

MY STORY AND NACH GA GHUMA: A CHALLENGE TO THE PRE-ESTABLISHED CANONS OF FEMININE STEREOTYPES

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Marriage is not only an honourable career and one less tiring than many others; it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact. There is unanimous agreement that getting a husband- or in other cases a 'protector'- is for her the most important of understanding.

(Simon de Beauvoir, The Second Sex)

Women who constitute half of the human population are never treated on equal ground with men in all spheres of human life. They are oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the matter of sharing the available opportunity for fulfillment of their lives, despite the fact that every woman strives for the development of her family, her husband and children. She is religiously, historically, socially and politically secondary and relegated to the background by men. The age old patriarchal social system made her 'incidental' 'inferior' and 'subordinate' to man. A woman in every culture is never regarded as an equal, an autonomous being.

Man can think of himself without women. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees. She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential (Selden, 1988: 534).

The above view of Raman Selden is clear evidence of male dominance in traditional social setup. In male dominated society a woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent home maker with multifarious roles in the family. As wife and mother, service, sacrifice and submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. She shows excessive endurance and the series of adjustments that she does faithfully and obediently. These are her admired qualities. Her individual self has a very little recognition in the patriarchal society. The present paper attempts to demonstrate various facets of patriarchal obligations under which Kamala Das and Madhavi Desai stifle and how they challenge these pre established stereotypes and its effects on families and within the family.

Kamala Das is beyond doubt the greatest woman writer in contemporary Indian English literature. Her autobiography *My Story* was first published in Malayalam in 1973, and English translation came in 1988. It shocked the readers with its total disregard to mindless conventions. She is often termed as controversial writer due to her frankness. Madhavi Desai is a novelist, short story writer and a poet of great repute in Marathi. She shot into fame by her stunning autobiography *Nach Ga Ghuma* which was published in 1988 in Marathi. She is the author of nearly 35 books on women's issues, including her autobiography.

Both Kamala Das' autobiography *My Story* and Madhavi Desai's autobiography *Nach Ga Ghuma* reveal that a woman is naturally creative and if given a room of her own, she can defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life boldly. Kamala Das published her autobiography at the age of Forty Two. It created a lot of interest and controversies in the society and literary circle. She wrote it during her serious bout with heart disease and to distract her mind from the fear of sudden death. Her journey into the past proved to be cathartic and it helped her in coming to terms with herself and the society. In *My Story* Kamala Das has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner. There is marvelous self analysis, introspection and also a challenge to existing patriarchal norms.

It is the known fact that the parental behavior affects the children and they are much influenced by parental bondage. It appears that Kamala's parents did not encourage her poetic sensibilities; rather they were unhappy with her brown skin. They were not aware of the independently developing personality of their daughter. As a school going child, Kamala felt asphyxiated due to indifference in typically conservative family and faced racial encounter with the white girls at school. As a result of it, she is seen constantly at war with her parents, with the society and its so called standards. In her future life, given the opportunity she drew out rules of her own and justified them. One of the far reaching effects leaves its mark on her life is, that of her marriage at a tender age that too without her consent. She wanted to continue her education, but she was forcefully driven into the wedding trap. Her friends at Calcutta laughed at her when they heard the news of her engagement. She was afraid of her father and uncle, who plotted and conspired to marry a person who was quite elderly. Kamala's narrative clearly expresses that her husband was all for lust. He expected Kamala to satisfy his physical needs and to be cowed by him. O. J. Thomas summarizes the pitiable condition of Kamala Das:

Kamala Das's story is the story of a woman who was denied love, when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life- name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is this background that she writes about love in all her writings. (Bhatnagar, 2001, 212)

After marriage Kamala Das longed to receive love at least in small extent, but instead she confronted with a husband who tried to rape her though it proved "unsuccessful" (Kamala Das, 1988, 84) She has given graphic accounts of her relation with her husband after marriage. She appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held by her husband. Her physical relationship with him was not at all happy one as he was only obsessed with her body, and this very fact created a sense of disgust in her. She considered herself a helpless victim of a young man's carnal hunger. She also vehemently notes that she was just a plaything for her husband. At the time of her marriage, she was so much deeply in love with him that she was ready to undergo any tortures made by him. However, her husband had rough ways of sex instead of love which he had practiced with the maids working at home. So Kamala Das decided to seek it outside its legal orbit, and made up her mind to be "unfaithful to him, at least physically" (Kamala Das, 1988, 90) Thus she started to assert her individuality. Her extra marital affairs are the outcome of the indifference shown at home. She was considered a 'freak' by her so-called lovers and 'unsatisfying soul' by her husband. No doubt these affairs pushed her to the edge of perversion, she least cared about them. Nobody except her grandmother tried to grasp her 'inner self' that was craving for 'true love'. It is surprising to know that though her marriage was a 'flop' she did not divorce her husband and continued to live with him till his death. She knew that she went

astrayed from her path and calls herself -“I am the sinner, I am the saint, I am the beloved and betrayed”. (Kamala Das, 1973, 37) Kamala Das knew that stepping out of this family compass and living alone is a daunting task for a woman in India. In this manner, she is shown to have a string of short and long term relationships, perhaps in her own way of being the rebel in a society of the late 20th century when traditionalism was the established norm and rebellion, that too among women, was considered a taboo. Such acts reflect the spirit of boldness and a complete disrespect for the societal norms. She has given voice to the thousands of modern women. Her ‘story’ unravels the inner sorrows and gives voice to the inner urges of a woman.

The second autobiography taken for discussion here is Madhavi Desai’s *Nach Ga Ghuma*, which goes very close to *My Story* except the incidents of extramarital affairs. It was published in Marathi in the year 1988, the same year when English version of *My Story* was published. It also created tremor among Marathi readers as it negatively depicted the then famous Marathi novelist and her husband Ranjit Desai. Madhavi Desai is also the victim of the age old traditionalism of the society in which women have no voice. Even if they try to create their own niche they are sidelined by the male dominated society. *Nach Ga Ghuma* depicts the trial and tribulations of a very sensitive and cultured woman.

Having been a daughter of a well-known Marathi filmmaker Bhalaji Pendharkar, Madhavi Desai had to spend an austere life at Tapovan where she spun cotton under the guidance of Gandhian figure Dixit Guruji. In her early childhood, she could not figure out why her parents kept her away from glimmers of life of films in which her parents were involved. At her tender age she was caught between ‘illusion and reality’. She had to lead a life which was very disciplined and full of hardships, whereas her other stepbrothers and sisters enjoyed very comfortable life. She was very much disheartened when her father chastised her after winning a prize in singing competition in school even though her mother herself was a good singer and used to sing for the films of her father. These incidents had an in-depth impact on her personality, though she never opposed them openly. These childhood experiences of Madhavi Desai demonstrate the double standard nature of her parents. Afterwards when she was busy with her college life, suddenly her marriage was fixed without seeking her consent. Madhavi wanted to complete her education first. However, she had no courage to tell it to her father. Her father declared, “Within two days there will be showing of ceremony. The boy is good and healthy. We are not your enemies. This marriage is for your better future.”(Desai, 1988, 69) Madhavi felt that the words of her father were like bullets to her ears. She spoke nothing. She was born and brought up in such a family where elderly people fix marriages. She got married to Narendra Katkar at the age of sixteen and came to Goa. Unfortunately, after some years of their happy married life Narendra Katkar died of Typhoid after blessing her three daughters. After his death Madhavi found it very hard to live the life of a widow in conservative society. She had to put up with rumors, scandal mongering etc. However, she endured it with a rare courage and completed her further education, reared three daughters and worked as a teacher simultaneously, and she also married off her first daughter Yashodhara in respectable family. When she was busy with her life after the death of Narendra Katkar, Ranjit Desai, a famous Marathi novelist proposed her on the insistence of her father. Initially she was reluctant to accept this proposal as she had still two daughters of marriage. Moreover, the responses from relatives and daughters regarding the second marriage were not in her favour. When Ranjit Desai assured her of the better future for her, and her daughters, she accepted it after giving much thought to it.

Madhavi Desai married Ranjit Desai in 1976, and came to Kowad, the hometown of Ranjit Desai. It appears that Madhavi never felt at home in Kowad. She was as if a stranger to

the place and members of the family. She tried to adjust to the new environ and became friendly with all. However, soon the rift between husband and wife began to widen due to eccentric nature of Ranjit Desai. He wanted her to be just a house wife. Though he outwardly encouraged her for her literary career and social work, he somewhere at the core of his heart, began to consider her as his rival. He started to insult her occasionally on the pretext of her treatment to his daughters from previous wife. Madhavi Desai endured it silently as all the doors were closed to her. She was very much anxious of her daughters' future and her status without a husband. She had double responsibility of her own daughters and his two daughters from Sunanda, his previous wife. In spite of many odds she settled the life of his daughters properly. However, his quirky nature made her life edgy. Her sacrifice was always overlooked. She was not given due respect by her husband. She just lived as a manager of the house. He treated her just as a 'showpiece'. (Desai, 268) When she began to assert her identity, he started to despise her, and finally pressurized her for divorce. When denied she was insulted publically, and he threatened to kill her. She endured it all as her third daughter was still studying and concentrated on her education. Moreover she was aware that the stigma is attached to a divorced woman. She was very much bothered about the public opinion about her status as a divorcee. So she tried to resolve the matter politely. Unfortunately more she tried to cling to it, more she was driven away from it. Finally she had to submit the will of Ranjit Desai, and at her late sixties she was divorced by him.

Both Kamala Das and Madhavi Desai are victims of patriarchal domination. Their autobiographies reveal their agonies of pain and sufferings and compromises. They defend against the subjugation and exploitation and assert their identity and try to create their own place in the society. They compensate their matrimonial maladies by excelling in literary and social work. In these autobiographies, we come across new kind of writings which are bold, tantalizing, and self assertive. While writing such an account of their life, they are conscious of their femininity, but we find them that they are determined to vindicate it against male chauvinism. Kamala Das is very clear in her stand against these stereotypes where as Madhavi Desai is rather submissive and tries to oppose very placidly. Never the less, both of them have used their literary output as a vehicle to give voice to inner section of women and their privacy.

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