Chapter 3

Autobiographical Element
Autobiographical element : Voice of Woman Character

Autobiography means the thought process that is personal. When the poet engross too much in her /his personal life and brings that semantic and episodic memories in his/her work that becomes autobiographical reflections. There are two kinds of memories in psychology:

1. Semantic memory- Semantic memory refers to a portion of long-term memory that processes ideas and concepts that are not drawn from personal experience. Semantic memory includes things that are common knowledge, such as the names of colors, the sounds of letters, the capitals of countries and other basic facts acquired over a lifetime. It bears the impression received by the company of elders, parents and by the society.
2. Episodic Memory: **Episodic memory** is a person's unique recollections of a specific event or an episode. People are usually able to associate particular details with an episodic memory, such as how they felt, the time and place, and other particulars. It is not clear as to why some memories of events in our lives are committed to memory, while others don't get recorded, but researchers believe that emotions play a critical role in what we remember.

The combination of both semantic and episodic memory gives rise to a creative process. When a creative mind witnesses any incident or event that happens in the life of any man or woman and he/she links that episode with the semantic memory he/she receives from home, society or from learning process then this combination of two generates either in thinking or subjective mode of a person. If the thinking rests on subjective mode then it becomes autobiographical revelation and that thought process of an individual becomes universal thought process. His/ her personal view might be his/hers but the pain and message that he/she receives from his/her struggle, conflict and binary of life sometimes appear universal. This universality is found in the works of Kamala Das and Adrienne Rich. Their poetry is named as autobiographical poetry but it’s not completely
autobiography rather it has an autobiographical reflection which is a psychological process that finds its impression in their poetry time to time. It gives the reader to have a glance of important events or incidents of their life which was cemented in their memory and keeps on floating on their conscious level of psyche. Whenever they meet with a person or witness any situation or incident which some or the other way bears some resemblance to own life, the episodic memory travels from unconscious level to conscious level and gets reflected in their poetry. In some of the poems this autobiographical impression is direct or some other places it is symbolically presented. Their poetry is overtly an expression of their thought process in connection with their personal life and experiences irrespective of pleasant or unpleasant, As we see in Kamala Das’ poem ‘The Moon’ which appeared in her collection ‘Only soul knows how to sing’:

Each night the moon cools the sun-cooked

Goodies of the world, pats and shapes

With weathered hands the dough of grief,

And swathes gently the embarrassed

Loneliness of middle age, so
That again the desired words

Are said on balconies, and faded

Eyes glitter with hope. (1)

Poetry is the best expression of soul. It not only relieves the poet from the burden of thoughts but also soothes the ailing heart of the reader. Through poetry poet revels the layers of their psyche. His/ her thoughts keep on travelling from all three levels of mind which is described by Sigmund Freud. According to him, human mind is divided in three levels:

1. **Conscious** level which serves as a scanner for us. It will perceive an event, trigger a need to react, and then depending on the importance of the event, store it either in the unconscious or the subconscious area of the human mind where it remains available to us. Only 10% of total memory is preserved at this level.

2. **Subconscious** is the storage point for any recent memories needed for quick recall. The unconscious mind can be seen as the source of dreams and automatic thoughts (those that appear without any apparent cause), the repository of forgotten memories (that may still be accessible to consciousness at some later time), and the locus of implicit knowledge (the things that we have learned so well that we do them without thinking). 50% -
60% of total memory is saved at this level. 3. Unconscious mind-30% -40% memories are locked here. It is the level where all of our memories and past experiences reside. These are those memories that have been repressed through trauma and those that have simply been consciously forgotten and no longer important to us (automatic thoughts). It’s from these memories and experiences that our beliefs, habits, and behaviors are formed.

Poetry of Kamala Das and Adrienne Rich can be easily understood in the light of this Freudian theory of psychology. Memories and experiences of their childhood which was saved in their unconscious minds affect them throughout their life. Those impressions become alive as soon as they get some ignition that may be in form of some abstract idea or an object. In the poems of Kamala Das and Adrienne Rich frequent expression of their life is obvious. In their poems they talk about their pain and loneliness, as we can see in the poem ‘Living in the cave’ of Adrienne Rich Published in the book titled:

Reading the parable of the Cave

While living in the cave,

Black moss
Deadening my footsteps

Candles stuck on rock-ledges

Weakening my eyes

These things around me, with their

Daily requirements:

Fill me, empty me

Talk to me, warm me, let me

Suck on you

Every one of them has a plan that depends on me.(2)

Here reading a work of Plato ignited the Rich’s thought process and she talks about her hollowness and people’s dependency on her which does not allow her to dream a life according to her wish.

In this chapter we will discuss and compare the thought process and autobiographical reflection in the poetry of Kamala Das and Adrienne Rich.

There is vast difference in the culture of both the poets Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das. American society has always been considered more advanced as compared to Indian society. With its child marriage, killing of female fetus
dowry, no equal rights and position of female the Indian society is considered as backward and tradition bound where changes are not easily accepted though how advantageous that can be. The effect of social suppression on women in India has been quite disastrous and Kamala Das’ poetry stands testimony of this. If we talk about American society such social evils does not have any existence there. Woman are not bound or chained in orthodox customs, they have rights and are aware of it. But functioning of human mind in two different culture and social environment is almost same. Kamala Das who belongs to a typical middle class Indian family and did not enjoy the advantages of education sounds similar to her highly educated American counterpart who lived in so called advanced society which has been for long talking about feminism and the emancipation of women. Consciously or unconsciously autobiographical details figure dominantly in the poems of these poets.

Both these women remember their grandmother with deep affection. In Rich’s poem ‘Grandmothers’ we get to know about her both maternal grandmother and paternal grandmother. In the first part of the poem she talks about her maternal grandmother Mary Gravely Jones who visited them rarely:
We had no pet names, no diminutives for you,

Always the formal guest under my father’s roof:

You were “Grandmother Jones: and you visited rarely.”

She explores her memories and writes that end of her life might have been different if she had been able to lend true expression to her creativity. Her thought process works on how her potential was nipped in bud, how marriage and motherhood did nothing to foster her talents. Rich recall one summer night spent with her grandmother. She writes:

One summer night you sat with my sister and me

In the wooden glider long after twilight,

Holding us there with streams of pent-up words.

You could quote every poet I had ever heard of,

Had read The Opium Eater, Amiel and Bernard Shaw,

Your green eyes looked clenched against opposition.”
In the second poem of Grandmothers, she talks about her paternal grandmother Hattie Rice Rich. She recalls that she catered to everyone’s needs, her sweet disposition made life easy for others.

*Your sweetness of soul was a convenience for everyone,*

*How you rose with d birds and children, boiled your own egg,*

*Fished for hours on a pier, your umbrella spread,*

*Took the street-car downtown shopping*

*Endlessly for your son’s whim....(5A)*

We also get to know that latter part of her grandmother’s life was spent commuting between Rich’s father and his sister because she was widow and without a true home.

*You were never “Grandmother Rich” but “Anana”*

*You had money of your own but you were homeless,*

*Hattie, widow of Samuel, and no matriarch,*

*Dispersed among the children and grandchildren.(5B)*

Kamala Das’ grandmother was always with her in memories. Very often we get grandmother’s impression in her poems. Whenever she looks at sea it
reminds her grandmother. In her poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’ she talks about the deep love and understanding she received from grandmother in her ancestral house. She states nostalgically

There is a house now far away,

Where once I received love. (6)

At another place we get the reference of her grandmother where she recalls the moment when she visited her ancestral town and grandmother requested her to spend a night with her. In poem ‘Composition’ she writes:

My grandmother asked me to spend

One night

In the old family –home.

We shall talk, she said,

Darling

We shall talk all night. (7)

In another poem ‘Nani’ which appears in the collection ‘The old playhouse and other poems’, we learn about grandmother’s concern toward her
granddaughter that she wants her to forget all bad incidents that can affect her life.

Poem of these poets don’t give any chronological order of the events that took place in their life. It appears on different occasion as it flashes in their memories. We get to know about the people who some or the other way touched their life. Their relation with their family member and the way remember them, their poetry has a record of it.

Unlike affectionate grandmother of Kamala Das, her father appears as a selfish and villain of her life who never tried to understand her feelings, her needs. Das portrays her as the culprit who was responsible for all the suffering she had to undergo in her life. If she has lost

*My way, and beg now at stranger’s door to*

*Receive love, at least in small change? (8)*

She writes his father got her married when she was not at all prepared for it. Whenever she remembers her father it was a figure that had sent her to hell. In her poem ‘An Introduction’ she writes
When

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me

But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.

Though she had several complaints with her father for not loving her, still she had some soft corner for him. When her father was in coma and was hospitalized, she states in one of her poem ‘My Father’s death’:

I feared

my father. Only in Coma

Did he seem close to me, and I

Whispered into his ears that I

Loved him.

Whole she longed for his love. She wished
You should have hugged me, father, just

Once, held me to your breast, you should

Have asked me who I was, in truth. (10)

In contrast to Das, Rich has an intense relationship with her father. Her Poem ‘After Dark’ records her grief over her father’s death, mourning their lost relationship, while simultaneously recalling her anger and frustration resulting from his patronizing attitude towards her and his constant supervision of her texts. At the same time she was grateful because he was the first one to detect her talent and forced her to cultivate it. He had been the one who insisted that she learn the craft of poetry, master rhymes and metric and become the skilled poet and a woman of letters. She states that it was he who knew her better than she herself-

Down years, wherever I was

In foreign languages even

Over and over, I know you better

Than you know yourself. I know

You better than you know
Yourself   I know
You     until, self-mained,
I limped off, torn at the roots. (11)

Similarly in the poem ‘sources’ she refers her father and talks that he brought up like a son but at the same time she says that sometime he shows cruelty towards her making her perfect in poetry. She also takes him to task for having raised her without any reference to her Jewish origin.

For years I struggled with you:
your categories, your theories, your will,
the cruelty which came inextricable from your love.

For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you.

I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son,
taught to study but not to pray,
taught to hold reading and writing sacred:

the eldest daughter in a house with no son, (12)

When we read such autobiographical poems or autobiographies a question strikes why do poets give account of their personal life? What impression do
these poets/authors want to leave on the readers? Answer of these question is beautifulu given by Canker. He says one writes it,

“Not by any means to put himself on show like a prostitute not to edify or entertain but only so that he may survey the vast field of his own soul, to react with pain and trembling from one gulf of his soul to another, to seek light of the day.”(13) (Reality and truth in literature: from ancient to Modern European literature by Irena Avesenik Nabergoj)

Hence we can say that autobiographical reflection exists as an echo of events which poet has personally experienced and which she/he remembers personally.

Poems of Kamala Das tell us that her married life was a nightmare for her. Her partner was failed to touch her soul he was confined with ‘skins lazy hunger’. He was pleased with her woman body. In ‘The Old Playhouse’ she states:

"........You were pleased

With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed

My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.

She further states that

...............cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (14)

In her poem ‘The Stone Age’ she compares her husband’s hand with a hooded snake.

.......... ask me, everybody, ask me

What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion.

A libertime, ask me the flavour of his

Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake

Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me why like

A great tree, felled, he slums against my breasts,

And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is (15)
Her husband could not see anything beyond her body and what she craved for remained like a dream unfulfilled. These things were so well printed in her mind that vary now and then it gets reflected in her poems. Because of her husband’s passivity she started seeking love outside the nuptial tie and this too we get to know through her poetry when she writes in ‘An Introduction’

................ I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man

Who wants woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love. In him..... the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me ...... the oceans’ tireless

Waiting. (16)

In another poem ‘Substitute’ she writes:

After that love became a swivel- door

When one went out, another came in.

Then I lost count, for always in my arms

Was a substitute for a substitute.
Oh, what is the use, explaining-

It was a nameless, faceless crowd.(17)

Like Kamala Das, Adrienne Rich too dissatisfied with her role of a traditional wife, mother and a housewife. She found herself stifled as she was educated and had creative mind which seeks and develops opportunity, but this role of a house wife made her life miserable and clogs her mind. She was overburdened with house keeping jobs and was losng her identity as a poet. This situation of her is expressed in her poem ‘Snapshots of a daughter-in-law’-

Your mind now mouldering like a wedding –cake,

Heavy with useless experience, rich

With suspicion, rumour, fantasy,

Crumbling to pieces under the knife- edge

Of mere fact. In the prime of your life.(18A)

She compares her husband as monster who was destroying her imagination

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters,
The beak that grips, she becomes.(18 B)

Rich absorbed her completely into womanhood and expected all would be as successful as her writing career and academic life but she found child raising much harder than she anticipated. There was a tug of war and she wanted to save herself as a female persona. She asks question:

Not that it is done well, but

That it is done at all? Yes think

Of the odds! Or shrug them forever.(19)

As Das was searching love in her married life, same was Rich did but received only lust on the name of love. She states in her poem ‘Two Songs’:

All day he appears to me

touchingly desirable,

a prize one could wreck one's peace for.

I'd call it love if love

didn't take so many years

but lust too is a jewel

a sweet flower and what
pure happiness to know

all our high-toned questions

breed in a lively animal.(20)

Rich finds woman reduced to the status of a body in a world ruled by men.

In the poem ‘Planetarium’ she asserts this idea:

I am an instrument in the shape

of a woman trying to translate pulsations

into images for the relief of the body

and the reconstruction of the mind.(21)

Rich felt suffocated in her married life, hence she decided to part from her husband. But from mind she could not separate completely. In her unconscious mind concern for his first husband was there. When she was informed about ill health of him, she called him, she wanted to save him. This episode of her life is recorded in her poem ‘For the Dead’
I dreamed I called you on the phone

To say: Be kinder to yourself

But you were sick and would not answer

The waste of my love goes on this way

Trying to save you from yourself

I have always wondered about the leftover

Energy water rushing down a hill

Long after the rains have stopped.(22)

Even after the death of her first husband, she could not forget him and incidents related to him kept flashing in her mind. In the poem ‘From a Survivor’

She talks about the kind of relation which she had with him

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact

Of a man & woman in those days
I don’t know who we thought we were

That our personalities

Could resist the failure of the race.(23)

She states that his body is as vivid as it was and her feeling is also very clear for him. Functioning of mind does not have any fixed order. Streams of memory can flow in any direction.

As a sensitive soul Rich does not forget anything or any person who were once a part of her life. In her poem ‘Mother -in-Law’ she requests her mother –in-law to reveal her heart, to develop a new relationship with forgetting all bad memories of the past. She tells her to talk about the secrets they both have but not spoken. She tells about her lesbian relationship and asks her to start a new companionship. She writes

Tell me something

........ your son is dead

Ten years, I am a lesbian,

My children are themselves.

Mother-in-law, before we part
Shall we try again? Strange as I am,

Strange as you are? What do mothers

Ask their own daughters, everywhere in the world?

Is there a question?

Ask me something.(24)

These lines show that Rich always believes in moving a head, she was sensible enough to understand other’s pain and suffering and made them her own. Though her experience with her mother-in-law was not pleasant one but her loneliness and pain caused by her son’s death developed a new relationship of pain once she underwent. She wanted to console her the ailing heart with her soothing words, with her company. Only a sensitive heart can do that, making others pain their own. She asks her mother-in-Law to ask questions, to share her pain. She wanted to start a new relationship with her. one thing that we find common in Adrienne Rich that they both accepts their way of living frankly which was not acceptable by the society Rich as a lesbian and Das having relationship outside marriage and both the points we get to know through their poetry.
Motherhood is the celebration of womanhood and an inseparable part of a woman’s life. Kamala Das proudly celebrates the moment when she gave birth to his son Jaisurya. It was not Kamala or Not Jaisurya, it was every mother and every son. This was the universal joy which was expressed by Kamala Das in her poem ‘Jaisurya’:

.......... And, then, wailing into light

He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust

Into the faded light. They raised him

To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son

Separated from darkness that was mine

And in me. The darkness I have known

Lived with. (25)

The name is chosen even before his birth. This is a clear proof of the mother’s overwhelming love for the unseen child. This is the individuality of a woman to adore the child and forgets her own pains of bearing it. In the poem ‘Afterwards’ She was busy in thinking how to nurture her
children and how to shape their future. She is worried about difficulties and oddities of life.

Son of my womb,

Ugly in loneliness,

You walk the world’s bleary eye

Like a grit. Your cleaverness

Shall not be your doom

As ours was. I will tell you why.(25)

As a mother she is concerned. She does not want her son to commit same mistakes that were done by her. As a guide she wished to lead his path to make his life smooth going.

There are many incidents about the life of Kamal Das we learn about through her poems. From the poem ‘Punishment in Kindergarten’ we get to know that once she was scolded and punished by her teacher. Childhood impressions leaves long lasting impact on a person’s mind and this poem is the example of this. Even after so many yeas Das remembers that episode of her life. The words said by her teacher sill echoes in her mind.
A blue-frocked woman caused, throwing

Words at me like pots and pans, to drain

The – coloured day of peace.

“Why don’t you join the others, what

A peculiar child you are!”

On the lawn, in clusters, sat my schoolmates sipping

Sugarcane, they turned and laughed;

Children are funny things, they laugh

In mirth at other’s tears, I buried

My face in the sun-warmed hedge

And smelt the flowers and the pain.(26)

Emotional minds have a peculiar quality that they get attached with all abstract thing and treat them as living beings. Separation from them bring tears in the eyes of them. Same attachment with a city Bombay is seen in the poem ‘farewell to Bombay’

I take leave of you, fair city, while tears
Hide somewhere in my adult eyes

And sadness is silent as a stone

In the river’s unmoving

Core...

It’s goodbye, goodbye, goodbye

To slender shapes behind window panes

Shut against indiscriminate desire

And rain;(27)

She used to spend her time walking and sitting beside sea shore. She used to burn her sorrows near sea whom she bids goodbye.

Similarly reading of Rich poem gives us a glimpse of her personal life. Though it’s not a deliberate attempt, its the working of human mind that wonders in the memories of past. In her poem ‘Sibling Mysteries’ she recalls her childhood days with her sister Cynthia. That was the golden time of her life when both the sisters walk together, play in rain and with clay. She writes:
Remind me how we walked

trying planetary rock

For foothold

Testing the rims of canyons

Field of sheer

Ice in the midnight sun

Smelling the rains before they came

Feeling the fullness of the moon

Before moonrise(28)

Later in the poem she recalls and gets upset that their mother always preferred their father and that derived both the sisters of closer physical and emotional contact with her. She carries on

Remind me how we loved our mother’s body

Our mouths drawing the first

Thin sweetness from nipples
And how we thought she loved

The strange male body first

That took, that took, whose taking seemed a law

And how she sent us weeping

Into that law

How we remet her in our childbirth visions (29) The dream of common language

Both the sisters did not get full love and attention of their mother. Father is projected as a rival. Still that memory troubles the poet. But both the sisters compassionate that in each other’s company. Both became closer and shared secrets with each other.

Close reading of the poems of Kamla Das and Adrienne Rich gives us the idea that both women poet played various role as daughter, mother, wife, sister but they were not content. It seems as if they were leading a life of a prisoner. Rich write in her poem ‘Natural resources’
I am tired of faintheartedness,

Their having to be exceptional

To do what an ordinary woman

Does in the course of things

I am tired of women stopping to half our height

To bring the essential vein to light

Tired of the waste of what we bear

With such cost, such elation, into sight (31)

Boredom and dissatisfaction were same for both female persona. Both want to flap their wings. As kamala Das write in her poem ‘I shall Some Day’

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea,

Love- words flung from doorways and of course

Your tired lust. I shall some day take

Wings, fly around, as often petals

Do when free in air, and you dear one,

Just the sad remnant of a root, must
Both Kamala Das and Adrienne Rich are modern poet. They are independent in thinking and so on in their writing. Their poetry gives us a glimpse of their life. Their happiest and saddest moments are recorded in their poem. Through their poems they talk to all the characters who were related to their life of affect their life in any manner. Their poems are personal statement of courage and acknowledgment of their weaknesses. Their poetry is derived from their life, hence autobiographical reflection is obvious in their work. But they give it universality and their voice and character are not some specific one rather they represent the society.

Kamala Das’ poetic output is comparatively limited to the four wall of the home, familial ties and man woman relationship. She does not know more about world and the politics as she herself states in her poem ‘Introduction’

I don’t know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. (33) Page 62
Rich’s poetic spectrum is comparatively wide. She does not only talk about men- women relationship but also takes interest in politics and writes its effect on the life of every individual including her. Her every poem seems personal but it is connected to the society. As she writes in ‘Diving into the Wrack’ where she is not only talking about personal loss but about the loss of socialism that has to be saved. She states

*I came to explore the wreck.*

*The words are purposes.*

*The words are maps.*

*I came t see the damage that was done and treasures that prevail*

*I sroke the beam of my lamp*

*Slowly along the flan*

*Of something more permanent*

*Than fish or weed.*

It is very obvious that through her poems she tries to make people aware of their personal, social, cultural and political loss. And purpose of poetry is this only. Instead of personal reflection in the works of both the poets it is
very clear that it also helps to understand their thought process ad to face the difficulties patiently and must try to search the solution and because of this their poetry is highly appreciated and respected.

Reference:


10. Kamala Das: Only Soul Knows How To Sing, Page 146


13. Irena Avesenik Nabergoj: Reality and truth in literature: from ancient to Modern European literature

14. Kamala Das: Only Soul Knows How To Sing, Page 38

15. Kamala Das: Only Soul Knows How To Sing, Page 82


17. Kamala Das: Only Soul Knows How To Sing, Page 65


25. Kamala Das: Only Soul Knows How To Sing, Page 75
27. Kamala Das: Summer in Calcutta, Op-cit, Page 45
28. Kamala Das: Summer in Calcutta, Op-cit, Page 41
32. Kamala Das: Summer in Calcutta, Op-cit, Page 54
33. Kamala Das: Summer in Calcutta, Op-cit, Page 62