



## Kamala Das's Conception of Feminism

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**Abstract-** *Kamala Das is altogether opposed to the orthodox ideology of male aggression, assertion and adventure. She seeks to expose in her autobiographical book My Story, the dimensions of injustice penetrated on a woman by her husband as well as her in-laws. Her conception of feminism seems to be guided by humanism consisting in cordial relationship. Marriage for her is a give and take partnership, woman is man's equal and honoured partner. Her rejection of male superiority does not imply female superiority. Her concept of feminism does not ignore the importance of a male person. Her feminism is not an anti-male stance. She has a firm conviction that human race will be incomplete without the honourable presence of male-persons. The male-chauvinism, according to Kamala Das, is not conducive to the all-round development of a female child. She is altogether opposed to the timidity on the part of women because it helps to create an illusion of domestic harmony and peace in the eyes of the neighbours, friends and relatives. She who is an upholder of women's liberty, surprises the readers by her statements that she bothers much about public opinion. In matters of woman's miserable light, she holds the rotten patriarchal pattern responsible.*

Kamala Das is altogether opposed to the orthodox ideology of male aggression, assertion and adventure. She seeks to expose in her autobiographical book *My Story*, the dimensions of injustice penetrated on a woman by her husband as well as her in-laws. However, her resentment is at times, mild in the sense that she does not ignore the importance of a male person. She realizes that a woman in Indian traditional family suffers undeserved ill-treatment. In her own case Kamala Das had to face unforeseen difficulties at the hands of the callous husband. Disillusioned with the sad experiences of married life, she opted out her

matrimonial circle, remarried in old age and reconciled to her fate. Commenting on her uncongenial marital status with Mr. Prabhakar Das, A.N. Dwivedi writes:

**"The inevitable result was that the black shadows of a crippling world began to darken her dreams of a happy, settled life. Her childhood innocence got shattered by the terrifying experiences of the adult world. She could not receive love in its true sense at the legitimate sources and her sense of attachment was never fulfilled."**

Her impressions about her husband were not good and lasting. She rather condemns

his shamelessness saying:

**"My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid, I did not know what sexual desire meant not having experienced it even once ..... It was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life ..... I did not know whom to turn for consolation."**

Like other middle-class Indian women, Kamala Das was denied freedom of thought and expression. She experienced the tortures of being confined to a limited sphere of household duties, treated as an object of love, sex and procreation. She felt suffocated, utterly helpless and hopeless. Devoid of comfort and autonomy in a patriarchal society, Kamala Das was forced to live within four walls of the house, wear sari and speak politely. She observed all around her that women were treated like slaves and servile creatures. Disgusted with the evil of familial and social tyranny she thought of unburdening her heart. Her talent was that of a writer. Her marriage with a creative artist would have been most suitable. She craved for her recognition and independent identity.

Kamala Das's conception of feminism seems to be guided by humanism consisting in cordial relationship. Marriage for her is a give and take partnership, woman is man's equal and honoured partner. Mutual understanding and respect for each other should form the basis of their relationship. Her rejection of male superiority does not imply female superiority. According to her, there is not much difference between man and woman. Bold and frank in her assertions, she has pleaded for a new kind of morality. She has sought to register protest against sexual colonialism as Iqbal Kaur points out: -

**"Kamala Das did display tremendous courage in revolting against the sexual colonialism and providing hope and confidence to young women that they can refuse and reject the victim positions, that they can frustrate the sexist culture's efforts to exploit, passivize and marginalize women."**

Kamala Das's concept of feminism does not ignore the importance of a male person. Her views on the so-called emancipation find expression in an essay entitled "My Instinct, My Guru" wherein she openly declares that too much freedom to women will mar the harmony and peace of domestic life. She asserts:

**"I don't want to be "emancipated" because I have seen so many of them "totally emancipated". They irritate their husbands. I hear complaints from men, their wives have become "so emancipated" that they dictate and they frighten them, all the men turned into mice. I don't think there is much difference between a man and a woman."**

Kamala Das's feminism is not an anti-male stance. She has a firm conviction that human race will be incomplete without the honourable presence of male-persons. She does not seem to agree with gynocritics who make discrimination between man and woman on the basis of physical structure and needs. She asserts clearly and openly:

**"I don't consider it to be that important, the little difference. We need only when we want to create children. Otherwise, it is all the same. We are dealing with people, the minds. The physical difference is not significant, it is not consequential."**

Feminism has one meaning for the westerners and another for Kamala Das. In an interview with P.P. Raveendran, she declares:

**"Feminism as the Westerns see is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because I have loved my husband and still love me children, who are sons and I think from masculine company, I have derived a lot of happiness. So, I will never be able to hate them."**

In her autobiography, Kamala Das seems to affirm her point time and again. The narrative is apparently a factual account of her life, and follows a line of development of the self. She herself is the source of the subject-matter. The anti-traditional themes of the poems in this autobiography are an eye-opener to the people of India and help to redefine the sphere of Indian women's activity. It may further be observed that the conflict between the traditional way of life and the modern needs of existence come out vividly. She is outspoken and assertive in dealing with the themes of love, marriage and sex as well as complex nature of human relationship. In it there is an introspection and self-analysis. She is satiric in tone when she attacks women submitting passively before men, and writes:

**"Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried. Beneath a man? It's time again to come alive. The world extends a lot beyond his fix-foot frame."**

The male-chauvinism, according to Kamala Das, is not conducive to the all-round development of a female child. It is rather an obstacle in her progress. Since her childhood, she has to remain under the stern discipline of her parents who took the girls to be puppets, and never allowed them to act independently. She mentions some of the events that rendered the female children helpless and hopeless. She says

**"(The parents) took us for granted and considered as mere puppet moving out limbs according to the tugs they have us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently."**

Kamala Das is altogether opposed to the timidity on the part of women because it helps to create an illusion of domestic harmony and peace in the eyes of the neighbours, friends and relatives. In the case of her parents' marriage, she called them "dissimilar and horribly mismatched". Assertive individualistic and independent as she desired herself to be, she realized very soon after her own marriage too: "I ought not to have married the one I did." She gives a vivid account of her married life and how she felt like:

**"When I got married my husband said you may have freedom as much as you want. My soul balked at this diet of ash. Freedom became my dancing shoe how well I danced and danced without rest until the shoes turned grimy on my feet and I began to have doubts."**

Kamala Das's personal bitter experiences are the common feature of the life of a traditional family wife. A traditional wife craves for warmth, love and companionship while the husband seems interested in sex.

Marriages ending in divorce bring infamy to the families of both the husband and the wife. Kamala Das's marriage flopped but it was difficult to execute divorce. They feared the step would be a blot on the families. In traditional societies the words 'divorce' or 'Remarriage' sounded strange. They linked these with the family honour as she puts:

**"..... there had been good-will between us two families for three generations which I**

**did no want to ruin ..... My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with us society's reaction to my action of an individual ...."**

Kamala Das is grimly conscious of the fact that in a traditional family, divorce is not a common feature. Kamala Das who is an upholder of women's liberty, surprises the readers by her statements that she bothers much about public opinion. When she was rejected by her husband, she thought merely of sticking to her marriage and preferred to suffer within. However, another bold and revolutionary step she has taken is that she has married for the second time which a conventional family could not tolerate. But by so doing, she has made herself an example. One may feel surprised at the step she has taken in her old age.

A close study of Kamala Das's *My Story* reveals that she is rather unwilling to accept the fast-eroding traditional social norms. But she seems equally unwilling to set aside the established values all of a sudden. However, she wants a change and reform in woman's position without asserting antimale stance. In matters of woman's miserable light, she holds the rotten patriarchal pattern responsible. As such she symbolizes the conflict between established system and modern style. Jaya Chakravarty writes:

**"Kamala Das's relationships must be understood in the light of the social set-up to which she is tied. She responds to her situation in a singularly new way and depicts the sense of alienation that characterises the modern Indian woman."**

Carlo-Kamala episode as mentioned by the author in *My Story* provides sufficient background to believe that Kamala Das is not

totally and vehemently opposed to all the long-cherished social norms. She condemns only those evils that render woman a servile creature and snatch her independent identity. She attempt to discard the hollowness of marriage that makes woman a slave to her husband and in laws, is candid about extra-marital relationship, has a tendency to pity herself in her situation but does not accept the offer of Carlo who promises her a better life. Her hesitation must have some reasons behind it: Why she does not go, if she is afraid of society or if she hopes that someday, she would be happy with her husband. Perhaps she realizes that marriage and society have not permitted her to go such a long way. However, her remarriage in old age removes all such suspicions.

Another implication of why Kamala Das did not remarry earlier is substantial in revealing her ambition for name and fame. Her wish to remain an object of discussion makes her conceal or distort the fact.

Kamala Das's own statements given from time bear witness to her ambition to gain popularity. Only a couple of years after her *My Story* was published, she admitted that "she had deliberately sensationalized some of the issues and incidents in order to gain popularity". However, it is true that her radical views have shaken off the roots of traditional ethos regarding male-dominance. Apart from this it should also be borne in mind that Kamala Das's chief concern in writing her autobiography was to lighten the burden of mind she had long cherished; as she puts it in the "Preface" to *My Story*:

**"My Story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease .... I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but**

**because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time come, with a scrubbed-out conscience .... This book has cost me many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it:"**

Kamala Das's reinventing self has opened a new chapter for discussion in literary circles. This, one of our exceptionally talented poets and also one of the first fine modern writers has sought to assert her femininity as a human in Indian literature, has gone back to orthodox life-style by adopting Islam. A great outcry has been raised over her conversion which compels the readers to make a fresh study of her autobiography and poems in the light of her remarriage with a Muslim. Meena Sodhi discovers some clues in her past writings which help us in focusing on her present frame of mind, and observes:

**"There are no definite clues except that the dominant note only too apparent in all her writings continue to be the urge for freedom, the need to establish her identity and liberation as an individual and as one of the most electric women in India."**

The remarks made by Kamala Das and those collected from newspaper reports and magazine articles approve of her conversion on exclusively emotional grounds. Moreover, her comments may be interpreted in the light of her ambition for recreating herself. Whereas some of the orthodox Hindus and Vishwa Hindu Parishad leaders 'tried to seek judicial redresses" some of them overlooked her step emphasizing the flexibility of Hindu religion or calling it her personal matter. The issue of her conversion has raised several questions which need to be answered in the light of new circumstances. The international film-maker is reportedly preparing

a film on her autobiographical book *My Story*.

The controversy raised over her conversion can have far-reaching repercussions. In an interview given to the Times of India dated December 19, 1999, she very frankly stated that she was attracted to the orthodox life-style of the Muslim women and hence her decision to adopt Islam. Meena Sodhi remarks:

**"Though she had resolved to convert some twenty-seven years back, she restrained from doing so as her children were not settled in life. She found Hinduism too lenient and it permitted her plenty of freedom. Wasn't it this freedom, which had spared her for writing not only numerous bold autobiographical poems but also an exceptionally flamboyant and revealing account of her life in *My Story*."**

It becomes a bit difficult to decide whether Kamala Das prefers an orthodox life style to a progressive one. She who has been yearning for freedom and identity should enter a circle wherein freedom for women is a matter of dream or where fatwa is issued against such a writer as that of *My Story*. Reportedly, retired professor and a CPI (M) activist Nabeesa Ummal declared:

**"I challenge her to write a book like *My Story* now. She will face the same fatwa and fate as Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasrin."**

Perhaps in a similar tone her reply and retaliation evince her stand for independence. In a seminar held on "Indian Muslim Agenda for 21st Century" which was sponsored by the Khair-Ummat Trust on January 24, 2000, Kamala Das spoke from the stage:

**"I will not run away like Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen did from their motherland. I am born an Indian and will**

die as one."

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