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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Desire to be Woman and a Woman's Desire: A Study of A. Revathi's *The Truth about me-A Hijra Life Story* and Kamala Das's *My Story*

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Focus of this paper is to explore the role of post-modernism in the wake of establishing the individual identity of Indian woman through their self-narratives. The post-modernist social movements make Indian women conscious of their separate self and give them the moral strength to reclaim their voice and identity, and their expressions by breaking through the established norms, traditions and taboos of the society. In *The Truth about me-A Hijra Life Story* A. Revathi dares to pen her plight of expressing the desire to be woman, having a male body and declaring the arrival of third sex by breaking the stereotypical categorization of male and female as two different and exclusive boxes. And Kamala Das's *My Story* bares the mental and physical urges of an Indian woman defying the established institutions, thus proving that women have their desires too. At the advent of post-modernism, these two autobiographies not only mirror the new woman's revolt against the rigid tradition and conventions, but reflect the prevailing of post-modernist thought and the emerging socio-economic transformation.

The desire to be woman: *The Truth about me- A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi

The Autobiography of A. Revathi is the life story of that woman who born male-bodied but with an irrepressible desire of feminine sensibilities is daring enough to raise their voice amidst cruelty, ridicule and existence in a different world. This is a bold revelation of the courage and essence of the oppressed, marginalized woman who challenged the prevailing

Customs imposed and culturally legitimated definition of gender itself. She fights against all odds, stands against all obstacles, voices against all unfair only to stay true to her feeling by breaking all social and cultural politics of the concept of gender and introducing the third sex.

This autobiography is a revolutionary step to change the perception of Hijra or the Hijra Community and an honest attempt to stand for the rights of the sexually minorities. A. Revathi herself writes in the Preface:

“...that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work.”

It is the story of a woman who born male as Doraisamy but her feminine instinct taunts her to end up with the male body to be a woman Revathi. From a very young age, she enjoyed the tasks that were assigned her sister more than her brothers. At heart she feels the rapture to be woman: *“I walked and sang and danced to my heart’s content, imagining myself to be a girl.”* In school that thought of being a girl haunts her:

“In class, I would sit staring at the girls, taking note of the way their braids fell, the intricate knot of their colorful ribbons, the jasmine and kanakambaram they wore in their hair, and their skirts and blouses. I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so.”

The strange desire to be a girl within and male body outside perplexed her heart and made her confused and anxious. With utter confusion and irresistible desire she often tries to solve the inner math of her life, but always ended up with asking numerous question to her inner-self, whose answer is unknown to her:

“A woman trapped in a man’s body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be with men, but felt shamed by this feeling. I wondered why God had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why he could not have created wholly male or wholly female. Why I a flawed am being, I wondered often.”

But the desire to look like woman, dress like them grows within her to realize the true self which is within. On a special festive occasion she dress up as a girl for a festival dance and then finding herself reluctant to shed the female clothes afterwards: *“As I re-emerged in my man’s garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind.”* On a point when someone said that she is looking like actress Revathi, she is sure of her feminine being:

“I imagined that was my name – Revathi. I looked at myself in the mirror and felt a glow of pride. I did look like a woman. It was at that moment that I was convinced I was indeed one.”

And this longing desire to be a woman costs her a lot of scolding, beating and suffering both from her family and community. And when she meets up with others like her, her desire finds wings to fly. Her quest to lead a womanly life takes her to a completely different and new life. She runs away to Delhi and later to Bombay to join communes of hijra to lead the kind of life she wants to. But the predication does not end there; there are much more in the store for her in the new life.

While living a life in hijra community she underwent the painful and potentially life-threatening operation to get rid of his manliness and be woman completely, not merely dressed as one. Though this gives her the moment of joy and a sense of fulfillment but she struggles for being the part of hijra community, struggles for proper livelihood and struggles for being marginalized:

“God has made us this way, I thought, and we have no works of our own, our parents do not understand us and this world looks us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all we want to live as human beings do, with dignity.”

Facing humiliation and brutality at every step, she finds it hard to gain employment as she fights for a social and economic existence and is forced to beg for living. And in order to get rid of her physical hunger she does sex work, as for her it is the only means to find sexual satisfaction. But the brutality of rowdies and the inhumanness of the police shake her from within. In order to have a proper living, she has no option left except begging and sex work. The lack of education, family support and hatred of general people forced them to adopt that kind of life. But her association with the NGO Sangama, makes her realize that she can lead a life of dignity by doing work other than begging and sex work. And by joining a wider world, attending meeting and seminar she becomes conscious about her right on equality and right to live a good life. Her perception about life changed and she is now ready to fight for her rights and her community.

“We want to live as women, and if are granted the facilities that will enable us do so, we’ll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or do sex work. Circumstances, faculty laws and

social hatred have left us with no course but to beg and do sex work. Our parents begot us like they did other children. We are also human.....Are not we human too, born of mothers, as others are? We have not descended from the sky, have we? We have rights, just like the others. We are citizens of this nation.”

Her association with the wider world, new perceptions, and changed attitude towards life made her a social activist in the field of sexual minorities. She fights to get a space in human society, stands for the general acceptance to their community. Despite of brutality, cruelty, operation and humiliation she is able to bring her voice, because the society is changing and is somewhat ready to accept new perceptions thoughts and feelings.

The woman's desire: *My Story* by Kamala Das

KamalaDas's*My Story* for the first time mirrors the mental and physical urges of an Indian woman very honestly. It is considered as “the most outspoken and controversial autobiography that has become a cult classic” for the kind of subject it addresses which still considered distasteful. Her story reflects human touch as she not only depicts ‘the story of her life but also of her body’ and which makes her a bold woman writer who does not speak of about inner self but about the female body and it is through body she realizes the spiritual self. It is truly another step ahead for an Indian woman to be truly frank, bold and honest about her inner sensibilities, anguish, and urge to fly, and desire to fall in love.

Kamala Das is the woman who shocked the tradition bound Indian society through her boldness, and forced Indian women to rethink about their identity and to reform their status in the society. And *My Story* is the revolutionary autobiography which jolted the very foundation of the tradition rooted Indian society. To quote K. Satchidanandan:

“I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colors and its turbulent poetry.”

Kamala Das stands for feminine sensibility and tries to dismantle the normative patriarchal tradition and social hypocrisies and rebels against conventions and restraints of society, which

are meant to exploit womanhood in this patriarchal society. K R S. Iyenger written in "Indian writing in English",

"Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate hurls it has received in an insensitive, largely man-made world."

In her story she stands out prominently to resist all the cultural impositions, obligations and oppressions which are cunningly designed to suppress a woman's feelings and desires. In the name of tradition they have been tortured, in the name of culture they have been cheated and in the name of morality they are forced to forget about their wish, want, desire and above all their own self. She rebels against all exploitations, conventions, traditions and accepted norms of society. She pens all her anguish, shows all her wounds, colors all her emotions, sings all her love, voices all her loneliness, alphabets all her mental trauma, bares all her intensely personal experiences and opens all her secrets to let herself empty:

"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 to be taken care of.... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honor my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience... The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband... This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My Story has given me." (Das, Preface)

In her self-narrative she opens her heart, and narrates her intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her 'greed for love', her fractured marriage, her sexual exploitation and humiliation, her failing and fallings, her 'desire to die', her moment of joy and above all her spiritual self.

She questions about the foundation of the most important institution of Indian society- marriage, where nobody do really care about the bride's wish:

“Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue.”

She becomes broken hearted when she could not get the kind of love and warmth expected from her husband:

“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life.....”

She finds brutal sex in place of love and affection and endures the torture and humiliations, as she puts it:

“The rape was not successful but he confronted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress. Repeatedly throughout that unhappy night, he hurt me and all the while Kathkalli drums throbbed duly against our window and the singer’s song of Diamante’s plight in the jungle.”

She further tells her husband’s patriarchal attitude and he is a typical Indian husband with orthodox perceptions who does not know the difference between sex and love:

“Don’t I feed you, clothe you and provide warm shelter? Don’t I discharge the connubial responsibilities competently whether you ask for love or not.”

And by discovering her husband’s homosexual relationship, she feels humiliated:

“I felt then a revulsion for womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through...I wanted for a moment to fling myself down, to spatter the blanched brilliance of the moonlight with red blood stains.”

She is always flooded with the sea of emotions, making her restless every time, sometimes with desires and without desire, sometimes with frustration, sometimes with emptiness and sometimes with fulfillment and sometimes with compromise:

“If my desires were lotus in a pond, closing their petals at dusk and opening out at dawn once upon a time, they were now totally dead, rotted and dissolved, and for them there was no more to be a re-sprouting. The pond had cleared itself of all growth. It was placid”

Sometimes she dedicated herself completely to god forgetting about the desire of human love, but she slips again to human love:

“Like phoenix I rose from the ashes of past. I forget the promises that I had made to God and become once more intoxicated with life. My lips had without rest uttered the sweet name of Lord Krishna while I lay ill, but when I recovered my health I painted them up with pink lipstick. On moonlit nights once I thought wistfully of human love....”

My Story is an honest account of an Indian woman who is bold enough to fight against gender biased customs and traditions. Her depiction of this aspect female sexuality is somewhat made her autobiography controversial but it is honest on her part as she always put forth candidly what she always felt. Her feminine sensibility requires fulfillment in love which she could not get in her life. Her ‘greed for love’ leads her to sexual unions, but not love. Her feminine desire is badly injured and tortured by masculine cruelty, heartlessness and sexuality. But throughout her life she shows a need for genuine love for the soul with a truthfulness and plainness uncommon in the Indian context, especially for woman.

“Love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults. I needed security, I needed permanence, I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear. Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change.”

With all her truthfulness, boldness she brings the feminine sensibility and problems to the forefront to claim empowerment and liberation in a confessional tone through her autobiography. She turns to a social rebel as she only finds egoism, manipulation and lust in return of love, as she finds loneliness in return of longing-ness and encounters hypocrisy in return of innocence. Her failure in marriage, her long quest for true love which was never fulfilled drive her mad to commit suicide, but her womanly instinct to resist everything gives her courage to combat negative forces to save her physical existence because for her the other one does not exit her soul. She pens all her deep despair, frustration, anger and drains all the mental turmoil on the paper to literary start a new life and new desire:

“My grief fell likedrops of honey on the white sheets on my desk. My sorrow floated over the pages of magazines darkly as heavy monsoon clouds do in the sky...”

Through her life narrative she opens up to her inner self in search of her individuality. Her life story focuses on her inner journey through introspection and self-analysis and her realization of the only reality- death:

“I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water. We have been mere participants in someone else’s dream.”

Kamala Das tells her story with utmost honesty, sincerity in all its frankness, boldness and unconventionality by attacking on all social conventions and taboos. Her defiance against social barricade makes it more revolutionary, her portraying of intensely personal experiences makes it more realistic, her confessions about her mistakes, desires and failures makes it more human.

Conclusion:

Post-modernist theories and approaches open up to new avenues of outlook and viewpoints on social, economic, political and religious issues. And it is the result of social movements that brings social modification and thereby set a new base and value in society. In A. Revathi’s *The truth about me*, she finds a new dimension in her life and her true self when she is open up for a wider world with wider perception and acceptance through her association with the NGO Sanagam, whereas in Kamala Das’s *My story* she finds her new life and realization of her true self about truth of life through her writing. In both these autobiographies, lives are uplifted by the current and cross- current of the social change, brought by the Post-modernist thought and approach.

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