



AN EXPLORATION OF KAMALA DAS' MY STORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study a single 'woman', whom the society often treats as mysterious. She is no one other than Kamala Das. Every person lives with a mask on his face. He expresses his real face only at some particular moments. But, in case of writers, this mask play is a bit complicated one.

Keywords -Kamala Das, autobiography, domestic issues, Indian women writing.

Introduction-

I think the hardest lesson for me to learn – and I have not learned it, one attempts to learn it every day- is that the word 'woman' is not after all something for which one can find a literal referent without looking into the looking glass.

Gayatri C Spiwak, The post-colonial critic

This paper is an attempt to study a single 'woman', whom the society often treats as mysterious. She is none other than *Kamala Das*. Every person lives with a mask on their face. Throughout their entire life only in some particular moments they make their real face visible. But, in case of writers, this mask plays is a bit complicated one. This is because the real personality often merges with the unreal world they create and, as a result, the readers get confused whether what they are reading is autobiographical or fictitious. Things get worse in case of women writers because there is a general tendency among readers since the olden times to connect the personal life of women writers with their works assuming what all the things they have written is autobiographical.

In reality, the women writers are often struggling with their problematic 'home' and problematic 'society'. As a mode of escape from the societal stoning, they have started writing with an indirect persona and the result is creating a literary 'other'. The choice of



Indian women's writing in English is deliberate. Women writers including *Kamala Das* learned English during the colonial and post-colonial periods and they found it more comfortable in writing in English than in their native languages because of the acceptance and value of English at the global level. *Kamala Das's* English writing was much different from her contemporary writers. She never copied the style of writing of native English authors and used a kind of 'Indianized' English. Before that, Indian English was not taken seriously. A women writer is often confused about what to write because a free flow of ink is not allowed to her. Before writing anything she has to censor and re-censor it in mind because she always fears what the society may think about her when writes honestly. So, she always searches for something safe to write, for example, about weddings, religious ceremonies, childbirth, deathbed, etc. All these are events which happen inside the security of home which she is able to connect with than a male writer. *Kamala Das* also wrote about these kind of domestic stories than dealing with the complicated world issues. But she differs from her contemporaries only because of her fearless honest writing. Most women writers lack courage to write about their private life, especially about sexual encounters. A few women writers talk about body or body expressions .It is amazing to note that the physical dimensions are systematically eliminated from their works. For example, in almost all works children are born but sexual union is not described. It is the middle class morality which stresses that women should not write about their own body. When compared to the past, present women writers are bold enough to focus on their own bodies.

Autobiography is, etymologically and in practice, the story of a person's life, meant to be shared with others. Broken down, the word auto/ bio/ graphy which means self/ life/ story, is the narrative of the events of a person's life. Autobiography is not regarded as a literary genre before the eighteenth century for so many reasons. The first critical controversy was over the division between fact and fiction and it is interesting to note that even in the 21st century critics have not found out an authentic solution to this controversy. Readers also are divided in their opinions about autobiography. Some people take it as a factual document and some others view it as being much more closely connected with fiction.

Everyone knows what an autobiography is but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement.

(Olney 1972, p 7)

This statement addresses the problem of defining autobiography. In olden times, autobiographies are considered as history texts because autobiographers mirror the history and culture of its subject. Actually autobiography is an interplay between the past and the present. An autobiographer writes about what all the things happened in his/her life and on what situation he/she is placed in, that is at their present. Truth in autobiography is a very complex question. The autobiographers present truth as seen from inside; so it is more subjective than objective. It is not a fault at all. *Kamala Das* turned out to be a controversy

queen after publishing her ground breaking autobiography *My Story* in 1989. The admission of intense feelings of hate, love and fear, sexual encounter and painful psychological experiences are something about which autobiographers are generally silent. This marks *Kamala Das* out as a unique writer among the autobiographers because she had pulled everything out under the carpet. It is hard to write and it is more hard when the writer is a woman and it is harder when she starts writing the truth or revealing the self. After the World War II, two bibliographies of autobiographies in both British and American literatures were published but it is important to note that no woman writer was included in those texts.

Autobiographies written by women are treated as sentimental chronicles and what all the things they are writing about are seen as either ‘made-up’ stories or non-sense.

*.... a book? NO, it is the personal outpouring of a disturbed lady
- albeit genius – whose eclectic life is of no more interest to her than to the
reader. There is no story line, no plot, no continuity. Her writing is frantic
stringing together of words without any thought for the ordinary arrangement
of noun and verb, it is hard readingit is utter confusion.*

(Alhearn 1974:17).

Saradakutty , a famous Malayalam critic, is of the opinion that Kamala Das’ *My Story* is the consequence of her reading *My Life*, Isadora Duncan’s autobiography. She was much influenced by the liberated U.S dancer who rejected the conventions of classical ballet. (Saradakutty, Mathrubhumi weekly, March 7-2007). *My Story* had its origin in a hospitalized condition of the author for a serious heart disease. It is even commented that the work was begun to “distract her mind from the fear of sudden death as well as to clear her outstanding hospital bills” (Dwivedi p140).

Kamala Das bravely fought against all criticism and protests and she courageously disclosed in the preface of *My Story*, “I have written several books in my life-time but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me”. It was her childhood in *Nalappat* house which contributed much to her literary career. Loyalty and affection of servants from different castes, traditional Nair weddings, stories told by her grandmother, trees and flowers around *Nalapat* house, dance of eunuchs in the streets, religious beliefs, downtrodden women, clever women who can win the heart of any man, freedom struggle, woman who seeks fulfilment in lesbianism, etc are all themes which she got from her village. Kamala Das’ autobiography *My Story* reflects the social structure of Kerala at that time. The attitude of upper class people towards the lower class and their pathetic plight are discussed in her autobiography. People belonging to each caste have to perform certain jobs in those periods. In India, presently people are free to choose their own jobs but still, the caste in which they are born forms part of their identity. In almost all societies distinctions based on wealth or status are there and one can alter their wealth or some other status but one cannot step out from the castes into which he/she has been born.

Kamala Das' life story is bigger, bolder and better understood when one peeps into her battered emotional love life. She was born with a dark complexion to unsuitable parents who lived in their own worlds. Sorrow played an important role in her life from the beginning and it continued when she married at the tender age of 15 to a lustful cousin who unashamedly boasted about his illegal affairs with his cousins and maid servants. Her very first experience with him was very bitter but an innocent girl of 15 did not know how to say NO to a man.

Early marital knot seemed to have given a jolt to her sensibility as a woman. She always craved for a beautiful emotional bond with her husband but his prime importance was for physical love. Love was an obsession to her. When marital love degenerated into lust she was haunted by frustration which later leads her to seek sexual fulfilment in extra-marital relationships with other men. She frankly admits it in this way:

*.....you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in other's arms.....*

Kamala Das, *A Man is a season*

The post-colonial Indian women writing in English is more concerned with man-woman relationship than any other issue. Many of these women writers including Kamala Das portray woman as an individual in search of freedom than an object of sexual pleasure. Kamala Das' poems express the quest for love and frustration in married life. *Vrinda Nabar* observes:

My story and her responses to my questionnaire suggest that she began seriously writing verse because of her intense unhappiness in her marriage.

The Endless Female Hunger, p 30

Kamala Das' life has been written, talked and gossiped about, there's nothing left to be said but still turns to be the favourite for the critics. There was a girl inside her, a wife, a mother and a lover who always longed for love. During her childhood for her *ammammas* attention Kamala Das obeyed what all things that old village lady told her. After marriage she adjusted with the likes of her husband. She played with her kids like being one among them. The only reward which she expected from all those people was nothing other than love. She says:

I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little.

Kamala Das, Interview with Warrior

Conclusion

One of the significant features of Kamala Das' autobiography is her instable feelings. While reading one page, the reader may feel that her husband is a womanizer and she hates him, another section may be a dedication to her loving husband where she mentions him as her



‘darling’. She rapidly shifts her emotions and feelings and thereby surprises the reader. She says her autobiography is an authentic one. Later she disagrees with the statement and proves with reasons that there is something fabricated in *My Story*. Instability in speaking and writing is the fact that one researcher finds out while working on Kamala Das. And this is one of the main reasons why researchers and readers follow her and her works after her death also.

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