



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: Merrily Weisbord

## Kamala Das: A Literary Dialogue

Usha Kishore and  
Dr B. Hariharan

**Kamala Das Suraiya** (1934-2009), who also wrote under the pen name of Madhavikutty, was a bilingual writer from the South Indian state of Kerala and one of the most popular and most controversial poets of Indian English. As a major Indian poet of contemporary times, Das has attracted international attention by her bold and previously unarticulated expressions of womanhood. The recognition of Das as an Indian poet in English came with the PEN Asian Poetry Prize in 1963. Since then her poems have been published in many anthologies including the *World Anthology of Living Poets* (1973). Her initial poetry collections in English are: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Tonight, this Savage Rite* (Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, 1979). Many other collections were published subsequently, incorporating both new poems and poems from the above collections.

Some of them are: *Collected Poems* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996), *Encountering Kamala* (2007) and a posthumous collection, *Wages of Love* ed. Suresh Kohli in 2013. *Collected Poems* won the Sahitya Akademi (New Delhi) award in 1984. Other works in English include her novel, *Alphabet of Lust* (1976), her autobiography, *My Story*, and short stories *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* (1977) and *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992).

The initial part of this literary dialogue on Kamala Das between Usha Kishore and Dr B. Hariharan took place at the Institute of English, Thiruvananthapuram, where Usha was on a study trip from Edinburgh Napier University. The following is an email dialogue, incorporating the initial face to face discourse.

**UK:** *Namaste* Dr Hariharan! I gather that we are both fascinated by the writings of Kamala Das. What was your literary association with the writer?

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**HB: *Namaste, Usha!* We sure are! I first met Kamala Das, thanks to my evolving friendship with the Canadian writer Merrily Weisbord. I met Kamala Das in her apartment in Cochin when Merrily had come to meet her as part of her project which was then tentatively titled *From Malabar to Montreal*. It was a memorable meeting. The first thing that struck me was Kamala Das's spontaneity and her exuberance. And she knew how to channel it as an artist.**

**UK:** You were closely involved with Merrily Weisbord's project, which culminated in the book, *The Love Queen of Malabar*.<sup>1</sup> What was your involvement in this project?

**HB:** My involvement in Merrily's project began when we met first in 1997 at a Conference on Canadian Studies organised at the University of Kerala. I had a paper at the conference titled 'The Story of Healing in Linda Griffith and Maria Campbell's *Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation*.' Merrily found the paper interesting, in particular what I had to say about cross-cultural sharing. Our exchange of ideas happened before Kamala Das went to Canada. After she returned from Canada, Kamala published *Ottayadippatha* (translated as *Narrow Lane*), which also recounts her Canadian journey. Merrily asked me to translate these sections in Malayalam<sup>2</sup> for her into English and I obliged. I also procured for Merrily some of the articles written in Malayalam magazines after Das assumed the name of Kamala Suraiya, after her Islamic conversion. We also had discussions on Malabar<sup>3</sup> Muslim names, the NDF (National Development Front), a radical Muslim youth wing and some of the political and cultural ramifications of Kamala's conversion to Islam. There were many instances when we discussed Kamala's zest for life, her playfulness and inventiveness. When the full draft of the book was complete, Merrily asked me to visit her in Cochin.<sup>4</sup> She gave the manuscript to me and asked me to read it while she went to Punnayurkulam.<sup>5</sup> She shared the manuscript with me before she showed it to Kamala, for she was not sure about the response she might get. I think I was the first one to read the manuscript before Kamala Das saw it. I read the whole manuscript and when Merrily returned, I had a long discussion with her. Merrily went back to editing the manuscript and it took some time before it was ready for Kamala's eyes. She mentions this in the book. I was witness then to how Merrily worked as a creative non-fiction writer. I was also able to help her source the bibliography on Kamala, appended at the end of the book.

**UK:** Weisbord in her book mentions your cross-cultural interpretation of Das. Can you please elaborate on that?

**HB:** Yes. She was referring to the way I tried to read the Canadian author Maria Campbell's play *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation*. My paper at the conference where I

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<sup>1</sup> Merrily Weisbord, *The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Malayalam is the language of Kerala

<sup>3</sup> Northern region of the south western Indian state of Kerala.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Kochi is a major port in Central Kerala.

<sup>5</sup> Punnayurkulam - Birth place of Kamala Das in the Thrissur district in North Kerala.

met Merrily, focussed on the way this play tried to draw out the ways in which cultural spaces are acknowledged. It is the way one receives modes of thinking and practice, different from ours, that mark lived spaces. It is a perception that makes for a contextual recognition of oneself. I tried to say that it is important to know one's responsibility as story-teller for that has an important bearing on one's creativity.

UK: What makes Weisbord's book different from any other biography?

HB: Merrily Weisbord's *The Love Queen of Malabar* is an amazing narrative of memories. It is much more than a memoir as it reveals the joys, fears, anxieties of two women across two continents. The book is not one more story about Kamala Das as woman and writer. It is fine writing that recognises the many faces of Kamala Das whose inventiveness was a large step ahead of the public. To talk of two cultures would be a cliché for there is a great deal of sharing that underscores the journey of Merrily and Kamala. Merrily Weisbord's narrative does not overwhelm her subject. She listens and in that listening hears, not just Kamala but other voices. It is a great way of collaborating to tell stories. She becomes part of the collaborative story in a significantly different way for she does not write herself into another's life story. It is a great effort to work your way through issues of cultural appropriation and cross-cultural collaboration and Merrily has done just that. A very striking quality of the book is that it does not make Kamala the exotic other. That is its strength. This book goes a long way in taking forward Indo-Canadian cultural relations. *The Love Queen of Malabar* is a must read as it takes head on the sheer poetry of the love queen's life as woman and poet and for its remarkable take on the complexity called Kamala Das.

UK: Can you shed some light on Das's *Annamalai Poems*?

HB: Kamala Das recounts her travel across the State during the Emergency<sup>6</sup> in a book that was published much later by DC Books (2009) titled *Keralasancharam* (trans. *Travels in Kerala*). The 'Annamalai Poems' were written when she went to the Annamalai hills in Tamil Nadu to recoup her inner strength. These poems chart a journey through the interior. I recall P.P. Raveendran had written about it in an essay titled 'Text as History, History as Text: A Reading of Kamala Das's "Annamalai Poems"'. These poems were written after her defeat in the Parliamentary elections of 1984. To quote a couple:

There were nights when I heard  
my own voice call me out  
of dreams, gifting such rude awakenings... (II)

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<sup>6</sup> Emergency is a reference to the political state of India, an eighteen month time scale, between 1975-1977, when Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) declared a state of emergency across the country, when she ruled by decree, suspending elections, curbing civil rights and censoring the press.

**If someone would only remove the sun  
from my way I would not have to face  
another sorrowful day... (IV) <sup>7</sup>**

**UK:** From the State of Emergency in India to Das's running for elections, let us consider the poet's involvement in politics. Was this a genuine need of the poet to serve the people or another of her endless quests of the self?

**HB:** Apart from contesting the 1984 elections from Trivandrum unsuccessfully, she was not into politics. When Emergency was clamped down, she was travelling across Kerala for the government to prepare a report on the tourism potential of the State. This was a time when a lot of writers and activists were very critical of the clampdown and the government's Home Affairs department in Kerala.

**UK:** I have always admired Das's work. In 2007, I met Kamala Das at her Cochin apartment and interviewed her.<sup>8</sup> During my interview, in response to my question whether she was influenced by her mother, the renowned Malayalam poet, [Nalapat Balamani Amma](#), Das's reply was: 'I've often seen my mother writing, sprawled on a four poster bed. This is where the influence stops.' Do you agree with this statement?

**HB:** Yes, I agree. For Kamala's writing very much spoke of the lived experience in our times. Her poems and stories capture moments that are always in the making. This is where her playfulness comes. Her poems and stories are threshold experiences. She played on the edge and so was way ahead of her times and critics.

**UK:** Don't you think there is an element of nurture in Das's work?

**HB:** Nurture in the sense of something that is deliberate, yes. I feel she discovered how to grow her work and this process describes the edge and passion in her writing. Telling a story can be quite deliberate; in her poems and stories she explores the limits of truth. 'Summer in Calcutta', the 'Annamalai Poems' or even *My Story*<sup>9</sup> come to mind.

**UK:** When you consider Das's autobiographical *My Story* – is this fact or fiction or magic realism?

**HB:** It is a remarkable narrative that plays with content, form, the assumptions that readers bring to it in the form of desire, scholarship, or even generic finality. It has the facts of fiction. This makes it real. In a sense, therefore, the form that gives shape to the narrative is very

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<sup>7</sup>Kamala Das, 'Annamalai Poems,' Poems II & IV in *Selected Poems* ed. Devindra Kohli (Haryana: Penguin Books, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>The interview was published in the journal *Kavya Bharati* No. 20 (2008), SCILET: The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, American College, Madurai, India.

<sup>9</sup>Kamala Das, *My Story* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1998).

**factual. She plays with the staples of the assumptions we have of subject formations. And yet, a lot of readers try to read a confessional self in the story in *My Story*. Such an approach determines the story in a certain way and the facts of the story elude the reader. *My Story* is an interrogation of the neat categories we have of the 'I' formation in literary selfies.**

**UK:** At the Institute of English, I came across your paper in *The New Frontier*<sup>10</sup> entitled 'Mask-Shots: Kamala Das'/Suraiya's *My Story*.' You elaborate on her 'narrative emplotment reconstructing the life of the self' and also the 'the art of narrative exposure' for the sake of an audience.

**HB:** When I opened my paper trying to draw attention to the core issue in writing autobiography, I was conscious that there is a very deliberate arrangement of many stories, which are evocative of a range of texts. This is what I tried to explain when I drew attention to 'narrative emplotment reconstructing the life of the self.' As readers, we experience a story in the way we name our discovery of connections of her conscious arrangement of stories. I was trying to see if the way in which Kamala tells stories could be understood by imagining how films were exposed when sequences are shot, when there are double roles to be performed by the same actor in a single frame. Film-makers employ masking as a technique here. I adopted, or perhaps stretched this to discuss Kamala's kind of narrative masking and specific mode of emplotment. I tried to indicate this while referring to her 'art of narrative exposure.'

**UK:** Are these devices transferred to her poetry as well?

**HB:** I wouldn't say these are her devices. Das's use of language is distinctly different in her poems. She thinks in different ways according to the language and genre in which she writes. I think it is this flexibility that distinguishes her. Consider for example, 'The Dance of the Eunuchs,' or 'The Wild Bougainvillea' or the poem she wrote when her son Jaisurya was born. The theme and rhythm of language resonate to create those startling moments in the dance of the eunuchs:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came  
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals  
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,  
Jingling. Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with  
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and  
They danced, oh, they danced till they bled. There were green  
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some  
Were dark and some were almost fair.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Journal published by the University of Kerala.

<sup>11</sup>'The Dance of the Eunuchs,' in *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das* (Kerala: DC Books, 1996).

And the agony of a mother's love at childbirth, along with the contemplation of a loveless relationship in the eponymous poem for her son:

It rained on the day my son  
Was born...

When rain stopped and the light was gay on our  
Casuarina leaves, it was early  
Afternoon. And, then, wailing into light  
He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust  
Into the faded light. They raised him  
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son,  
Separated from darkness that was mine  
And in me ...  
Out of a mire of a moonless night was  
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of  
The wrong is born the right and out of night  
The sun-drenched golden day.<sup>12</sup>

**UK:** Do you think there is a degree of narcissism and hysteria in Das's work?

**HB:** I do not think so. She did not write literary selfies. As a reader if I search for Das in her works, I would have assumed her presence in my mind reading the text. I would end up discovering the hysteria of my mind searching for something very elusive. I would suggest instead that she was very much Ovidian. I am not sure if there are other women poets writing in English in India who dared to sing like this Ovid. She risked singing her songs and for this reason I think of Orpheus. It was a big risk she took with writing *My Story*, her risqué story of social morality. In the process I think she also discovered how to play with the idea of the poetic personae. I feel that when we insist on narcissism, we become Maenads who tear Orpheus limb to limb. It is as though the risqué has to be smothered by hysteria.

**UK:** The *poetic personae* of Kamala Das in her confessional poetry (in the autobiographical mode) are often interpreted as the poetic voice. Do you agree?

**HB:** I would say that the poetic personae are very playful and so I am wary of the term confessional used to describe her poetry though she has been read in that fashion. I feel that is very limiting and does not do justice to her *oeuvre*. What would be the confessional voice of a poet who 'speaks in three languages, write in two, and dream[s] in one'<sup>13</sup>? I also feel that it has become fashionable to claim to have a confessional poet in Indian English Writing.

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpts from 'Jaisurya,' *The Love Queen of Malabar*.

<sup>13</sup> Quote from Das's well known poem, 'An Introduction'

**UK:** Do you feel that Das portrays her South Indian identity and sensibility in her poetry?

**HB:** One sees the Malayalam writer in her short stories and a cosmopolitan identity at play in her poetry. And yet, there are some stories where you see her appealing to something that is more than regional.

**UK:** In her poetry, Das explores the region of North Kerala, which highlights a Malabar identity, just as Arundhati Roy portrays Central Travancore. What do you think?

**HB:** Das uses a lot of North Kerala and other geographies as well. She did that throughout her writing career. For this reason, I would not hazard a comparison with Arundhati Roy. I feel that the canvas, the material and even the way of handling the regions are quite different. Roy works within the limits of the Syrian Christian world in her first novel and attempts at a kind of journalism as novel in her second outing. Das captures more than the North Malabar cadences in her work. Consider, for instance, narrative worlds she conjures in her Malayalam short stories, her memoirs, and novels.

**UK:** Can Das's projection of her Nair heritage and her rebellion against patriarchy in a nominally matriarchal society be read as part of her projection of a new identity, a new Indian woman emerging in Post Independent India?

**HB:** Certainly. But she cannot be tied down to just that. I am thinking in particular of works like *Pakshiyudemanam* (The Smell of the Bird), *Neipayasam* (Ghee pudding), 'A Doll for the Child Prostitute,' the stories collected in *Padmavati the Harlot* and *Neermathalam*<sup>14</sup> *Pootha Kalam* (trans. 'The Flowering Spell of Neermathalam'). And, of course, the collection of poems, *Ya Allah*.

**UK:** Do you consider Kamala Das a feminist poet?

**HB:** I don't think she wore any 'ism' up her sleeve for the world to see. The performing voice that shapes her poems allies with feminist concerns and it is possible to make an argument based on that. Her poems and stories are very much concerned with companionship and I feel this has not elicited serious critical attention.

**UK:** Was she well read on the subject of feminism?

**HB:** I am not sure if she read books on the subject of feminism. But she would have got her education on the concerns that feminists have from Calcutta, Bombay, and North Kerala. She spoke her mind and this is perhaps what makes one think she had read up on feminism.

**UK:** Do you think she was influenced by any contemporary Western or Feminist Movements?

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<sup>14</sup>*Neermathalam*, known as the sacred garlic pear or temple plant is a native of South, East and South East Asia. Its botanical name is *Crateva magna*, aka *Crateva religiosa*.

**HB: I have not come across Das's remarks on this subject. She soaked in much of what she saw and heard and it was transformed in her works.**

**UK:** Despite Das's denial that she is a feminist, she was one. We agreed on this!

**HB: That was her signature. We can agree to disagree!**

**UK:** I feel that Kamala Das's portrayal of womanhood has been a highly debated issue, ever since the publication of *My Story*. My feeling is that Das's poetry is highly autobiographical, subjective and confessional, projecting an acute awareness of her femininity. Perhaps here, we will have to adhere to our dissenting views! I think that initially her confessional poetry, comprising of her failed marriage, extra-marital affairs, her portrayals of the female body and her endless female hungers, was a shock to traditional Kerala and to the wider India. In 1976, when *My Story* was published, it created an uproar in Indian literary and social circles. With her personal experience being the basis of many of her confessional poems, hasn't Das been simultaneously praised and chastised by critics, Indian and Western?

However, I am tending to conform to the theory that Das's sensual adventures were more fantasies than reality. Her so-called real-life exploits can also be read as magic realism or bio fiction. So the question arises whether Das's poetic personae, usually attributed to be autobiographical, are real women or imagined? Whatever the case may be, Das's expression of womanhood has attracted international attention by the bold, uninhibited articulation of feminine urges. Other Indian women poets, contemporaries of Das, with a similar strong feminist slant and expression of sexuality are Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia and Eunice de Souza. However, my reading is that there is a strong element of feminist politics in Das's poetry. She breaks contemporary gender stereotypes in her poetry.

**HB: Yes, this is an important strand in her work. As she details the thought patterns that create these stereotypes, she simultaneously works in other thoughts, images, emotions or value systems. The internal dynamics that result foreground the stereotype for what it is. The way she foregrounds stereotypes is important. That is her politics.**

**UK:** Beyond the sexuality, I feel poems like 'Introduction' are subversive in the fact that they challenge patriarchal social norms. I recall K. Satchidanandan's<sup>15</sup> critique that women suffer cultural scripts in their bodies and women writers are like the mythical woman warrior who went into battle scarred by the thin blades which her parents used to write fine lines of script on her body. 'An Introduction' highlights a number of issues like child marriage, arranged marriage, male dominance and marital rape. It is to be noted that Das also uses the word rape in this context in her autobiography.

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<sup>15</sup>K. Satchidanandan is an Indian writer, academic, translator and critic. The critique mentioned here is K. Satchidanandan's Introduction to *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*.

'An Introduction'<sup>16</sup> is a poem that can be considered a polyphonic text, articulating several of the poet's portrayals of womanhood. The poem is a dramatic monologue with the exposition of the poetic persona, which proceeds from rebellion to helpless reconciliation. As you know, the poem is one of Das's best known works and is a powerful lyric that explores female consciousness. However, one needs to note the disillusioned closure of the poem, as the poetic persona confesses that:

It is I who laugh, it is I who lie dying  
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,  
I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

The poem indicates that the quest for female identity culminates in the total annihilation of the female personality, which becomes a subservient part of the dominating male ego. The woman's function in the patriarchal society is primarily one of negation and Das's very act of writing breaks the set rules and norms of this status quo.

Along the same vein, Das is considered an iconoclast who shook the literary world with her frank and bold confessional writings. What is your view on this?

**HB: She was very sure of what she was doing when she wrote and was way ahead of her readers and critics. Das invented herself every time she wrote. Her poems are about how she comprehended her thoughts on the page. The Confession Box has been around for too long. The problem with the confessional mode is that it has a theological underpinning and supposes an authority, which could be the reader or addressee that can manifest variously. Kamala Das engages with the stereotype of being a woman, mother, wife, lover, and poet in a way that she discovers the plot that creates the type. This is the freedom one reads and recognises in her writing. This is her frankness and her iconoclasm emerges here.**

**UK: Das's poetry also has strong religious references. Can Das's 'Krishna references' be read as a discourse of her unconventional feminine sensibility and a resistance against patriarchal values?**

**HB: There is a reinvention of Krishna in her works, and like every reinvention of Krishna in the Indian tradition, it speaks the language of the unconventional. It is the language of celebration. Such a spirit of celebration upturns patriarchy. The *Gita Govinda*<sup>17</sup> is the best example.**

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<sup>16</sup> *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*.

<sup>17</sup> *Gita Govinda* (Song of Govinda) is a sequence of Sanskrit lyrical poems on the Hindu God Krishna and his consort Radha, composed by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Indian poet, Jayadeva. The verses of *Gita Govinda* often form an oral narrative in Indian households, where the Sanskrit text is often set to music and more often sung than read.

**UK:** I feel that there is a touch of the *Gita Govinda*, which portrays the erotic feminine sensibility of Radha?

**HB: Absolutely. She recounts how as a young girl they used to dance to Jayadeva's songs. The spirit of celebration marks the element of Bhakti. This is ecstasy. Krishna is this ecstasy for her.**

**UK:** I also read an erotic *Bhakti* element as with the medieval poetry of Andal and Mirabai.<sup>18</sup> The erotic feminine sensibility of Radha deciphered in *Gita Govinda* can be seen in Das's poem, 'Radha,' where the protagonist melts into the core of Krishna. Another poem on a similar vein is 'Krishna'<sup>19</sup> where the poet speaks in the voice of Radha, the eternal lover:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,  
I cannot see beyond it.

The element of *Prema Bhakti* or devotional love, as elaborated in the *Gita Govinda* can be glimpsed in poems like 'Vrindavan',<sup>20</sup> where the woman lies to her husband about her divine lover, Krishna and makes excuses of the marks on her breast as:

it was so dark  
Outside, I tripped over the brambles in the woods.

This certainly draws parallel with Jayadeva's verse that celebrates Radha's metaphysical ecstasy in her carnal love for Krishna:

I savor passion's joyful time; his lotus eyes are barely open.  
My body falls like a limp vine...

(*Gita Govinda*: The Sixth Song. 'Careless Krishna')<sup>21</sup>

We have discussed the influence of the *Gita Govinda* on Kamala Das's verse. Considering Das's other poetic influences, both her own or attributed by academics, let us re-examine the poet's oft quoted statement that she did not read. However, there are influences of Sarojini Naidu, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson in her confessional poetry. Who do you think are Kamala Das's main influences?

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<sup>18</sup> Andal was a 9<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet, from Tamil Nadu, South India. She one of the earliest women exponents of the Indian medieval *Bhakti* (devotion) tradition of poetry, composing devotional lyrics overflowing with erotic ecstasy. Mirabai was a 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet from the North Western Indian state of Rajasthan. Mirabai too employs the erotic element in her devotional poetry.

<sup>19</sup> *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord*, trans. Barabara Stoler Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2016)

**HB: I would return to *Gita Govinda* and the writers/artists she met while living in Bombay. And perhaps the stories she must have heard while staying in her ancestral home. I feel that the syndicated columns she wrote and the artists whom she met in Bombay, the stories she heard in Punnayarkulam from the women, all shaped her literary sensibility more than Naidu, Plath or Dickinson. I am not sure if research has been able to definitely establish literary influences.**

**UK: Das lived and wrote during the Independence Movement, her poetry does not reflect that, although her prose highlights certain elements of the movement. Her poetry often is concerned more with womanhood and a Kerala identity, rather than nationhood.**

**HB: She was growing up into a young girl during the independence movement. She did float a political outfit in the early 80s and did try to champion the cause of destitute women but that has not received significant attention. This could be the reason why she does not concern herself with questions of nationhood. But her writing that focussed on women and issues of identity certainly has a political dimension to it. She was a poet of the interior, discovering the vagaries and variations of love. Her poems explore, to borrow the title of Carol Shields' novel, 'the republic of love'. While talking about the film adaptation of her novel, Shields had this to say about love: 'Love is, in the end, a magic and mythical force, inexplicable, indecipherable. Its arrival cannot be arranged nor its properties deconstructed. We can only marvel, as I hope the audience of this film will marvel, that, despite our fear and cynicism, it occasionally enters our lives and transforms us.' Every line in Das's poetry speaks of the transformative power of love.**

**UK: Despite this, don't you think Das's poetry traces the evolution of the nation in the empowerment of women?**

**HB: True. The journey that discovers the interior evolves to open up the potential of what it means to be a woman. You learn to hear from where the voice is coming. That is important for national imaginings.**

**UK: I feel that Das's contribution to the formation and evolution of Indian feminist discourse warrants a re-examination. The element of sexuality in her work needs to be extracted from her socio-cultural background (where she has been classified as erotic, vulgar and catering to nymphomaniac tendencies) and examined in the broader context of postcolonial feminism. The stereotypical interpretation of feminist writers like Das needs to advance to a more objective analysis in the context of Indian feminism. More emphasis needs to be placed on the South Indian matriarchal traditions and the plight of womanhood within this so-called female-oriented tradition needs to re-interpreted. Das's preoccupation with sexuality signifies the maturing of the Indian feminist, who has broken the fetters of tradition and created a space for herself within the postcolonial nation. The very private voice of Das thus takes universal proportions and maps a space for the postcolonial female subject. In this context of feminism, Das's work is open to misreads within and without India as often her location in the Kerala**

matriarchal tradition is ignored. However her work provides scope for dialogue in the international feminist arena as it feeds into the articulation of sameness, by the challenges to patriarchy. Her work brings to light the woman question, which is one of the major concerns of the postcolonial nation state of India.

When we talk of postcolonialism in the broader sense, we certainly need to consider one of its primary component elements, language. What do you think of Das's use of English and her contribution to the evolution of Indian Poetry in English? Do you see an attempt in the decolonisation of the language, as in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel?

**HB: She was not a nightingale,<sup>22</sup> but then a poet who discovered a language that was open to the changing times. She discovered landscapes of the mind in poem after poem. Perhaps she was decolonising the mind. As she said, 'Only the soul knows how to sing'.**

**UK:** Das's use of language can be interpreted on two counts: a female corporeal language and a strong cultural language that translates Indian culture, more specifically the culture of Kerala. Before Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair, Das was one of the first Malayali<sup>23</sup> writers to bring such uniquely Kerala imagery into her work.

On the first count, Das can be credited as the first poet bequeathing Indian English poetry with a new discourse – the female corporeal language. Having mapped the symbolic trail of the feminine text, Das proceeds with the personal in her pronouns, nouns and references and a lexical field of feminine paraphernalia. These recurring words explore the mind of women and elaborate their world. Some of them are: bangles, gems, scents of sandal and musk, dolls, lipstick, hair dye, honeymoon, womb and pigtails. This female diction presents a female vision. The feminist voice in Das would have fallen on deaf ears if it did not possess the timbre of the feminist corporeal language, which challenges the established order by creating a distinct identity for Indian womanhood.

Following on to cultural translation, one example is the prose poem, 'The Swamp<sup>24</sup>,' where the oracle of the goddess Bhagavati is described vividly, portraying a uniquely Kerala image, with long hair, a cummerbund of bells and scimitar:

the bhagavati's oracle took two steps forward to swing back  
again the chosen one with the long hair the waistlet of bells and  
the scimitar he spoke to my grandmother in a warble not his own...

The reference is to the *vellichappadu* or temple oracle, usually seen in the temples of the Goddess Bhagavati. Literally translated as the 'light-bringer,' the *vellichappadu* is usually a

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<sup>22</sup> Reference to Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), poet, writer and nationalist, who was known under the sobriquet of 'The Nightingale of India.'

<sup>23</sup> Malayali (literally, speaker of Malayalam) is a synonym for a Keralite.

<sup>24</sup> *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1973).

priest, recognised by his shoulder-length hair, red *dhoti*,<sup>25</sup> heavy brass anklets, a cummerbund of bells and a sickle. It is believed in Kerala that the *vellichappadu* becomes possessed by the Goddess especially during temple festivals, where the Goddess is invoked in music and dance.

Another poem that presents cultural translation is 'The Palmyra Tree',<sup>26</sup> where a Kerala specific legend is highlighted. In the poem, Das explores the legend and gives the reader a portrayal of the much discussed Yakshi<sup>27</sup> and describes her as a celestial ogress:

Who descended on at dusk,  
Disguised as a maiden,  
To lure an unwary male  
into her abode, and then  
after a tumultuous mating  
devoured his flesh and  
flung down his bones.

('The Palmyra Tree')

However, these are Hindu images. Let us now talk about Das's conversion to Islam. You have already raised this. Don't you think that a controversy that haunted Das in later years is her Islamic conversion?

**HB: I feel that she was trapped. A position such as the much publicised 'love jihad' might be construed as emanating from the far right, but that is only a cover up. And yet, I would also add that she did what she did. She was a poet. This modern day Orpheus did not turn back to see her lover but carried her Krishna along.**

**UK:** What was the aftermath of this controversial conversion in the socio-cultural and political spheres of Kerala?

**HB: There were political statements and different kinds of threats. She was idolised and there were volunteers guarding her house. It did give some teeth to the radical elements in Islam. The whole question of conversion did come up for discussion in the visual and print media; much was written about it. The conversion was also consumed. When she died, her body was brought to Trivandrum and thousands gathered to have a last glimpse of Madhavikutty as her mortal remains reached Kochi and from there to Trivandrum.<sup>28</sup> People from all walks of life came to pay their last respects to her when her body was kept in the Senate Hall of the University of Kerala before the last rites at the Palayam mosque near the University.**

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<sup>25</sup> Dhoti is a traditional Indian male garment, comprising of a long piece of rectangular cloth, wrapped around the waist and legs.

<sup>26</sup> *Encountering Kamala: Selections from the Poetry of Kamala Das*, ed. Andrew Arkin (New York: Gorgeous Notions Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Yakshi is a malevolent female ghost according to Kerala legend and folklore.

<sup>28</sup> Trivandrum, now known as Thiruvananthapuram, is the capital of Kerala.

**UK:** According to Das (re: my interview), her *Ya Allah* poems are based on her initial reactions to Islam and her conversion to that religion? Would you agree?

**HB:** Yes, they were published after she converted to Islam. Whatever she wrote and published till her conversion was even conceptually different. She seems to use a very different language and framework to describe love or even a relationship with god here:

Gracious Allah  
Known to be forgiving  
I have joined your household  
As its one tainted slave.

...But in loving You  
I did the rightmost thing to do.

('Ya Allah')<sup>29</sup>

**UK:** It is interesting that Kamala Das's work is still considered a landmark in the redefinition of Indian English poetry and the emergence of the New Indian Woman, post-independence. Her poems often form part of the British secondary and undergraduate syllabi. I have taught 'An Introduction' and other poems, with excellent responses from my British students.

**HB:** Kamala Das's work continues to be taught in school and university syllabi, internationally. There are a lot of researchers who continue to study her work. She is one author who stands apart in post independent India particularly for the way in which she draws our attention. Whenever I have taught her poems, I learn to listen to the soul that learnt how to sing and be heard.

**UK:** Dr Hariharan, Thank you for this enlightening discussion on one of India's most sensational writers.

**HB:** Thank you for this opportunity to talk about Kamala Das who continues to haunt us like Orpheus.



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<sup>29</sup> *Encountering Kamala.*

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