

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Merrily Weisbord's *The Love Queen of Malabar*: A Study in the 'Female Experience'

Shamla K.M.

Assistant Professor of English
Govt. Polytechnic College
Perinthalmanna
Malappuram (Dt.)
Kerala, India

Article History: Submitted-29/03/2017, Revised-17/04/2017, Accepted-24/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

Merrily Weisbord, the Canadian female non-fiction writer, fascinated by reading Kamala Das' works in English, visits her in Kerala which initiates a lifelong friendship between the two female writers that culminates in the writing of the book, *The Love Queen of Malabar*, a book that presents Kamala Das as the woman who suffered, the real woman behind her texts. It depicts Kamala as the woman who worshipped love but found her desire little fulfilled in life; an ill-treated wife, an unsatisfied lover and later a misunderstood believer but always a firm and loyal devotee in love. Kamala Das in flesh and blood and her experience that triggered most of her writings form the central focus. 'Female experience' as envisaged by Elaine Showalter in her notion of 'Gynocriticism' (335) seems to unite these two women writers who find convergences in their motherhood other than being writers which nullify divergences that surface in the form of culture, language, geographical disparity, colour, creed and soon. The paper is an attempt to reveal the fact that women writers share a common platform of 'female experience' nurtured by love, empathy and friendship inspite of various differences.

Keywords: Merrily Weisbord, Kamala Das, Love Queen of Malabar, Female experience, Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism.

Merrily Weisbord, the Canadian non-fiction writer, in her mid fifties, engages herself in an exploration into the life of Kamala Das. Weisbord found Das' writings so captivating that she sets out to Kerala and finds herself involved in a life-long friendship with the legendary poet of love. But this relationship turns out to be an emotional binding of two women whose sharing of experiences leads to new vistas in feminist reading.

Much has been written on Kamala Das emphasizing her as a poet of love and sensuality. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in their introduction to *Women writing in India Vol. II Twentieth century*, remark about the theme of love and longing in Kamala Das' works (394). Das writes poems in English but stories in Malayalam under the pseudonym Mahdavidukuttu. Her autobiography, first published in Malayalam as *Ente Katha* and later translated to many

Merrily Weisbord's *The Love Queen of Malabar: A Study in the 'Female Experience'* languages, took the literary world by storm. But the 'story' within *My Story* can be regarded as a cyclone that hits on many of our notions of sexuality and gender.

In the midst of a vast ocean of literary critical texts on Kamala Das, Weisbord situates her text as a 'memoir of a friendship' focusing on the experience that triggered much of Kamala Das' writings. According to Tharu and Lalita in their introduction to *Women Writing in India Vol.1600 B.C.to Early Twentieth Century*, "Literary texts, the assumption is, express author's experience and reveal the truth about his or her world and as they do so, they provide us with access to the universal dimensions of human nature"(28).

Female experience, which Elaine Showalter considers as the essential rudiment of Gynocriticism (335), presents itself as the vantage ground for the two women to identify with each other. "Women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space" (Showalter 345). Gender, which the feminist critics regard as a cultural construct, has been seen through the diversity of culture, religion, love, marriage, motherhood and creative writing. These cultural diversities shape the gender roles of these women and their writings can be seen as an attempt to raise beyond these confinements.

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces the creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 295)

Weisbord meets Kamala for the first time in her house in Cochin. There she finds Kamala as a celibate and mourns the recent death of her husband. But as a person who has read *My Story*, Weisbord finds it hard to make sense of Kamala who loathes and loves her husband at the same time. This paradox in fact initiates her to Kamala and sets the tone for further revelations in their relationship.

Kamala's bell-like articulation and the music of her voice captivate me. But I am having trouble reconciling what she's saying now with what she wrote about her husband twenty years ago, at the age of thirty seven in *My Story*. (*The Love Queen of Malabar* 15)

This uncertainty in her relationship with her husband throws light on the peculiar way marriage and family are placed in the Indian society. Kamala during her conversations with Weisbord presents herself as an enigmatic mixture of traditionalism and radicalism. She exhibits simultaneously the mutually quarrelling notions of adhering to the conventional marriage and at the same time shows signs of transcending beyond the marital boundaries. "Matriarchs are expected to look after husbands. And there was some feeling that I was protected. He was giving me some kind of emotional shelter" (*TLQM* 15). This rendering by Kamala Das is seen along with an extract from her poem "Loud Posters".

I am today a creature turned inside
out. to spread myself across wide highway;
of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
was always my desire. . . (Das 47 I-4)

To the dumbfounded Weisbord Kamala offers an explanation that informs her predicament. Married at the age of fifteen and who spent forty three years of married life, the marriage had grown into her so that she fails to resent, protect but endure.

Thus the passivity that is the essential characteristics of 'feminine woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned, it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by teachers and by society. (Beauvoir 307)

The value assigned to marriage in the conventional society has made her withstand even the homo-sexual behaviour of her husband. She obeys her husband silently when he pushes her into his superior's bed. "All the grief inflicted upon me by my husband paid dividends. All the struggles proved useful later, poetry came oozing out like blood out of injuries" (TLQM 16).

Kamala remains a mystery for Weisbord who has spent her entire life in a culture where women enjoy a comparatively free sexual behaviour and where marriage is not a status icon for women to exist honourably in a society. But Weisbord's own practice of living with a man without being bound by marriage is resented by Kamala. She insists Weisbord to legally document her relationship. Hence marriage is the deciding factor for female sexuality in the Indian cultural context."The modern individual family is found on the open or concealed slavery of the wife. ... within the family he is the bourgeois and his wife represents the proletariat" (Engels 79).

When Kamala made sexual transgressions in her personal life and expressed herself frankly in her art thereby shattering the conventional taboos, it resulted in great turmoil in the literary and cultural scenario of Kerala. Weisbord observes when she behaved in an equally or more aggressive manner in her youth, the Canadian society never regarded her as someone beyond normalcy. "But my promiscuous sexual behaviour was only mildly disreputable in 1960's and '70's North America, while Kamala's subversive, relatively innocent behaviour was exponentially more transgressive in India" (TLQM 39).

According to Indian tradition, marriage ties a woman to her husband eternally, however brutal he may be. Jasbir Jain in her work *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The writings of Shashi Deshpande* says, "In a society in which kinship patterns and community structures exercise an overwhelming control over the individual, romantic self-indulgence is not encouraged" (272).

Kamala's very attempt to liberate herself from this oppressive bondage called marriage was met with cold response even from her parents. Without education and economic independence she would be left a destitute. "Anyway, since women were expected to make their marriages work, she couldn't expect parental sympathy for her plight" (TLQM 81).

Here the semblance of shared experience disappears where Weisbord on similar situation of marriage failure had gained strong parental support.

The only thing I [Kamala Das] envy you is your friendship with your father, because my father was never very friendly with me. Your father maintains this

Merrily Weisbord's *The Love Queen of Malabar: A Study in the 'Female Experience'*

dialogue, and with a father like that, you could get your escape, get your release.
(TLQM 81)

When she found herself cheated out by her normal life she concluded it as her destiny. Kamala who feels herself proud of being a Nair woman which gave her courage "in the face of the patriarchy" (119) but cannot save herself from a marriage which she cannot agree with. But it is the same sad marriage that made her agonized heart to spell itself into poetry. Jain says, "There are perhaps, atleast two selves in a woman, one that wants freedom, the other that wants to belong" (84).

Here the two women writers of extremely divergent cultural realm try to look at reality from the common ground of female experience. This shared experience reveal their sisterhood in the wide scenario of women's writing thereby turning differences in culture and attitude as superficial. "I make assenting sounds as Kamala describes the conflicting pulls of motherhood and writing: Not everybody understands this conflict, and her blunt rendition of our predicament bring me closer to her" (TLQM 62).

When the same issue Weisbord discusses with her Dad, he fails to understand.

The coming together of these two women allows the female experience to get unraveled from the early stage of childhood itself. For Kamala, her childhood was a period of heavenly bliss thanks to the warmth of love she got from her grandmother. "My grandmother was my safest most loving refuge ... She was my first love, and has always been my love" (TLQM 78).

This ethereal childhood bliss makes her live through all her adult agonies which in turn get expressed in her poems, like "My Grandmother's House".

You cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud and loved. (Das 13 12- 14)

Montreal, the home land of Weisbord, where Kamala Das visits, evokes vivid images of childhood as shared female experience. Here geographical and cultural boundaries get nullified.

I think Nalapat is Kamala's emotional centre as this place is for me. I store images of the land I love – the path of the Back Lake, the granite rocks and tree roots I leap over ... In hard times these images are my refuge ... Kamala too has stored images of childhood and immortalized them in books. (TLQM 78)

Ponds in the ancestral home of Kamala Das and lakes in Montreal too are seen as a source of 'Primal connection' (TQLM 79) between Weisbord and Kamala. "Kamala swam naked in the ponds of Malabar, and I in Laurentian lakes. Her joint family home was called Nalapat House, mine was called the Acres. ..." (TLQM 79).

Weisbord finds herself quite different from Kamala in terms of their attitude towards religion. The former finds it difficult for her to be a part of any institutionalized religion or to think in terms of God. For a westerner like Weisbord, love and spirituality are mutually

exclusive terms. But for Kamala the first lessons of love and sex were taught to her by religious scriptures.

But when I talk of about love making, I'm thinking of Radha and Srikrishna sporting – how Radha's anklets used to jingle when he was on her ... If I visualize Krishna, the God of all Hindus, sporting with his girls, how can I think of sex as something unclean? (TLQM 31)

As a girl of thirteen or fourteen she read of sex in the Gitagovinda, a prayer book. Hence she never associated obscenity with sex. "If God figures in a love story, then a love story is sacred. It is not profane" (TQLM 32).

This interlinking of love with religion has its relevance in the later part of her life too. Her conversion to Islam in 2000 is described in her letter to Weisbord as:

Life has changed for me since Nov.14 when a young man named Sadiq Ali walked into meet me ... I stayed with him for three days. There was a sunlit river, some trees, and a lot of laughter. He asked me to become a Muslim which I did on my return home. (TLQM 142)

She was lured into religion by love and the betrayal in love could not make her leave the religion so easily. Though mentally she was fed up with religious fanatics on both sides she could not express it in public. "The mind has its own limbs and they're all folded up" (TLQM 230).

Within a short span of four years Kamala Das then Kamala Surraiya found organized religion a disagreeable one. When Weisbord visited her in Cochin in 2004, her dislike for religion was very pronounced. "She sounds increasingly fed up with fundamentalism of all stripes, culturally sanctioned male superiority, religious interference in her writing and painting" (TLQM 234).

But she never wanted to hurt Muslims and hence continued to be a Muslim superficially. But her faith in religion transformed into faith in a concept of God. "A presence in my room. I'm not alone, I visualize a shower of moonlight falling on someone in prayer ... I feel bathed in light and I know there is a God" (TLQM 235).

Her insistence on a personal strain of God made her view in terms of Sufism. In fact she is even related to the mystic poet, Raabia Basri, a eighth century Muslim slave women turned poet.

There is an interesting anecdote related with Raabia's life which speaks volumes in female free thinking within the bounds of patriarchy. Once Raabia asked Hassan Basri, a fellow Sufi mystic, his opinion on wisdom. He answered that wisdom was divided into ten equal parts out of which nine were given to men and the remaining one part is left with women. She agreed with him and came up with a second question, his attitude towards sexuality. Sexuality too according to Hassan Basri was divided into ten equal parts out of which nine were given to women and the last one part to men. Then Raabia's striking reply was that she agreed to what he said but added that man with all his bulk of wisdom could not

Merrily Weisbord's *The Love Queen of Malabar: A Study in the 'Female Experience'*

control the least which is his sexuality. On the contrary woman with just the least of wisdom could very well manage the so-called bulk of sexuality (Mohammed59my translation). But the modern version of the Sufi mystic, Kamala Das, can never place human love beneath the love of God. "Merrily, we are phallus worshippers, we Hindus. I don't think God could give me a feeling like that" (TLQM 235).

Human love gets itself so tangled with her spiritual concerns that if she is asked to take sides, she would prefer human love to the love of God. When Merrily wonders which God (Hindu/Muslim) she would seek, when she is alone or feels sacred, her reply astonishes even Merrily. "I turn to the man I love ... I think even when I'm about to depart for another world, I will try to phone him. I will not speak words to God" (TLQM 239).

Motherhood is yet another experience on which the two women converge in spite of their diversities otherwise. "But you are caught in concerns I share – the way writing – for money leeches energy, the conundrum of adult children, how we express love and create intimacy" (TLQM 9).

In their old age both have space enough in their life for female friendship and emotional bonding as their children are matured and no longer crave for their mother's cares.

We both know we are strong, able and interested in the world outside, the family life that nourishes and troubles us. We like each other, two grown women, immune to most external approbation but vulnerable to what the others think. (TLQM 47)

It is their vocation as women writers that brought them finally together. Women writers find themselves connected by an invisible thread of shared female experience through which they can communicate easily. Such communication may have the warmth and spontaneity of telepathic or intuitive relationship as we find in the attachment of these two women writers. Merrily thinks of writing of this particular book as a joint venture.

... but I keep hoping that Kamala will take or share editorial responsibility – relieve me of the sole burden of it. Perhaps it's the length and intimacy of our friendship and the protector role I've assumed: or the persistence of my original co-writing impulse. (TLQM256)

Towards the end of the Memoir, Merrily pays a beautiful and in fact a memorable tribute to Kamala Das. When K.P.Pavitra, a reporter for Mathrubhumi queries after Merrily's choice to write about Kamala, she answers: "Because she's a fascinating person, because her vast reservoir of east, west, esoteric, recondite, traditional, modern baggage and lore gives her unfathomable scope" (TLQM 257).

The epilogue briefs on the death of Kamala Das, a short, detached narration but with inbuilt agony of separation. After being a celibate for more than a decade she was awakened sexually at the age of sixty seven by a man who was half her age for which she had to pay heavily in terms of her conversion and its aftermath. But life failed to quench her thirst to be loved. 'The love queen' in fact leaves the world with a heart poorly fed in love which informs most of her writings.

If I had not learned to write how would
I have written away my loneliness
or grief? Garnering them within my heart
Would have grown heavy as a vault, one that
only death might open, a release then
I would not be able to feel or sense ...(TLQM 87)

Works Cited:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 1949.

Das, Kamala. "My Grand Mother's House", *Summer in Calcutta*. DC Books, 1965, 2004
Edition.p.13.

..... "Loud Posters" qtd in *The Love Queen of Malabar : Memoir of a Friendship
with Kamala Das*. Merrily Weisbord. MC William's University press,
2010.

Engels, Frederich. Quoted in *The Female Eunuch*. Germaine Greer. Flamingo, 1999.

Jain, Jasbir. *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writings of Shashi Deshpande*.
Rawat publications, 2003

Mohammed, Sidhique. *Raabiya Basri : Divyanuragathinte Vishudhapakshi*. Raspberry
Books, 2010.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" *Modern Criticism and Theory*.
David Lodge (ed.) Longman, 1991.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha (eds.). *Women Writing in India. Vol. 1, 600BC to the Early
Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

..... *Women Writing In India. Vol. II, The Twentieth Century*. Oxford University
Press, 1993.

Weisbord, Merrily. *The Love Queen of Malabar : Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das*.
MC William's University Press, 2010.