Chapter I
Introduction

Indian English poetry has sprouted from humble beginnings in the 1830’s with the poems of Henry Derrozio and Kasiprasad Ghose to the mighty torrent of verse pouring from the Writers Workshop in Calcutta and various magazines which reserve a page for poems in English by Indians. Though it can claim to have a history of a hundred and fifty years, the early poetry has often been commented upon for its derivative quality. Only echoes could be heard and not an authentic poetic voice. Gordon Bottomley describes Indian Poetry in English as “Matthew Arnold in a saree” (qtd. in Shirish Chindhada 13); however V.K. Gokah has pointed out that it is also “Shakuntala in skirts" (The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry 49). Pre-Independence Indian poetry in English was largely imitative poetry that was made in England. Indo- Anglian poets before Independence were not so bold as to make a daring experiment in form and technique to suit the Indian sense and sensibility, milieu and temper. Two hundred years of British colonialism made them only imitative poets, attempting subservient cultural allegiance to England.

Indian Poetry in English, barely within sixty five years of India’s Independence, has had an amazing growth. It is a surprising phenomenon of experiment, development and achievement. In the course of its development, it has ceased to remain a mere satellite moving around the sun of English poetry. In his choice of themes the modern Indo- Anglian poet breaks away from the presentation of idealized landscape or mythological figures. He takes a close look at his surroundings and attempts to mirror contemporary life in all its starkness, confident now that he speaks in a language and in an idiom that is understandable by a great many Indian readers. He is critical of Indian life. He is emboldened with the
breakdown of traditional inhibitions. He ceases to look to the West for inspirations. He evolves his own techniques to suit indigenous experience. The tone is distinctly Indian.

A foreigner’s language has become a vibrant medium of poetic self-expression and communication in the hands of such distinguished Indian poets in English -- Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das and K.N. Daruwalla. These poets have drawn critical acclaim and attention everywhere. They have variously helped Indian - English poetry to cast off its derivative origins, and thus have given it a particular habitation and a distinct name. As Mr. Lal would say:

It is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment. English is no longer the mother-tongue of the British. In the hands of Indian poets, “English is their natural mediums of expression – not an alien tongue but the language in which their feelings find form most satisfyingly, the language in which they make love (Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo 23).

By transcending the anglomania, by rediscovering the roots in a meaningful tradition and by naturalizing the English language to express the Indian sensibility and milieu, the Modern Indian- English poets have produced a significant output. Post- Independence Indian English poetry has proved vibrant and varied, robust and responsive to the times. It has acquired a distinct character and discovered its own voice.

To quote K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

We may now turn to the post-1947 period. For over a century, some verse in English has been appearing in Indian journals and verse collections too had been coming out in a steady, if thin, trickle. But when C. R. Mandy became the Editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India 1947 and decided to publish some verse also in that widely circulated magazine, Indian – English poetry suddenly acquired a new currency and even respectability (“The New Poets” 649).

As stated by Balachandran, “The Post- Independence Indian poetry saw its new poetry in the fifties. Among the new poets A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Shiv K. Kumar, Kamala
Das, Monica Verma, O. P. Bhatnagar, Gauri Deshpande, Adil Jussawalla and Ezekiel occupy a prominent place” (qtd. in Patil 134).

Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das are, perhaps, three of the well-known and most significant Indian poets writing in English. They may be said to have laid the foundation of modern Indian English poetry. No one can walk beyond his shadow. As the poet leans over the pages, the shadow of his past falls on them from which he cannot extricate himself.

To quote K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

All our yesterdays are involved in the poet’s deeper consciousness; and no true poet can escape the pressure of present, for he is in it and of it, and the best he can do is to relate the immediate present to the living past and also – if possible, and if his vision is unfaaltering and clear- to a future that is already in a process of becoming (“The New Poets” 641-642).

The researcher has made up his mind not to duplicate in his research the topics already investigated with regard to the three poets. So Much has been said about Nissim Ezekiel by way of the self in him. The findings relating to Kamala Das centre more about Kamala Das as a love poet and a confessional poet. A review of the earlier research topics on A. K. Ramanujan shows that they revolve round his family in his poetry. The researcher at present is of the view that there is still room enough on the subject, and the thesis statement to be evolved about the three poets taken up for evaluation. Hence the researcher has titled his thesis “The Pastness of the Past and its Presence in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das.” The researcher been motivated by the sincerity of the voice and the frankness of the tone that have been unheard in the Indian context. Even in the matter of man - woman relationship, their poems are open books. The three poets share with the readers, with no layers of secrecy, their yearnings and longings. Therefore the researcher has made a fair appraisal of the works of these three poets taken up for research. The
researcher has not confined himself to a single approach. A work of art lends itself to multiple interpretations. Multidimensional approach has been employed for the interpretation, illumination and evaluation of their works.

In the following pages, an attempt has been made to study the past lived by these three poets. The title of the thesis, though it takes its origin from T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, is a complete deviation in its wording and its meaning from what T. S. Eliot meant. The word ‘presentness’ in T.S. Eliot has been replaced by ‘presence’ in this thesis. Again, it is not about the impact of the past writers upon the present writings of the three poets taken up for study. The title of the thesis means how the past with all its charms, pains and pleasures are still remembered by the readers in the artistic creations of these three poets. To borrow a phrase from K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, it is the Living Past [Emphasis by the researcher] the readers find portrayed in their poems. The experiences, to which the three poets have been exposed and those they encountered in their career graph are not things of the dead past but the living past in the corpus of the poems of the three writers.

Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das have been the first Indian poets recognized internationally as a part of New English literature. In Ezekiel poetry is to be found dramatization of memory of the family incidents from childhood. A. K. Ramanujan who was raised in a family, that was both modern and traditional South Indian Brahmin, carried the memories of older India to America where he lived for many years. A. K. Ramanujan was pre-occupied with the past which remained a part of himself. His Indianness is a part of his past, the seed from which he grew up and to which he remained inextricably connected. A. K. Ramanujan’s poems are rich in images and cultural echoes as words reflect and interact with other words to bring to mind a wide variety of associations from more than one culture and various historical periods. Kamala Das is an Indian poet in English writing poignantly her romantically inclined past who, in her search for ideal love, gets herself entrapped in the
arms of lustful men. Unloved at home and at school and with her marriage on rocks she goes outside the precincts of marriage but the experiences she undergoes leave her disillusioned and drive her from gross physicality to sublime spirituality.

Chronologically looked at, Nissim Ezekiel one of the father figures among contemporary Indian men of letters, comes first in the study. Nissim Ezekiel, with his fine pale skin, white-gold hair and simple style of dress, with long full sleeved shirt hanging loose out of his trousers is an intellectual high priest in the poetry circle in Bombay. A ‘presiding angel’, Nissim Ezekiel is the most well-known of the Indian poets in English in the present times.

Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay in December 1924 of Orthodox Jewish parents (Bene-Israel). His parents were English and Marathi speaking, modern Bene-Israel Indian Jews who encouraged active, productive, secular lives. Nissim Ezekiel’s father was a Professor of Botany and Zoology; his mother was a school teacher, then a founder and principal of a school started and run by her over thirty years. The flair for teaching in Ezekiel was inherited from his father and mother both devoted to education. After attending a Catholic school in Bombay, he did his B. A. at Wilson College and was actively involved in Trade Unionism and in M. N. Roy’s Radical Democratic Movement.

Ezekiel, who was already part of the Bombay intellectual scene, was a friend of Ibrahim Alkazi who gave him a one-way ticket to England. For three- and-a-half years in London he supported himself through such poorly paying jobs as clerk and dishwasher. He studied philosophy, attended poetry readings, and had poems accepted in such literary magazines as Poetry Quarterly (qtd. in Bruce King 4). His poems were also published in The Illustrated Weekly of India. After living as an impoverished, Bohemian, foreign student (the
poetry of the period implies there was a love –life), Ezekiel made his return to India scrubbing decks on board a ship carrying coal and transporting ammunition to Indo-China:

   In everything, a bitter thought.
   So, in an English cargo-ship
   Taking French guns and mortar shells
   To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
   And learned to laugh again at home

(“Background, Casually,” *NECP* 180)


Ezekiel had lived in London a late romantic notion of a poet’s life of poverty and dedication. In India, he had an arranged marriage, joined *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, serving it for four years, then spent five years working on an advertising company, a year as a factory manager, worked in journalism and broadcasting before being offered a Professorship in Bombay’s Mithibhai College in 1961. In 1972 he moved on to the University of Bombay as Reader, later Professor, in American Literature until his retirement in 1985.

Despite being internationally famous, impoverished, frightened, and poorly dressed, Ezekiel smelled badly, and lived in filth. He avoided medical doctors and used health cures; although by 1994 he was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. It was not diagnosed until 1998 when he was placed in a nursing home at Mumbai where he spent his final years (qtd. in Bruce King 8). He breathed his last on 9th January 2004, at the age of 79, and was buried at the Jewish Cemetery, Worli, Mumbai.

Ezekiel chooses the English language as the medium of his creative art. It is the vehicle of his mental make-up, thinking, feeling, aspiration and basic communication. His versatile genius can be found in his poetry, plays, criticism, journalism and translation. Rather than Marathi, he chooses English which is the language he knows better by education, training and circumstances. Ezekiel himself claims: “Contemporary poets of India generally
write in English when they have gone through English medium schools. I write in English for this reason and cannot write in any language” (qtd. in Anisur Rahman 62).

The use of an Indian English for comic purpose (a sort of pidgin English) recurs in Nissim Ezekiel’s poems. This Indian English is characterized by vernacular impact on syntax (where the sentence structure is influenced by the mother tongue of the speaker) as well as other kinds of linguistic transfers, unusual collocations (like “salt-giver”), extended analogies (“black money”), or even new culture-bound meanings for “proper” English words. Nissim Ezekiel explores and exploits these various devices in his Indian English poems like “A Very Indian Poem in Indian English,” “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,” “The Professor,” “The Railway Clerk,” “The Patriot,” “Soap,” and “Irani Restaurant Instructions.”

Ezekiel has to his credit, several poems, plays and articles in journalistic criticism. His poems are collected in A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1958), The Unfinished Man(1960), The Exact Name(1965), and Hymns in Darkness and Passion Poems(1976), Poster Poems and Latter Day Psalms(1982). Of eight plays written: Nalini (1968), Marriage Poem: A Tragi-comedy (1968), The Sleepwalkers(1968), Who Needs No Introduction(1973), and Song of Deprivation(1969), The Wonders of Vivek (1986), A Family Failure (1986), Don’t Call it Suicide (1993), the first three plays have been published under the title Three Plays (1969). As a critic of art, music and dance, he has written literary and art criticism for various journals.

Ezekiel has held many positions and posts in India and abroad: Lecturer, Khalsa College and then Professor of English, Mithibai College, Bombay; Reader in American Literature and then Professor of English, University of Bombay; Visiting Professor, Leads University and the University of Chicago; Associate Editor, Imprint and the Indian P.E.N; Editor, Quest, Imprint and Poetry India; Poetry Editor of the Illustrated Weekly of India; the General Editor of Bibliography of Indian Writing in English Series and Art Critic, The Times
of India. He was the Chairman of International Panel of Judges for Commonwealth International Poetry Award.

The awards Ezekiel had won and the honours bestowed on him, amply demonstrate his significance as a distinguished figure in the cultural, literary and intellectual circle of India. He was a recipient of Fairfield Foundation Grant; an invitee of the U.S Government under its International Visitors’ Programme; a Cultural Award Visitor to Australia; the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Latter Day Psalms*; the Padma Sri Award for his contribution to literature in English. He had organized Poetry Reading Sessions at various Universities at home and abroad -- Washington, New York, Boston, Cambridge, Chicago, Urbana (Illinois) Gara, Burekeles, Oakland (Michigan) and Rotterdam International Festival.

Ezekiel is a poet of the ordinariness of events. He weaves poetry out of ordinary events and incidents. He takes a situation and describes it in such a way that it assumes a kind of social and universal significance. The personal emotion gets transmuted into artistic emotion. Thus Nissim Ezekiel’s distinction to discover poetry in ordinary reality as observed, known, felt and experienced than as the intellect thinks it should be, is in evidence, for example, in “Night of the scorpion”, “The Visitor”, “How the English Lesson Ended”, “Ganga” and “Entertainment”. The poems in “Indian English” treat of ordinary life. As Chetan Karnani says, “These poems are “instances of Nissim Ezekiel’s capacity to transmute every ordinary occurrence into a poetic perception” (“A Very Indian Poetry in Indian English” 97).

Ezekiel was deeply influenced by the poetry of Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Auden, Empson, and perhaps some of the Movement Poets. And he was also influenced by Blake, Rumbaed and Bawdelaire Rilke. Balaram Gupta states:
On hindsight, it may now appear that Ezekiel wanted to become the T.S. Eliot of India – an ambition natural enough for a young Commonwealth poet who himself was deeply influenced by the poetry of Eliot, Pound, and Yeats. It must have been tempting to bring about the same radical aesthetic reorientation of poetic practice in India that Eliot had done in England during the early decades of the 20th century. But whereas Eliot wrought the poetic revolution with greater finesse and sophistication, Ezekiel seems to have done the same with avoidable bluntness and unnecessary abrasiveness (Intro. *Nissim Ezekiel: A Critical Companion* 14).

Nissim Ezekiel’s canvas is wide. He writes on a variety of topics. Love and sex, the problem of marriage, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life, the need to overcome alienation and to foster integration among the various aspects of his character are Nissim Ezekiel’s major themes.

To quote Seema Raizada:

> Alienation is one of the most outstanding motifs in twentieth century English poetry and fiction. Partly under its influence but more because of the identical effects of materialistic civilization in our own country, alienation can be seen as important motif in Indo-English Literature. In poetry which reveals its basic themes with a greater immediacy than other forms of literature, alienation acquires the distinctness of a powerful feeling. We shall then get something like the temperament of Nissim Ezekiel who is a typically urban and intellectual poet voicing himself in attraction and repulsion, objectivity and subjectivity with a uniformly active ironical wit and humour (“The Theme of Alienation in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel” 40).

The theme of alienation is central to all his poetry. It is intimately integrated to all the other themes. Ezekiel belongs to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago. His Jewish background makes him, as confessed by him, a natural outsider. His affinity to the Indian tradition with his Indian background as a Jew has been disputed by a slender few. Ezekiel has made it categorically clear that he belongs to India: “India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by not withdrawing from it” (qtd. in Dani 186) As R. Parthasarathy states, “Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with
himself” (“Nissim Ezekiel” 28). Ezekiel himself has stated in an interview: “Scores of my poems are obviously written for personal therapeutic purposes” (qtd. in Parthasarathy 28).

Love in its varied forms is a subject matter exploited by many a poet. The poetical fancy of Ezekiel has had a rich harvest of poems, out and out sensual. Ezekiel too is given to descriptions of love from different angles. Most of the poems deal with the sensuous aspects of desire. Experiences, marital and otherwise, have had their impact on his life. There are also autobiographical touches in the poems selected for study where he talks about his painful as well as pleasant relationship with his wife. The sight of a woman wherever she is found, be it in a hotel or a bookshop or a bedroom or on a roadside, does not fail to stir the imagination in him and there follows a series of vignettes.

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet with a passion for form and precision so rare a quality among contemporary poets as to be quite unique. According to Adil Jussawalla, “Perhaps, he is the first poet to show the Indian readers how craftsmanship is an important to a poem as its subject matter” (qtd. in P. D. Chaturvedi 110). To quote Srinivasa Iyengar: “Nissim Ezekiel’s Poems are, as a rule, lucid -- a merit in these days -- and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous” (645).

Ezekiel, perhaps, is not essentially a religious poet, though words “God” and “Soul” occur in his poems. In the poem “Background, Casually” he confesses: “At home on Friday nights the prayers/ were said / I heard of Yoga and Zen” but he never felt gravitated towards becoming a rabbi-saint. In commenting on Nissim Ezekiel’s religious and philosophical poems especially post- April 1967, a few preliminaries must be stated first. In a letter to Professor. Delmer Bogner at New Platz, New York, Ezekiel wrote on 14th June, 1966: “I was brought up in a mildly orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal Jewish. I attended the liberal Jewish Synagogue in Bombay until I abandoned religion altogether soon
Ezekiel writes in varied styles. He writes in the traditional verse as well as in free verse. He has written “Found Poems”, for example, “The Truth about the Floods” where the word order of prose is meticulously preserved. He has written “Passion Poems” in the tradition of Sanskrit love poems. In the poems in Indian English, he has not only tried to depict Indian culture but has made use of Indian English with its syntactical and linguistic peculiarities. He reflects not only what many Indians think but also the way they think.

“Nissim Ezekiel’s use of free verse is not an escape from the restraints imposed by a fixed form. He is well versed in the handling of metrical verse,” says Paul Verghese (“The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel” 65). According to M.K Naik,

Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry reveals technical skill of a high order. He has written verse which is extremely tightly constructed. His mastery of the colloquial idiom is matched by a sure command of rhythm and rhyme (“The Asoka Pillar: Independence and After” 195).

In his free verse, the rhythmic mode suits the emotional mood of the poem. For example, the change of rhythm in the incantatory words uttered by the peasants in “Night of the Scorpion” helps the poet to achieve different effects. There is “a lapidary quality” about Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry and this has made him, says M.K. Naik, one of the most quoted poets of his generation” (“The Asoka Pillar: Independence and After” 195). With the result, many of the lines can easily be remembered.

Ezekiel avoids references to classical and mythological figures, eschews Aurobidonian grandiloquence and prefers the contemporary idiom. He himself has said, “You cannot write good poetry in a language which is not alive” (“Should Poetry Be Read to Audiences” 25). He employs conversational tone and ironic mode by means of which he
catches immediate attention and gains immediate intimacy with the educated reader. There is tautness and austerity in Nissim Ezekiel’s best verse, and although, the thorn of irony pricks now and then, the target effect is cathartic. Nissim Ezekiel’s use of prosody, restraint, conversational idiom, mastery of irony, purity of diction and perfect restraint over emotions place him on the top of the contemporary Indian poets in English.

Many of the younger Indian poets in English have acknowledged Nissim Ezekiel’s constructive influence on them during their formative years. As an editor of many journals, Nissim Ezekiel has exercised strong influence on the shaping of the careers of many including A.K. Ramanujan, Keki N. Daruwalla, R. Parthasarathy and Kamala Das and has introduced new poets to the National English Poetry reading public by his choice of verse in the poetry page of journals like The Illustrated Weekly of India.

A talented playwright, accomplished prose writer, perceptive critic, knowledgeable editor besides an inspiring teacher and an engaging broadcaster, Nissim Ezekiel was a man of varied parts. However, first and foremost he was an eminent poet who strode the Indo – English poetic scene like a colossus during the second half of the younger poets who, probably without ever admitting it to themselves, assumed that “Nissim Ezekiel’s time was not his own – it belonged to all of us.” (Gupta. Intro. Nissim Ezekiel: A Critical Companion 11).

To clinch in the words of Gupta:

Though Nissim Ezekiel’s contribution to Indian Writing in English is thus variegated he will be remembered chiefly as one who renovated the ‘dialect of our tribe’ when it was most urgently needed. If our poets are to make their mark on the international scene, as their novelistic brethren have done and come anywhere near the poetic achievement of an Okara, Achebe, Soyinka or Walcott, they have no better option than to forge ahead combining the technical competence of Nissim Ezekiel with Aurobindo’s loftiness of imagination (18).
Next to none in matters of linguistic mastery, technical virtuosity and stylistic skill, is A.K. Ramanujan who has earned for himself a significant place as the most gifted of Post–Independence Indian poets in English. As stated by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, “he has stabilized as one of the most talented of the ‘New Poets’.” William Walsh regards him as one of the ‘Big Three’ in Indian Poetry in English, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and R. Parthasarathy.

Attipat Krishnasawami Ramanujan was born in 1924 at Mysore into a Srivaishnava Brahmin family. His father was a famous Professor of Mathematics, and the languages used at home were English, Tamil and Kannada. There were many cultural influences at home. His father was interested in Sanskrit, English, and Tamil literature; his mother read novels in Tamil and Kannada; his grandmother told him folktales (qtd. in Bruce King 13). Having completed his high school, he studied for B. A. Honours Degree in English literature at Maharaja’s College, Mysore, during 1946-49, followed by an M. A. Then he was interested in Kannada poetry, met Kannada poets, began writing poetry in Kannada and English, and soon was publishing in Kannada Magazines. A major change in his career began when, after earning graduate diplomas in Descriptive and Historical linguistics, he was granted an award by a Fulbright Fellowship for three years for studying Linguistics at Indiana University where he earned a Ph. D (1963).

A. K. Ramanujan who began reading T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and other modern poets was influenced by Adiga, a Kannada poet who had already brought the techniques and sensibility of modern European literature into Kannada. As Bruce King says, “His influences thus were the classical Tamil and medieval Saint’s poetry of South India and modern, by way of both European literature and Indian literature, where modernism has already been absorbed and indigenized” (Three Indian Poets 13).
Though hailing from a family where modern-western thought and Brahminism were practised side by side, A. K. Ramanujan rebelled against Hinduism. He met and married a Syrian Christian woman and novelist from Kerala whose family had lived in Aden for many years. An emotionally intense love marriage between the two highly talented people, (she was a novelist) it broke down twice and they remained divorced. A. K. Ramanujan’s literary reputation rests on the solid foundation of poetical works which are admired for their technical deftness and poetical perfection. With only three volumes, *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971) and *Selected Poems* (1976) A. K. Ramanujan has proved himself as one of the most talented poets. He was a tri-lingual poet- - a Tamil writing in Kannada and in English. *No Lotus in the Navel* (1961) is a collection of poems in Kannada. Translation is considered to be his real forte. He translated into English some Tamil love lyrics from *Kurunthogai, Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* and also *Sanskara* (1976) a novel by U.R. Anandamoorthy from Kannada. *The Interior Landscape* (1976), *Speaking of Shiva.* (1973) and *Hymns for the Drawing* (1981) are his other works of translation. All the poetical volumes of A. K. Ramanujan as well as his selected poems and his translated ‘Akam’ and ‘Puram’ pieces from classical Tamil Literature with his foreword, acknowledgement and Translator’s Note were brought out by Oxford University Press.

As stated by Shubho Ray:

Ramanujan was a scholar of Indian literature who excelled in writing both in English and Kanada. He collected many accolades as a scholar and author, those of a translator, poet, philologist, folklorist, and playwright. His academic study assorted across five languages: Tamil, Kanada, Telegu, Sanskrit and English. He published works on both classical and modern variants of these literatures and also argued strongly for giving local, non-standard dialects their due. Although he settled in the U.S.A. he was out and out an Indian in the themes of his poetry. Family, Hinduism and India constitute his anthologies and presents him his identity (“A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry: Interface between “Roots” and “Exile” 73)

of India and the *Penguin Book of Love Poems* (1974). The awards and accolades he has won, for example, the Gold Medal of the Tamil Writers’ Association for the *Interior Landscape* (1969) and the National Book Award in America for *Speaking of Shiva* (1974) and the prestigious Mac-Arthur Foundations Award (1983) highlight his significance as a contemporary Indian poet in English. *The Striders*, his first book of English poetry, was recommended by the *Poetry Society*, London, to its members. In 1976, he was honoured with the title of ‘Padma Shri’ by the Government of India for his contribution to Indian literature and linguistics. He had also been made professor on the committee of social thought at University of Chicago, held visiting professorships at various American Universities, including Harvard University, and joined the Advisory Board of the Princeton Library of Asian translations. He contributed fifteen articles to the *Encyclopaedia of Oriental Literatures*, wrote the section on Dravidian Literatures in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974). He was long interested in and a collector of Indian folklore, which were sometimes alluded to in his poems. He co-edited *Another Harmony; New Essays on the Folklore of India* (1986). He published the *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages* (1991). His own poetry and translations are found in many anthologies such as *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse* (1945-1980) and the *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*.

Though physically existing there in America, A. K. Ramanujan is mentally present here in India. He has no detachment of an alien from the psyche and ethos of India. To quote Parthasarathy, “His Indian experience repeatedly features in his verse, and is often precisely recreated in its original setting” (“A. K. Ramanujan” 95). The texture of his experiences is typically Indian but it is rendered or recorded through a Western medium. A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry, as Varghese says, expresses an Indian sensibility sharpened and conditioned by Western education. A. K. Ramanujan’s past experiences, his preset familial
ties, and his ancestral belongingness play a significant role and thereby he identifies himself closely with the Old Vedic Indian Tradition.

To quote Niranjan Mohanty:

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry from the beginning to the end, goes on celebrating his links, his ties, with the original homeland. And it is through such celebrations that Ramanujan cleanses himself, gathers ‘peace’ for himself and reaffirms his faith in himself as an Indian (“Orientalist Construction of Home and / or Nation: A Study in the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan, Sujatha Bhatta and Meena Alexander” 22).

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry has nothing palpably American or British; it communicates most naturally and unaffectedly the Indian sensibility. His Indian experience (Inner form) is expressed through English medium (Outer form).

To quote Dwivedi:

Though Ramanujan has been living in the ‘Land of Automobiles’ distracted by the din and dust of big cities, by the pollution of air due to nuclear tests and expanding factories, by the violence of blood-thirsty hounds, he has been in close touch with India and her people through what he states frequent visits and field trips’ and through ‘personal and professional pre-occupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folk-lore, and these constitute the ‘substance of his poetry’ (“The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan” 56).

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry has its origin in an Indian experience recollected in an American environment. As A. K. Ramanujan himself has stated: “The authentic voice of the poet does not solely depend upon the tongue in which he chooses to express himself; the landscape, the personal, the appropriate moods, all become a language within a language” (“Chicago and AKR” 41).

A. K. Ramanujan’s is poetry of memory where the past becomes disturbingly alive. The past is the source of origin in much of his poetry. There is always a recollection of the past in his poetry. His inconsistent preoccupation with the past produces poetry in which memory plays a vital role. The past which is always with us offers us the richness of understanding and the richness of expression.
To quote M.K. Naik:

Memory plays a vigorous and creative role in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry. His poetry is not emotion recollected in tranquillity but recollection emotionalized in it. Time and again, a hood of memory like a coil on a heath unfolds itself in his mind (“The Asoka Pillar: Independence and After” 201).

Living in a distant clime, A. K. Ramanujan yearns and longs for a past which lives in his memory. Memories constitute a large section of A. K. Ramanujan’s interior landscape in “Small- Scale Reflections on a Great House,” “Love Poem for a Wife I,” “Obituary,” “Looking for a Cousin upon a Swing” and “Of Mothers, among Other Things”. “A River” recalls the memory of his visit to Madurai and of the flood in the river Vaikai and registers his protest against the callous indifference of the Tamil poets to the havoc and the tragedy caused by the flooded river.

“History” records the poet’s childhood memory of the pettiness of the daughters in coveting the jewels of the dead one. “Breaded Fish” recalls the childhood memory of the gruesome sight of a dead body. “Snakes” is a memory poem recollecting the childhood terror of snakes. All family poems are memory poems.

The family is usually the central metaphor that explores the hinterland of memory and knocks his experience into disturbingly vivid forms. His poetry demonstrates how an Indian poet derives his strength from going back to his roots -- his childhood memories- - and from the kind of environment around him. As Parthasarathy says, “The family, for A. K. Ramanujan, is in fact one of the central metaphors with which he thinks” (“A.K. Ramanujan” 95). One finds luminous evocations of A. K. Ramanujan’s family life in the poems “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House”, “Love Poem for a wife I”, “Obituary”, “Of Mothers among Other things” and “Looking for a cousin on a Swing.” Thus, the most striking feature of his poetry is that though living abroad, he makes the Indian scene
with its inevitable past the basic theme of many of his poems and comments upon it objectively and without inhibition.

A. K. Ramanujan is a conscious craftsman with a scrupulous concern for the art and craft of poetry. He uses mostly monosyllabic words which lends musicality to his diction. He blends sound and sense and employs internal rhyme and assonance. He avoids superfluity and achieves terseness. He opts for free verse in the place of regular rhymes and for stress-rhythm in the place of traditional syllabic rhythm. He has been able to forge an oblique, elliptical style all his own as in the title poem “The Striders.” His language has a cold, glass-like quality as in “Obituary.”

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetic strategies include using lines and stanzas of varying length, spacing of lines, flow of thought from stanza to stanza and repetition of words and phrases. A stanza may be of one line or two lines or four lines or ten lines as in “Looking for a Cousin upon a Swing.” He uses quatrains as in “Of Mothers, among Other Things” or septets (stanzas of seven lines) as in “Love Poem for a wife I.” He uses a single line after every four stanzas of triplets as in “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House.” These devices go a long way towards avoiding monotony and contributing musicality. The device of repetition adds to the tragic vision of the poet in “A River.”

A. K. Ramanujan’s poems are like the patterns in a “Kaleidoscope”, and as a result tableau-like pictures emerge, for example, in “A River”. His poetry is image-oriented. As Parthasarathy says, “He has an eye for the specific physiognomy of an object or situation while he then reveals with telling effect…” (“A.K Ramanujan” 95).

A. K. Ramanujan is modern in his choice of variety and complexity of themes, for example, family life, nostalgic memories of childhood, impact of urban civilization, Indian myths, history, culture and heritage, above all, its topography and environment. As Diwivedi says, “The greater part of complexity in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry proceeds from the
amalgamation of the two cultures…. His formative Indian experience repeatedly appears in his verse, but his long stay in the West also leaves its marks upon it” (“The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan” 95). He is also modern in his tone of disillusionment and in the use of colloquial, conversational style. It should be borne in mind that his fastidiousness as an artist accounts for the thinness of his poetic output. He passed away on 13 July, at the age of 64, in a Chicago hospital during what was supposed to be a minor operation.

To conclude: “A.K. Ramanujan is the composer of an alert and grainy poetry whose touch is abrasive and whose is microscopic” (qtd. in William Walsh 138).

Among the trio, Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das, the last one of the best known contemporary Indian writers in English stands first in her brutally frankness of tone and whose overexposure of sex has earned for her the labels, a bad daughter and a sexy poet. A puzzling, intriguing personality, full of contradictions, she has been differently described as “a poet of the body,” “a poet below the navel,” “a poet displaying sighs and thighs” and betraying endless female hungers and flaunting “a grand flamboyant lust.” Both her life and work are so controversial and unconventional as to receive comment and criticism from readers and discerning critics.

Whatever she has said about herself in My Story has resulted in much maligned misunderstood popular estimate of her character and personality as a woman and an author. Through unabashed recordation of her own experiences My Story and in most of her poetical artefacts and even essays and through the various situations portrayed in the short stories, Kamala Das has highlighted the various images and roles of an Indian woman, as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a mistress and even as a prostitute. She has focused her attention on the problems encountered by a woman in the male dominated social set-up, the categorised roles assigned by the convention Hindu-ridden society to a woman, the prejudiced attitude of man
towards woman, and the treatment of woman as a sex object for consumption instead of as a complementary for contemplation.

As stated on the blurb:

Mrs. Das, who received no formal education, no pompous University degree, stands on her own merit and is placed on the pinnacle of reputation and distinction among Indo-English poets of today. Her scintillating verse has that irresistible force and tilting rhythm in it which captures the reader’s attention immediately. The reader often feels that he is in the presence of a writer who is highly gifted and skilful, largely emotional and subjective, and who is ever celebrating the charms of the body and the hungers of the sex, without getting him bored even for a while (Dwivedi, *The Poetry of Kamala Das*).

A few readers, thus, read her for the sheer titillation of her unabashed sexuality; a few others for her candid sensationalism for a kick, and only an esoteric minority, probably read her for what she intrinsically is (qtd. in Kalaithasan, Intro “Kamala Das: A Critical Study” 2). Devendra Kohli, in his first ever monograph on Kamala Das, does not give an adequate account of the life of Kamala Das. He begins the life-story of the poet in one sentence: “Kamala Das was born on 31st March in Malabar in Kerala” and finishes it in another: “She was publishing short stories in Malayalam, her mother-tongue, before she published *Summer in Calcutta*, her first collection of poems in English, in 1965”(24-25). Equally meagre is the autobiographical note by the poet herself: “Born [sic] 1934. Education--nothing to speak of. Married to Madhava Das, with three sons. I write short stories in Malayalam. Health--poor. I cannot think of anything else to say about myself” (qtd. in Lal 9).

Kamala Das was born into an aristocratic Nair Hindu family in Malabar, on March 31, 1934. Her maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were Rajas, a caste of Hindu nobility, and her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her maternal great-uncle, Narayana Menon, a prominent writer, and her mother, Balamani Amma, a well-known
Malayali poet. Kamala Das was also deeply affected by the poetry of the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nairs. Her father, a successful managing director for a British automobile firm, descended from peasant stock and favoured Gandhian principles of austerity. The juxtaposition of “royal” and “peasant” identities, along with the atmosphere of colonialism and its pervasive racism produced feelings of inadequacy and alienation in Kamala Das. Educated in Calcutta and Malabar, Kamala Das began writing at the age of six (Her poems were “about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless forever”) and had her first poem published by *P.E.N India* at the age of fourteen. She did not receive a university education. She was married in 1949 to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India who later worked for the United Nations. She was just sixteen years old when the first of her three sons was born; at eighteen, she was a mother and a disgruntled wife who began to write obsessively. Her nom de plume was Madhavikutti in her Malayalam writings. She wrote her writings in English under the name, Kamala Das. After her husband has died, she converted to Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiya.

As in the poems of A.K. Ramanujan, memory plays a vital role in the poems of Kamala Das. Family is the dominant imagery in the poetical corpus of A.K. Ramanujan. So is it in the poems of Kamala Das. Through the lanes and by-lines of memory, the poetic pilgrim travels the territories of ancestry. To quote Irshad Gulam Ahamed:

> In the essentially retrospective frame work of her mind, memory is accorded a primary place. The faculty of memory is hailed in her discursive prose as a vital mental apparatus and a source of creative power. It is the courier of the moments of childhood and ancestry. Ironically, memory as an object of that remarkable faculty brings her pain and gloom (45).

It is well-nigh difficult to understand the total personality of Kamala Das without considering how school and home, by their impact, nurtured in her certain traits of character, contributing towards the type of woman and the type of writer she became. Kamala Das and her brother grew up more or less as neglected children, uncared for and unloved by their
parents -- a busy father and an indifferent mother -- who had no time to fondle and foster them at a time when they most required and deserved parental love and affection.

Kamala Das and her brother considered themselves as the children of loveless parents. Even the servant was of no affectionate nature towards children whom he considered were lacking in beautiful table manners. Umpteen were the humiliations suffered by them at the European school, because of their colour. Later she got isolated from her Nair community that misunderstood her. Over and above, her forced premature marriage alienated her from her grandmother at the Nalapat house.

Kamala Das got married at the age of fifteen to Madhava Das, a Reserve Bank official. In her agreeing to marriage at her early age, she only longed to fly away from the parental world of indifference and neglect, only to seek in marriage, love and affection that she was intensively craving for. A forlorn girl, helpless and desolate and denied of love and friendship at home and school, she sought love, understanding, affection in her husband but soon she found that it became a ‘bad-to-worse’ situation; her husband was no model for virtue. She got disillusioned; she felt that she was “a nodding doll for her man’s parlour, a walkie-talkie to afford him warmth of sex at night” (“Of Calcutta,” CP 58-59).

Kamala Das felt that love was never to be hers. She was in love with a husband who hungered for her body, not for her love. She recalls her marital life:

he folded
Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasures that had come his way, richer harvests of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine;

(“Of Calcutta,” CP 59)

What Kamala Das needed was the caress of affection without sexual significance. To quote her: “I needed security, I needed permanence, I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear” (My Story 194). This she could not receive from him.
Kamala Das realized: “If love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable” (My Story 99).

The poet admits her desire to find fulfilment outside marriage in her unending quest for ideal love: “What I was looking for? I wanted to get so close to a man so that I would find something that was real love, something that was not lust” (qtd. in Gopal 69). She sought men in search for love but found lust in them. Very soon, she was disappointed with the futility of her search. While she failed to receive love from her husband she turned to others. But they only toyed with her body and did not fulfil her emotional needs; they assuaged the skin’s lazy hungers. So to save her face, she would “flaunt at times, a grand flamboyant lust.” There is heard an agonized cry of the poet’s soul to throw off the mortal dress and to seek union with the Divine mate. The title of the poem “The Prisoner” (OSKHTS 29) is richly suggestive of her own self got in the trap of physical love from which it is ever trying to escape in search of the ideal lover that she always seems to be after.

To the poet, sex was only of secondary importance. She herself states: “Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy” (My Story 202). Physical relationship was only a fractional part of her need to be loved. She wanted something more than that. She longed for a freedom from the shockers of physical love and longed for final reunion with Lord Krishna:

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at core
O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You....

(“Radha”, The Descendants 9)

Though a poet of physical sensations, Kamala Das has rare moments of her spiritual sublimation through love when she sees herself attaining, as Andal, a symbolic union with the Eternal in the form of Krishna [Divine Lover]
Kamala Das examines love in its many guises sensual, filial, adulterous and the impossibility of reciprocal love. The love poems of Kamala Das are unconventional. Kamala Das is at once a love poet, a confessional poet and a liberated poet. As a poet of love, she examines more boldly than what a man would do, the pangs and frustrations of love from her various profoundly personal and subtly physical angles.

Kamala Das’s provocative poems are known for portraying explorations of the self and female sexuality. Regarding her treatment of love, Kalaithasan states, “Kamala Das has added a new dimension to Indian poetry by her unabashed portrayal of relationship in terms of love and sex. She makes an honest probing into the experience of love on a deeper level than men” (23). All these convey the stamp of her personality.

As a confessional poet, she picks out her private experiences with astonishing brutal frankness that is unheard of in an Indian woman. As an emancipated poet, she writes with a dashing bravado of liberated women from the bondage of conventional and social values and mores which had been suppressing them in her country for a long time. She burst upon the Indo-Anglian scene like a daring, fascinating spectre of unconventionality blowing to smithereens the traditional reticence of Indian womanhood (Nandakumar, “English” 48).

Kamala Das writes with no embarrassment on forbidden subjects. She is “the first Indian woman to write frankly about sex” (Nissim Ezekiel 352). She makes uninhibited use of otherwise forbidden sex vocabulary and images. She does not suffer from social mores which prevent women from a bold exposition of the theme of love.

Kamala Das’s rebellious views on love, sex and marriage are recorded in her poetical compositions. She has brought out six books of poems in English: *The Sirens* (1964), *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), a selection of her love poems, together with those of Pritish Nandy in a volume entitled *Tonight, This savage Rite*, and her collected recent publication, *Collected Poems*
In addition to six books of English poetry, Kamala Das has, to her credit, a short fiction, *A Doll for a Child Prostitute* (1977), a novel, *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories, *Padmavati: The Harlot and Other Stories* (1992) and her autobiography *My Story* (1976) which earned her more fame and popularity than those from all her other works.

Kamala Das’s creative genius can be seen in the articles she contributed to periodicals like *Blitz, Femina, Debonair, Eve’s Weekly, Imprint, The Illustrated Weekly of India, The Indian PEN, Mirror, Opinion, Quest, Sunday, Span, Society* and *Youth Times*. The articles in these journals carry the stamp of Kamala Das’s brutally frank views on love, sex, and marriage. Kamala Das’s works are available in French, Spanish, Russian, German, Arabic, Japanese, Tamil and Sweedish. She is represented in every anthology of Indian Poetry in English. Her poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who attempts to free herself sexually and domestically from the role of bondage imposed by the past (qtd in. Harrex12).

Kamala Das travelled extensively to read poetry in the University of Duisburg- Essen, University of Bonn, Adelaide Writer’s Festival Frankfurt Book Fair, University of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore, South Bank Festival (London) Cencordia University (Montreal, Canada). She has also held positions as Vice-Chairperson in Kerala Sahitya Academy, Chairperson in Kerala Forestry Board, President of the Kerala Children’s Film Society, Editor of Poet Magazine and Poetry Editor of *Illustrated Weekly of India*.

Kamala Das did not write poetry in Malayalam because she, like Nissim Ezekiel was not in touch with the regional language and she did not like to be a second rate poetess in Malayalam. She was a recipient of accolades, awards, honours and prizes including the P.E.N Philippines, Asian Poetry Prize (1963), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for her writing in Malayalam (1969) Chiman Lal Award for fearless journalism (1971), the ASAN World Prize
(1985), and the Sathiya Akademi Award for her poetry in English(1985). The fact that she won a number of coveted prizes demonstrates amply her significance as a contemporary Indian poet in English.

The Saudi Gazette in 1984 included Kamala Das’s name on the list of nominees for the year’s Nobel Prize for Literature (Kamala Das, “A Woman Writer’s Predicament” 27). However she missed it. Kamala Das feels the world is not yet ready to recognize and appreciate her poetry. After the publication of My Story, she states, foreign journals like Time, Asia Week, London Times, and Melbourne Sun wrote features on her but ignored her poetry. They were more interested in writing gossip about her life. Kamala Das adds: “They (The Foreign Journals) conveniently forget the varied expressions of my soul that are reflected in more than thousand poems and more than five hundred stories” (qtd. in Nair 31).

All along she has had a complaint that she is not given due recognition by the Malayalees. Recognition has come in search of her with the award of the Kumaranasan International Literary Prize for her publication, Collected Poems.

Kamala Das moves from naked physical confessionalism to religious confessionalism. In an interview with Bismi Paniraman, she confessed: “Now the time has come to reveal my allegiance to Islam. I want protection. I want a god to forgive all my sins. Allah alone is my god. This is my firm conviction” (qtd. in Bismi Parinaman 23).

Kamala Das is now Kamala Suraiya, a Muslim. Her Krishna poems are replaced by “Ya Allah.” Here is her recent confession: “I always had a pink pillow with me when I slept. It has been my one companion, my husband, which I would embrace and call out, “Krishna.” Now I will call ‘Mohammed’” (qtd. in Charmy Harikrishnan 71). In a recent interview, she claims: “Sri Krishna is Allah. Allah is Sri Krishna” (qtd. in Bismi Parinaman).

As confessed by Kamala Das, conversion had been in her for more than 27 years. On December 26, 2009 she was formally initiated into Islam by religious scholars from Malabar.
at her house in Kochi. People began wondering how a person of a rebellious thought; writings and life can conform to conservative Islam. Inconsistency is inherent in her character. Shocking are the statements made by Kamala Suraiah after her conversion to Islam. “I am converting Krishna into Allah and making him the prophet after naming him Mohamed. If you go to Guruvayour now, Krishna will not be there... he will be with me” (qtd. in Farzana Versey, “From Krishna to Allah: Kamala Das Suraiya” 5).

After her conversion to Islam, Das wrote a poem “Yah Allah” (Jan-March 2000) under the name Suraiah Begum:

Yah Allah  
I perceive the prophet’s features as  
Yet unrevealed on my beloved’s  
Mains….who but Mohammed would  
Dare to embrace a sinner and call her  
Mother? I seek refuge in you, first a moment  
Or two, of forgetting for the weariest  
Pilgrim of whose foot balls thumped  
The beaches, the hills the proscenium  
Of the brave old cities of the world  
Where she strutted swinging of human  
Love (Poetry Chain vol.16 No.10).

The poem celebrates the new faith and glorifies the Prophet Mohammed and his blessings. It is marked by personal touches where the poet expresses her pathetic situation and prays for forgiveness. Haunted by the hostile press and the scurrilous critics, Kamala Das, “the weariest pilgrim”, now appeals to her new God, “Oh Allah”, to have mercy on her.

Kamala Das even said “I have shifted all the idols and pictures of Hindu Gods in my room into the guest room. She defends herself saying, “I have made new discovery. Islam is the religion of love; it gives protection to women, and I need protection. I am an orphan. I have no one. Hindu Gods punish. Allah forgives sins. I want a forgiving God” (qtd. in Farzana Versey, “From Krishna to Allah: Kamala Das Surayya” 5).
Suraiya is quite serious when she says, “But now the time has come when I can no longer remain a Hindu, I hate being cremated as a Hindu. I love being buried as a Muslim” (qtd. in George Iype, “When the temptress dons the Purdah” 4) As per her wish, she lies buried at the Palam Mosque in Trivandrum, her life having come to an end at the age of 75 on Sunday May 31st 2009.

Kamala Das is utterly unpredictable. In My Story, she makes a claim. There is no parental influence on her. In a later statement, she tells the readers that “It was her foster parents who helped her develop an identity of her own and inspired her to speak in her original voice (My Story 110).

At a much later stage of her poetic development, she, in a characteristic forthright manner, rejects the idea of any kind of influence on her.

She further affirms her originality in the same manner in an answer to Kaur’s questionnaire: “Consciously I have not imitated any writer. I have kept myself away from books in order to preserve my independent voice. And as you say, for me there has been no teacher at all practically. Some of them came but they did not help me (qtd. in Kaur 7).

To quote Kalaithasan: “In spite of all her reading and familiarity with a number of writings, it would be surprising to know that her poetry is not derived from her reading” (“Kamala Das: A Critical Study” 78). “I tried not to read much for I wanted to evolve my own style before knowing of others” (Kamala Das, “Leaves of Grass on Kerala Coast,” Span 31). Her style is hers. She never touched a paint mixed by another. She herself observes: “As a matter of fact, I have not picked up anything that belongs to another, not even another woman’s husband” (“The Uninvited Poet”). She stands an original artist.
However, in the essay “Leaves of Grass on the Kerala Coast,” she tells the readers, she chanced upon Walt Whitman’s book and discovered that “Afterwards there was no poet to influence me so greatly. It implies no poet other than Walt Whitman influenced her greatly” (Span 30-31).

That it is not unusual for Kamala Das to contradict her statements from time to time is clear from what she admitted to her interviewers. To quote Kalaithasan: “It cannot be denied that there was an adroit calculation in her to gain attention as a new writer” (“Kamala Das: A Critical Study” 123). In an interview, she says “when I was in 20’s 30’s, I loved publicity….oh, It was such marvellous fun to pick up a magazine and see myself in it” (qtd. in Gopal 65). Nor can it be disputed that there was in her, psychologically, a tendency to sensationalize in order to project her image and importance. In the same interview she admits: “I sound phoney when I am most myself. I can put on an act, talk bawdy to my guests …. But it is all in act” (qtd. in Gopal 69).

Kamala Das’s life is full of controversies right from her sexually charged poetry to her conversion to Islam in the year 1999. It is difficult to decide in what category to place Kamala Das.

Parental alienation and indifference which Kamala Das suffered determine to a great extent, the kind of mother she became. Deprived of motherly love, she bestowed love and affection upon her children. “I have loved any children as if they were my favourite gods and as if they were my favourite toys. They have made my world very much of a paradise” (Kamala Das, “The Sparrow on the Glasspane” n.p.). Again to quote her own words: “On the threshold of death, I pray to god to let me live until my small son started walking” (qtd. in Nair 10). Even after death, she wanted to return to her children “as a ghost after her death from the hospital to be with her children” (My Story 196). It is a shock to learn that such a
loving mother turned to be an indifferent mother. As she claims that of all the things in the world she loved not her husband, not even her children but her writings, her writings only. She herself admits in *My Story*:

I loved my writing more than I loved them (my parents) or my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid Goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was a writer. (211).

The writings of Kamala Das earned her the label as erotic, and sexy and even stirred up a hornet’s nest among the convention-ridden conservative literary community in Kerala. Her frank portrayal of her personal life and numerous affairs in her autobiography led many to consider her “immoral” and “nymphomaniac.” On her return to her state, after having become famous in Calcutta, she was treated with death threats. She has been shocking the conservative readers all these years. It all began with *My Story* a book that has not stopped selling since it was first published in 1975.

Kamala Das seems to shock her readers with her confessions unabashed which but are sincere and convincing though unconventional. She wrote *My Story* when she thought that she might die. “Death knocking at the door left her with the only option of, emptying myself of all secrets so that I would depart with a scrubbed out conscience” (“Preface” n.p *My Story*). It is the sensitive but sensational document of a woman’s confession at the death bed. *My Story* created a big roar. People were shocked on reading her sexual adventures:

With its frank uninhibited handling of feminine desire, it had already created a sensation in Kerala…., literally shaking up the prudish Malayali reading community used to shoving under the carpet all matters relating to physical intimacy. (Sachidanandan, K. Relocating *My Story*)

Kamala Das portrayed herself as ready for love, ripe for sexual banquet. It is difficult to say how much of *My Story* is a fact and how much of it is fiction. Kamala Das, ever
mischievously enigmatic, kept the readers tantalized by dropping contradictory hints, first confessing it was nothing but truth and then declaring it was just a wish – fulfilling fantasy, an alter-life she had created for herself (Sachidanandan, K. Relocating My Story vii).

What emerges from a study of her statements in confessional flavour is an intriguing, puzzling personality in Kamala Das. A compound of contradictions, she is constantly inconsistent, because she has denied in her interviews whatever she wrote in My Story. The very first sentence in the “Preface” to My Story runs: “My Story is my autobiography.”(n.p). She also admits. “I too tried adultery for a short while but I found it distasteful”. (My Story 193). In an interview with Revathy Gopal, she poses the standing question: “But which woman hasn’t?” (qtd. in Gopal 65).

In My Story, she admits that she was a practiced teller of white lies. “But her lies in My Story are not white lies and they serve to blacken her image in the eyes of many of her readers” (qtd in. Radha 35).

Elsewhere in an interview with Kerala Kaumundi week-end magazine, she flatly denies that she had any extramarital relations. She claims that she has the chastity of Mother Teresa. No man other than her husband has entered into her thoughts or trespassed into her dreams. (Rama Chandran n.p). Such a claim is strengthened in an article “I Have Lived Beautifully” (Debonair).

At times, a strange cowardice stalks me, makes me want to deny my past, deny my nature to tell my relatives and friends that I wrote lies and that I need the money the brave books provided me with. I feel tempted to tell them that I have been conventional like them and that I projected a false image to make my books sell (40-41).
In an interview with C. Mohandas, she denies that *My Story* is her autobiography:

At no time did I claim it (*My Story*) to be my autobiography. At the time of its publication, I was in need of money. A fictitious story will have no sales. Therefore I agreed to bring it out of as if it were autobiography. (72).

Kamala Das’s main purpose is to sell the book and in order to make it sizzling and spicy, she has added some imaginary episodes in her autobiography. “Once she admitted in an interview that if one wrote about reality only, then it would have no appeal to readers. (qtd. in Nare Veena 23). Such books would have no sale. *My Story* is a blending of truth and falsity. It is nothing new for Kamala Das to contradict her statements from time to time.

Soon Kamala Das sparked up another controversy through nude paintings of young females. Thus Madhavikutti released her first nude paintings in the 1980s. She proclaimed: “I find the nude female body the most beautiful in the world” (George Iype 200). Her diverse paintings depicting nude females shocked the Malayalees again. Elsewhere in the poem entitled “The Looking Glass” she assumes the role of a teacher who offers readers the secret of love making:

... Stand nude before the glass with him
........................................................................................................
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. (68)

As stated by Kalaithasan: “The language is nakedly embracing. These advances might appear disgusting and awkward. But they are erotic tips to get the man’s love” (198). In an interview with Suresh Kohli, she has stated “I feel a woman is most attractive when she surrenders to her man. She is incomplete without a man” (Wikipidea June 2, 2009). Readers cannot but wonder at the sudden change that has come over Kamala Das after her conversion to Islam because she who, in the past, took delight in drawing and painting nude
female and even offering an erotic tip to woman is now against the exposure of the nude female form.

Kamala Das is highly critical of the present day trend. She does not mince words when she makes a scathing attack on the practice of using female models in semi nude as a symbol of advertisements.¹

A woman’s body has become a commodity to popularize products. In a society where incidents of eve teasing are on the increase, molestation in offices goes unabated. Promotion is done only after a female employee entertains her boss. What a woman needs is nothing but protection of her freedom.

In her telephonic talk to The Times of India (Tuesday Feb 10, 2009) she stated that what attracted her in Islam was *purdah*. “A woman in *Purdah* is respected. No one touches or teases you if you wear one. You get total freedom”. She felt that *purdah* gives her a lot of protection. The dress gave her a sense of security. No man even made a pass at a woman in *Purdah*. Wearing a *Purdah*, a woman can travel anywhere and feel safe. Nobody is going to make any disparaging remark against a *purdah* clad woman because they are all afraid of Muslim rage. Behind every *purdah* clad Muslim woman, some Muslim is lurking with a dagger to ensure her safety. So *purdah* is always safe. It protects women. It also keeps the dust, the heat and the insects away from woman’s body.

Once again Kamala Das has, thus, sent shock waves through straitjacketed Malayalees. But this time it is not through any sex-oozing or nude paintings but through conversion to Islam.

¹In Delhi alone, most of the offices has a common worker to comfort the customers with a melodious voice. In the recently-held book fair at a pragmatic Maidan, female models in semi nude form were misfalled as a statue so as to attract and allure more and more visitors. The oglers thronged such venues and were in a hurry to touch their body what a shame!
Readers should not miss to see the altruist in Kamala Das as revealed in poems like “Nani,” “Honour,” “The Flag,” and “The House Builders.” One cannot but admire the compassionate heart in Kamala Das and heightened identification with the hapless, the houseless, the poor and the needy. There are pages and passages where she talks about feeding and housing the poor and downtrodden. Poems on Sri Lanka in particular demonstrate Kamala Das’s empathetic ethnic identification with the Tamils in their syntax.

To the end of her life, her heart continues to flow with the milk of human kindness as is revealed by her donation of 17 cents of ancestral property in Punnayaurkulam in Thrissur district to the Kerla Sahitya Academy terming the land and trees as her “kingdom of emotions” that inspired her writings. It was a memorial for Kamala Suraiya.

To borrow from Shakespeare: “As long as men can breathe,” so long will live Kamala Das in the pages of her poetry. Kamala Das is now Kamala Suraiya. Suraiya is an Arabic term for the star called Krishika in Sanskrit. True to her name, Kamala Suraiya will shine and scintillate like a diamond in the sky. “Poets die many times after their deaths. They die especially again in obituaries. They live again, do they not, when their poems are reprinted after their deaths” (qtd. in Nambisan 1). The past is not dead and buried but comes alive at present.

The foregoing pages introduce the poetic career and the poetic output and the formative influences of the trio – Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das. The multifarious experiences seen and felt and shared by these three poets got printed on their hearts and impressed on their minds giving rise to poems that have been explicated, interpreted, analysed and evaluated in the pages of the thesis justifying the researcher’s stand that the past is not divorced from the present but is related to the present.