INTRODUCTION
Feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry

The thesis, "Feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry" intends to explore Das as a poet from feminine perspective. Das's autobiography 'My Story', and her poetry, are obverse and reverse of the same coin. It is her poetic manifesto.

Das's poetry springs from her personal experience, even though it is watered and enriched by her study of the Western writers. Therefore, she says "Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Materlink, Mansfield and Virginia Woolf?" (My Story, Page 108). Her poetry and My Story have parallel situations. Her recollection of childhood, her parents and their attitude to her; her marital life, extra-marital affairs, craze for security and permanence, quest for ideal love finally lead her to accept Radha-Krishna myth. She goes beyond this in reverting to Islam with a new name Suriaya. In Das's composition: "When I got married my husband said,

You may have freedom, as much as you want."1

We know that her husband gave her freedom to carry on with love affairs out of wedlock. Consequently, her father's friends and villagers came with whetted appetites and looked like sick hounds. Lesbianism and rape is played out in school when young girls fall in love with her. While traveling in a train, a college student creeps into her berth. Her doctors, teachers and friends hold her hands. Carlo, the Italian friend, the black god, and many other old men kiss and cuddle her. Not only these but her numerous male cousins grab and kiss her. Thus the picture presented of Das is the iconic of the sexless emancipated woman. She claims to be "ready for love, ripe for a
same time she is vulnerable, gentle, passive and incapable of denying another pleasure. After her transformation, she is snifffy about freedom and feminists. This journey for her was a journey through fire and water to arrive at her wisdom that God is formless and is:

1. Say (O Muhammad (RSW): "He is Allah, (the) one
2. [Allah - the self-sufficient Master. Whom all creatures need, (He neither eats nor drinks)]
3. "He begets not, nor was the begotten.
4. "And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him." [Al-Quran- Surat Al-Ikhlas]

Undoubtedly, we admire her indomitable courage in accepting the Truth, so also, her calibre as a born poet. For her poetry is "...like music in the Kael's egg" ("Nani". The Old Playhouse and Other poems. p.40)

Purpose and plan of the Research:

Kamala Das's feminine perspective has not been fully explored in her poetry. The purpose of this study is to fill in the lacuna. Though there are attempts by some of the critics to see various facets of the problem, yet my aim is to pick up and go beyond the insights of the critics sighted. I have recounted what other critics have explored on the feminine perspective in Kamala Das's poetry, and then have struck out on my own by discovering the virgin aspects on the topic of the study.
The scope of the research comprises five chapters:

Chapter I: Survey of Indian Poetry in English
Chapter II: An Indian Perspective of Feminism
Chapter III: Biographical details
Chapter IV: A Critique of Feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry
Chapter V: Conclusion

Select Bibliography

Chapter I

Indian Poetry in English began before Indian Independence. The poets can be divided into three divisions: (I) Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Toru Dutt (1856-1874), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Michael Madhusudan Datt (1824-1873); (II) Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, A-jn Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre, Daruwalla and Kamala Das; (III) (Post Modernism) 1980-Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Vikram Seth and Imtiaz Dharker.

The pre-Independence Indian poets in English are called derivative and imitative. It is a facile remark on them if we take into consideration the nature of literature itself. American, Canadian and Australian poets are no less imitative and derivative. They were not altogether of indigenous growth, but they are the offshoot of European tradition.

The Indian poet writing in English is either called "a dog walking on its hind legs" (in David McCutchion's remarkable phrase), or "whoring after-English gods" as Parthasarty puts it. But the poets of post-Independence have broken away from such
workshop group led by P. Lal.

These new poets stated their aims and broke away from the spell cast on them by Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. Aurobindo was rejected for his philosophy in poetry, because these modern poets laid stress on private, personal concerns. Their poetry did not incorporate schemes of historical or cosmic speculation, a poetry which was concrete rather than abstract, precise and lucid in statement rather than expressed philosophy. Those modern Indian Poets do not have their roots in purely Indian culture. Only a few of them are from Hindu family backgrounds. While Ramanujan and Parathasarathy are born and brought up as Hindu Sri Vaishnavas, many others are either from reformism or modernizing Hindu groups. While Kamala Das has reverted to Islam. Ezekiel's parents were Jews, Dilip Chitre's family are agnostics of Hindu descent. Agha Shahid Ali and Saleem Peeradina are Muslims. Katrak, Daruwalla, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, Darius Cooper and Jimma Anissa are Parsi. Meena Alexander's parents are Syrian Christian community, Jayantha Mahapatra, Deba Patnaik are Christian Converts. Manohar Shetty and Shiv Kumar have rebelled against Hinduism.

The poets of post-modern era promise a variety of new devices including parody, pastiche, collage, inter textuality and literary cannibalism of various degrees. One of the main thematic concern of these poets is the nature of poetry itself. They are involved in the Indian context celebration of difference and the exploitation of ethnicity.
Kamala Das is a feminist of Indian pattern. She comes from the Nair family. She belongs to the tradition of matriarchal society and rituals of folk belief. The traditional beliefs of this society are "carrying milk to the snake shrine and adorning the picture of the goddess Kali. Indian feminism is to assert the shared identity of both genders. That is, both men and women belong to the human race. For Indian women it is part of humanism. It is to understand that woman does not break the human bondage - the relationship between husband and wife even though they turn out to be a square peg in the round hole. Their feminism consists of live and let live. Therefore, the protagonist of Kamala Das puts on man's dress to satisfy her husband's desire to sodomise, after she guesses what her husband did with his friend in the closed room. Indian feminism calls for the creation of an environment where men and women can express themselves freely and move fearlessly. That apart, they are given full opportunity to attain the pinnacle of their potential. Militant feminism is hardly accepted in India. Womanhood is that noble being who accepts things. It does not mean that she accepts suffering. Silent suffering has wrongly become a female characteristic. Womanhood is a celebration of life. Woman gives an opportunity to man to attain his aims and ambitions while the woman herself does not remain backward, ignorant and miserable. Women perform difficult and multiple roles. In house-hold tasks, they sustain their families on their shoulders. From scrubbing to cooking, from washing to mending, the women perform multiple tasks. A maid employed for swapping, scrubbing washing and cleaning is recognized, but the woman of the house, if she does these tasks, she is not recognized to be so. Angel of the house is denied even the status of a servant. The work of managing a household, rearing up children, satisfying the husband in the bed, entertaining the guests and the relatives and looking after the needs of members of the family is no work at all. Thus, house-wives are not given the status of earning
The western mode of feminism began in the 19th century. Mary Wollstonecraft advises women to become masculine. In the Second Sex Simon de Beauvoir says that women have never shared the world equally with men for they are dependent on men. To be equal to men, they have to escape the traditional feminine world. For this act neither their husbands nor society helps them. Merilyn French, in Beyond Power: ON Women, Men and Morals, defines feminism as not only a political movement demanding access to the rewards and responsibilities of the male world, but also to transform society to 'feminize it.' As stated above, the feminist agenda has reverted during 1980 to 'pro-family' stand. Juliet Mitchell points out that, writers such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer have stressed that the women should not adopt the male model of careerism at the cost of their needs for intimacy, family and children. And Germaine Greers says, "The most valuable commodity in the family is a loving heart where happiness consists in seeing others happy."

These feminists do not accept men as a yardstick of excellence of virtue. For them emancipation cannot be attained by acquiring the status of men, but not forcing woman to be feminine and by rejecting the male-female polarity. The characteristic of men and women should not be different. Both men and women should develop not only the masculine qualities, such as, strength, bravery, fearlessness, dominance and competitiveness; and the feminine qualities, such as caring, nurturing, love, timidity and obedience. These are human qualities. As we have stated above, while expounding the Indian mode of feminism that these qualities are not the qualities of
not be loaded as a result of her birth. Motherhood is glorified because of the qualities of caring, sacrificing and tolerance. As a result of this they are confined to the roles of wife, mother and daughter. The qualities mentioned above for women are the most excellent qualities. Men devalue these in favour of power and success. The patriarchal system has denied these qualities for men. Consequently, they are hard and harsh. Pro-family feminists hold that the excellent positive qualities of men and women should be shared by the human race. Since women have proved that they are capable of competing with men in every field, men should learn to develop respect and esteem for women's moral goodness, nurturing and caring. Men and women should complement and complete each other. To be equal of man, woman should not change her excellent qualities but change the system that exploits and takes advantage of her goodness and devalues it.

In the light of the above discussion, we have analysed the feminism of Kamala Das by taking her autobiography and her collections of poems in the chapters that follow in the body of the thesis. For Kamala Das, per se, feminism means search for ideal love and security, identity, quest for the extra-marital love affairs to decide on her own whether one can get ideal love else-where, or only in the company of her husband. In her poems she explores empathetically the plight of women from the moment of deflowering to her husband's indifferent and callous attitude towards her. She experiences throughout her life male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and physical exploitation, the utter disregard for her wishes and her spiritual quests in celebrating the beauty and courage of being a woman.
Kamala Das was born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar in Kerala (Dwivedi 297). Her love poetry began at an early age. Her uncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon worked from morning till night and thought that he had "a blissful life" (Warrior Interview). The poetry of her mother also left an indelible impression on her young mind. Her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma, and the sacred writings kept in her house of Nayyar community by women (India world) did not affect her mind no less. She was educated at home and married at 15 to K. Madhava Das, who was many years older. She bore her first child at 16, but her husband was often in a fatherly role to the children and to her. He encouraged her to associate with people of her own age, and also encouraged her writing. This biographical fact is belied by poetry. She has cast aspersions on her husband for being indifferent to her woes and needs. Her husband was invariably proud of her accomplishments, even when they were controversial. This fact goes much against the picture of her husband, that she has portrayed in her poetry. It is only when one likes the poems of one's wife, one can feel proud of her accomplishments. It is difficult to understand why she writes such derogatory things about her husband. We know that her husband supported her decision when she wished to begin writing. Could such a gesture from her husband should have earned such a despicable portrait unless it is an imaginative rendering of her personal life! She was 16 when her first son was born and says that she "was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born" (Warrior interview). Das had to do writing along with her house-hold duties; unlike her great uncle. After her family went to bed, she started writing poems til' morning. This told on her health "There was only the kitchen table where I could cut vegetables and after all plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing" (Warrior interview). Consequently, she fell ill and that gave her more time to write.
how could she blame him? Her husband was proud of her even when the scandal and controversy swirled around her sexually charged poetry and her, My Story, triggered dispute. Her husband was very proud of her (Warrior interview). Though he was ailing for 3 years, before he breathed his last, his presence brought her tremendous joy and comfort. She has been successful as a syndicated columnist. She has given up writing poetry as it does not sell in India. Her columns do. She writes columns from women's issues and child care to politics.

In December, 1999 Kamala Das reverted to Islam. She pledged her allegiance to Allah. She declared that she could never "repose faith in Hinduism because Hindu gods never forgive. They only punish." She performs namaaz five times a day with a special prayer at 3 a.m. Her Krishna changed to Prophet Mohammed and suddenly wrote:

Ya Allah

I perceive the Prophet's features, as
yet unrevealed, on my beloved's

Less than a year she floated her political party 'Lok Seva'.

She is known to her Malayalam readers as Madhavikutty to her English audience as Kamala Das, and to her Muslim brethren as Kamala Suraiyya. She is known internationally for profoundly feminine, lyrical English poetry and at home for her short stories in Malayalam. She and her family later moved to Mumbai and from there to Calcutta before returning to Kerala.
understanding. He was supportive and caring. For her, he was father, brother, friend and husband.

Kamala Das is a bilingual writer. In 1965 her Summer in Calcutta (Kent's Award Winner) came out. The other collection of English poems are The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973); Mana (1975); and Only the Soul Knows How to Sing. Her controversial memoir, My Story was published in English in 1975.

Her writing made critics call her 'erotic and sexy'. She is labeled as 'immoral' and 'a nymphomaniac'. She painted nudes and released her first painting in 1980.

Kamala Das has received awards such as; Asian Poetry Prize for her work, Kent Award for English writing from Asian countries, Sahitya Academy Award and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award. Her works are translated into French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.

Chapter IV

A Critique of feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry

Kamala Das has been held in high esteem by critics of her poetry. Sunanda P. Chavan in The Four Voice: A study of Indian Women Poets in English says that the poetry of Kamala Das symbolizes... the elemental quest of a woman, a deeply sexual being for a man... with man-woman relationship in its full complexity she has modernized the Indian poetic psyche."
Devendra Kohli comments on her poetry: "But within her limitations, she writes poetry which is brilliantly, ruthlessly and honestly and spontaneous."  

For Anisur Rahman, Kamala Das's greatness of poetry lies in her imagery. He says "Admittedly, it is a poet's range and choice of imagery that constitute the elements of greatness in his art." Bijay Kumar Das has this to say on Kamala Das: "The variety of moods, the change of tone, the emphatic employment of new diction, and the subtle poetic touch make her poetry moving and loveable." Feroza Jussawalla makes the following perceptive remark: "The subject of Kamala Das's poetry is solely that of the struggle to find the self beyond the physical and thus find the freedom to create. "Bruce King pin points by saying that Kamala Das's poems are neither situated in the act of sex nor in feeling of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self dramatization and feeling of shame and depression.  

Keki N. Daruwalla, an intelligent fellow-poet, is of the view that Das has "In a manner... shown the way to the [other] women poets in India". He particularly takes note of the "inner world of failings, frustrations and relationships" and the "intensity of feeling" and "the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex" and maintains that love, the "lazy animal hungers of the flesh" and the hurt and humiliations faced by women are "the warp and woof of her poetic fabric".  

Her feminism is not that of the militant type. It is pro-family feminism. Therefore, her protagonist does not rebel against her parents when they choose for her husband. On the first night of the wedding, she succumbs to the brutal sex gymnastics of her husband. Her protest to such a life is through her poetry. She does not see from
foreign element in it. The feminism of Kamala Das comes out clearly when we compare her with Sylvia Plath as far as their concern for their grand-mother, father, husband, motherhood and with their tension trying to be a woman and individual at the same time. This study can be extended to compare Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Kamala Das's poems. Further, her feminism can be explored by comparing her with Nissim Ezekiel. Her poem "A Hot Afternoon in Malabar" can be compared with Nissim Ezekiel's poems on Mumbai. Her daring description of love and sex comes closer to Shiv K. Kumar. "The Looking Glass" presents a feminist view of love. Kamala Das's feminist stand gets a deeper perspective if we study this with the poems of Eunice de Souz's *Fix*. De Souz's poetry is feminist in awareness, vision and affinities to the mode of other woman poets. These two poets are rejecting patriarchy and asserting their right to behave the way they think fit for themselves is similar to Mamta Kali's wish in her poem 'Compulsions'. As Smita Agarwal wants to come into her own, the persona of these poets disowning their parents, would create problems for the future generation. Alexander Pope writes about this problem thus: "We think of our fathers fools so wise we grow/Our wiser sons no doubt will think of us so". Through poems like Meena Alexander's "Sita's Story" and Sunanda Swarup's "Lament of Urmila", we explore Kamala Das's feminism. Similarly Monika Varma speaks for all Indian Women in her poem "Give me Space". Kamala Das's feminine concerns are also seen in the poems of Sulekha Samantaran, Sujata Bhatt and Gauri Deshpande, Tara Patel and Imtiaz Dharker. Therefore, Kamala Das's feminine perspective gets further dimension by comparing her with Anais Nin, Dorris Lessing and Eria Jong.

Kamala Das's 'Composition' takes us to Nissim Ezekiel's "A Time to Change". Ezekiel speaks of detachment, while Kamala Das emphasizes deflection of torrid emotions and interpersonal relationships towards the Lord. Kamala Das's feminine

Kamala Das leads her life with her husband and children and never thinks of divorce. This itself shows the Indian concept of feminism which is pro-family and pro-life.
Footnotes

1) Kamala Das. The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (Mumbai: Orient Longman Ltd. 1973)


5) Bruce King, Modern Indian Poetry in English, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp.47-52)


16) Bruce King op.cit. p.151.