



KAMALA DAS: THE REAL SELF

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is regarded as one of the most controversial women writers of the 21st century. So, many critics and researchers had worked on her but still there is something novel in her and her works to explore about, only because of the mysterious aura which she had left behind. Every person lives with a mask on his face. He reveals his real face only at some particular moments. But, in the case of writers, the role that this mask plays is a bit complicated.

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

Introduction:

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. People make their real faces visible only in some particular moments throughout their entire life. 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 the 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, 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 woman writer is often confused over 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 she 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 kinds 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.

Kamala Das' autobiography *My Story* reveals that a woman is naturally creative and if given a space of her own, she can defend her selfhood and narrate her life story boldly. 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 means self/ life/ story, 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 of the 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 their subjects. 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 his 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.

Kamala Das has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner in her autobiography *My Story*. *My Story* is a life narrative of Das' inner journey and a search for her own identity. One can find introspection and self-analysis in her life story and while searching for the truth she is aware about her subordinate gender and her limitations. In her poem *The Conflagration* she observes;

Woman is this happiness, this lying buried beneath a man?

It's time again to come alive.

The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame.

Kamala Das. The Conflagration.

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 into 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 led 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

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 *ammamma's* 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

Kamala Das' life story is set in the once matrilineal framework of the Nair Tharavad. Colonization and the imposition of western notions of morality upon the native systems influenced her peculiar individual position. 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 any 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. Kamala Das' autobiography is the



collective repository of a woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Nevertheless, she has demolished patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

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