

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to trace the feminine expression in the context of matrilineal socio-cultural environment in the works of Kamala Das. The topic has been taken as Kamala Das is a unique case. She was born in a matriarchal family. However, her life at Mumbai and Calcutta brought her close to the patriarchal culture. But she did very much suffer its negative impacts as she lived in the comforts of a nuclear family. Here was a double advantage for her. The best of what a matrilineal society had to offer her led to a consummation or completion in the best of what the modern westernized world had to offer.

She was born at a time when the matriarchal set-up was undergoing great transformations. It was then on its last legs like the Neermatala tree in the courtyard of Nalapat House.

This house to which Kamala Das had great attachment was a gift to Kunji from her husband, a thampuran. This woman was Kamala Das's grandmother's grandmother's mother (Das, Neermathalam Pootha Kalam (NPK) 7). The house was four hundred years old (Das, My Story (MS) 112). The most beautiful aspect of the house was the many trees bearing flowers or fruits forming a green shadow all around the house. Among the innumerable trees stood the Neermatala tree, which is a rare tree: This tree is scientifically named as Crataeva Nurvala. It is a medium sized deciduous tree which bears yellowish - white flowers. It is

usually found only in dry deciduous forests which is its natural habitat. But it used to be planted in courtyards long back for the medicinal quality of the bitter leaves as well as due to its use as fodder for cattle. Its four petalled flower is endowed with a sweet fragrance. The atmosphere at Nalapat to her was like the tender evening sun, the moonlight and affection (Neermathalam Pootha Kalam - 274). While at Nalapat she felt "no fear, nor even joy but an anonymous peace" (MS - 208). In almost all her literary works there is the expression of a nostalgic longing to live in such a house.

The family was not very rich. But it had its traditions of low living and high thinking. The financial position at Nalapat was "precarious". The jewellery were sold for fighting off litigation and bankruptcy associated with the disputes related to inheritance and partition of family property. (MS 4). Being staunch followers of Gandhiji and his principles the family led a very simple life. They used to wear only Khaddar clothes. Even the servants there were made to wear only Khaddar. The grandmother spent her leisure hours spinning khadi yarn on a thakli. Whatever little jewellery remained at home were donated to the Harijan Fund (13). Though the life style was very humble the family could boast of great intellectuals known for their philosophical insights and literary talents. Kamala's mother Nalapat Balamani Amma and her grand uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon were great writers. Apart from such great literary personalities there were also talented people like Ammalu, Kamala's great grandmother's younger sister who used to write beautiful

poems about Krishna but never let the world know of her ability. Thus the family had a rich poetic tradition.

The elegy entitled 'Kannuneerthulli' written by the grand - uncle brought him fame. The translation of the same was printed at a press in Great Britain. He is also famous for the book 'Rati Samrajya' which was a study based on the works of Havelock Ellis and the Indian Sexologists. Vallathole Narayana Menon the famous Malayalam poet was a friend of his and the two together used to have literary and philosophic discussion at Nalapat (MS 33). At the grand - uncle's evening durbar there would be occasionally present brilliant grammarians and writers coming from distant places to stay with him (15). Nalapat Narayana Menon was also a member of the Theosophical Movement and so personalities like Sardar K.M. Panikkar, James Cousins and Miss Lightfoot, the Australian danseuse were his friends. Therefore Nalapat provided a platform for "intense and intellectual talk" (33).

Kamala's mother is also a well-known poet. She was always busy engaged in composing poems in Malayalam. She used to be devoted to her writing all throughout day that Kamala Das says there was a period in her life when she believed that an adult woman's sole duty was to write verse. (Suraiyya, Path of the Columnist (PC) 161). Nalapat Balamani Amma was honoured with a fellowship by the Sahitya Academy. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan and the Saraswati Samman. She was a scholar in Sanskrit and Malayalam. In her early days she was attracted to Theosophy and was "fed on the 'vedas' and 'upanishads' " (73).

Nalapat also had a grilled library full of books consisting of those written by Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Havelock Ellis and Varahamitra. It also had a fine collection of palm-leaf manuscripts written mostly in Vattezhuthu (MS 14). All these certainly have done a lot in whetting Kamala's innate qualities as a writer from her childhood itself. She had inculcated a reading habit from a very young age itself and used to read books of great writers in Malayalam and English. She had fascination for reading books like Isadora Duncan's autobiography, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and so on. These books influenced her thinking. It is obvious from her own words, "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" (MS 152-53). The book My Story is also said to be a consequence of her reading My Life, Isadora Duncan's autobiography. It is assumed that Kamala was much influenced by the liberated unconventionality of this U.S. dancer who rejected the conventions of classical ballet. (Saradakkutty, Mathrubhumi Weekly, March 11-17-2007).

However, it is around her grandmother that her memories linger more. It was from the grandmother that she used to learn about the stories from Indian Puranas, stories about Krishna and the like. The grandmother also helped her a lot to know about her roots and bind her to the family tradition. Kamala Das with her unconventional way of thinking

could never attempt doing any thing that may cause displeasure to her grandmother. Even her pseudonym "Madhavikkutty" as she is known in her Malayalam writings was donned by her to mask her identity from the grandmother so that she will not be hurt by the unconventional observations of her grand daughter in her works.

The Neermathala Tree was also like an "ancestress" for her. The very thought of it soothes her aching heart like the "lullaby sung by a mother". (NPK 39). The beauty of the tree in bloom and the fragrance it renders to the atmosphere around is beyond description to her. She always used to carry the desire in her even during her student days in Calcutta to reach Nalapat every year when the tree was in full bloom. But she could not do so then and even now, she says in Neermathalam pootha kalam . All the same, she says, the picture of the tree in bloom was kept locked behind the safety of her eyelids so that whenever she wanted to have a look at it all she need do is to close her eyes. It is very significant that she attributes some kind of a connection between the tree and the matriarchal system which she very much wants to pervade once again in the social set up. The tree remains a symbol of "emotional security" for her (91). The emotional security she speaks is that derived from matriarchal system.

In addition to all these, Kamala was also able to fill her mind with a wide cultural spectrum. In Kerala she enjoyed bathing in the pond. The festivals like Vishu, Onam and Thiruvathira were colourful and offered a wide variety of fun and gaiety. Then the houses were

decorated with paddy and coconut blooms. The oracle of the local temple used to visit every house on a certain day every year. He would be escorted by drummers and singers. In the Nalapat house there used to be performances of Kathakali and Ottamthullal several times a year. While in cities like Mumbai and Kolkata she experienced a totally different life fashioned according to western standards like eating with a fork and knife, having soup, cutlets and stew for lunch instead of rice and curry etc.

Nalapat, like all matriarchal families was a sisterhood of women. The feminine society, their aspirations, disappointments and short comings were a world by themselves. And Kamala Das, as part of this feminine world at Nalapat is richly qualified to deal with them. The relationship between women or among women's community is called by people as the Lesbian continuum. This has nothing to do with sex as such.

The school experiences of Kamala were also an extension of those in her own house. At the age of nine, she was admitted into a boarding school run by Roman Catholic nuns. It was a convent school exclusively for girl students. Therefore as in her family, females dominated in school as well. The school life gave her some ideas of Lesbianism as sex.

Implied in the concept of sisterhood are the sympathies of a wider nature and a concern for sufferings of women all around. Kamala Das shows great sympathy towards career women who have to face a lot of difficulties while trying to do justice to their twin roles as working

women and house wives; she has her concern for the poor and uneducated girls who work as domestic helpers, coolies and even as sex workers. This extends to larger segments of feminine concern and further towards the marginalized and deprived people all over the world. Thus, she shows much distress at the way minority groups like the Sikhs in 1984 at Delhi and the Tamils in Sri Lanka were ruthlessly killed. She also shows ardent fellow feeling for the poor.

The heights to which Kamala Das could rise is a measure of the extent to which the potentialities of a woman of her background could be realized. Of course, in her case as well as in the case of her mother, the co-operation got from the spouse has been something significant. In order for a woman to pursue her career successfully there ought to be a completely supportive family to encourage and help her. Both V.M. Nair, Kamala's father and Madhava Das, her husband were equally good in this respect. We find her stating that it was because of her father's abundant support and encouragement that her mother was capable of devoting her time entirely to poetry writing and become acclaimed as a poetess. Mr. Das was also there behind every literary pursuit of Kamala. He would give her tips regarding the kind of materials she should deal with and the like. The very fact that he quietly bore the negative image she had created of him through MY Story and various poems is in itself sufficient proof of his supportive attitude.

Kamala Das is fortunate to have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances from different walks of life. They range from

ambassadors to artists and writers. This has contributed much in broadening her perspective of the world and life itself. Participation in great literary seminars and conferences at national and international levels has enabled her to have contacts with almost all eminent Indian writers particularly in English and Malayalam as well as those from other countries. These are not mere passing acquaintances. They have high esteem and regard for her personally. In Path of the Columnist, we find her referring to a gift sent by the Australian Ambassador in Mexico. It was the biography of Friedo Kahlo, The Mexican painter. She values the gift as a great treasure not just for the gesture on the part of her friend, the Ambassador, but also for the experience of being "stimulated" by the genius of the painter (95). In My Story she speaks of the great Indian diplomat and statesman, V.K. Krishna Menon's visit to her at a Delhi hospital when she was admitted there. The man who was considered to be very arrogant in his behaviour seemed "kind hearted" to her as she heard him scold the nurses for not being careful and when he wiped her damp forehead himself with a corner of a towel (170).

Her work My Story is not merely an autobiographical effusion of Kamala Das. It deals with a lot more than the personal details of the author. It is a work abounding with instances pointing to the social and cultural scenes in Kerala especially during the transitional phase from matriliney to patriliney which the Nair community was then undergoing. In it, she speaks about the situations of Nair women as well as all other women belonging to various social strata in Kerala. She also gives relevant details of the various forms of exploitations, discriminations and

prejudices which were not just part of Kerala society but Indian society as a whole. In addition to the class/caste prejudices we also find her pointing out through the work, the discrimination people of India had to face at the hands of the British who ruled India then.

But the book is widely known for the blatant revelations of her personal or private matters. In it, she speaks about her lesbian connections and extra-marital relationships; about her growth into womanhood; her first night with her husband and a lot more such things which astounded everyone. In it she states with down-right frankness "like the majority of city-dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while." (183). She also gives a candid description of what is termed as "cocktail season" in Calcutta where respectable men and women belonging to high level social sphere indulge in immoral practices. Such outspoken expression of feminine self which every other woman would want to conceal was something new and rather unexpected on the part of a woman writer, so that a lot of controversy ensued the publication of the book. She was very much misunderstood for her frank and open manner of writing and she is still not free of censure..

But it has to be acknowledged that her creative genius has wide acclaim the world over. She has hoards of admirers who admire her for the outspoken manner of her writings. There are as many critics too. The recognition she has received from all parts of the world is because of her boldness and daring attitude. She does not confine her writings to any ideologies least of all feminism. Though she herself has never tried

to act as a role model for anyone, women writers in India and abroad attempt to model their writings in the way she does. In this sense she is a path-finder. Kamala Das got the courage to write the way she does because of her family background. Her creative genius had been nourished by the tradition of Nalapat family and its head, the grandmother.

The two beautiful and never-fading images that haunt the memory of all readers of Kamala Das for years to come are those of the oil-lamp at the grandmother's window and the Neermathala tree. As we shall see later they are the symbols of the matrilineal system with its characteristic codes of behaviour and relations.

In a conversation with Eunice D'Souza, in answer to a question whether her frankness is part of her upbringing as a Nair woman, Kamala Das replies, "I was not brought up as a Nair woman. My father was the family bread winner and he treated us like menials. The servants were paid salaries we were not." (D'Souza, 32). Such a kind of sense of loss creates in her a yearning for matriarchal life and values as she feels she has not been able to enjoy its advantages completely. Eversince her childhood, she has always been trying to hold firmly on to a relationship that would be everlasting. She found that such a relationship can be provided only by the grandmother and a family like Nalapat. But unfortunately, as she records in Ente Katha, her autobiography in Malayalam, whenever she felt she had at last got hold of a solid footing at Nalapat something or the other would happen which would sweep her

away from it (51). This inability to become part of such an atmosphere permanently brings a nostalgic longing in her for her feudal, matrilineal ancestry which according to P.P. Ravindran is her "intimacy to the past" (Rajan, P.K.84). And past to Kamala Das is Nalapat house, the Neermatala tree, the grandmother and the matriarchal set up. The purpose of the thesis is therefore, to examine how far the expressions of her feminine self is influenced by her matriarchal social and cultural environment as revealed through her works.

