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Kamal Desai



Kamal Desai is a name to be reckoned with in the period of Marathi literature that comes after Mardhekar, though she started writing short stories slightly later than Gangadhar Gadgil. The post-Mardhekar literature articulated new perceptions and used new modes of expression. It would be appropriate to describe Kamal Desai as post-Mardhekar rather than as a post-60's writer, because the insights gained during the heyday of *navkavita* seems to characterise her fiction.

Kamal Desai's stories are only a handful but significant. On one level, her stories deal with the real world – the world of the middle class and lower middle class on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border and their cultural ambience. But she avoids a straight-forward narration and many of her stories are rendered in the symbolic mode. For, she wants to capture grey and elusive areas of the human unconscious. In fact, the narrative movement from the conscious to the unconscious does not lend any outward clarity to her characters. Very often her stories appear obscure. This obscurity springs from the complexity of experience communicated, from the simultaneous movement of characters on multiple levels of time and from the use of a myth-like atmosphere. Her stories express human loneliness, suffering and cruelty in relationships. She has effortlessly

created narrators that face death and suffering. Her stories accord to their atmosphere a nightmarish quality. In her creations, however, she does not reflect on individual man. Her stories attain universality because of her concern for a set of values.

On the face of it a novelette like *Ratrandin Amha Udhacha Prasang* (1964, Popular, Mumbai) deals with men involved in the Marxist movement. But the narrative neither treats real political issues nor political events that would forward the narration – nor is politics is not given any specificity. One reason that immediately suggests itself in that the characters have moved away from politics. But a closer examination shows that the writer is no longer interested in employing the psychoanalytical approach. Instead she begins to pose metaphysical questions: why do certain events take place at all? Is there any divine dispensation behind them? Therefore, the intensity and tensions that inform the stories in *Rang* are absent in *Ratrandin Amha Udhacha Prasang*. Serenity, peace and a sad thoughtfulness pervade it. This partly explains why Kamal Desai took to writing novelettes.

She must have found the short story narrow as she wanted to write about metaphysical problems. She wanted to embody these questions in characters and situations, to give free scope to

concepts and widen her vision of life. Many readers of Kamal Desai strongly feel that she ought to have written a novel. But like Gauri Deshpande, Sania and such other distinguished women writers, she did not go beyond the novelette. *Kala Surya...* (1968) is also a novelette. In *Kala Surya* she projects a world that stands at a distance from the readers by using myth-like elements such as the Viranchi village, chariot and stone as - reliefs. A world of domesticity does exist there but it does not matter in the novelette's structure. Only symbols and images have significance: a temple without an idol and a woman says, "I have laid a mine field under the Black Sun" and is out to destroy it. In her novelette and other stories, the relation between man and the idea of sin seem to predominate. Her characters assert that they did not bring sin with them. It belongs to the soil and is inherent to it, they contend. The novelette also expresses the thought that if someone accepts sin, the rest can experience liberation. The one who follows the path of sin or that of piety is decidedly alone and the majority hang in balance between these two extremes.

In Kamal Desai the question of human solitariness figures along with human suffering, the arrest of life and search for one's self. In spite of these serious concerns, her mastery over narration does not slacken or the story does not come alone to the level of an essay. Because Kamal

Desai is sensitive to the relation between the unconscious and the conscious worlds, between the present and the past and between truth and falsehood, she refuses to employ the omnipresent mode of narration. Her fictional world seems strongly aware of the limitations of human action. The shifts in narration helps in understanding the characters from their point of view and those of others. Barring a few exceptions, these characters do not assume any physical clarity. But the world external to them is worded in dark colours and human life acquires an unreal form.

While articulating such experience, one runs the risk of making it hazy or allegorical. But in Kamal Desai's fictional world the sequence of events have no importance and human life is rich and serious and its experience, meaningful. Surrender to technique and the penchant for cold psychoanalysis so characteristics of *navkatha* are set aside and her world expresses a deep concern for life.

It is only natural that one wants to respond to her works from a feminist perspective. *Rang II* (Popular, Mumbai, 1998) carries a detailed Introduction by Vidyut Bhagwat from this point of view. The thrust of her argument is relevant in that she elaborates how for Kamal Desai the question of a woman's identity and freedom are linked with freedom, mental inclinations and the feeling of being

related to society as a whole. She also seems to deeply consider the arrested growth of society.

From the feminist perspective psychoanalytic symbols assume primacy. Or the title *Hat Ghalanari Bai* (Mouj, Mumbai, 1975) itself suggests the co-existence of the feminine and the masculine and a determined imaginative leap. Her fictional world tries to discover a philosophical meaning in the relations between women characters, between the violent aggression in men-women relationships and even romantic attachments. She intensely feels

that her women characters want their feminist cry to be heard. Here is a writer who has rendered men and women caught in space and how they reach for freedom in movement. But her fundamental concern appears to explore the possibilities of liberation from this difficult human existence.

To introduce Kamal Desai as a person, it needs to be said that she taught English literature and aesthetics in the active period of her teaching career. Both these subjects and her wide scholarship have left their marks on her fiction.

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