



Research Paper

Constructing Narratives In A Patriarchal Culture: The Case Of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT: *The Indian woman writers have constructed narratives in Indian context which is predominantly patriarchal culture where some have internalised the feminine roles and some have reacted against their stereotyped roles. Most of them started writing with a feministic approach in a transitional phase of Indian literary history when colonial writings were being replaced by postcolonial writings. The autobiographies written by women during this period can be studied as an outcry for the exploitation of women in a patriarchal culture. The bilingual literary career of Kamala Das [1934-2009] witnessed to the many efforts she made as a woman writer to engage with the patriarchal culture of Indian society. Two of her self life narratives My Story (1976) and A Childhood in Malabar (2003) are being analysed here to explore the influence of patriarchal dominance in the then social scenario. Both the writings quite candidly explore what it means to be a girl and a woman in Indian context where an undertone of suppression, suffocation, and subjugation is clearly heard. She was the writer who prepared ground for other Indian woman writers to fight against the patriarchy, the oppression, the sexual colonialism.*

KEYWORDS: *patriarchy, feminism, life narratives, oppression, desire.*

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Indian culture in its multiplicity is predominantly a patriarchal culture, a male-dominated culture, a male-centric culture. It is a culture weighted towards the males by sidelining the females and keeping them in marginalised positions. The female writers in India have constructed narratives in this socio-cultural environment. Some have internalised the feminine roles which the dominant culture has thrust on them and some have reacted against their stereotyped roles. The bilingual literary career of Kamala Das [1934-2009] witnessed to the many efforts she made as a woman writer to engage with the patriarchal culture of Indian society. Her works can be studied as an outcry for the exploitation of women, and against branding her simply as an object. It is pertinent to mention that Kamala Das was writing in a transitional phase of Indian literary history when colonial writings were being replaced by postcolonial writings, in response to changing cultural imperatives. The main theme of Indian women's writing shifted from staging national consciousness to an articulation of individual consciousness more specifically to feminine consciousness.

Writers like Mary Wollstone Craft, John Stuart Mill, Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir and Kate Millett have ignited the feminine consciousness in the west. These theorists of feminism focussed on the internal deformation of women's selfhood caused by women's existence under patriarchy. The investigation into woman selfhood, female identity or women's subjectivity with in patriarchal context was the primary objective of their writings. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) in her famous work *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) analysed the impact of social oppression on the very selfhoods of women. Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), the American Transcendentalist in her work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) is of the view that "women must leave off asking men and being influenced by them but retire within themselves and explore the ground work of life till they find their peculiar secret". John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in the "The Subjection of Women" is of the view that: "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others."

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), in her famous work *A Room of one's Own* has written that a woman who wishes to write fiction or poetry must have a room of her own and some income, but even with a room and money she has other obstacles, her difficulty with 'the phantom' known as the 'Angel in the House', who constantly interrupts her and wastes her time. In her opinion a woman has to kill the angel in order to be able to write and she recommends for an intellectual androgyny as a solution for woman writers. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), French philosopher, novelist and critic is of the view that: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. In her famous work *The Second Sex* she has identified woman as the negative object or "Other", to man as the dominating "Subject" who is assumed to represent humanity in general. Kate Millett in her path breaking work *Sexual Politics* attacked the western social arrangements and institutions for males' dominion over females. She is one of the foremost writers to use the term 'patriarchy' for the social system where power is held by the father and woman selfhoods in the family face subordination.

Indian woman autobiographers in English who have quite vividly presented feminine issues and patriarchal influence are Sunity Devee, Cornelia Sorabji, Savitri Devi Nanda, Shudha Majumdar and Kamala Das. Sunity Devee's *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) narrates her childhood by describing how young girls were made to worship symbolic figures made of flour to have a good husband and wealth. Her autobiography unfolds her willing submission towards her husband and after her husband's death she took the shelter of her son, thus throughout her life she lived under the shadows of men. An autobiography by India's first woman lawyer Cornelia Sorabji, *Her India Calling* (1934) tells the story of the author's relentless struggle in the male dominated society. Savitri Devi Nanda in her autobiography *The City of Two Gateways: The Autobiography of an Indian Girl* (1950) portrays the discrimination in society regarding gender. From the very moment of her birth, the discrimination was made and she was asked by her father to dress as a boy, during her time even a poor dirty boy was considered better than a girl. Shudha Mazumdar's *A Parrern of Life* (1977) exposes how it was considered a sin to revolt against one's husband. Kamala Das too had this line of thought but she is very direct in exposing the female self in her writings; two of her life narratives *My Story* (1976) and *A Childhood in Malabar* (2003) explore quite candidly what it means to be a girl and a woman in Indian context.

Kamala Das has written many novels, poems, short stories, memoirs where an undertone of suppression, suffocation, and subjugation is heard. She herself declares that her writing is like dripping of blood, like the crying of crow, like the roaring of lion, very original, very honest and very true. From the very beginning she was bold and emphatic in highlighting the vicissitudes that beset a woman's life in the Indian cultural context and it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that she started a new trend by her sensational, frank and bold way of writing. In a style that is avowedly confessional Kamala Das has laid herself bare in front of her readers to expose the stark reality of a woman's life. Without succumbing to social norms entrenched in a patriarchal culture, she has explored contested spaces of feminine freedom and desire.

Two of her autobiographical narratives *A Childhood in Malabar* and *My Story* are being analysed here to explore the influence of patriarchal dominance in the then social scenario. *A Childhood in Malabar* is a narration of her childhood where she has quite vividly described the vegetative nature and the nature of several human characters surrounding her immediate environment. It is a reflective and richly detailed account of her memories of growing up in Kerala and Calcutta. *My story* is a narration focussing on her youth and old age which shocked the initial readers by surprise with its fearless articulation of subjects depicting the author's intensely personal experiences. She has quite explicitly described a woman's bodily needs, sexual desires and illicit affairs which were taboo subjects during her time. She has expressed many things, which she had to care for as a woman unabashed to the point being controversial.

Kamala Das was born to a mother from the Nalpat royal family and her father was a peasant Nair of Kerala. While analysing *A Childhood in Malabar* in the Indian patriarchal context we can find that where men stood for knowledge, wisdom and decision, women were considered as epitome of love, affection and care, supposed to involve in domestic affairs only. While describing her grandmother she writes:

"I had been in Ammamma's care for about two years. A period during which she had drawn the deepest satisfaction from rubbing freshly made coconut oil into my hair every day, then washing out the oil with powered green gram, drying my hair and combing it neatly."

About her grand uncle she writes:

"Guest who came to Nalapat liked to stay there for at least a week. Most of the time, they relaxed in the front verandah, paying no heed to the passage of time as they savoured Ammaman's conversational skills. Many of them were well known people. Advocates, literary figures, diplomats, expert physicians, astrologers: they were all Ammaman's friends."

In one of her childhood incidents she describes how the wish of her father prevailed in important decision making where as her mother was kept away, though her mother was a successful person in her times.

When the author was sent to a boarding school at the age of nine, she describes the incident as the sole decision of her father. In her words:

“When I was nine, my father, coming home on leave, found me to have become too rustic for his liking and immediately admitted me into a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns. I went with him in a taxi, carrying with me a long black box shaped like a child’s coffin in which my grandmother had packed my meagre belongings.”

As a girl child, she found that girls are trained to become successful house wives from the very beginning of their childhood. She found her own mother and grandmother to be successful wives by not reacting against the will of their husbands. In her words

“Ammamma was no feminist but she was extremely feminine. Which must have been why she discovered heaven itself in her husband’s demonstrations of affection and in attending to his needs? He was thoroughly male. What he needed was a sweet-natured and soft spoken wife.” “You must never say anything offensive to your husband”- was what her grandmother used to tell the author.

Describing the situation of a woman of Nalpat who left her husband at an early age, she writes “She was a woman who longed to liberate herself from the shackles of marriage, to free herself from the authority of a man”. While telling about her mother’s marriage she describes that her marriage was ‘conspired’ and ‘plotted’ by her mother’s father and uncle. Describing her own marriage in *My Story* she says ‘my life had been planned, ‘I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandparents put up with for long’. So, the larger point being made is that marriage of girls in her family for generations together have been forced upon them. Nobody has ever thought of taking their consent in the decision of marriage. She lived a choice less life which means that she has no right to choose her own life partner.

“Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father has spent half a lakh on its preparation. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue.”

At an early age when the author was in her teens she was forced to marry by putting an abrupt end to her education. The man was one of her relatives quite matured than her age, who hurt and humiliated her and with whom she was unable to pair herself mentally and physically. She has spent an extremely unhappy loveless married life where she has experienced marital rape. The so called marital love of a woman was out of compulsion due to the fear of society and as a wifely duty:

“I was to be the victim of a young man’s carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children. I would be a middle-class house wife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a sting 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 of mercy. I would wash my husband’s cheap underwear and hang it out to in the balcony like some kind of national flag, with wifely pride.”

In patriarchal culture marriage for women was more of a social, physical and economical union than that of emotional. For fear of breaking the tradition women continue to serve the role of a wife, even though sometimes it becomes a confinement for them.

In her words:

“Then I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the buttons and darned our old garments all though the hot afternoon. In the evening I brought my husband his tea and a plate of snacks. I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, ‘Get out of this trap escape...’”

Though the author was unhappy with her marital life, she could not gather enough courage to reveal her grief to her father. She writes: “My father was an autocrat and if he went wrong in his decision he did not want ever to hear about it.” The life of author in shatters is unimportant in front of the male ego of her father.

In the words of K Satchidanandan:

Of course there was a minority, mostly women sentenced to patriarchal oppression and unable to find a way out of its asphyxiating labyrinths, who could identify themselves with the sad, lonely and ever experimenting protagonist of “My Story” in her desperate search of true and lasting love. Many of these women later grew up to be writers themselvesthough none of them has dared narrate their private lives and bare their unconscious the way Kamala Das--- had done.

Dr Dipti Mahanta in “ Kamala Das’s *My Story* : A critical Perspective” is of the view that Kamala Das is among very few woman writers who has shown an indomitable courage to tell the truth about her experiences as a body, there by killing the ‘angel in the house’ and disclosing the truth of her typically feminine experience.

Thus the idea of patriarchy dominating her life was realised early in her life when she found that her father never cared for her .The result was that, her life was filled with the lack of fatherly love in childhood, which could well have been compensated in the arms of her husband, but in her marriage also, what she got

initially was the need of her body to the man. The fatherly neglect in childhood and also from her husband in her adult life gave birth to the quest for liberty in her life, which got amply reflected in her works. In *A Childhood in Malabar*, she blames her father and in *My Story* she blames her husband for not allowing her to lead her life in her own way. She has openly expressed her hatred for the male chauvinistic world through her writings. She was the writer who prepared ground for other Indian woman writers to fight against the patriarchy, the oppression, the sexual colonialism.

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