

### Semester III

Born on 31st March 1934 in Kerala's Malabar District, Kamala Das Surraiya began to be known popularly as Kamala Das in the Indian literary scenario for her remarkable contribution to Indian writings in English as a poet. She received her education privately at home. Moreover, being a bilingual writer, Das also wrote poems and short stories in her native language Malayalam, most of which were published under her pen name Madhavikutty. From her childhood onwards she had been exposed to a literary environment at her home as her great uncle Nalapat Narayan Menon was a poet and she was greatly influenced by him. Her mother Balamani Amma's poetic passion and the religious writings of the Nairs too were great sources of inspiration for Das. Her father V.M Nair worked as the managing editor of the Malayalam Daily 'Matrubhumi'. The oeuvre of her writing in English include the collection of short stories Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories(1992), poetry books Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems(1973), The Anamalai Poems (1985) and also Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (1996). There is the novel Alphabet of Lust (1977) to her credit also. She was conferred with the PEN Poetry Prize and Sahitya Academy award. In the year 1984 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

My Story (1976) by Kamala Das is the translated version of her autobiography Ente Katha(1973) written in Malayalam. It was serially published in a weekly named Malayalanadu. In the preface she declares about writing the 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 and, besides, there were all the hospital bills....I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets...

Das's desire to reveal her secrets constitute one of the important elements of an autobiography. My Story thus traces her childhood in Calcutta and Malabar, her marriage as well as her literary journey. It also documents her personal experiences of being a woman, her quest for love and most importantly her assertion of self.

To situate Kamala Das's My Story in the milieu of women autobiographers, a brief account of the development of women's autobiography in India is discussed here. Bahinabai's autobiography (1700) is recorded as the earliest autobiography written by an Indian woman. Rassundari Devi wrote Amar Jiban (1876), and she became the first woman autobiographer in Bengali. She was an ordinary housewife but possessed an extraordinary zeal to read the holy books, for which she learned the letters painstakingly from her son's book. Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924) wrote in

Marathi Amachya Ayshyatil Kahi Athwani (Memoirs of our life together), Binodini Dasi (1863-1924) wrote Amar Katha (My Story) in Marathi. These women autobiographers hail from conservative patriarchal background, always remaining in the periphery, devoid of any space of their own. They were expected and taught by the senior women to be good wives. In their autobiographies, women like Lakshmibai Tilak, Ramabai Ranade express their view on marginality in parental households where singing, playing, reading and writing were out of question. Lakshmibai Tilak's husband converted to Christianity, and to live with her husband she also had to convert herself. She had tough time in trying to shed her original identity. On the other hand Ramabai Ranade was married to a western-educated husband, who insisted her to learn Marathi and English. In order to do so she had to confront the scornful attitude of the other women of the house, who tried to dissuade her from learning. She had to sustain her effort in difficult circumstances. She always remained careful not to offend her husband in any condition. Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948), who was associated with reformist Prarthana Samaj, writes in her autobiography that women simply considered themselves unfortunate beings. Her own mother and stepmother, who were educated, believed that education made women harsh and ambitious. She also made tremendous effort in learning. These women were silent sufferers who were taught to please men and never to worry them with their problems.

Most of the mentioned memoirs are the women's personal experiences as individuals. The early women autobiographers always concealed their sexual life. There are no references therefore to menstruation, menopause and sexual experience in their autobiographies. Their autobiographies also reflect the turmoil and disagreements overshadowing their expectation of a liberal society, attaining freedom from their situation of being colonized. Their life stories also throw light on the ways through which they overcome the obstacles of life, making a space of their own. In the nineteenth century the common themes of the women's memoirs are their happiness and satisfaction derived from their husbands' progress along with their own education and the prospect of a renewed life for themselves.

The later group of women autobiographers is marked for their assertion of right to create new identity models for women to meet the challenges of the changed times. The autobiographies of Binodini Dasi and Cornelia Sorabji bear testimony to the mentioned fact. Binodini Dasi is a legendary figure in Bengali theatre. Her autobiography is a major document of the Bengali theatre and the earliest first person records of a woman who remained single and worked for a living. She was victimized and used by the male dominated society while trying to restore the theatre she was working in. Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) was the first woman to be graduated. She was not given the scholarship which she obtained from Govt. of India after she acquired the first place in Bombay Presidency College. She had to wait for thirty long years to qualify as a practicing lawyer after she received her degree of Bachelor in Laws.

Another group of women autobiographers like Brinda (1910), Urmila Haksar (1922) and Sharan-Jeet Shan (1945) record their trauma of being women. But they cultivated the conviction that women can be liberated only when she is economically independent. Education and career assume great importance for these women. These autobiographers seek their fulfilment outside their domestic role. They were achievers by nature who would not remain satisfied only with their men's success. They had to excel in their own pursuits individually to satisfy their craving for self-fulfilment. The autobiographies of Durgabai Deshmukh, Dhanvanti Rana Rao, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay had the highest honor of being awarded the Padma Bhushan for their successful public life. They challenge the myth that woman is made only to be confined in the four walls of their home.

Kamala Das's *My Story* does not fall into the category of a typical woman's autobiography. For several reasons, her autobiography is considered as a notable one written by an Indian woman. She has revealed the bitter truth of life in a stunningly simple manner. The contribution of her memoir to women's autobiography in general and specifically to Indian women autobiography is also significant. She, while narrating her life without much apprehension, has crossed the gender boundaries of what is considered to be correct for a woman. Moreover, the autobiography reflects the life of an artist, giving us an insight into the creative development of one of India's controversial woman writer who seems to be compassionate about the possible protest of Indian women as extremely exploited agent in the social and domestic circumstances. She strongly protests against victimization in *My Story*. Her protest is directed against the injustices and the persecution to which woman in India have always been subjected to. *My Story* brought Kamala Das to prominence for being exceptionally vocal about her most private experiences.

Kamala Das passed her childhood very nicely at Nalapat house with the host of relatives around. She studied in a European school in Calcutta for a few years. Her father used to work in a private firm. She mentions that at that time British families had friendly relation with Indian families. So, her family too had close connection with a number of British families. But Das's experience in school with the British and the Anglo Indian classmates was not good at all. She and her brother were treated very rudely by the other students. They were made fun of their colour. Kamala was called as "Blackie". She also realised that the white students were given priority in everything. Once, a poem written by Das was given to an English girl called Shirley Temple to be read in the assembly saying that the latter wrote it. Though her parents never expressed their disappointment over their colour, but her father made them drink a monthly purgative and insisted her grandmother to apply turmeric and oil on Das's skin. There are so many other things that affected young Kamala's mind. For instance, she was conscious of the reality that her parents were awfully incompatible. Her mother never loved her father, and only because she was a typical Indian wife who never raised her voice that domestic harmony prevailed in their household. Her father never articulated any word of appreciation

for his children, which affected her as well as her siblings. Kamala felt a sense of alienation at school and at home also. The life she led all throughout might also have been affected by her childhood experiences.

Therefore, Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story* can be termed more of a personal memoir, through which she reveals her most private and personal experiences. It is an account of her childhood days, her married life and her growth as a woman as well as an individual too. On reading her life story it becomes quite explicit that she had never been a tradition bound woman, who would conform to the social norms. She led her life on her own terms and conditions, turning a deaf ear to what others said and thought about her. She epitomizes a modern Indian woman who is extremely vocal about her feelings and experiences, and rarely succumbed to the situations which did not suit her temperament. She, through her courage and confidence, asserts her identity as an individual. She puts forward the reason of being different than the other women of the time as: