



International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences

ISSN(O): (2349-4085) ISSN(P): (2394-4218)

Impact Factor- 5.414, Volume 5, Issue 2, February 2018

Website- www.aarf.asia, Email : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

The Story of Kamla Das

Yogesh Singh Mohan
Assistant Professor(English)
DAV College, Sadhaura.

Abstract

Kamla Das remains one of the most elegant women writers in Indian English literary canon. She was the first to challenge the male dominance both in writing and experience. Her autobiography, which she called a compelling writing, shocked her prudish compatriots beyond reconciliation. Her revolt is unique given the times she wrote in and of course as I said the language! She chose to write in English, the experiences which were quintessentially Indian. That was too much to ask for an Indian Woman writer! Obviously her devil may care attitude emboldened the women writers who followed her footsteps and eked out a room of their own in the literary arena which was essentially phallogenic. Feminist critics like Irigaray described the multiplicity of psycho-sexual experiences in women and the subsequent multiple voices and an almost carnivalesque representations of experiences in their writings. Ms. Das also, through all possible means at her disposal, wrote of the real life events, in a fiercely confessional tone which caused a lot of resentment not only among the male readers but also among the females as they too subscribed to the male ideology. Ms. Das challenged the hegemony of male experience and through her writings tried to dislocate the 'centre'. Her poems like 'The Sunshine Cat' or 'The Freaks' are but a manifestation of the anguish, disillusionments and subsequent distress caused by a parasitic matrimony that propelled the writer towards the tabooed relations with other men. Being trained as a submissive, passive Indian girl, the oppression was too much to bear and gloom descended on her mental horizon. Being diagnosed with depression, she took to writing on the behest of the doctors, as a means of easing out the pressure. And thus we found our first liberal revolutionary, MadhaviKutty aka Kamala Das aka Suraiyya on whose writings have I dwelled and tried to extract some nectar for my peer readers and scholars.

Key words: Patriarchy, revolt, phallogenic, confessional, feminist, dominance.

Kamla Das aka Suraiyya, coming from the best of the Nair lineage, had an acute understanding of her subaltern status within a stand-offish patriarchy and her autobiography like other women's is polyphonic where every unconscious effort has been made to portray her trials and tribulations in as many voices and diverse layers of meanings as possible as Krishna Kriplani would put it simply about the variety of hues in Indian English Writings says:

'Such then is the linguistic jigsaw puzzle of modern India. Without a proper appreciation of this complex pattern one is likely to miss the significance of one of the most characteristic aspects of modern Indian literature, namely, its multiple character. It Has been said that Indian literature is one, though written in many languages-a faint echo of the famous Vedic verse: 'Truth is one though sages call it by various names'. This characteristic permeates not only literature but almost every significant aspect of Indian culture.'

and Ms. Das' life remains a paradigm of a modernist's journey defying patriarchy, and the resultant psychological insecurities, anxieties and dislocations wherein she took up arms vehemently against her tongue-tied paralytic state as a jilted sunshine cat. As women were made into the 'other', to quote words from *The Second Sex* by Simon de Beauvoir, it would be relevant to highlight that a woman's reactions to the people and events in her life would be quite unlike as that of a man's as defined by St Augustine in Confessions or Rousseau, where she would be incorporating and assimilating them with her being. This realization of self through relationships is also corroborated by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of the Black Folks* where the author identifies a similar phenomena among the ethnic, religious minorities and marginalized groups.

Rashsundaridevi in her *Amar Jiban* tragedizes the limitations of a woman's life in term of her access to the language. Binodini Dasi in *Amar Katha* simply echoes the life of Umrao jan, a prostitute-actress who by virtue of her very status freed herself from the male inhibitions. Similarly the autobiographies of Shirin Madam, Pandita Rama Bai, Hamsa Wadekar, Kanan Devi, Durga Khote, Amrita Pritam, Ajeet Kaur, Rosy Thomas, Bama, CK Janu, Nalini Jameela and the historic-gossip work 'The Wicked Women of the Raj' dealing with the likes of Anita Delgado, Mollie Elsip, Morag Murray etc. not just highlight the dichotomy between the idolized construction of 'woman' for the revival of national consciousness and the real woman of blood and flesh. Kamla Das breaks the mould of male domination through a fiercely confessional, uninhibitedly fresh diction.

Oh yes, getting

A man to love is easy, but living

Without him afterwards may have to be

Faced.

The looking glass

Was the society ready for an emancipated, educated woman like Kamala, or better still, are we even ready Now? This disharmony is appalling indeed. Famed poet, Ramanujan decried the antithesis between the inner self and the manifested conduct of Indians in ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’

Lord of the sixth sense

give us back

our five senses.....

Deliver us o presence

from proxies

and absences

from Sanskrit and the mythologies (25)

A confessional poetess like Sylvia Plath, Ms. Das vividly celebrated femininity in all forms-puberty, menstruation, lesbianism, lust, infidelity, revolt. Her articles in Malayalanadu so infuriated her father that he even exerted pressure to stop her work from being published, of course to no avail. It was in the year 1973 that her autobiography ‘Ente Kadha’ got published in her mother tongue Malyalam. With the book came accolades in form of prizes and translation into foreign languages. In preface to ‘My Story’, Kamala Das elaborates her compulsive reasons for writing an autobiography as, “My story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought, that writing would distract my mind, from the fear of a sudden death. Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honors my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed- out conscience.”(6)

At this juncture it would be pertinent to differentiate Ms. Das from the salacious writers who wrote with a self avowed motive to earn cheap money as Nissim Ezekiel takes the veil off their faces:

Damn you all sensitive poets

Seducers of experience

.....

Victims of your own spontaneous fraud

You are in hell

And you donot know it.

When did you last write

A real poem?

Famous essay writer J.S. Miller once commented that if women were to live separately from men and all their encroaching ideologies propounded in their literature, they would create a literature of their own liking and subsequently a self image very different than the one that's been trusted upon them by the patriarchy.

Coppelia Kahn has said that history is basically a record of male experience, documented by men from their point of view. Therefore, it becomes imperative for women historians to recreate and reframe the female experience and fill the muted blanks so that the voice of the female emerges.

The society in those years was itself in a state of flux and Adil Jussawalla found that Indian English writing:

reflects the Indian petty bourgeoisie's present inability to find a dynamic role for itself in a society which is slowly transforming itself from the semi-feudal to the capitalist. Wedged between the class that employs it and the broad masses of peasants and the growing urban proletariat, it can only torment itself with its own contradictions or turn on itself in a fury of self-destruction. This is the writing of a bourgeoisie at a dead end.

The chapter 'A brush With Love' in My Story deals with the first sprout of love, the first experience that took an immature teen girl out of her ambit of innocence. It deals with lesbian love making, an incident in which the author was a mere passive recipient of whatever was showered over her in name of love making in the train journey to her home back from hostel.

"She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, so very sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling.... It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that none, not even my grandmother had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot."⁷

The same chapter describes an untoward incident, an unwanted embrace by a family friend and an acute reminder of the inability of family elders to prevent the young girls from such perverts.

"Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Do not you love me he asked me? Do not you like my touching you? In addition, I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was goodbye."⁹ And this unwelcome guest would soon be the man in her life, her husband about whom she would later write:

Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?

The Freaks

Constant humiliations and neglect left deep scars on her psyche. She could never come to terms with her husband's indifference and her hatred took a more derisive tone ,
They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to.....

The sunshine cat

In chapter 'An Arranged Marriage', 'she wrote, "My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Don't you feel any passion for me? he asked me. ' I don't know', I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth."10 She further writes," It would not do to dream of a different kind of life. My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I would be a middle-class house-wife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of national flag, with wifely pride." 11

Shirley Geok-Lim sees Das's autobiography as a document that expresses the writer's ambiguity as a female trying to assert herself and her demands in a patriarchal society. Ms. Das' female characters upset the traditional notions of who is a female, how should she behave in the Indian male oriented socio-cultural milieu. Marilyn French reported in 1985 that majority of Indian women were married young by their parents to men whom they had never seen before. Then they are taken to their husbands' home, where they should behave in a servile manner throughout their lives. Keeping this context in mind, Kamala Das seems to have tackled the man-woman relationship in a bold perspective and opened the floodgates of female expression for writers like Shobha De, Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya , Jhumpa Laheri who were more empowered and socially accepted , thanks to the changing times. A.Roy remarked that it was these women writers who brought about some sort of a female renaissance in Indian English Literature by demystifying the woman and bringing in light

the real portrait of Indian women basking nonchalantly in the radiance of their being. These writers were not silenced on the issues of female sexuality and aspirations from life and society.

Elaine Showalter had once stated that the concern of Gyno-critics was to create a female framework to analyze the women's literary output in a different light, bereft of the hitherto significant male dominated models of criticism. It is an uphill task for women will require memory to link the broken channels and the task almost takes mammoth proportions as for Ramanujan reminiscence is anthropological,

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving
affections, seeds, skeletons
millennia of fossils records
of insects that do not last
a day. (Collected Poems 122)

And it is in this very context that Kamla Das's autobiography succeeded in casting an indelible mark on the canvas of Indian English writings which was unprecedented and in many ways remains unchallenged till date. K. Satchidanandan wrote "I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colors and its turbulent poetry."

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