

## **Transformation of Social Structures: An analysis of Kamala Das' writings**

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### **Abstract**

The article observes the process of social construction and its function in the society of Kerala. It examines the role played by social institutions in assigning the gender roles to women. It focuses on how education has brought in changes in understanding and questioning gender, which puts forward the thought of transformation of social structures. The writer chosen for my study is Kamala Das. It observes how the writer seeks for the transformation of social structures through her revolutionary ideas; better treatment to women in the society; challenging norms that restrict women and their freedom. The writer sets herself as an example of bold and great expressionist. Kamala Das expresses the inner world of women and addresses the conflicts. The writer has created her own world by crossing the limitations drawn by the community that she is a part of. She began her journey as a writer discovering herself through the hard paths chosen, later realizing that she has to face the odds posed by community, gender definitions, social institutions which intersect each other and collectively authorize the patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal power operates through institutional controls. The writer has strived hard to make her personal voice heard to the public.

**Keywords :** Social Institutions, Self discovery, Gender, Patriarchy

### **Introduction**

The study limits its scope to the twentieth century Malayalam literature. The following lines give a brief account of the nature of conflicts that operate in Kerala society.

'The progressive Literary Movement of the thirties interrogates the insular nature of the mainstream aesthetics. By the late fifties, a new generation of writers had begun questioning the legitimacy of the social-realist idiom employed by the progressive movement. The modernist writers of the fifties and sixties articulated the angst of the outsider, preoccupied as they were with themes of alienation and disillusionment. The experimental idiom cultivated by the modernists got radicalized in the seventies when resistance movements inspired by the Emergency, feminist thought and ecological activism brought about a new thematic in literature. The closing decades of the century evidence new relations between life, society and literature.'(Ramakrishnan 2011, p.79)

The social, cultural and political movements in the 20th century Kerala have put novel writing and reading to new openings. Modernist fiction had explored the angst-ridden psyche of displaced, distraught individuals trapped in oppressive surroundings. The fractured subjects of these narratives long to get back to a state of wholeness or health but they find it difficult to transform themselves. A few categories that have restricted women from expressing themselves are examined.

Categories such as caste, gender, class, region, nation and modernity have been productive in providing fresh insights into Indian literary texts. Literature, as a social institution, has always been mediated by several power structures in society. In the later decades of the 20th century novel in Malayalam has risen to unprecedented level both in terms of quality and quantity spanning across a wide variety of subject matters. Kamala Das has emerged as a writer who boldly expressed herself and her writings mark rare honesty and sensitivity, provocation and poignancy. Shashi Tharoor, reviews her work and states, 'Hers was one of the first and arguably amongst the foremost female voices in Indian English letters, and her contribution was n tony in literary creativity and originality but in the liberation she provided so many young women readers who felt freed and empowered by her words.'

Kamala Das through her characters celebrates individualism and gives preference to freedom than her own life. The characters work individually on those by means of questioning, recalling their past, relating them

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to the present and understanding and realizing their positions in the society instantly leading themselves to work on their lost selves. These women characters provide alternate options to the women in the society by breaking the norms that hinder their path in achieving their goals. She expressed differently marking as a challenge to the social order. She breaks the shackles which restrict women's freedom of thoughts and represents women by creating awareness among them.

'Kamala Das voices the agonies and weights of a normal Indian woman who is enduring behind the thick cover of preservationist conventions and traditions. The tone of her voice speaks about the casualties of sexual mortification under the male mastery. Her works support a beam of expectation in the hearts of ladies smothered under male control and she communicates her emotions and encounters honestly through her lyrics. Her works are portrayed by an abnormal state of truthfulness and respectability.' (R Prigya, P.1)

The hardships experienced by Kamala Das make her realize that she has opted a very tough path and speaks about the depth of understanding and expression as well as the kind of restrictions posed by the society. She speaks about women writers facing the challenges in the field of literature. Women writers are being controlled by patriarchal authority in dictating the themes to be written or touched upon as per the so called male standards of writing.

Kamala Das seeks for the transformation of social structures which help in liberating women and as a writer she hopes for a new social order. The women characters in her short stories, *The Kept Women* and other Stories, fight their ways out by breaking away from the conservative traditions that existed at their own times and are successful in carving out new lives for themselves.

The writer's goal is to liberate the women from social conditioning such as ignorance, poverty exploitation, caste, class and gender bias. She speaks about transformation of consciousness and change in perception as well as interpretation which reminds us of feminist consciousness. She strongly believed in passage of time that can bring transformation in society which promises women better status. She has strived hard to make her personal voice heard to the public. She sets as an example of bold and great expressionist.

### **Social Institutions versus Kamala Das' writing**

Marriage and family as institutions play a prominent role in assigning gender roles among the members of the society and gender roles are fixed to men and women differently with clear demarcation. Kamala Das through the story, *The Cattle Market*, questions the right to imprison girls in the house. She emphasizes that girls deserve the knowledge of the world outside and that they can excel in various fields if they enhance the knowledge deserved by them. She empowers women through her writing. She brings in the concept of women's education and further suggests women's participation in the public activities. She therefore upholds women's intellectual power as against the images created by men based on assumptions that women are weak, ignorant and incapable. She disproves the masculine assumptions, interests and ways of reasoning and proves that these are gender-biased.

Kamala Das through her revolutionary ideas challenges the norms that restrict women and their freedom. She expresses the inner world of women and addresses the conflicts of body and soul.' In one of her stories, *The Game of Chess*, the narrator expresses this as follows, 'One part of me –my mature self-kept asking my other, weaker self: "Why do you love this man who offers you only pain?" I am unable to bear this pain of mine. It is affecting my body too.'

The author boldly expresses about sex, puberty, menstruation, infidelity and homosexuality which is tabooed and many writers don't dare to draw courage to speak about such. Anjuly Mathai opines that it is revolutionary in her time, when Malayali society was held within the rigid confines of hypocritical Puritanism. Anjuly Mathai adds, 'she is the first one to teach us it's okay to desire, not just with our minds, but also with our bodies.' This speaks about the writer's openness in introducing the readers to the tabooed topics related to sexual yearnings of a woman which were never spoken about by the other women writers. Ancy K Sunny states, 'Her writings open a window into the intricacies of the female mind, thought process, her tussles with the patriarchal setup to which she was bound, her quest for love, and her acknowledgement of the body's carnal desires.

Kamala Das has crossed the limitations drawn by the community or society that she is part of and is successful in creating her own world. How her writing was received by the societal members is always a matter of fact:

'The readers of the serialized autobiography were drawn into a charming and intriguing life of love and longing, of desire and disloyalty. The writer, ever mischievously enigmatic, kept them tantalized by dropping contradictory hints first confessing it was nothing but truth and then declaring it was just a wish-fulfilling fantasy, an alter-life she had created for herself. The more orthodox readers of Kerala found it shockingly forthright and were quick to brand it immoral, denying to their sisters or daughters access to its agonized excitement. Its great author was looked upon as a seductress, not someone to make friends with.'(Satchidanandan 2009,p.vii)

Kamala Das challenges the societal norms and moreover as a writer she cannot choose what she writes about and what is to be expressed comes to her quite naturally. Anjuly expresses, 'Paradoxically, the more she was disrobed of her fantasies, the more she took refuge in them. The more her husband disillusioned her notions of love, the more she invented imaginary refuges for the immense love she wanted to give and receive.'

As a writer Kamala Das began her journey to discover herself. Books and authors like Chekhov, Flaubert, Maeterlink, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf have influenced her a lot. The kind of reading has impacted her and enhanced her knowledge resulting in change of perspective. She expresses:

“Society can well ask me how I could become what I became, although born to parents as high-principled as mine were. Ask the books that I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. The books like a mother-cow licked the calf of my thought into shape and left me to lie at the altar of the world as a sacrificial gift.” (Satchidanandan 2009, p. xvii)

Kamala Das continues her journey of writing through the hard paths chosen, later realizing that she has to face the odds posed by community, gender definitions, social institutions which intersect each other and collectively authorize the patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal power operates through institutional controls:

'A woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique identity as she is aware of how she is being defined as a woman, whose group identity has been determined by the dominating male culture. They don't recognize themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, so they develop a dual consciousness- the self as culturally defined and the self as different from the cultural prescription.'(Satchidanandan 2009, p.xi)

Kamala Das in her autobiography *My Story*, speaks about a strange custom among nairs of getting a young girl married to an old man, 'It was customary for a Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night.' Even Kamala Das is a victim here as she is married to a man who is much older than her.

Kamala Das' *My Story*, stirred up a hornet's nest as she gives a detailed picture of her childhood, coming of age, sexuality, emotional class, marital issues and extramarital affairs. Her son comments that she rebelled against patriarchy and the boundaries set by society. Kamala Das challenges the dominant system and its attendants through her forceful weapon- writing. She questions the indifference that is marked by the society in the modes of expression that is the kind of writing men were permitted to but not women. In her *My Story*, she gives an account of her grand-uncle who wrote about sex being accepted by the society, 'My grand-uncle had written at that time a book on sex, *Rati Samrajya*, which was an academic study based on the writings of Havelock Ellis and the Indian sexologists.' (pg 21) In contrast women are always expected to mute themselves regarding such topics. But Kamala Das breaks this norm of the society. Kamala Das also speaks about the community restrictions in *My Story*,

'No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principle phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi's legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her. (Das 2009,p.23)

Kamala Das expresses as how her early marriage has affected her physically and mentally reflecting her sexual unpreparedness. She comments on how social institutions are being held responsible for her state. And further states about how restrictions have driven her mad in her *My Story*, 'My husband was advised to call in a psychiatrist. I had begun to shed my clothes, regarding them as traps. My old ayah wept guilty tears

whenever she saw me in this demented condition.' There may be many women who would have not spoken about these but Kamala Das voices it boldly. But the society always interprets it in a different manner veiling her genuine expressions associating those with excuses such as Leukamia, written when consumed alcohol or insanity. She often speaks about freedom and associates it with madness and gives clarity that the odds posed by community, gender definitions and social institutions have intersected each other and collectively have authorized the patriarchal ideology by driving her mad. The following lines speak about the effect,

'Madness is a country  
Just around the corner  
Whose shores are never lit  
But if you go there  
Ferried by despair  
The sentries would ask you to strip  
At first the clothes, then the flesh  
And later of course your bones  
Their only rule is freedom' (Das 2009, p. 105)

Kamala Das expresses her circumstances which force her to die but that feel of dying ceases when she decides to write. Writing gives her rebirth and welcomes her to a new life with new perspective. The author feels that it was a good phase in her life when she had engaged herself in writing. Therefore, she is successful in finding an alternative in the form of writing which gives her enough strength to fight the dominant system and its attendants in the society. She finds great relief in writing that nourishes her back to life. She shares the joy of writing and proudly mentions,

'Writing became my only hobby, I wrote almost two stories every week and mailed them, borrowing the money for stamps from my husband. The Mathrubhumi sent me twelve rupees per story. Each story took me one full night to finish, for it was not possible to write when the children were awake.' (Das 2009, p.132)

The author shares about the experience of being alienated by the members of the society including her friends and briefs the readers as how she felt about it. The actual words of the writer are here:

'As I wrote more and more, in the circles I was compelled to move in, I became lonelier and lonelier. I felt that my loneliness was like a red brand on my face. In company when there were dinners at any friend's house, I sat still as a statue, feeling the cruel vibrations all around me. Then my husband realized my plight and stopped taking me out anywhere.  
I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all round me, but no friend to give me well-meaning advice, no relative telling me of my discrediting my family name by my unconventional ways of thinking...' (Das 2009, p.170)

## Conclusion

Kamala Das speaks about the power of writing and how as a medium strengthens her to express her true self in My Story. She tells how the relatives of hers feared that she would write of their misdeeds, of the accidental deaths in the locality and of the true immorality which takes shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of the society she is part of. And further adds on as how writing has taken her on addiction. The following lines reflect her interest in writing and the kind of sacrifices she is ready to make for the sake of writing:

'They took their grievances to my parents who were embarrassed but totally helpless, for it had become clear to them that I had become a truth-addict and that I love my writing more than I love them or my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer.  
I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons.' (Das 2009, p.195)

Kamala Das takes pleasure in opining that the writers always reflect their mind and she counters the commentators by stating,

'The essence of the writer eludes the non-writer. All that the writer reveals to such people are her oddities of dress and her emotional excesses. Finally, when the muscles of the mind have picked up enough power to read people's secret thoughts, the writer shies away from the invisible hostility and clings to her own type, those dreaming ones, born with a fragment of wing still attached to a shoulder.' (Das 2009, p.169)

The author expresses that she enjoyed writing the most, 'I learnt for the first time to be miserly with my energy spending it only on my writing, which I enjoyed more than anything else in the world.' She confesses the kind of bonding she has with her readers:

'I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin, the hair and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers. I have no secrets at all. Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time I walked to my lovers' houses dressed like a bride, my readers have walked with me. I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of an all-seeing God they follow me through the years.' (Das 2009, p.202)

She also speaks about the demands and the control of the editorial authority in *My Story* and how she derived happiness out of writing;

'I typed nearly a thousand words a week. I wrote about the subjects the editors asked me to write on, fully aware that I was uneducated by the usual standards and that I had no business meddling in grave matters. But how happily I meddled to satisfy that particular brand of readers who liked me and like my honest approach..... But writing was possible. And it certainly brought me happiness.' (Das 2009, p.202)

At the end Kamala Das turns philosophical by stating, 'The oft-repeated moves of every scattered cell shall give no power to escape from cages of involvement. We are trapped in immortality and our only freedom is the freedom to discompose....' She wants the readers to realize that humans are immortal whereas systems and arrangements are mortal meaning these can be dissolved. The following lines reflect the same, 'But ultimately we shall discover that we are immortal and that the only mortal things are systems and arrangements.'

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