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IDENTITY CRISIS OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT WORKS OF
KAMALA DAS & SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

In the recent past and at the present also, numerous women writers have given voice to the question of women injustice and their quest of identity in the patriarchal society. In the Indian literature especially Indian English Literature, women writers have emerged victorious in highlighting the harsh attitude of families and society towards women as well as increasing autocracy of conservative mindsets. Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande have been termed as distinguished women writers in India who have established their immensity by dealing with the issue of position of women in the existing society. They have always emphasized upon the exposing the unhappy personal life and frustration of women because of the given set up and orthodox attitude of the male dominated world. Marriage provides women security but no opportunity for self-expression and open involvement in the outer world. Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande both opine that after marriage a woman is transferred from one cage to another. The present paper is an attempt to portray the predicament of women in the select works of Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande. Here the endeavour has been made to depict the humiliation and the helpless attitude of women at various points of life through various literary outputs of Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande.

KEYWORDS : Autocracy, distinguished, predicament.

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INTRODUCTION

The major theme of Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande works has always been the quest of identity. A woman is the centre of their world and her desires, aspirations and failures in the male dominated society are the main points of their works. Their writing is gender specific which focuses on the stereotype expectations of the society from women. They deal with the women consciousness and the way she is made feel lesser and a burden on the family. Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande have also dealt with the childhood and the conservative upbringing in the conventional culture. The women characters in their works appear to be successful but inwardly they feel disturbed in their lives. The pain and tribulations faced by women in the given patriarchal set up has made to contemplate on the topic of quest of identity. Kamala Das and Shashi

Deshpande both present the Indian woman and her dilemma between tradition and modernity, hesitation and the desire to express, happiness and sorrow.

BATTLE FOR IDENTITY

Shashi Deshpande's major focus is on human relationships especially the relationship between husband and wife, father and daughter and also between mother and daughter. Her novels echo the lives of suffocated women in quest of refuge from their sufferings. Similarly Kamala Das also concentrates on male female relationships especially in context of the marital liaison. Kamala Das in her few works has also discussed her relationships with her father, mother, brother and especially her beloved grandmother. But the main motif of her work is to delineate loneliness, agitation and frustration in the conjugal relationship. Kamala Das has written a number of poems in this context and her ultimate drift towards spirituality as her ultimate solace. The opening poem "The Dance of Eunuchs" from her first volume *Summer in Calcutta* reflects the aridness in the feeble and helpless life of eunuchs which indirectly indicates towards the dryness of Kamala Das's post marriage life. Likewise another poem "Fear of the Year" explains the emotionless life of slow desires and the life of indifferent faces with no smile. Furthermore the poem "The End of the Spring" has also been written on the pessimistic note which shows the poet's doubt on her husband's expression of love, "While I wait for your phone call. I do not, /Know who to believe. You, who say you love, /Or the voice that tells me no,no,no...(1-3). The female character in Kamala Das's works which is actually Kamala Das herself as her works are more of autobiographical nature, are not very traditional and conventional rather they are honest and straight forward in their expression of frustration in love and hunger for the emotional attachment from their mate.

Similarly Shashi Deshpande has surfaced her female characters in a very candid way. Female characters in Shashi Deshpande's novels are not the reflection of 'Sita' image. They are the women of the present time who are the designer of their own fate. Hers are the authentic tales of middle class women and their humiliation in a male dominated society. The women in her major three novels (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*) try to find a safe escape from domestic and sexual fence. But in each fence be it love, marriage or sex, they find themselves more trapped and consequently they lose their identity which results into utter disappointment and displeasure. Sathupati Prasanna Sree opines, "Her women characters vent their feminine sensibility in their frantic desire for an authentic communication with their own selves as well as with the society" (17). Just as Kamala Das explained, Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists also find it uncomfortable to adjust in their orthodox and patriarchal middle class family. In Shashi Deshpande's works numerous types of exploited women can be seen. To the first type, belongs the heroine's mother who is a traditional woman. She believes that she ought to remain in the company of her husband and try her level best to adjust to remain in the working relationship with her husband and his family. Here, she represents the ancient religious ethos that the woman should obey her father's commands before her marriage and her husband's after marriage. The problem of being a girl and/or a woman has always been focused by Shashi Deshpande in her novels. It is evident from her works that there is a tremendous feminine sensibility working within her. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* feels the submissiveness of being a woman because the society makes her feel like that. Right from the childhood Indu was reminded by the women members of the family that she is a "girl". So she should not act like a boy. She has certain constraints which she is supposed to follow:

As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. (158)

Despite being the victim of patriarchy, some of the female characters in her novels possess the supremacy to control and influence over other women because of their social rank as mother and mother-in-law. Jaya's mother (*That Long Silence*), Indu's (*Roots and Shadows*) and Saru's mother (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) belong to this sort. The protagonists experience hatred and disgust towards their mother, whom they view as a dominating member of the family. Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terror*, was the sufferer of

gender discrimination created by her own mother who always emphasised that boys are the assets whereas the girls are liabilities. Her feeling of an unwanted daughter to her parents was developed from her mother who stressed that her birth created a lot of misfortunes, "It was terrible" (169). Nirmala Prakash asserts:

This particular thematic strand is dealt with more elaborately and extensively in *That Dark Holds No Terrors*, yet another novel by Ms. Deshpande. In fact reconciliation with mother remains a distant dream for Saru, the protagonist of the novel, essentially because the mother held her responsible for failing to save Druva, Saru's brother, from drowning. (31)

The heroines like Saru and Jaya see marriage as an escape route made in order to release them from the suffocation they experience in their parental home. Their act of marrying outside their community as in case of Indu can be viewed as the rebel against the patriarchal mindsets (especially the mother becoming the crucial part of patriarchy) towards marriage.

Even Kamala Das was not so attached to her mother, Balamani Amma as she never expressed her love for her kids. Kamala Das says that her parents were not aware of the proper upbringing of their kids. Recalling the leisurely hours of her mother she states that her mother spent her time lying on her belly on a large four post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. Though Das inherited the art of writing poems from her mother yet she could not develop fondness for her mother. At the tender age of six she started writing poems on her dolls and each of her poems made her cry but the same feeling could not be shared by her with her mother. She mentions that her mother was least concerned with what she felt and desired as a child, teenager and as a grown up young girl. She explained in her autobiography *My Story* that "her parents took us for granted and considered us mere puppets moving out limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently" (63). Moreover, Kamala Das's parents were not so proud of their kids but only pitied them. The only elder who provided her unconditional love and gave her maternal touch was her grandmother. Even after Kamala Das's marriage when her grandmother died she lamented the loss of her grandmother and realized that she would never find such love in her life again. She explains the same feeling in her poem "My Grandmother's House" in her volume *Summer in Calcutta* :

There is a house now far away where once
I received love...That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books. I was then too young
To read, and, my blood turned cold like the moon... (1-5)

Kamala Das could never develop intense attachment with her father as she did not receive the love from him that way she wanted it. On the other hand the fathers of the Shashi Deshpande's heroines become source of support or even motivation for these women. The profound agony in Kamala Das's literary works crops up from her experience of alienation and estrangement from her early childhood. This resulted into a severe identity crisis and inferiority complex. As mentioned in her autobiography *My Story*, Kamala Das feels frustrated as a child from her father, an epitome of domineering patriarchy. She presents herself and her brother as the children of loveless and indifferent parents. They never gave them attention and care which is the desired focal point of every child. Kamala Das says, "We must have disappointed our parents a great deal" (11). She further says, "Our instincts told us to keep away from the lime light, to hide in the vicinity of the kitchen where we could hold together the tatters of our self-respect..." (12). 'Limelight' might mean warmth and compassion which every child genuinely deserves. Consequently she started feeling suffocated in the Nair community which failed to understand and acknowledge her. Besides her forced marriage at an early age alienated her from her parents. Furthermore, her marital relationship just proved to be a skin communicated thing as her harsh husband did not give importance to the emotional attachment and expected a heated physical relationships full of lust. A.N Diwedi in his book *Kamala Das and Her Poetry* says, "Her husband had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was ever busy sorting out his files and affixing his signature on them"(2). She felt betrayed in every form and engulfed in utter loneliness. As a traditional wife

she was expected to perform her household responsibilities and take care of her husband's needs as mentioned in the poem "The Old Playhouse" in the volume *The Old Playhouse* :

You called me wife.
I was taught to brak saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. (12-16)

Whereas in another poem "Freaks" taken from *Summer in Calcutta* Kamala Das expresses her deep anguish and disillusionment in love. In the poem, the poet expresses the impossibility of love-fulfilment and the likelihood of love turning into the lust. The poet wonders why lover is capable of anything more than expressing lust which consequently results into the painful silence:

...The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence. (14-17)

Trapped in the loveless relationship with her husband, she felt humiliated and disturbed. She craved for the relationship which could give her care and compassion. She gave vent to her anguish in many of her poems like "The Sunshine Cat" which is the true presentation of the lust related brutality. Through this poem Kamala Das explains the nature of male callousness which is the harsh reality of the present day world. The insensitivity of the male makes her of sexual meanness and she depreciates :

They did this to her, the men who knew 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.... (1-4)

K.R.Ramachandran Nair in his book *The Poetry of Kamala Das* asserts, "Each line consists of short and abrupt fragments of sentences indicating the hurtful manner the woman is treated by the band of cynics including the husband" (21). Unable to find solace in her relationship with husband she entered into extra marital relationship in search of the love and emotional bond. But unfortunately she encountered those men who offered her only physical pleasure just like her husband did and expressed their unwillingness to provide the affection she desired for. So she again indulged in a deadly anarchic sex-life. The poem "Substitute" (from *The Descendants*) mentions the same mental boiling of Kamala Das, "Our bodies after love-making/Turned away, rejecting" (29-30).

Similarly for Shashi Deshpande's women, relinquishing the roles of daughters, mothers and wives is a very aching process. Like Kamala Das, the female heroines of Deshpande are deeply attached to their parental house. When the female heroines of Deshpande start living in their parental homes they sense a feeling of catharsis in their new haven. Such state of mind could not be seen in case of Kamala Das. Though Das was deeply attached to her ancestral home, Nalapat House but she had a number of bitter experiences of childhood like gender discrimination and indifferent attitude of her parents.. Shashi Deshpande's heroines while staying in their parental house, revert back to their elders' style of living and give up the routine to which they were habitual in their marital homes. Saru in her embarrassment finds herself taking over the efficiency in all the day to day chores that she did dutifully. She finds herself resuming the role that her aunt took, in her parental home as the family head. In accepting the new roles and new outlook towards old roles, Deshpande's heriones break the mental obstructions which they had initially built around themselves. In fact they start identifying themselves with their elderly counterparts and assume the roles of their mothers after they return home. During this process feeling of hatred towards their mothers also deciphers and they consequently overcome the feeling of bitterness towards them. Their stay at their ancestral home provides them the chance relook at their past and assess their past decisions. However, their stay at their parental house does not provide them permanent respite from their sufferings but these temporary retreats help them to deal with

their real self and introspect themselves better. It is here that they start exploring the sexual and other reasons that lead to their mental agonies.

Just like in Kamala Das's works, dissatisfaction in women's sex lives is known as one of the important reasons influencing the conjugal relationships of Deshpande's women. Neither the women nor men constructively try to do something to remove their marital and sexual monotony. The women protagonists in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* have a tendency to ignore the sexual roots of their marital discord. Their sexual dissatisfaction reaches at the ugly height and upsets the harmony of their routine living. Hence they seek sexual satisfaction by resorting to extra marital affairs. Saru starts having affair with her boss Boozie and her classmate, Padmakar Rao as a substitute to her unfulfilled and unhappy marriage. Yet, these relationships do not provide her complete gratification. In case of Indu's affair with her cousin, a guilty woman is seen. Similarly Jaya in *That Long Silence* also feels guilty of her aborted affair with her neighbour. Trayee Sinha in her research paper says:

Deshpande's women characters do not confine themselves to one particular man. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* we find the same strategy. After leaving Manohar, Saru has affairs with Boozie and Padmakar Rao. Deshpande talks explicitly about female sexuality. She liberates her women characters from sticking to one particular partner. This is also seen in her other novels like *Roots and Shadows*, *Small Remedies*, *That Long Silence*, *Moving On* where women characters like Indu, Madhu, Jaya leave the idea of living and loving one particular man. This is a bold attempt made by Deshpande to leave the traditional ideas and going beyond the "norms". Our society is full of paradoxes. A man can do everything – he can develop several extramarital affairs but when it becomes the question of a woman, the idea gets reversed. So whatever the term equality denotes, in case of a woman, it is actually a myth. (4)

Eventually Deshpande's women decide to accept themselves in whatever form they are. With the passage of time they show their determination to confront the situation and face the crisis. Although the problem do exist but their approach towards undergoes a change. 'The dark, for Saru, 'hold no terror' and Jaya and Indu also anticipate hope and glee in their family lives. On the other hand, Kamala Das herself as the main protagonist of her works also find delight in the spirituality and feel ecstasy in worshipping in Lord Krishna. Though it was a temporal relief for her yet she found a new way out of her worries and agonies.

CONCLUSION

The works of Kamala Das have a largely autobiographical content and are highly confessional in nature. Most of her poems have been written on the subject of marriage which depicts her resentful attitude towards her husband and with other men with whom she formed endless physical relationships in order to find some consolation of her sufferings. Kamala Das illustrated the life of a woman full of misery and struggle, a life lived on a ground that was hollow and scorched due to barren relationships before and after marriage. She not only voiced her own agonies and despairs but those of women who are the victim of male governed society. Her experience became the experience of a woman who waged an unstoppable campaign against the male dominance. The autobiography and poetry of Kamala Das exhibit the unfolded image of a woman suffering from irresolution, restlessness, anxiety and insecurity. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande has also given the picture of the Indian women and how they preserve their identity as daughter, wife and mother in the male dominated world. Shashi Deshpande treated her heroines as a pure human being and not as proxy for others. Deshpande while analyzing the man-woman relationships usually concentrates on the question of women's place and individuality in the patriarchal society. Shashi Deshpande through her literary works presents the point of view, thereby unveiling her desire to explore the aspirations of women caught in the web of tradition and modernity. So, it can be said that Kamala Das and Shashi Deshpande are the flag bearers of the women liberation and have incessantly written to articulate the women's standpoint thereby, awakening the women's consciousness so as to liberate from the cocoon of domesticity, insecurity and helplessness.

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