



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO- CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATRIARCHY IN KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

Sir Ernest Barker (1874-1960) who was the principal of Kings College, London (1920-1927) opines that family is a single society. He was the Prof. of political science at Cambridge University and the above said opinion is written in his book The Values of Life. Robert E. Park and Ernest W Burges in their book Introduction to the science of Sociology define family in another way. According to them, “the family is the earliest, the most elementary, and the most permanent of social groups” (P 213). They are of the opinion that marriage, childbirth and the other ceremonies are some stages in the evolution of family.

There are so many studies and researches on Kamala Das, especially the man-woman relationship, confessional poet, feminism and linguistics in her works etc. But nobody has worked on the socio- cultural environment presented by her which is one of the basic elements of the creation of literature. Kamala Das created her own place not only in Indian literature but in world literature too. She opened areas in which are previously forbidden or ignored emotions expressed truly. Anyhow she is not a typical Indian writer who created her own space in literature but an Indian writer who created much noise with her open writings while entering into literary arena.

Until recently, among the Nair community of Kerala matriarchal system was prevalent. Anyhow during Kamala Das' childhood matriarchy system was followed by Nair's in Kerala. The main reason for this system was the constant fights between the Keralites and the people from Tamilnadu and Karnataka. There were also fights between different kingdoms inside Kerala and most men will be in war filed always. The southern part of Kerala was a war belt and the people of those areas were under the war threat from Pandyas and Cholas. In course of time, the members of Nair community became the fighting class of the Kerala Kings. Another possibility which Jeffrey points out and the popular said to be reason which is spread among Keralites is the custom among Namboothiris in Kerala. In olden times the Namboothiris owned vast estates and in order to look after those lands, only the eldest male member could marry from their caste and the other male members have to marry from Nair community. The Namboothiris who married from Nair families are actually visitors to those



Nair houses and that marriage is called Sambandham in Malayalam language. The children born from such relationship fall under the responsibility of women and they were not permitted to enter in their fathers house.

So women are forced to undertake all responsibilities of home and they were even free enough to choose a partner according to their taste. All those women at that time had an identity of their own and they enjoyed social and individual security under matriarchy. Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, in old Malabar district on 31st march 1934. The British ruled India in those days and Malabar district was under Madras presidency. Presently Punnayurkulam is in Trichur district which is regarded as the cultural capital of Kerala, and the land of poorams. The Nalapat family to which Kamala Das was born was a matriarchal family and it was one of the aristocratic and feudal families in Kerala. When Kamala Das was born the matriarchy was in a falling stage but not completely.

In almost all her works one can see the traces of matriarchy and one would get a clear picture about the ancestors of Nalapat tharavad and the social and cultural patterns of different periods. The socio-cultural environment of Kerala is reflected on each generations of Nalapat family and vice-versa. Kamala Das not only depicted the members of Nalapat family but also about the people who were in touch with Nalapat family. For example, the servants of different time, relatives and neighbours etc. All these people are a vital part in her works and their life style also gives a clear impression of the socio-cultural environment of those days. Kamala Das narrates Nalapat house,

The house, though not large by local standards, had an inner courtyard and a temple situated inside the main hall which opened out to the south..... A dining hall for the women of the house, the servant's quarters, three small bedrooms on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the first floor overlooking a narrow verandah and an attic where the old trunks and palanquins were stored. My Story ,p 11.

The house, every corner of it, every little stone, every tree and every occupant in it supplied her with themes for quite a number of works. The house was gifted to Kamala Das ancestress, Kunji by her dotting husband. He was well versed in astrology and architecture and he chose the site for Nalapat house and designed it. There were so many trees around Nalapat house and most of them were planted by Kunji during her honeymoon days. Among them the Neermathala tree near the snake shrine was Kamala Das' favourite " which burst into bloom every summer with large butter coloured flowers that filled even inner rooms with perfume" (My Story p13).

Kamala Das mentioned about that particular tree in many of her works and she had even written a memoir titled Neermathalam Pootha Kaalam in Malayalam. The tree holds a lot of memories for her and after the partition of Nalapat property the snake shrine area belong to



Kamala and she offered that particular piece of land to Kerala Sahithya Academy. That specific area is still maintained by academy as a tribute to Kamala Das. The bond between Kamala Das and Neermathala tree was so strong and she believes that she cannot exist without the memory of that tree.

When Kamala Das was living in Kochi someone from the BBC and London Observer came to film the Nalapat house and they asked her why she had never thought of selling the place because it was occupied by snakes and civet cats. She answered them that it was because of Neermathala tree. She writes, “ I wanted to hold on to my tree” (Path of a Columnist p-20). The tree was a witness to all the events in her life, by using the word ‘holding the tree’ she literally means to hold the memories of Nalapat house. She talks about the tree and its flowers relating it to her marriage and her delivery. Other than the Neermathala tree, there were so many other flora and fauna in the surroundings of Nalapat house. A coconut estate was there and after the death of any family member they will plant a new coconut tree for their remembrance.

There was a crocodile living in Nalapat pond and a lot of dragon flies and other small insects flied around the country bean plant. There were venomous green snakes on the lemon plant and lizards, spiders and caterpillars on the walls of Nalapat house. But all those living beings never hurt the Nalapat people. There was mongoose families living near the wooden wall and orange coloured chameleons rested in the steps of Nalapat house. They never make the people living inside the house afraid and Nalapat people also felt that all those living beings are not their enemies. So all of them lived together with a mutual understanding in Nalapat compound.

To the north of the house there were cattle sheds and large trees bearing flowers and fruits which added the greenery of Nalapat house. The only male member of Nalapat family was Nalapat Narayana Menon, Kamala Das’ grand uncle. He was a poet and philosopher. Nalapat is the name of his mother’s tharavad and not his father’s. As a part of matriarchy he took his mother’s family name. The women also used their mother’s family name or matrilineal uncle’s as their surname. Matrilineal joint family, called Tharavad is found among Nair’s in Malabar and Travancore and the property of tharavad is the property of all males and females belonging to it. There are so many rules and norms related to tharavad and among that unmarried son belong to mothers tharavad and married one belong to his wife’s tharavad. The Manager of tharavad property is the oldest male member in the family and he is called as Karanavar or Karanavan and his wife is called as Ammayi. Karanavar enjoys absolute power in the tharavad and after his death the eldest male member become the next Karanavar. When tharavad become too large, it is divided into Thavazhis. A thavazhi in relation to a woman is a group of persons consisting of a female, her children, and all her descendants in the female line.



The matriarchal values rooted in Kamala Das' mind helped her in understanding the psyche of women and it is the same matriarchal values which pacified her in all her crisis time by giving her strength to move on. The religion, customs, tradition, kindness, power structure, love towards fellow beings and the belief in Almighty are the contributions of matriarchy in her life. Every woman possesses such a nostalgic memory in her life, the past golden days of her life, which gives her immense energy to struggle and to live. For Kamala Das, it was Nalapat house and the surroundings and she always lived with the memories related to that. Knowingly or unknowingly such a social system contributed much to Indian literature via Kamala Das.

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