is wrong

It does not grow like a song

It leaps and falls, cries
with outstretched hands one moment
and opens its parched lips
to swallow all the hungers of the earth. (118)

Her use of words such as thirst, hungers and fever makes us see the resemblance of her poetry to that of Das. The same intensity is evident in her paintings too. Cour has done a series of paintings on her visit to Brindavan, the birthplace of Lord Krishna. His hold over her is as strong as it is over Das. This is evident in a painting titled "Widows at Brindavan" (Fig. 20, Page 208). The hapless women see their Lord in the waters of the Yamuna— their longing to join him is mournfully rendered. Though her paintings contain a sense of mysticism, and are often symbolic and surreal they are grounded in the daily life of the people of India. She feels that her supreme achievement is the bringing together of the mystic and social strains. She is very sensitive to the suffering of humanity. I would like to quote Ameena Meer who said of Cour: “She is moved by the spiritual, the religious ecstasy of Karbala at Iraq, the living history in Babylon and Athens, the peace at the tombs of Sufi saints; but she is equally affected by the physical reality around her, the widows, destitute and shaven, chanting at Brindavan, beggars lining the route at Nizamuddin, even newspaper sellers at traffic signals” (67). Cour makes use of a number of symbols. Arrows symbolize
sufferings water symbolizes death, kites and kite flying becomes the symbol of male freedom and woman enclosed in a box or forcefully immersed in water is symbolic of the limitations forced on woman.

Cour's paintings are similar to Das's in many ways:

1) Similarity is evident in their choice of the subjects for painting, for example, mother and child, abuse and humiliation of women.

2) Their paintings reveal the influence of traditional art. In Cour the influence is seen in the rendering of the background with pink and green hills.

3) Both the artists pay very little attention to perspective and there is deliberate distortion of the bodies. Cour's paintings especially depict figures in physically impossible positions. The figures are generally long and imposing, their shapes dominating the canvas.

4) Another obvious similarity is seen in the eyes of the female figures in their paintings. They seem to be staring straight at the viewer.

5) Cour too has painted a widow-emaciated, bald, barely a woman draped in white cloth. Her eyes penetrate the viewer almost accusingly reminding of the injustice and humiliation she has suffered.
Fig. 20. Widows at Vrindaban.

(Oil Painting. Arpana Cour rpt. in The India Magazine Vol. 8 May 1988)
Cour's poems do not seem to be as effective as her paintings. Her poems are milder in nature. The intensity seen in the paintings is missing here. A few lines from her poem “My Love” are quoted below:

whatever they say of love is wrong
it does not grow like a song
it leaps, and falls, cries
with outspread arms one moment
and opens its parched lips
to swallow all the hungers of the earth (118)

As Rajalakshmi Debee Bhattacharya says:

These women poet painters stand poles apart from ... Kamala Das. At the same time they are rooted in her and linked with her, sharing the same ambience and the same concerns. These poets and perhaps women poet painters anywhere in the world, inhabit the same women's world. It is impossible to get out of one's skin. They possess distinctly feminine sensibilities (161).

Das has a lot in common with Tagore too, perhaps due to the fact that they shared the same kind of background. The classical painters' works are rather different, their environment was different, and their priorities were different. However, one common factor stands out – their
need to explore a second creative medium, arising from a sense of incompleteness in their chosen field or medium of work.

Poet painters are thus, more than artists, are more than poets, for they say more than what is seen on the surface.
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