Appendix 'B'

I. A Telephonic Interview With Kamala Suraiya

Past two months I was looking for a contact-number. It was not the phone-number of any Ieena-Meena-Deeka. I went on searching continually on most websites and informed all my friends and well-wishes to find this number for me wherever they come across a name Kamala Das or Kamala Sorayya. Yes, it was this grand lady whose telephone number I wanted urgently. The urgency was derived from my working on her for my research but more than that it was the result of my frequent arguments about her in the groups of academic demonstrators who read only to argue. I always tried to justify her words, language, poetry and everything related to her, while my counterparts laughed at me for liking her and ridiculed or satirized her image. I really liked Kamala Das so much that I did not read all of her works but whatever books of her poems and prose were available at my place, those I read again and again and yet wanted to read the same again. Finding the affinity of almost transparent integrity with the present moments of times, I likened myself to Kamala Das and felt what she uttered and found myself defending her everytime. My latest argument was about her conversion, which was the most opportune topic for my critical friends. I commented that religion is a matter of personal feelings and especially an artist should always receive the freedom and consideration, positive, in such matters. My friends pointed out her publicizing such a matter and objected the reasons she offered as ‘pardah for protection’ and ‘Allah for subservience’. True that she spoke out in such words. But who should demand the reasons and why, was my point. Somebody taunted me ‘oh, why don’t you go and meet your favourite Kamala Das and ask her what the true reasons are and why does she hide those? Hence, my excitement to find her phone number and take her appointment. Finally I was successful in getting a number of some member of Lion’s club at Cochin, Mr. George and the gentleman kindly gave me another number of some advocate Krishna Mohan for further help. There was a sober voice of the advocate who offered me the telephone number of the great poetess and I was overjoyed. Immediately I dialed the lucky number and noted down the time and day. It was Friday, 28th of February and 3o’clock in the noon. This was my first talk with
Kamalaji; without the knowledge that I shall continue the contact, I was too excited, to get it recorded.

"Hello, can I speak to Kamala Das, please?" I wondered why did I not say Kamala Sorayya. Perhaps it was a matter of habit.

"Yes, Kamala speaking", the sweet and mellow voice arrested my tongue and I was surprised, as if not expecting her so easily accessible,

"Oh, Kamalaji, you are there, oh, that is so nice of you, Namaste Kamalaji, I wanted to speak to you......" but I realized I was speaking like a stupid layman! She asked immediately "who are you? Your voice is very young! What is your age?" Not knowing how to tell her about myself, I tried to be quick and was stupid again, "can you guess?"

"Oho, you are a naughty girl! I think you must be around twenty-five or so!"

I was happy she underestimated, and tried to be wiser, "By God, Kamalaji, your guess is ninety percent correct!

I am a lecturer of English and am working on your autobiography for my research project.......

She seemed interested but alert, "you are doing your M. Phil?"

"Oh no, I'm doing my Ph. D. In fact, I am comparing your My Story with other two women's autobiographies".

"Who are they?" "One is Amrita Pritam and the other is Jean Rhys". "Your topic is very interesting it seems, have you read My Story?"

"Of course, Kamalaji, I have read it more than thrice. I wanted to meet you for an interview,....."

"you can take any date you want from my secretary. Here is my Canadian biographer, would you like to talk to her?" And before I answer, she handed over the receiver to another hand of her foreign admirer, Merrily Weisbord. That was, to some extent, my disappointment. I thought she is typically Arien! Seeming natural even when being proud! Ok, how can I mind that. Merrily Weisbord introduced herself to me and I, did the same. She wrote down my name and e-mail address and told me to telephone her in the night, at the hotel she was staying. I noted down her phone number of the hotel, and said good bye, nice to hear your voice etc. with some reserved courtesy.

The whole of evening passed in my efforts in recalling the haunting effect of her voice and I decided to talk to her the very next day. In the night I talked to Ms.
Weisbord who was all praise for Kamala whom she called “a fantastic woman”. She stated that Kamala has brought an emotional revolution in the set order of Indo-European image of woman. She informed me that she would complete her biography in coming one and half-year and would like to discuss something about Kamala to me. I asked her what was her opinion about the recent conversion of Kamala. She was plain and lucid in her answer:

I think, Kamala has converted to find a peaceful life for herself. She says Islam is the religion of love. She believes the greatest truth of human life is love and Islam spreads love. I think she is influenced by the spiritualized concept of Allah that Islam offers, as the formless and shapeless invisible omnipresent almighty. I did ask her about this and she said, Islam is introduced in her life by the blind Muslim boys she adopted and brought up, Irshaad and Ahmed. One of them has submitted his Ph. D. thesis on her works, in the university of Aagra. I don’t think there is any woman so thoroughly honest and loyal to her own impulse and experience....."

I shared my liking for her poems and uninhibited expressions with the biographer; she told me that a film was in the making on Kamala’s My Story; its Canadian director, also, has offered a role in one of his films to Kamala but she declines to play that, for preserving her newly accepted faith in Islamic norms of life. Weisbord sounded very enthusiastic about her own writing of the biography and promised me to send the news of its future publication, so that I can order it.

The next day was not as lucky as Friday and I missed Kamala who had been away from her home. She had been to see her mother who was sick and bedridden. For a week I lost my touch with her and thought that she would definitely forget me. It was 9th of March, Sunday, next time when I heard the same voice but not as proud as I thought it would be. She had recognized me when she said

“How are you Bhagyashree?” I felt shy and humble,
“I am fine. How is your mother?”

“She is not well. She is ninety-three-now and the doctors have advised her a complete bed-rest. I think I’ll need to be with her frequently hereafter. She is in Kallur at present. When do you want to come?”

“I wish to come as early as possible but my college vacations start on 1st of May. I think I’ll be able to come in May first week. Will that be suitable for you?”
"Oh no, Bhagyashree, My son is coming here May first week, with his wife and my
grand-children. They are coming from abroad and will stay only for a week or so. I
think they are reaching here by 6th or seventh of May. You can come before 6th or
after 14th or fifteenth of May...you should plan like that...."

"Ok, Kamalaji, I'll try my best to plan that way, but in case I'm not able to do that,
will you answer some of my questions on telephone?" I did not know how I spoke
that without preparation. I always wanted to see her and now why was I demanding a
telephonic interview. But it so happened. Spontaneously I said that and she was also
pleased, tired of too many visitors perhaps. She quickly said,

"Of course, why not Bhagyashree, I shall answer all your questions and you
can also write to me if you want written answers....."

"Kamalaji, I'll send you my questionnaire and some of the queries I shall ask you on
phone. Next time when should I phone you?"

"Bhagyashree, you can call me at anytime before eight o'clock in the night. I sleep
early and I rise early, because many people come to see me in my office here. I run
the child and women health care department and try to do some social service. We
must use some part of our lives for others I think.

"Kamalaji, you are great. I have also written a poem for you. I'll post that with my
questionnaire....."

"So you are a poetess! Bhagyashree you sound so humble and so emotional. Why are
you so polite?"

"Kamalaji, I like you poems, I wish to translate those into Hindi. I need your
permission".

"Oh yes, I shall give that. Do you think translations can be good?"

"Yes, and I think they can be useful and you must give me a written permission for
translating your poems...."

"Bhagyashree, you don't need my permission you can translate whatever you like and
don't talk to me about money and all that. I am too old to enjoy money now".

"Thank you Kamalaji, thank you very much. I've started telling my friends that you
are my friend now..."

"Oh, you can always tell that, here is my daughter-in-law, you can have a word with
her....."

And once again, she handed the receiver to another unknown hand, but the
voice was equally friendly. Her daughter-in-law, who stays at Poona with her
husband and daughter, admired Kamala's homely and generous conduct. She said that her world-popular mother-in-law was always busy doing something for her visitors and readers. She loves painting and talking about scriptures. She also said Kamala was the most soft-hearted person she had ever met in her life. Thanking her I ended the talk with a new hope of telephonic interview, not simply because it was easier, more economic and earlier possible but also because I would be able to keep in touch with a great writer for a longer period. I prepared a questionnaire and posted it soon. A fortnight passed in between and I recalled that her birthday was on 31st of March. This was the next chance for me. Fresh in the morning of this day, loaded with airy news of possibilities about minor and major changes in the national policies of the Budget, I made my call. I was sorry. She had been to Kallur again. I worried about the health of her mother. In the evening after seven o'clock I tried again, hoping that she might be back. And there she was! I wished her many many happy returns of the day. She was not surprised but admired my meticulousness, not knowing the Virgo-flaws. I also enquired about her mother's health. It was not much improved. Her voice wet with anxiety and feelings, she said, "I find this world full of so many miseries, Bhagyashree, I don't know how all this chaos will evaporate! Small innocent children catching strange diseases, the old ageing human beings stretching peaceless existence...... I can only pray like a helpless beggar......we are poor puppets trying to survive...." I could feel the mixed sentiments of personal and general human anguish in her voice. I dropped my idea of asking question when she was in such a mood and told her that I have posted my questionnaire. She did remember her promise of the telephonic interview and gave me the date, 11th of April, Friday again by chance. I waited for the day and practiced my question as if it was a programme for shooting. My joy at being known to a great writer, was ofcourse exciting but also my guide and teacher, Dr. Girdhari Sir, boosted my enthusiasm and promoted my excitement everytime. Finally the lucky Friday of eleventh April arrived and I dialed the same sweet number once again. This was my telephonic interview with Kamala Das alias Kamala Suraiya.

'Hello, Kamalaji, Good morning!'

'Hello, Bhagyashree, good morning! But I liked your Namasteji better! There is a touch of warmth in that word you know! And the routine good-morning is so over-used!'
‘Yes Kamalaji, you are right good-morning is over used but I said it today because this morning is really good for me!’

“Oh, Bhagyashree, you are so sentimental! Are your questions ready? You can ask whatever you want to....”

“Thank you Kamalaji! First of all, you tell me about your present engagements. What are you doing these days! Are you writing something new? Poems or prose? Or columns?”

“Presently I am not able to give that much time for writing. In fact, I cannot help writing poems and bits of prose here and there, while in my office but my health does not co-operate, I have my office on the same floor where my room is but I gasp when I move and I cannot walk as fast as I could last year. I have to take one of my maidservants and she takes me slowly to the office where I sit for longer time in the day. The visitors who come to see me are mostly poor women and children. They bring their sick children with them and tell me “Amma, bless, our child” I embrace them to comfort their agonized minds. I place their child between my knees and pray for its health. I offer the prayers for them concentrating my faith that God may bless them, through my touch or words. I believe a pure prayer is always granted. Because of all this I don’t find much time to write, but I have not stopped writing”.

“Kamalaji, I heard that you stay alone although you have three sons. Why don’t you stay with them?”

“One of my sons is abroad, settled there happily. The other is in Delhi, working as the editor of the times. The third stays at Poona with his wife and daughter and all the three are so busy, holding higher posts and, higher status than me....that I don’t feel like intruding upon their lives. I have my own circle of visitors and the public-life that I make my comfort, is so crowed that I don’t find it proper to disturb their families. People come to see me and I pass my time in social work so much so that this staying alone is actually full, so fulfilled that I find it the only source of survival for me”.

“Kamalaji, what is your motive in conversion to Islam?”

“Oh, Bhagyashree, you are too young like many of readers, to understand the need for a relief, peace and sense of spirituality. I searched these things whole of my life from the earliest age, and they kept eluding me all these years that I lived alone, thirsty for love, weary and withered by my wanderings in the baffling ways of life. now that I have found a source, in this religion called Islam I don’t think I’ll be as lost and
lonely as I used to be. Since I've converted there are so many threats of killing and abusing me but I did not bother. If I get murdered by some fanatics, I think I shall be a martyr of religion. And I did embrace Islam but when I bless people even now I utter the Durga Stotra which comes to my tongue easier than anything else. Of course I utter that within my conscience and people don’t hear it. They only see my lips moving. I don’t think God in any form, Hindu or Muslim, refuses me or ignores my prayer. Islam had revived my hope for peaceful life. That is all.”

“Kamalaji, as a poet and a woman writer, what would you say about women’s issues like dowry, career, marriage and suffering in patriarchic society...?”

“Women must be confident and courageous, first of all....”

“Like you, Kamalaji....”

“Oh, No Bhagyashree, I don’t say, like me, for I don’t think I am courageous. In fact, I don’t feel that I am strong and independent enough to be a feminist or an advocate of women’s lib. I wish women come out from their psychic phobias and work out their desires and plans in such a way that their suffering lessens. The problems like dowry and bride-burning and wife-battering can be fought and solved only through the concerned participant’s confidence and courage. Every woman should dare to be herself despite all odds around her....”

“Kamalaji, I want your message for me, finally....”

“Bhagyashree, you are so nice and so polite. I am thankful that you have flattered me and I bless you my child. You will achieve your goals in life. Be honest and truthful to yourself and you will be happy.”

“Thank you Kamalaji, thank you very much”. I put down the receiver with a sense of contented joy in my eyes.
II. Interview with Kamala Das

The Questionaire sent to Kamala Das alias Kamala Suraiya and the answers received in response by correspondence:

Q: What do you think, was the most powerful influence, on your mind, that inspired you to write?
A: My loneliness. My powerful loneliness!

Q: What were your dreams, as a girl growing-up?
A: I dreamt of Lord Krishna. I wanted to be loved by Him.

Q: How would you look at relationship, in past, with your father?
A: Not satisfactory. He was distant, and I was scared of him.

Q: What would you say about your husband?
A: Unsatisfactory relationship. He disliked poetry.

Q: Did your husband promote your art of writing?
A: He did, but that was only for the money my writing brought in.

Q: What do you recall about your relationship with your mother?
A: She was cold and distant. I do not recall her touching me or fondling me in the childhood.

Q: Do you recall any incident or memory with your brother?
A: We floated paper-boats in the rivulets formed in the yard of Nalapat house in the rainy season. That was a nice game for us.

Q: What do you think, is the definition of poem?
A: The poem is as close to the poet as the marrow inside the sternum.

Q: What is the meaning of autobiography, in your view?
A: In my view, an autobiography should adhere to the truth. But my husband's view was different.

Q: Is there any difference between a poem and an autobiography? What?
A: In autobiography the writer can tell lies to make the book saleable. poetry is seldom written for money.

Q: What is your meaning of religion?
A: Discipline. Joining a particular religion is like joining the army.

Q: As some say, are there any political causes behind your conversion.
A: No. Only certain emotional causes.

Q: What is that which made you abandon Hinduism?
A: I loved a Muslim and was under the impression that he loved me. I have not abandoned the Hindu way of life. I am still a vegetarian and I respect a satvic lifestyle.

Q: What do you think is the purpose of Islam?
A: Islam promotes sacrifice. Perhaps that is its most attractive purpose.

Q: What are your future plans?
A: I leave the planning to God.

Q: Do you think you suffered as a woman! Or as a poet?
A: Yes, both ways. My soul walked like a naked babe and caused embarrassment.

Q: Were you ever disturbed by the public-response to your writings?
A: Yes, a little.

Q: What do you think, is the purpose of your autobiography My Story?
A: It was written in a lurgy at the Bombay hospital (Room No. 565) where I lay ill and in pain. It helped to pay the bills.

Q: Do you think you have escaped something, which you should have written in My Story?
A: No. Let it remain as it is. It became popular with the women living outside India. It brought me admiring visitors.

Q: Whom would you like to give the credit of your achievements as a writer?
A: God, I suppose.

Q: Would you like to add something or re-write your autobiography?
A: Yes, I would like to write a more accurate autobiography but being a Muslim I cannot reveal all. I do not wish to hurt the community.

Q: What do you think is the relationship of man and woman dependent on?

Q: What would you say about Indian, rather South-Indian codes of morality?
A: Fraudulent features, pretense, hypocrisy etc.

Q: Do you think your quest for love is fulfilled?
A: Yes. I feel so.

Q: Did you meet a single person whom you would like to devote
yourself to?
A : yes.
Q : Do you wish to enter politics?
A : Not any more.
Q : What are your views on social reform?
A : I cannot favour originality to become a social reformer. I am
obsessed with my desires and the fulfilment of them perhaps.
Q : How do you imagine God? In what form?
A : I imagine God as an embrace which I can feel or sense but He has no
form. I taste him as I taste the sun, the rain, or the waterlines. The thought of
God guides my ecstasy during my prayer after 3 in the morning in the pre-dawn
moments.