

BLOCK: III

Unit 1: Maya Angelou: Background

Unit 2: Maya Angelou: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Unit 3: Kamala Das: Background

Unit 4: Kamala Das: *My Story*

Unit 5: Kamala Das: *My Story* (Supplementary Unit)

UNIT- 1

MAYA ANGELOU: I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 About the Author
- 1.4 Maya Angelou's works: An Overview
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *learn* about the author,
- *understand* the socio-historical condition of the time,
- *know* the literary contributions of the author,
- *analyse* the content and style of Angelou's works.

1.2 Introduction:

Best known for her unique and pioneering autobiographical writing style, Maya Angelou is one of the most celebrated and renowned women writers of her time. Her autobiographical debut novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is written in the form of a memoir, narrating the author's life since she was three-years old up to her teenage years. The narrative explores the author's struggle with racial discrimination, sexual assault, parental neglect, identity crisis, and other events that mold her formative years. Apart from being a writer, Angelou was also known for her singing and dancing, particularly in the calypso and cabaret styles. She performed professionally across different countries, from the US and Europe to Africa, with her albums sold commercially across these places. She also performed a wide variety of stage activities and on the screen as an actor, director, and producer as well.

1.3 About the Author:

Marguerite Annie Johnson, most popularly known as Maya Angelou, was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Bailey Johnson, was a doorman and navy dietitian, and her mother, Vivian Johnson, was a nurse and card dealer. However, her parents had a chaotic marriage that subsequently ended up in a divorce. Angelou had an older brother, Bailey Jr., who named baby Marguerite as "Maya", derived from the word 'My' or 'Mya Sister'. At a very tender age, when Maya was only three and her brother was four-years old, both the children were sent by their father to live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson, to Stamps, Arkansas, alone by train, unraveling the beginning of multiple displacement that Maya endured through her growing years.

At the age of eight, Angelou was sexually exploited and raped by her mother's lover, Mr. Freeman. Soon, the incident was revealed to her mother and brother when they discovered Maya's stained undergarment under the bed while changing the linens. Mr. Freeman was trailed and sentenced to prison, and eventually murdered after his release. This incident deeply traumatized her, leaving her completely silent and disengaged with anyone. She believed it was her confession that killed the man. This period of silence forms a prominent factor in developing her love for books and literature, with contribution of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a kind, educated lady who would lend books to her. It was Mrs. Flowers who introduced Angelou to writers from the famous literary canons such as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, including Black female writers like Anne Spencer, Jessie Fauset, and Frances Harper. This phase of her life was crucial in developing her ability to listen and observe the world as well as her memorizing skills. Angelou later moved to Oakland, California, back to her mother. There she continued with her schooling in George Washington High School while also attended the California Labor School to take dance and drama lessons. Soon, World War II broke out and Angelou applied to join the Women's Army Corps. However, her application was not accepted due

to her association with the California High School, which assumedly had some communist ties. At fifteen, she applied for the job of streetcar conductor but was rejected due to racial concerns. She was under the legal working age and had to lie in her resume, documenting herself as nineteen years old and after many consecutive attempts, she was recruited. She became the first African American woman to work as a professional streetcar conductor in San Francisco. After working for a semester, she returned back to school and graduated from Mission High School in the year 1944.

Maya Angelou joined the Harlem Writers Guild in 1959. The Guild was formed in 1950 by the African American writers in New York to support the literary works and publication of Black authors. She was also the coordinator of Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a prominent African American advocacy organization. She actively worked as a correspondent in Egypt and Ghana during the decolonization of Africa. She was an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, and had been a close friend with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Maya Angelou was an African-American memoirist, poet, actor, director and producer of plays, movies, and television programs, and a civil rights activist. Her love for literature was inculcated during her formative years in Stamps. She wrote seven autobiographies, with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) as her debut literary work that catapulted her to instant fame and international recognition. The book narrated tales of unwavering faith upon oneself, bravery and resilience, amidst great suffering and trauma. The narrative resonated with the readers who suffered similar angst and social chaos like racism and abuse. The book was nominated for the National Book Award and has been translated into many languages worldwide. Following this, she wrote six more autobiographies, depicting the struggles she endured during different phases of her life as well as the milestones she achieved and celebrated all the way along. She also wrote three essay books, several collection of poetry, and a horde of plays, movies, and television shows. Her artistic career spans over fifty years. She received dozens of awards

and was awarded more than fifty honorary degrees. However, before trying her hand at writing, Maya tried a string of jobs like cooking, night club performer, and streetcar conductor. She was also the cast member of *Porgy and Bess*, an English opera composed by an American composer, George Gershwin. She was designated as the first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1982. She became the first poet to make an inaugural recitation at the first inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993, where she recited the poem, "On the Pulse of Morning". Angelou was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014 from the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials for a session tagged "Women Who Move the Nation". She also won the Grammy Award for her spoken albums of poetry twice, in 1995 and again in 2002. Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honour, by Barack Obama, in 2010, for her remarkable contribution in the field of art and literature.

Maya Angelou died on May 28, 2014. After her demise, several memorials were held in her honour at different universities and churches, including the Wake Forest University and the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. In her memory, the US Postal Service issued a postal stamp in her name in 2015, in honour of her legacy.

1.4 Maya Angelou's Works: An Overview:

Maya Angelou wrote a sum of seven autobiographies, starting with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her works stretch a long time span from the beginning of World War II until the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. covering her journey to and fro to Arkansas to Africa and back to the United States. Apart from the autobiographies, Angelou's extensive literary career also includes five collections of essays, several volumes of poetry, plays and screenplays for televisions and films, directing, acting, as well as public speaking.

The seven autobiographies of Maya Angelou are discussed below-

- ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)***

The first in a seven volume series, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in the year 1969, which chronicles Angelou's life from when three-year old Maya was sent to Arkansas, Stamps, to stay with her grandmother, Annie Henderson until she becomes a mother at the age of sixteen. The memoir is a coming of age narrative that explores Angelou's transformation from an insecure, lonely child to a strong, independent woman. The memoir highlights Angelou's journey from being a victim of racial discrimination, sexual violence, and identity crisis to a proud, dignified African-American woman capable of dealing with all the societal prejudices with grace and resilience.

- ***Gather Together in My Name (1974)***

This is the second book that follows the events discussed in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1974. Here, she is addressed mostly as Rita, one of her many names, and spans two years of her life from the age of seventeen to nineteen. The title of the book is derived from the Bible and it explores the struggle and challenges faced by a Black woman in a White patriarchal society, following World War II. The book highlights themes like motherhood, family bonding, racism, education, identity, etc. It is during this phase of her life that Angelou becomes closer to her mother as she tries to raise and provide for her new-born son.

- ***Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas (1976)***

This is the third of the seven series of Angelou's autobiographies which spans her early twenties, from 1949 to 1955. The book chronicles Angelou's struggle as a single mother to raise her young son as well as establish a successful career in the entertainment world. The book explores many of the themes from her prior autobiographies like racism and motherhood along with themes of travel and music. The memoir depicts her travel and the different kinds of people she encountered and interacted with, which makes 40% of the book, with its roots in the African-American slave narrative. It is during the course of this memoir, that she changes her name from Marguerite Johnson to Maya Angelou

and her son changes his name as well from Clyde to Guy. The book explores their mother-son relationship and how it strengthens towards the end of the narrative.

Stop to Consider:

Slave Narrative:

Slave narrative is a literary genre that recounts the life story of a fugitive or a former slave, either orally spoken or written by the individual himself. The genre became one of the influential as well as controversial literary style in American literature, both fiction and non-fiction. From 1760 to the end of the Civil War, approximately hundred autobiographies of former slaves appeared in the literary scene. Slavery was abolished in 1865, following which around fifty slaves wrote book-length narratives on their lives. During the 1930s, the period of Great Depression, the WPA Federal Writers' Project collected personal histories from more than 2,500 former slaves, which eventually resulted in a slave narrative of 40 volumes. *The book, Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in two volumes in 1789, was the first internationally acclaimed slave narrative to become a best-seller. Another significant book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, published in 1845, is often considered a seminal text, an epitome of slave narrative. The text recounts the journey of the quest of freedom to eventually being free, the pursuit of literacy, and the significance of intellectual as well as physical liberty in an individual's life. Another popular and one of the most widely read nineteenth-century novel was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, published in 1852.

• ***The Heart of a Woman (1981)***

The Heart of a Woman is the fourth memoir written by Maya Angelou, published in the year 1981, which spans her life between 1957 and 1962. This work too chronicles her travel experiences across places

like California, New York, Cairo and Ghana. It explores her experiences and adventures of motherhood of raising her teenage son who towards the end of the book leaves for college and Angelou cherishes and celebrates her newfound freedom. She becomes actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement, while romantically engaged with a South-African anti-apartheid fighter.

- ***All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986)***

The fifth memoir by Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, spans Angelou's life between 1962 and 1965 and was published in 1986. The book opens when Angelou was thirty-three years old and recounts the phase of her life when she lived in Accra, Ghana, in search of the past history of her tribe. The title of the book is derived from a Negro spiritual and the narrative continues from the event that marks the end of her previous memoir, *The Heart of a Woman*, that is a traumatic accident of Guy. The book ends with Angelou's return to America.

- ***A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002)***

Maya Angelou's sixth book, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, begins where her previous book, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, ends. It spans her life between 1965 and 1968, and narrates two crucial events of her life, that is, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. It begins with her trip from Accra, Ghana and ends with Angelou writing the opening lines of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book narrates her grief and loss on the death of her friends and how it greatly altered not only the socio-political scenario of the country but also her personal life.

- ***Mom & Me & Mom (2013)***

The seventh and the final volume of her autobiography series is *Mom & Me & Mom*, published in 2013, shortly before Angelou's eighty-fifth birthday. The book significantly focuses on the mother-daughter relationship between Angelou and Vivian Baxter. It attempts to delve into Baxter's perspective as a mother and explain her behavior, especially her abandonment of Angelou and her brother, Bailey, at a very young

age. The book somewhat ends on a positive note with Angelou's reconciliation with her mother, Vivian.

Maya Angelou also wrote a collection of poems-

- ***Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie (1971)***

This is the first poetry collection by Maya Angelou. Most of the poems in the collection were originally written as lyrics when Angelou worked as a night club performer, later recorded in two albums. The collection comprises of two sections with a total of thirty-eight poems. The first section, "Where Love is a Scream of Anguish", centers on the theme of love and loss and is a compilation of twenty poems, with its tone structured mostly like blues and jazz music. The second section, "Just Before the World Ends", consists of eighteen poems, focuses more on socio-political issues like racism, marginalization and discrimination of the Other, identity crisis, White predominance, etc. *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and was a best-seller of its time.

The poems in both the sections are as follows-

Part One: Where Love is a Scream of Anguish

- "They Went Home"
- "The Gamut"
- "A Zorro Man"
- "To a Man"
- "Late October"
- "No Loser, No Weeper"
- "When You Come to Me"
- "Remembering"
- "In a Time"
- "Tears"
- "The Detached"
- "To a Husband"
- "Accident"
- "Let's Majeste"

- "After"
- "The Mothering Blackness"
- "On Diverse Deviations"
- "Mourning Grace"
- "How I Can Lie to You"
- "Sounds Like Pearls"

Part Two: Just Before the World Ends

- "When I Think About Myself"
- "On a Bright Day, Next Week"
- "Letter to an Aspiring Junkie"
- "Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett and Other Latter-Day Saints"
- "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition"
- "Faces"
- "To a Freedom Fighter"
- "Riot: 60's"
- "We Saw Beyond Our Seeming"
- "Black Ode"
- "No No No No"
- "My Guilt"
- "The Calling of Names"
- "On Working White Liberals"
- "Sepia Fashion Show"
- "The Thirteens (Black)"
- "The Thirteens (White)"
- "Harlem Hopscotch"

Maya Angelou wrote a book of meditations named, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, published in the year 1993. She further authored several children's books that illustrated stories and tales of children from different parts of the world like *My Painted House*, *My Friendly Chicken and Me* (1994), and *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1998), along with a series named Maya's World, published in 2004-5. She also penned an anecdotal handbook for women entitled, *Letter to My Daughter*, published in 2008.

SAQ:

Q.1. From your reading of the chapter, discuss the important themes prevalent in Maya Angelou’s autobiographies.

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Q.2. What is the literary significance of her poetry collection, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie*.

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Q.3. Apart from being a writer, discuss Angelou’s role as a socio-political figure.

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1.5 Summing Up:

Maya Angelou’s literary endeavours were often based on or inspired by or somehow related to her own personal life experiences and her moral predicaments. She usually explored the themes of economic, social, racial, and sexual oppression in her works while at the same time taught values like courage, resilience, patience, and faith. Her works were significant literary contribution in the field of art and literature to show the readers a true picture of life and experiences of a Black woman in a White dominated patriarchal society.

1.6 References and Suggested Reading:

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UNIT- 2
MAYA ANGELOU: I KNOW WHY THE
CAGED BIRD SINGS
(Reading the text)

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Reading the Text: An Overview
- 2.4 Major Themes
- 2.5 Imageries and Symbols
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *have* a detailed understanding of the text,
- *learn* about the plot and structure of the text,
- *analyse* the themes of the text,
- *know* the socio-historical significance of the text.

2.2 Introduction:

The book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is an autobiographical novel by Maya Angelou, published in the year, 1969. The novel is a bildungsroman narrative, chronicling her life from early childhood through her teenage years. It instantly rose to fame and became one of the most widely read books of the contemporary times as well as was on the best-sellers list consecutively for two years.

The title of the book is derived from the poem, *Sympathy*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar. The book is an exploration of Angelou's childhood until she grows up, narrating traumatic events of her life such as rape,

racial discrimination, cultural displacement as well as the evolution of her strong identity as an African American woman. Her literary endeavors richly portrayed her cultural heritage as well as her individuality as a writer, which is both inspirational and empowering.

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 had a profound impact on Maya Angelou. It was during that time, she met writer James Baldwin and cartoonist Jules Feiffer and she was inspired to write her own book. She wrote her first autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as a way to grieve the loss of her friend as well as portray her own personal struggles with racism. Angelou also co-wrote the screenplay for the movie version of the book for television in 1979, starring Esther Rolle as Momma and Diahann Carroll for the role of Vivian.

Stop to Consider:

Maya Angelou was deeply influenced by one of Martin Luther King's speeches he delivered in Harlem. They met for the first time in 1960 in New York. Both King and Angelou, along with comedian Godfrey Cambridge, created a play, *Cabaret for Freedom*, proceeds from which were given to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She discussed about her relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. in one of her excerpt in *Black History Month Special 2012*, where she also discussed about the Civil Rights Movement. She once commented that Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice reminded her of her brother, Bailey. In her autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, she discloses her first impressions of King: "He was shorter than I expected and so young. He had an easy friendliness, which was unsettling" (Angelou 107). Even after King's death, Angelou continued to be a close sister-friend to his widow, Coretta Scott King.

2.3 Reading the Text: An Overview

The autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, explores the young and early years of the author's life.

The narrative begins in the year, 1931, with three-year old Maya and her elder brother, Bailey, who lived in a segregated American South, in Stamps, Arkansas. They lived with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, and their crippled uncle, Willie. Addressed by the children as Momma, Annie Henderson owned the only store in the Black neighborhood of the town. The two children settled in with Momma, providing her helping hands to run the store as well as around household errands. They learn to read as well as do arithmetic while in Stamps.

Growing up in Stamps, Maya and Bailey, constantly suffers from the agony of being abandoned by their parents, whom they considered dead. Maya is convinced that she is an ugly child, the reason her parents did not wanted her. She suffers from emotional insecurity and inferiority complex, not only with the White genteel children but other Black children as well. Bailey, being the perfect big brother to her, always had her back whenever people passed unkind remarks on her, putting them in their place.

A family friend of Momma, a former sheriff, often visited their home for supper. One night, he advised Momma to hide her son, Willie, because assumedly a Black man tried to mess with a White woman and the Whites were planning revenge on the Blacks. Later, a group of young White girls ridicule Momma outside her store to which she does not react but stands silently, yet strong and unmoving. When the Great Depression hit the industrialized Western world, Momma keeps the shop going by exchanging goods with the ration that came as relief with the families in the neighborhood. One day, Maya and Bailey received gifts for Christmas from their parents, whom they assumed to be dead. After a year, their father and Momma's son, Daddy Bailey, returns home. He was an extraordinarily handsome man, unlike his crippled brother, who owned a rich, luxurious car. He came to Stamps to take Maya and Bailey to St. Louis, Missouri, to live with their beautiful mother, Vivian.

Stop to Consider:

Great Depression:

One of the longest and the most widespread economic depression of the 20th century, the Great Depression was an economic shock that began around September 1929 and lasted for a decade until 1939. It had devastating effect across many countries around the world. It led to the Wall Street market crash of 24 October which came to be recognized as Black Thursday. Both rich and poor countries suffered with catastrophic fall in personal income, tax revenues, prices and profit. International trade suffered, unemployment rate soared high. The cities around the world that were dependent on heavy industries were hit hard. The agrarian areas and farmer community suffered too as crop prices fell. The origin of the Great Depression is often examined in the context of the United States economy as it began in the United States and then spread around the world.

Maya and Bailey left Stamps with Daddy Bailey in his fancy car for St. Louis where they resided with their maternal grandmother and their uncles. They began school and discovered themselves more advanced than the city children in their studies and were moved up a grade. Later, the children moved in with Vivian and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. During their stay with Vivian, Mr. Freeman began to sexually exploit eight-year old Maya, eventually molesting her. He would constantly terrorize her to keep quiet and never reveal his nasty crime to anyone by threatening to kill Bailey if she did. Scared and traumatized by the event, and Mr. Freeman's threats to kill Bailey, she hid her stained underwear under the mattress of the bed. She falls sick and stops talking to anyone. Few days later, while changing the linens, Vivian and Bailey, discovers the garment and realizes what happened. Mr. Freeman was taken to court for a trial. Maya, fearful of him killing Bailey and her own prior silence, lies about his touching her many times even before the rape. Later, the police discovered Mr. Freeman dead body, presumably being beaten up to death, probably by some underground criminal associates of Maya's family. Maya feels guilty and

stops speaking altogether. Much to Maya's relief and Bailey's distress, after a few months, both the children are sent back to Momma, to Arkansas. However, Maya continues with her silence even after being home to Stamps.

Maya's silence starts bothering Momma and everyone around. Eventually, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a sophisticated, kind woman takes it upon herself to help Maya speak again. One day, she invited Maya for tea and lends her some books to read. However, she keeps one condition that Maya have to read the book aloud which Maya gladly agrees to. Finally, she starts speaking again. Two years later, Maya begins working for an elderly white woman, who always knowingly or unknowingly addressed her as 'Mary' rather than by her real names Maya or Marguerite. This offended and infuriated Maya as she saw it insulting to her identity and she breaks some invaluable china utensils in order to get fired. Later, Bailey gets upset after watching a movie featuring Kay Francis, because he believed the actress looked like their mother, Vivian. Following this, he makes a futile attempt to return back to his mother. Maya makes her first friend, a girl named Louise Kendricks, at school.

Both the children continue to encounter and struggle with racial discrimination as time went by. One such incident was when Maya got cavities and Momma takes her to a nearby White dentist who borrowed money from Momma during the Great Depression. Nevertheless, despite Momma's prior help, he refuses to treat Maya because she was a Black child. He insults them saying that he would rather put his hands in a dog's mouth than Maya's and Momma had to take a bus to a faraway Black dentist for Maya's treatment. Later one day, Bailey encountered a White man who asked him to help a group of Black men in pulling out a decaying dead body of a Black man from a pond and carry it into the jail. This incident left Bailey traumatized. Following these events, Momma decides to send both the children back to their mother, who was then living in California.

Back with their mother, Maya and Bailey moved to Oakland, in California. There they met Daddy Clidel, Vivian's new husband, who

turns to become a genuine father figure to Maya. She attends a school with only three Black students. When Maya is fourteen years old, she receives a scholarship to the California Labour School, where she learns dance and drama. One summer, Maya goes to spend time with Daddy Bailey in South California, who lived with his girlfriend, Dolores. Maya do not get comfortable with Dolores. While staying with Daddy Bailey, Maya goes on a shopping trip with him to Mexico. She enjoys the trip thoroughly until she loses track of Daddy Bailey. She found him later, too drunk to drive. Maya was extremely clueless in the situation but takes up the courage to drive themselves home. Although she had never driven before, she manages to do so until they reach the border where she hits another car. Back home, Dolores is upset about the whole incident and she had a heated argument with Daddy Bailey. Maya tries to console Dolores but eventually ends up slapping her for insulting Vivian. Dolores tries to hurt Maya and cuts her, following what Maya decides to leave. She spent a night in the junkyard, where she awakens to find a community of runaways that included Blacks, Whites, and Mexicans, living there. She accompanies them for a month and finally returns to Vivian.

Meanwhile, Bailey befriends a group of street boys and begins seeing a White prostitute. Eventually, he leaves home at sixteen, much to Maya's dismay. Maya is later appointed as the first female African American streetcar conductor in San Francisco. She returns to school after completing one semester at the job. One day, she reads the novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyff Hall, portraying lesbian relationship. She misunderstands the concept of lesbianism and is terrified that she might be one. Her mother, Vivian tries to clarify her doubts but to no avail. Nothing reassures Maya, and scared of her misunderstood sexuality, she decides to get physically intimate with a man. Not only she had an unpleasant experience but also it leads to an unfortunate pregnancy as well. Her brother, Bailey, suggests not disclosing the news to her parents and returning to school. However, after her graduation, she confides about her pregnancy to Vivian and Daddy Clidel, both fully supporting her. She gives birth to a baby boy and named him Guy. The novel ends with Vivian assuring Maya that she will be a good mother.

2.4 Major Themes:

Let us discuss some of the major themes in the novel:

- ***Racism***

I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings deeply explores the social issue of racism. Maya suffers the insidious effects of racism from a very young age, since she lived with Momma, in Stamps, Arkansas. The text vividly portrays the ill effects of racism in an individual's psyche as well as the physical agony it can inflict on the oppressed. Maya, since a very tender age, ingrained within herself the common stereotypical beauty standards, resonating with the idea that blonde hair, white skin is beautiful and she is an ugly, Black child, whom even her parents did not wanted to have. With the passage of time, Maya grew up to witness more overt and personal incidents of racism. The White dentist's refusal to treat her because of her skin color comparing her to a dog who seemed more worthy to him than her, the insistence of the White lady she worked for to call her Mary, ignoring her real name and identity, etc. are some instances of her being a victim of racial discrimination. The significance of the Joe Louis's Championship boxing match to the Black community illustrates the community's hope and desperation for vindication through the athletic triumph of one man and a way of validating the Black identity in a society of White predominance.

- ***Displacement***

All throughout the novel, Maya keeps on moving from one place to another, from one family to another, never settling to be what can be considered one's own home. From the age of three to sixteen, Maya is shuffled to and fro several times, either due to her inability to adjust or hostility of some people she crossed path with, or sometimes due to family affairs. She, at the age of three, along with her brother, Bailey, moved to Stamps, in Arkansas to stay with their grandmother, Annie Henderson, whom they addressed as Momma. Few years later, Maya and Bailey left Stamps with Daddy Bailey, their father whom they considered to be dead all these years, in his fancy car for St. Louis, where they lived with their maternal grandmother and their uncles. Later,

the children moved in with Vivian and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman where Mr. Freeman began to sexually exploit eight-year old Maya and rape her. This traumatic incident was followed by a court trial and eventually the murder of Mr. Freeman. All these events proved too much for little Maya to handle and she stops speaking to anyone. Both the children were sent back to Momma in Stamps. After a few years, the Great Depression hit and everyone suffered in their own ways. Both the children witnessed many disturbing events, especially that of racial discrimination. Momma, worried about its impact on the children, decides to send both of them back to their mother. Maya and Bailey moved to Oakland, in California with their mother. A few years later, Maya goes to spend time with Daddy Bailey in South California, who lived with his girlfriend, Dolores. Following a heated argument with Dolores, which led to some physical assaults, Maya leaves home ones again. She wandered for a few months, and finally returned to her mother, to San Francisco. A premonition of her constant movement can be seen in the poem she tried to recite on Easter as a little girl that said "I didn't come here to stay". However, at the age of thirteen, when Maya moved in with her mother, Vivian, and Daddy Clidel, she, for the first time felt a sense of belongingness and what can be called a home with Daddy Clidel as a genuine father-figure in her life. Maya's personal displacement echoes the displacement of the Black community as a whole by the powerful socio-political forces that considered themselves superior and looked towards suppression and dominance of the marginalized other.

- ***Resistance***

Resistance is one of the major themes in the novel. Almost all the major characters show resistance to the societal ills and discrimination that the Black community people are exposed to in their own ways, both subtle and complex. Momma's realistic outlook towards life and her silence, which is oftentimes seen as subservience, is her ways of resistance. When humiliated by the White young girls in front of her store, Momma stood firm in her place, unprovoked, and without uttering a single word, and patiently tolerating all their scorn and misbehavior until they were tired and went away disappointed. Her silence and refusal

to react to such leg-pulling or humiliation was her way of resistance. Daddy Bailey's luxurious lifestyle, his flashy clothes and fancy car, and his strong assertion of masculinity, serves as resistance to the society in the face of dehumanizing and emasculating racism. Vivian's family in California established connection with the underworld and other influential people to maintain them in the city which can be perceived as a form of resistance to deter any harassment. The local Church of Stamps also can be seen as a venue of subversive resistance in the novel. One significant event is when the preacher delivers a sermon criticizing White people's charity while the Black community revels in the idea of the Whites burning in hell. Maya's first act of resistance can be considered when she broke the costly china at the White woman's house who would constantly call her Mary instead of her real name. Her sense of resistance and resilience can also be witnessed when she becomes the first Black streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

- ***Inequality and discrimination***

The unequal social position and inferior treatment of the Blacks because of racial discrimination is rampant throughout the novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. From her early childhood, Maya is taught by Momma to treat the Whites with respect, even though they are 'powhitetrash'. However, at the same time, she also advised her to fear and avoid them. In the novel, Maya vehemently records the social reality where most of the interactions with the Whites in the segregated American South usually turn out to be dangerous or humiliating for the Blacks. The Black men were often lynched for even looking at White women, assumedly in the wrong way by the police. Insulting a White person is a deadly crime, even if one is provoked. Maya's perception of the Whites as superior got ingrained since she was a little girl. She saw them as prettier, richer, happier, and more fairly treated by the law and their stories represented in movies and books. They lived free of any racial discrimination or violence. The novel not only catalogues the racial discrimination and inequality between the Blacks and the Whites, but also encapsulates a complex hierarchy within the Black community itself that comprised of light-skinned Black people and dark-skinned Black

people. Those with a lighter skin tone are looked up with more respect and are considered more beautiful than those with a darker skin tone. Maya's mother, Vivian is light-skinned, a fact that rationalized her assumption of her rejection by her mother for being an ugly child. She perceived Vivian to be too beautiful to be her mother, and it is for this reason that her mother sent her away to stay with Momma to Stamps. This also made Maya envy and unsecured of other children in town, who are light-skinned or are bi-racial. Uncle Willie was discriminated not only for being a Black but also for being crippled, illustrating the various oppressions and prejudices that molds an individual's identity and experiences.

- ***Gender and sexuality***

The novel also recounts the various ways in which gender and sexuality influences and affects an individual's experience and identity. From a very young age, Mary recognizes the disadvantages of being a girl and often occasionally wished to be a boy. It has been ingrained in her mind that to be a hero, one has to be male as the books she read mostly depicted men or boys as heroes. At the age of eight, Maya was sexually exploited and raped by her mother's lover, Mr. Freeman. The incident left Maya extremely traumatized and she was guilt-stricken for her own rape, leading to her prolonged silence following Mr. Freeman's trial and eventual death. She assumed people might blame her own promiscuity for her rape as she had been told on many occasions by Momma to 'keep her legs closed'. Her perception of sexuality got complicated and problematic following this event as she begins to navigate herself as a sexual victim. One day, she reads the novel, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyff Hall, that was based on a lesbian relationship. She misunderstands the concept of lesbianism and is terrified that she might be one. Though Vivian tries to clarify her doubts, it was to no avail. Maya, scared of her misunderstood sexuality, decides to get physically intimate with a man. Not only she had an unpleasant experience but also it leads to an unfortunate pregnancy as well.

• ***Literature and language***

Maya Angelou, as a writer as well as a character in the novel, sought refuge in literature and language to express her innermost feelings, emotions, turmoil and the struggles she have endured and overcome in her life at a very young age. The novel itself testifies Maya's love for literature as she took to writing as a means to voice out her concerns on social issues like racism, gender bias, inequality, and others. Language and speech played a pivotal role in Maya's life since a very young age. She had been a quiet and docile child but very observant of other people's use of words and speeches. While her stay in St. Louise, she has been advised by her uncles that as long as she is smart enough, her physical beauty or ugliness can make up to that. Hence, it got ingrained in the blooming mind of little Maya that because she is not very pretty as per society's beauty standards, she needs to be well read. After her assault by Mr. Freeman, she had a traumatic period that consequently resulted in her prolonged silence. It was during this phase, she met Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a kind, educated woman in the neighbourhood who instills in Maya, the love and passion for literature. It can be considered as one of the most formative period of Maya's childhood as she learns to read, memorize, and appreciate poetry and other literary works. Mrs. Flowers would lend Maya books but with the precondition that she will have to read them aloud, something Maya readily agrees.

SAQ:

How racism led to socio-political discrimination of the marginalized other? Discuss.

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2.5 Imagery and Symbols:

The text is replete with various imageries and symbols. Let us discuss some of them:

The Store:

The store is one of the most significant parts of Maya’s childhood. It was a central gathering place for people around the neighborhood where she encountered people from different sections of the society, from the cotton-pickers to the canners. She notes that the store was her favourite place to be until she left Arkansas at the age of thirteen. The store was symbolic of hard work, help and compassion for one’s fellow human being during crisis, loyalty towards one’s community, and strength, resilience and self-respect for oneself.

Maya’s Easter Dress:

Maya’s Easter dress, a lavender taffeta dress, altered by Momma for her to wear on Easter was symbolic of Maya’s concept of beauty. She believed beauty means to have a white skin tone, in stark contrast to her own skin color. The lavender dress, while hanging by the sewing machine looked magical. Maya was convinced that the dress will reveal her true beauty, much to everyone’s amazement. However, when she donned the dress on Easter morning, it turned out to be a living nightmare for her. She realized that the dress was only a throwaway, given by a White woman. This shocking incident, however, makes Maya aware of herself as she realized that real beauty lies on the inside and her transformation will have to take place internally.

SAQ:

Discuss other imageries and symbols you can find from your reading of the novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?

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2.6 Summing Up:

One of the most quintessential autobiographical novels, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, explores the coming of age of a Black girl in the American South as she struggles deep-seated racism,

identity crisis, sexual exploitation, parental neglect, sexual ignorance as well as unwanted pregnancy, until she grows up to be a brave, resilient, and one of the most influential woman writers of her time. Against the backdrop of racial discrimination, Angelou describes the traumatic events of her childhood and the prejudices she was ingrained with, as she explored the evolution of her strong cultural identity as an African American woman. The text is a culmination of narrative of displacement, search for one's identity, love for one's culture, and a passion for literature which also became a route to voice out the inherent concerns that molded an individual, and as extension, the society.

2.7 References and Suggested Readings:

Angelou, Maya. *The Heart of a Woman*. 1981.

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McMurry, Myra K. Role-Playing as Art in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird". *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 2, May, 1976, pp. 106-111. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3198806> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3198806>

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Walker, Pierre A. Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Oct., 1995, pp. 91-108.

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UNIT- 3

KAMALA DAS (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch
- 3.4 Her Works
- 3.5 Critical Reception
- 3.6 Reading Two Poems
 - 3.6.1 “My Grandmother’s House”
 - 3.6.2 “A Hot Noon at Malabar”
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

This unit is designed to help you–

- *position* the poet in her proper historical age and ‘context’,
- *understand* the extent of her literary concerns and the various complexities of the life of a woman that are highlighted through her work,
- *gain* a sense of the critical review of her works,
- *appreciate* her style through analysis of two poems by her.

3.2 Introduction:

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to Kamala Das, one of the prominent Indian women poets writing in English, through two of her very significant poems, “My Grandmother’s House” and “A Hot Noon in Malabar”. As you proceed through this unit, you will be able to appreciate the preoccupations and travails of Das as a person, and a woman writing about her innermost thoughts in unrestrained verse. Care has been taken to acquaint you with the socio-economic conditions of

the twentieth century, so that Kamala Das is understood in the context of her times, in the context of her needs and urges.

Kamala Das is one of the significant Indian poets writing in English. She began writing poetry by the time English poetry by Indian poets had moved away from national themes to more personal experiences. With Das, one confronts a wide range of human feelings and emotions with deep psychological and philosophical complexities. The poet has dealt it all with a candour and freshness which is remarkable.

3.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch:

Kamala Das was born on the 31st of March in 1934 at Punnayarkulam in the coastal region of Malabar in the state of Kerala. Her real name is Madhavi Kutty, 'Kamala Das' being her pen-name. Both the parents of Kamala Das were poets and it is no surprise that Das should take to poetry too. But what is surprising is that she was educated at home and was denied formal school and college education. Before she could really come into her own, Kamala Das was married at the early age of fifteen. She had three children and lived in Mumbai. But Das's married life was fraught with disappointment and disillusionment. A completely unfulfilled woman, she writhes with pain and disenchantment in her writings. It is curious to note that though incomplete as a lover, her husband can be a 'kind' person and is apparently a 'good friend'. But he is a 'friend' who does not care if she is promiscuous. This only adds to her agony and frustration in her married life. Kamala Das records the poignant story of her life in her autobiography 'My Story' serialized in 'The Current Weekly' from January to December, 1974. Similar autobiographical prose pieces like 'I Study All Men – I had to' was published in the 'Illustrated Weekly of India' in 1971.

Irony sears through her poetry as Das writes with passionate candour, and in revolt against the situation she finds herself in. It is entirely unconventional and shocking in the Indian context. But Das continues to be completely sincere, being true to herself, both in her prose and poetry. All the time, even as she writes her shattering, but not always

too perfect poetry, she continues to live with her husband. What is significant is that Kamala Das must be acknowledged as one of the greatest Indian poets writing in English who had the courage to bare her essential feminine sensibility without inhibitions nor any kind of hypocrisy.

Stop to Consider:

A Brief Look Backwards:

It is nearly one hundred and fifty years since Indian poets have been grouped together through the single vein of the English language. Starting from 1817 onwards, Toru Dutt, Henry Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Manmohan Ghose have made their mark. Of those writing in the first half of the twentieth century, mention may be made of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose (or Sri Aurobindo), Sarojini Naidu, Joseph Furtado and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. In the latter half of the twentieth century, much good poetry came to be published. But nothing was accomplished on the scale of Tagore or Sri Aurobindo. This began what is termed as the Modern Period. Nissim Ezekiel, Dorn Moraes, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Arvind K. Mehrotra, Keki N. Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Shiv K. Kumar, R. Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan are important names to contend with so far as modern Indian poets are concerned.

Of the modern women poets special mention may be made of poets like Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgado, Eunice De Souza, Imtiaz Dharker, Smita Agarwal, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne D'Souza, Tara Patel and others.

Vinay Dharwadkar writes of the changing contexts and their multiplicity in relation to Indian poetry in English. His summary account of the scene of Indian poetry continues with regard to women poets and the context of their writing. "In the post-colonial decades, that world has undergone a new series of far-reaching transformations. For one, during the past thirty years it has been

altered increasingly and with great effect by the emergence of women poets in the various languages. Until the end of the British Raj, and even in the first decade after Independence, there were few prominent women poets in the country: in the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance, there was Toru Dutt (English); between the two World Wars there were a handful of figures like Sarojini Naidu (English); and Mahadevi Varma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi); and in the final years of colonial rule there were a few younger women like Indira Sant (Marathi) and Balamani Amma (Malayalam). Since the late 1950s, however, the number of women poets in print has risen sharply. This shift is part of the larger, more dramatic trajectory of change Indian women have been creating for themselves in the domestic and public spheres, especially in the domains of literacy, education, journalism, scholarship, the arts, the entertainment industry, politics, and the various modern professions. Between the 1950s and 1970s, we therefore find women poets like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kamala Das (English), and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (Bengali) working concurrently with fiction writers like Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu), Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya (both English), and Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), scholars like Irawati Karve (Marathi), Romila Thapar and Meenakshi Mukherjee (both English), translators like Lila Ray (Bengali and English), and editors like Madhu Kishwar (English and Hindi) to bring into existence a large, well-defined emergent community of women intellectuals, and a formidable body of women's post-colonial writing in the various languages. In the 1980s there has been virtually an explosion of women's poetry in India, with dozens of new names and voices in English, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada.

The situation of woman poets in Indian English, in fact, may be a good measure of the change as a whole. In the 1960s, the foreground was occupied by relatively isolated figures like Monika Verma and Kamala

Das. In the 1970s Gauri Deshpande, Malathi Rao, Anna Sujatha Modayil, Lakshmi Kannan, Mamta Kalia, and Sunita Jain, as well as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Priya Karunakar, Debjani Chatterjee, Nasima Aziz, and Meena Alexander entered the picture, giving it the look of a community of women poets. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Imtiaz Dharker, Tilottama Rajan, Charmayne D'Souza, Shanta Acharya, Menka Shivdasani, and Sujata Bhatt, among others, filled the frame, joining (whether they wanted to or not) the poets who had survived from the previous decades, and giving that community an impressive new profile. Together with their counterparts in the other languages, these women writers have effectively displaced Indian writing from its 'traditional male-dominated centres' ” (204).

SAQ:

Which notable features characterise the 'context' of Kamala Das' poetry? (80 words)

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3.4 Her Works:

In this section you will be introduced to some of the major works of Kamala Das. Although each of her books cannot be discussed in detail, care has been taken to choose those that project the quintessential strains of her writing.

Kamala Das began writing verse in school and had already published her work in the 'Indian PEN' (1948). She started as an amateur poet using traditional verse methods and finally evolved as someone with a strong and strident personal voice though she did not quite improve on her knowledge about poetic technique or theory. As Bruce King opines, 'She is a natural poet with an excellent feeling for sound, rhythm, phrasing, image, symbol, word play and drama.' Her poetic contributions are to be seen in four volumes of poems which include *Summer in*

Calcutta (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Stranger Time* (1977). *My Story*, Das' autobiography, was published in 1975. Although Kamala Das made her mark as an Indian poet writing in English, her acumen as a writer in the regional language, Malayalam, is also noteworthy. She is known as a writer of short stories in her mother-tongue for which the Kerala Sahitya Akademi honoured her with an award in 1969.

Kamala Das is also renowned for her prose-writing in English. A number of miscellaneous essays project her as a very controversial person among the Indian reading public. Some of her essays are 'I Studied All Men', 'What Women Expect Out of Marriage and What They Get', 'Why Not More Than One Husband?' and, 'I Have Lived Beautifully'.

In the volume *Summer In Calcutta* (1965), some of the significant poems are- 'The Dance of the Eunuchs', 'The Freaks', 'Spoiling the Name', 'The Fear', 'My Grandmother's House' so on and so forth. This first published anthology of Kamala Das's poetry sets the tone for her entire writing. Of the fifty poems in it, only a few deviate from the theme of love or failure in love. The exceptions include 'The Flag' about poverty-stricken Indians and 'Sepia' about dissipated and inactive Indians. This volume depicts a harsh sun-scorched tropical world. Against this backdrop, Kamala Das lays bare her unhappy soul, her craving for love in all its dimensions, her longing for her happy carefree childhood and her initiation into a world of lust and physical craving which she tries to rationalize, but all the time inwardly rejects. The poem, 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' which starts the volume sets the tone of all her works. The dancing eunuchs, with their colourful whirling movements symbolize Das' frenzied sex life. But behind it all, she is as devoid of love and true affection as the hollow, pitiful lives of the freaks of nature, the eunuchs. 'The Freaks' vents the need for sexual gratification of a woman. She is in bed with a man who is passive and completely unaware of the needs of the woman beside him. The autobiographical strains in the poem are only too obvious.

Kamala Das's early poems are basically concerned with her marriage, love life, desire for intimacy, and the repercussions- which included guilt, and her fame as an author. Raised in the warmth of the close Kerala matrilineal society, she felt alienated when her father moved to Calcutta. Her early marriage and the life of drudgery at her husband's home combined with his callous, uncaring attitude towards her shocked her, and made her subsequently angry, confused and rebellious. She longed for her happy childhood in Kerala, and she reminisces about it. This is also noted in the poetry of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy. Kamala Das idealizes her childhood in, 'My Grandmother's House' where she was showered with love and affection that she misses so terribly in her married life. So she says:

“(...) you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved ... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?”

The same theme is also noted in 'Corridors'. In 'Composition' Das juxtaposes her present life with the time she spent, 'lying beside my grandmother'. As she moves so freely as it were in a wild hunt for love, there is a poignant remembrance of her grandmother – 'I miss my grandmother'. In 'A Hot Noon at Malabar' Das takes us once more to the warmth and charm of her grandmother's house where she basked in joy, her senses stirred, ready for warm love. This is the mood that Kamala Das wishes to relive but in vain.

The Descendants, which is comprised of twenty-nine poem is the second volume published in 1967. Most of the poems in this volume have similar themes as those of the first. But soon one notes a dualism in her writing, where the soul is contrasted with the body. As Bruce King puts it, 'She seems to imagine overcoming this dualism only through death; her poems are filled with longings to die, especially to drown in the sea, water being associated in her mind with an all – encompassing, universal calm

...'. This is noted in poems like 'Suicide', 'The Descendants'. *The Old Playhouse and other Poems* (1973), contains thirty-three poems including fourteen poems which have been published in the first two volumes. The longing for the innocence of children, the frustrating present of a married woman, the wild search for love, the sexual adventures – hollow and yet demanding, the need to subjugate men with female wiles, and finally the oppressive guilt, making Das yearn for death – are the focus of her poems. This is noted in poems like 'Glass', 'The Prisoner', 'Blood'. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* she says:

“You called me wife.
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf ...”

This is in revolt against the male chauvinism, the dominating male who wishes to subjugate the woman and crush her spirit. Dominant strains of feminism mark Kamala Das' poetic delineations. In 'Stone Age' Das once again airs her extreme feminist views as she ridicules her husband intruding into her privacy of her mind where she fantasizes about different men in her life.

Stop to Consider:

The 'Confessional' Mode of Kamala Das:

As an exponent of the 'confessional' mode of Indian poetry, Kamala Das is essentially one of the modern Indian women poets giving expression to her suppressed experiences. It is appropriate to say that Kamala Das creates a free form, shaking all the established norms of life and art. She was unconventional in life, and she is equally unconventional in her diction, and in her verse-form. The crucial factor in all confessional poetry is a matter of tone. The free verse of Kamala Das, by carefully avoiding all clichés of expression, has perfected a way of treating the most intimate experiences without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos.

Often the images of Kamala Das are symbolic which helps to increase the expressive range of her language. The ‘sun’ and ‘heat’, ‘house’ and ‘window’, ‘cremation’ and ‘burning’, ‘nature’, the ‘human body’, ‘sleep’, ‘sea’, the ‘mythic grandmother’ and ‘Krishna’ constitute her range of imagery.

Kamala Das may be said to have ushered in a kind of new morality according to which the time-honoured virtues of timidity, submissiveness, chastity, and dependence on men are to be thrown overboard. The reminiscences of Kamala Das’s childhood at Nalapat House, her family home, are tinged with nostalgia, as found in ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’ and ‘My Grandmother’s House’. She writes, ‘From every city I have lived I have remembered the noons in Malabar with an ache growing, inside me, a homesickness.’

SAQ:

Analyse the idea of candour and revolt in Kamala Das’ poetry. How important is ‘context’ in this case? (80+70 words)

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3.5 Critical Reception:

Kamala Das won sudden recognition in 1965, and with her third volume, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), which included her earlier work also, she has tried to build on her reputation as a strong feminist in Indian poetry in English. Critics like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar compare her ‘confessional poetry with that of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Judith Wright. Works like ‘Composition’ are a sustained exercise in self-exposure. But Iyengar agrees with Vimla Rao, when she says ‘Kamala Das finally appears to be a poet of decadence ... a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing to gain control even over her art’.

Her autobiographical 'My Story' has stimulated interest in the poet in her. M. Elias wishes to bring to the fore her Malabar antecedents and concludes that when Kamala Das speaks, it is 'rather the Nair maiden unburdening her collective nightmare.' But there are lines of poetry written by Das that transcend all kinds of monotonous self-exhibitionism, and the deadening sex and sensuality as found in the following lines:

"I also know that by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul ..."

M.K. Naik says that the most colourful feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat beneath the breasts', 'the warm shock of menstrual blood', and even 'my pubis'. But these are not wanton expressions of a nymphomaniac. The persona in Kamala Das's poems is merely 'every woman who seeks love'. She may 'flaunt a grand, flamboyant lust', but basically she remains the eternal Eve, proudly celebrating her essential femininity. Eunice de Souza lauds the honesty in the writings of Kamala Das. She is also impressed by a control of form and the disciplined expression of painful emotions. However, her poetry is often seen to get out of control due to callous editing. Das's main problem is not to know when to stop. So, often the cumulative impression of strong feelings results in a whine. Devendra Kohli wishes to draw the reader's attention to compulsions to articulate and understand the workings of the feminine consciousness as in 'The Music Party', 'Jaisurya' and 'Afterwards'.

Often the poems of Das offer a version of the *carpe diem* theme, a seizing the day both in awareness of the passing of time and youth, and in a need to live intensely. If many poems speak of unhappiness and the desire for an all-absorbing love, others are filled with Das's discovery of the life around her on the streets and in bedrooms. The interest of Das's poetry is not the story of sex outside of marriage but the instability of her feelings, the way they rapidly shift and assume new postures,

new attitudes of defence, attack, explanation or celebration. Another very significant factor in Das's idea of 'feminism' is that it is her husband who must comfort her from rejection by another man : as seen in 'An Apology to Goutama'. In 'I Shall Some Day', one reads of her own fear of the attraction to domestic comforts and her fear of freedom:

"I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea."

Das brings a sense of locality to her poems. Although Ezekiel refers to his environment, Das draws on more concrete and defined situations like bedrooms, restaurants, and streets in which she meets her paramours, the rides in cars, the people she meets visits and observes. The most significant achievement of Kamala Das however, is her introduction of 'Indian' English. This unshackles the Indian writers from the language of the colonizers, creating a literature based on local speech. This essentially brings to the fore a new voice, tone, idiom and rhythm to translate what the writer feels with an immediacy as yet unknown.

SAQ:

How important is the reference to gender in reading Kamala Das's poetry? In what way does 'gender' define the context of her poetry?
(70+70 words)

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3.6 Reading Two Poems:

3.6.1 "My Grandmother's House"

'My Grandmother's House' refers to the family home in Kerala where she spent her childhood. A poem that recalls the happy childhood days of the poem, it is a poignant pointer to the poet's painful present devoid of true love. It also conveys the sense of rootless ness and alienation that Das experiences when uprooted from her grandmother's home. A desperate need to satisfy her love-lorn state makes her almost cringe

before strange men, seeking love, even if it is just a little bit of it. But to her utter chagrin, all she receives is callousness, which makes Das dejected, and in a bizarre way, renew her quest for true love once again : ‘I who have lost / My way and beg now at Strangers’ doors to Receive love, at least in small change’.

‘Love’ or the quest for ‘true love’ is the dominant theme in the poem, ‘My Grandmother’s House’ as in most other ‘confessional’ poems of Das. Failure in the search for true love in her married life suffocates the poet. She is now a broken woman, sad, devastated and terribly lonely. But she has not always been the same. She had a warm rich and happy past in the house of her grandmother:

“There is a house now far away where once
I received love”(Lines: 1-2)

We see ‘Love’ in more than the romantic sense it is a synonym for human affection and security. So, closely associated with the theme of ‘love’ is that of ‘rootlessness’ and acute sense of alienation. The kind of freedom that Das’s husband offers to her as a writer shocks her. In “I Study All Men I Had To” Das writes “Last week the editor of a Kerala Weekly, a well-known capitalist, offered in return for any autobiography, a month’s holiday at the most expensive hotel ... I was thrilled. My husband said: why not take ‘K’ along with you as a diversion? You seem to find him attractive. After working hard, I shall not grudge you a bit of relaxation. This is what I mean by friendship. It is hard to find a friend as good as my husband.’ The irony of the situation is clear and indeed tragic. So, Das imbued with a flux of feminine sensibility revolts at this insensitive attitude of her husband and all other men, and takes on a strong feminist stand. She revolts against all kinds of male domination. As she defies male chauvinism, she also celebrates the body, her sexuality. Hence, suggestions of private moments ‘... lie / Behind my bedroom door like a Dog ...’ show her brooding candour in her treatment of love.

Even as Kamala Das speaks in a non-chalant, uncaring tone about her various acts of physical relationships, one cannot ignore the sad and poignant cry for a fuller and more serene kind of love in her poem.

“... you cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved”

One certainly does not miss the heart-rending voice that speaks of lost values from a lost world, one which had once been so dear to Das.

Kamala Das is said to be a ‘natural’ poet. Hence, there is nothing very planned, calculated nor artistic in her style. However, one cannot ignore the imaginative use of ‘diction’ in her poetry nor the easy, flexible rhythm which lends variety and control to her poetry. Also, the use of images is lively, original and realistic. In ‘My Grandmother’s House’, ‘house’ is a dominant image, running through the poem as a firm leitmotif. It symbolizes love, security, sanctity and an identity for the self.

According to Bruce King, Das’s most remarkable achievement is writing in an Indian English: “Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Idealization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech; and this is especially important for women writers. Such a development is not a matter of national pride or linguistic equivalent of ‘local colour’; rather it is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what the writer feels or is trying to say instead of it being filtered through speech meant to reflect the assumptions and nuances of another society.

As soon as ‘that woman’ (her grandmother) died ‘The house withdrew into silence’, The simple lucid narration has a quiet poetic intensity. The apprehension roused at ‘death’ and ‘decay’ is projected through the image of cold ‘snakes’ slithering around the dark lifeless house. The

ideas of snakes moving ‘Among books I (Das) was too young to read’ is a painful as it is poignant. For, Kamala Das, perhaps fantasizes about other loving, rich and more fulfilling treasures like the ‘books’ in the house, and rues the fact that she had to lose them all before she could even relish them. The two lines emphasize the painful longing of the poet for her grandmother and the house with all that it embodies. So, after her grandmother’s death, she felt like an orphan – and so became cold and aloof. The simile of ‘coldness’ as embodied in the moon, in contrast to the childhood full of pride and love, emphasizes the decline into darkness already realized in the metaphor of a house falling into decay. The decay of the present is the cause of the poet’s nostalgia. The distance between the past and present is comparable to that between earth and moon.

Critics have expressed a distaste for the simile of a ‘brooding Dog’ even as they have lauded ‘an armful of Darkness’. They have opined that Das has degenerated into ‘bathos’ in her use of the simile. The metaphor of the subhuman species, ‘Dog’ enters a note of shock, and shocking change. We soon realize that it is meant to formulate her present state of lonely submission. Her life with her husband was reduced to that of a dog, so demeaning it seemed to her. The metaphor of ‘small change’ in ‘... I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to Receive love, at least in small change?’ reinforces the completely degraded ‘self’ that Kamala Das’s married life has reduced her too. In such a plight ‘an armful of Darkness ...’ of her grandmother’s house can perhaps be her only succour and sustain her in her sordid existence in which, as she says in ‘The Freaks’ : ‘Its only to save my face, I flaunt, at times, a grand, flamboyant lust.’

By juxtaposing the two utterances in the two poems of Kamala Das’, we can read the sexuality in her poetry. Bruce King emphasizes that the “interest of Das’ poetry is not the story of sex outside of marriage but the instability of her feelings, the way they rapidly shift and assume new postures, new attitudes of defense, attack, explanation or celebration. Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in feelings of love;

they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self-dramatisation and feelings of shame and depression.”

“My Grandmother’s House” is dramatic like the dramatic monologue. The conversational tone, the concrete images, the narrative tone, the ‘invisible’ second person (the husband here) whose presence is so pregnant throughout, help to exact a forceful and poignant drama. ‘...you cannot believe, darling, Can you, that I lived in such a house, and was proud ...’ The heavy sarcasm, the cold irony in the highly dramatic utterance serves Das to give vent to her acutely disturbed mind in a very effective way. Thus, in ‘My Grandmother’s House’ the poet has effectively cast her psychological trauma at the loss of her childhood innocence with the stark reality of marriage and adulthood.

3.6.2 “A Hot Noon At Malabar”

“A Hot Noon at Malabar” captures a mood of warm lassitude in the poet. There seems to be a sense of quiet indolence, of reflection and a deep longing to relive a world lost in time.

The poet reminisces about her youthful experiences in the house of her family. A pageant of fascinating scenes flashes upon her mind’s eye. It is a hot afternoon in Malabar. The poet remembers the beggars coming up to the house, crying for alms. Then come the men from the hills carrying caged parrots to sell and the old dirty fortune cards which they use to forecast the future. Kamala Das remembers the ‘Kurava’ girls with their deep looks reading the palms with soft musical voices. The bangle-sellers are fascinating as they spread their colourful wares on the cool, black floor. They are all from a mysterious, altogether different world. The dust on their feet bear testimony to the distance they covered to reach Malabar. The poet almost hears the grating sounds of their feet as they clamber up the porch, so different were they. They are strangers

in the world of Kamala Das and her family in Malabar. They peer curiously into their cool, ordered lives, into the 'shadowy rooms', towards the 'well', uncertain of their reception. Then there are the wild suspicious lot, who live life recklessly, wildly – their voices wild, untamed, 'like jungle-voices'. Das remembers the pantheon of mysterious and mystifying folks invading her afternoons and stirring her wildest fantasies. A wild abandon consumes her. But those moments hold no sense of guilt or regret. They were glorifying, happy and wild. Kamala Das longs to revel in the past experiences she enjoyed in her grandmother's house. But she is elsewhere, sad, lonely and quite unconnected- "To/Be here, far away, is torture."

The heady romance for Kamala Das of the colourful and wild group of people from the hills is fascinating. The romance associated with the hills is a contrast brought out in the last lines (Lines 22-24): "Wild feet/ stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my/Home in Malabar, and I so far away." In her adulthood, Das encounters different men. They invade her privacy. But they cannot hold her fancy for long, leaving her with distaste. She is unfulfilled and lonely. The wild folks of the hills however, continue to fascinate and beckon her for years. Das rues the fact that she is so far removed from the fairyland of her childhood.

The theme of alienation, loneliness and nostalgia for a happy childhood is thus once again dominant in 'A Hot Noon at Malabar'. The narration becomes a collage of vibrant childhood fantasies. As Das recalls the people, one by one, the lethargic afternoon comes to life, filling Das with fancies of every timber and hue. At the same time it projects her agonizing married life by contrast.

The uninhibited sexuality that Das writes about with such candour is apparently absent in the poem. But to a keen reader, the projection of 'the physical' (albeit in a more mature fashion) is clearly evident in, 'A Hot Noon at Malabar'. The different groups of wild men from the hills invade the privacy of young Kamala on a hot afternoon.

“Yes, this is
A noon for wild men, wild
thoughts, wild love.”

The ‘local’ setting fills out the language with an almost exotic quality. So, words like ‘Kurava’ and ‘bangles’ are easily assimilated into the body of the poem. Besides, the pictures that Das conjures up of ‘whining beggars’, men with caged parrots, the fortune-tellers and gypsy girls, the bangle-sellers, strange unkempt wild men are very Indian in a south Indian ambience of Malabar

The Lines

“..... all covered with the dust of roads,
For all of them, whose feet, devouring rough
Miles, grow cracks on the heels”. (Lines: 8-10)

highlight the strangeness of the figures, but also their rough homeliness. As the poet proceeds, one finds her talking of ‘their hot, eyes/ Brimming with the sun’. Their eyes, dark, silent ones ...’ Here, the eye for detail of the poet is noted. Then Das uses the very apt simile of ‘jungle-voices’ to describe the wild voices of the men. The repetition of the word ‘wild’ towards the end of the poem reiterates the unreal, rather surreal fantasies that take hold of the poet in the afternoons similar to the afternoons of Malabar which she gives expression to, with the pageant of the different groups of wild men from the hills.

The structure and rhythm of the poem is in keeping with its mood. The prolonged narrative stance, punctuated with a leisurely rhythm creates an indolent mood of fanciful imagination. It is an apt vein to relive the happy memories of Malabar. It is also the right frame to embrace a need to unfurl inner urges dormant in the mind of the poet. The concluding line without a full stop, ‘wild feet stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my home in Malabar, and I so far away ...’ suggests the happy possibilities that await Das at Malabar, but which are all denied in her married life away from home.

Check Your Progress:

1. Assess the significance of the 'feminine sensibility' displayed in the poems of Kamala Das. Discuss the strategies by which it is projected.
2. Highlight and discuss the sense of alienation that Kamala Das constructs in her poems.
3. Discuss the thematic significance of 'My Grandmother's House' and 'A Hot Noon at Malabar' in terms of both 'Indianness' and the 'Feminine'.
4. Attempt a comparison of Daruwalla's and Kamala Das' poems in terms of their ironical probing into the fabric of contemporary Indian society.

3.7 Summing Up:

Kamala Das is one of the most original Indian poets writing in English. Hers is a fiercely feminine sensibility that stops at nothing to speak of her thwarted feelings with courage and candour in an insensitive man centered world. Intense and involved, Das reveals a mastery of phrase and a control over rhythm which is admirable. Words flow uncontrolled wielding a resonance of meanings which adds to the feverish poetic intensity in Das. Her introspective style recalls that to Nissim Ezekiel's. Sometimes, however, Kamala Das's obsession with her 'self', including her longings, yearnings, disappointments become unrelieved and stifling so that her poetry tends to degenerate into maudlin bathos. Yet, one cannot deny the fact that Kamala Das 'mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms'.

In this unit, an attempt has been made to apprise you of the essence of Das's poetry through the two prescribed poems. Through a structuring of the life, the works, the influences, the study of critical reactions, and an assessment of the themes and styles of Das in her poems, we have tried to present the artistic genius of Kamala Das for your understanding and appreciation.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 4

KAMALA DAS: MY STORY

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 An Overview of “My Story”
- 4.4 Summing Up
- 4.5 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

This is the fourth unit of Block III. The aim here is to provide you with a general introduction to Kamala Das and her work. An attempt has also been made here to acquaint you with “My Story”, the autobiography of Das prescribed for study in your syllabus .

After finishing the unit you will be able to

- *acquaint* yourself with the author’s life and background,
- *gain* a comprehensive knowledge of the author’s personal life,
- *provide* an overview of the diverse thoughts and ideas within the text,
- *understand* the struggles she has overcome in her personal and professional life to establish herself as a prominent writer.

4.2 Introduction:

Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surayya or Madhavikutty, was a highly acclaimed writer in Indian English literature. She used the name Madhavi Kutty when writing in Malayalam and Kamala Das when writing in English. She was born on March 31, 1934, in Punnayurkulam, Malabar District of British India, now part of Thrissur District in Kerala, India. Her father, V. M. Nair, was a managing editor of the famous Malayalam newspaper Mathrubhumi, and her mother, Nalapat Balamani

Amma, was a well-known Malayali poet. Kamala Das was a unique blend of both her parents' influences.

Kamala Das was a notable feminist figure in the postcolonial period who expressed herself in Malayalam and English. She is famous for her candid and unapologetic exploration of female love, relationships, and sexuality, breaking free from the constraints of societal norms and traditions. Kamala Das is often called the 'Mother of modern Indian English poetry' because she portrayed a wide range of emotions and experiences in her writing, drawing from her practical, social, political, and emotional life, all while deeply influenced by Keralite culture and tradition.

She was born into a wealthy but traditional family. Even though she had material comforts, she felt lonely and longed for genuine relationships. Her parents married her off at a young age, hoping marriage would make her happier. At just 15, she got married, hoping to find love and companionship, but she still felt unfulfilled emotionally, even in her marriage.

"My Story" was originally written in Malayalam as "Ente Katha." It was serialized in "The Current Weekly" of Bombay from January to December 1974 before being subsequently released as a book in 1976. This book has since been translated and published in 15 different languages. It reflects her personal life and experiences, making it a significant contribution to Indian literature.

In 1976, when Kamala Das was in her fifties, she published "My Story" as her autobiography. This book has fifty short chapters with titles meant to make readers feel sympathy and engage emotionally with her story. These chapter titles are carefully chosen to create curiosity and wonder. Instead of telling her life story in a strict chronological order, Kamala Das organized it in a way that felt more like poetry and art without following a strict timeline.

Her autobiography is a detailed and lively account of the most critical and difficult moments that have significantly shaped her life. She carefully

describes the tough times she's been through, giving readers a complete understanding of the tricky things she's faced. She tells her story in a personal way, which makes her experiences more interesting.

Apart from discussing how Western culture affected Indian society and how moral values changed, the autobiography also shows how she dealt with personal challenges. These challenges occurred because of the beliefs of her time, which mostly favoured men. Her book isn't just a feminist critique; it's also a story about a female writer who went from feeling not good enough and subservient to becoming a confident and strong individual and, ultimately, a celebrated artist.

Kamala Das used her writing skills to share her deep feelings and the difficulties she faced in a society that often mistreated women. She opened up her heart and soul without fear in her writings, not caring much about what critics or society thought. She positively accepted all the harsh criticism.

The tough times she faced turned her into a rebel, always ready to stand up to anyone who questioned her beliefs or the truth of her experiences. Kamala Das' life is a strong example of a woman who went against society's usual expectations and expressed her true self through her writings. She challenged the unfairness and biases of her time. Her legacy still reminds us of how literature can shed light on the struggles and strength of women in a male-dominated society.

Stop to Consider:

Kamala Das first told her story in a Malayalam journal, which was then translated and shared in English weekly publications. It's an interesting piece of work because it was presented as an open autobiography but deliberately made to look like a fantasy. This way of writing upset some people, especially those who like things to be traditional and ordinary.

In 1976, Kamala Das's "My Story" was a groundbreaking work because it fearlessly discussed women's romantic feelings and sexual

desires; no one ever wrote in this fashion in Indian women's literature.

Kamala Das was brave and honest in showing what women felt.

Her open and straightforward approach to women's sexuality was quite a big deal, especially in Kerala, where people had more conservative ideas about these things. Her book challenged society's traditional views and norms, and few would be comfortable with that level of openness. But it was a significant step towards breaking down those barriers.

As her story continued to be published, Kamala Das realised that her readers were getting the wrong idea about her. She admitted that she had accidentally created a false image of herself through her writing. Towards the end of the series, she made it clear that she understood this.

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4.3 An Overview of “My Story”

"My Story" is an autobiographical work authored by the renowned Indian writer and poet Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surayya or Madhavikutty. Initially published in Malayalam under the title "Ente Katha," the book provoked sharp and diverse reactions from readers

and critics. This autobiography is presented in a chronological and linear narrative style, adhering to a realist approach. In "My Story," Das shares her experiences, including the challenges of her marriage and her profound self-discovery as both a woman and a writer.

In her autobiography "My Story," Kamala Das shares her life story honestly, starting from her childhood and going all the way to her later years. In this personal tale, she opens up about her innermost feelings and thoughts, giving a genuine and unpolished view of life in Indian society.

Stop to Consider

The book is structured like a novel, with a well-defined plot and a storytelling style. Despite being labelled an autobiography, Kamala Das later acknowledged that she wove elements of fiction into the narrative. This work blurs the lines between fact and fiction, making it a unique and controversial piece of literature that has left a lasting impact on Indian literature. The book has caused a lot of controversy because it has provoked strong reactions from its readers and critics regarding how it portrays relationships, which some people admire while others criticize. In the context of Indian culture, the more traditional readers in Kerala were shocked when they read it and labelled it as immoral. They even tried to prevent their sisters or daughters from reading it because it contained intense and disturbing emotions. It's important to note that this book became the best-selling autobiography by an Indian English writer in the history of Indian English literature when it was published. There was also controversy surrounding its publication, as some family members did not want it published, but Kamala Das was determined to publish it at any rate. Nevertheless, it has remained a highly popular and successful woman's autobiography in India.

"My Story" offers a candid and reflective exploration of Kamala Das's life, capturing her emotional journey, the highs and lows of her marriage, and her transformation as a woman and an artist. She shares her experiences of childhood, marriage, and self-discovery. She reflects on

her early innocence, adolescence, and evolution into a mature and philosophical writer.

The book is divided into fifty chapters that discuss different parts of her life. She talks about her experiences as a common girl, wife, and mature woman. These chapters provide insight into the diverse phases of her life, each of which can resonate with the different sensibilities of women in India.

In these fifty chapters, Kamala Das talks about her life very openly and honestly. She tells us about how she faced racial discrimination, her complicated relationship with her husband, her experiences of being harassed, and how she discovered more about herself. Kamala Das also writes about her career as a writer, her affairs outside of her marriage, having children, and how she gradually learned to accept her husband. She also delves into writing about sexual openness and various other aspects of her life. The book focuses on the political and social upheavals that characterized the pre- or post-independence era in India and the author's journey and struggles. It explores her personal growth, relationships, literary career, and quest for self-identity, all set against the backdrop of the changing times in colonial India. Kamala Das authentically and openly discusses her life without getting too much into that time's significant political and social changes. Kamala Das experienced the most joyful moments of her childhood and life in her hometown in Malabar, particularly in the Nalapat house. Her frequent travels between the bustling city of Calcutta and the peaceful Nalapat house are recurring themes in "My Story." These journeys highlight the rapid and dramatic changes and personal growth she underwent at these two locations. Calcutta made her feel unwelcome and inferior, while Nalapat offered her a sense of security and confidence, not only in her childhood but even after her troubled marriage. It appears that Das deliberately used the motif of these journeys to underscore the significant transformations occurring in her personality. These journeys comprise a substantial part of her narrative and involve a quest for her identity, filled with contradictions, moments of happiness, and sorrow.

The autobiography's first four chapters recount the author's childhood memories. Kamala Das's family originally hailed from the southern part of Malabar, Kerala, but she spent her early childhood in Calcutta. Her father worked for a British automobile company, while her mother was a well-known Malayali poet. In "My Story," there is an apparent tension between colonialism and anti-colonialism, which is exemplified through the father's adoption of British ways of life and his insensitivity towards his wife's cultural traditions and sentiments. The father's preference for using a knife and fork while eating, a practice associated with British culture, highlights his assimilation into colonial influences. This choice represents his desire to conform to British standards and distance himself from his Indian heritage.

Moreover, the father's demand that his wife strip herself of all jewellery and wear white khaddar, a simple, unadorned Indian fabric, manifests his strong commitment to adopting British customs and distancing himself from traditional Indian customs. This action reflects the father's willingness to suppress his wife's individuality and cultural identity in favour of conforming to colonial norms. The father's insensitivity to his wife's sentiments is evident in his authoritarian command. By dictating how his wife should dress and what she should wear, he shows little regard for her feelings and cultural attachments.

The first chapter of the autobiography, titled "Rule Britannia", delves into her childhood experiences, shedding light on her experiences of facing racial discrimination when India was under British colonial rule. She attended a convent school run by a British man named Mr. Ross. During her time at the school, Das was subjected to hurtful comments and discrimination. She was often called names like "Blackie," which was a derogatory term based on her skin colour. This racism was deeply hurtful to her, and it made her very angry.

Despite the discrimination she faced, Das was a talented scholar. She had a remarkable ability to write poetry, but her talent was never acknowledged by her school's British students and teachers.

Furthermore, Das' parents did not treat her kindly. They would yell at her, and this created fear among the children. This fear of their parents led them to hide in their bedroom whenever they felt threatened.

As a young girl, Das was acutely aware of the conservative values upheld by her South Indian family. Her early education, primarily conducted at home, played a significant role in shaping her closed mindset, making it challenging for her to break free from these confines. Throughout her upbringing, her thoughts were largely confined within the boundaries of her own femininity. Interestingly, the depiction of her childhood is more influenced by the societal, political, and national context of the time rather than focusing primarily on her personal or individual self-perception.

Upon entering a European school, Das found herself suffocated by the prevailing awareness of race and colour among the children. She frequently witnessed instances of injustice and discrimination that she found difficult to tolerate. The preferential treatment given to white children by teachers and guests infuriated and frustrated her. Das talked about her childhood and focused a lot on how she was mistreated because of her race.

In her autobiography, she recounts the significant impact her grandmother had on her life, mainly through the event of her grandmother's death, representing a common experience among girls and women in need of emotional support when they are separated from their mothers or other family members. Kamala, in particular, found this support in her grandmother.

Kamala's grandmother, Valiamma, had endured the loss of her first husband due to her uncle's anger. She remarried within a week, but her second husband, her father's nephew, was not as considerate or gentle as her first husband. The Nairs, especially the males, could be rough when angered. They often disregarded the women's feelings and decided according to their whims and desires. Kamala's grandmother's house was the source of immense joy for her during her childhood. As she

grew older, she consistently longed for the affection and comfort she experienced in that place and conveyed her nostalgic yearning in her writings. Her recollections of her past in Malabar and her grandmother's house reflect the deep sense of emptiness she experienced after departing from it.

Das was growing up and being closely watched over her behaviour. Her family had strict moral standards. It's interesting that even though her grand-uncle wrote a book about sex, her family never openly talked about it, especially among the women. The family environment was not congenial for the growth of young girls. She noticed that women in her family mainly were expected to follow tradition and often had to listen to men. Even though women led her family, she realized that women faced challenges similar to those faced in societies where men have more power. Sex was such a taboo and feared subject within her family that it was actively disliked and avoided.

As Das reflects on her past life from a mature perspective, she does so with a sense of distance. During her teenage years, she spent most of her pre-adolescent time away from home, attending various boarding schools that had both Anglicized and Indian influences. Her first boarding school experience was at an institution run by Roman Catholic Nuns. In this environment, the girls were subjected to strict, puritanical rules, and they had to conform to these regulations. She goes into great detail about this school's daily routine and its profound impact on her. She also fondly recalls the close friendships she formed during this period, highlighting her significant experiences with her friends. Das's closest companion from her early childhood was her brother. As young children, Kamala Das and her brother, along with the help and cooperation of their friends, initiated a theatre movement called the Vannery Children's Dramatic Society. They performed their plays on the multi-level patio of the Nalapat House, renting colourful curtains, costumes, and stagehands from the nearest town. The village lacked electricity then, so the street lights were hurricane lamps covered with various coloured cellophane, depending on the occasion.

Their first play was a Malayalam adaptation of a chapter from Victor Hugo's renowned work, 'Les Misérables.' This chapter depicts Jean Valjean's visit to the house of Temardierre to meet the young orphan Cossette. Their group managed to move the stern-hearted elders in the front row to tears with their performance. Kamala Das's most remarkable role was that of the Mughal queen Noor Jehan. If she ever had a childhood hero, her brother consistently excelled in his studies.

She cherished the unique and meaningful bond she shared with her brother, which was characterized by silent yet pure communication. This relationship provided significant emotional support to both of them. Their relationship was exceptionally strong, marked by their playful activities, daily routines, games, and even studies. Their connection was characterized by simplicity and a profound mutual understanding. She valued her relationship with her brother more than any other family connection. She thought it was the most fundamental. This bond was very special to her and impacted her life and how she saw the world. This closeness had a profound impact on her, influencing her to adopt a liberal mindset and nurturing her rebellious spirit in future.

As Das got older, she became very aware of her appearance, especially her skin colour and how she felt about her body. Unfortunately, her family often said mean things about her skin colour, which made her feel self-conscious about how she looked. Her immediate environment was filled with individuals who significantly emphasized a young girl's physical attractiveness. This environment only served to increase her fixation on how others viewed her. Her deep concern for societal opinions and her strong yearning to be seen in a favourable light by the general public became persistent subjects in both her writings and her conduct throughout her life. Her path was characterized by a profound sensitivity to the way others judged her, and this sensitivity had a substantial impact on the formation of her identity and her life experiences.

During her early years, she often felt insecure because she didn't receive enough love and attention from her parents. They were busy with their own social activities. The lack of attention and love from those around

her deeply affected her. Her search for love is intertwined with her physical need for human connection. As a teenager, she tried to satisfy her fleeting feelings of love through a young boy named Velu and an outlaw in her class named Govinda Kurup, whose arrogance and mischievousness she found admirable. When she was young, she tried to love a student leader who had been put in jail for being part of revolutionary activities. Sadly, her attempts to make him love her back didn't work because he was only interested in politics and didn't feel the same about her. As Kamala got older, she figured out that the reason she failed in her romantic pursuit was because she thought she looked too plain. So, she decided to change her appearance to be more attractive. During her teenage years, she developed an instinctual pursuit of love. Das's father hired a young Bengali art tutor, marking her first interaction with a man. She was attracted to him and found herself fascinated by his pink earlobes. To capture his attention, she started wearing a sari to her tutoring sessions due to her infatuation. Her parents noticed this change in her appearance and decided to discontinue her classes. This separation left her heartbroken and deeply affected, and she eventually decided to visit the man at his workplace. However, her depression and sorrow only intensified when he didn't make any romantic advances.

Stop to Consider

Kamala Das was known for being very real and honest. She didn't pretend to be someone she wasn't or hide her true feelings. She believed in being truthful and didn't care much about what society expected from her. She openly shared her life story, from her teenage years to adulthood, without holding anything back. Kamala faced societal pressures that made it difficult for her to express herself freely. Love and protest were essential parts of her life. As a way of protesting, she often fell in love to break free from the restrictions placed on her, like her identity, safety, and religious beliefs.

Kamala had a strong desire to speak up and express her concerns. This desire started when she felt ignored as a child and continued as she

realized the impact of her parents and what society expected of her. She is transparent in her desires and follows her heart, regardless of social, cultural, or moral norms. She is so true to herself that she doesn't care about the scandalous reactions of her Indian readers. She breaks linguistic taboos by describing the female body in unusual ways, shocking conventional Indian minds. In her writing, she violently breaks the trap of patriarchal traditions.

Self-Assessment Questions

- Give a detailed account of Kamala Das's early life and family background? (350 words)

.....
.....
.....

- How did Kamala Das's early childhood and upbringing shape her identity and worldview? (350 words)

.....
.....
.....

Her family persistently saw her as a burden. Neither her parents nor grandmother could endure her presence for an extended period. At fifteen, Kamala Das found herself in a situation familiar to many Indian women. She was deeply unhappy with her marriage. Others made all the decisions regarding her marriage, and she was not even consulted on the matter. She was dissatisfied with how they arranged such a significant event as her marriage without even considering her thoughts and aspirations.. Her marriage fails to provide her with relief from her loneliness. She expected nothing more from her spouse than companionship, conversation, and warmth. However, what she experienced in her marriage was cruelty and rudeness. Remembering her initial sexual encounter in her married life, she recounts her husband's first attempt to have intercourse with her as an unsuccessful rape. She felt that her husband didn't truly love her; instead, he had

married her only to improve his social and financial status. She was only an object of his sexual gratification for her husband.. She suffered through her husband's selfish actions and his neglect of her emotional and physical well-being.

Kamala Das juggled her roles as a creative writer and her duties as a daughter, wife, and mother. This constant shifting between these roles led to a fractured sense of self and a divided existence for the poet.

When Kamala Das was expecting her first child, her husband decided to send her to her grandmother's place, Nalapat, due to his frustration with her difficult temperament, despite her harbouring resentment towards him for physically abusing her. Kamala Das was reluctant to leave her husband and give birth at her grandmother's house. She describes the experience of childbirth as a crucial part of her story, possibly one of the earliest instances in Indian women's autobiographies where the process of giving birth is portrayed as a pivotal milestone in a woman's life.

In Kamala Das's family, childbirth usually occurred at home and held cultural significance. However, giving birth at home carried risks and health hazards, with many women, if they survived childbirth, being susceptible to postpartum fever and other illnesses. Kamala Das herself faced such health issues but was fortunate to receive care from her grandmother during her recovery at Nalapat.

When she was just 19 years old, she experienced a nervous breakdown because she felt like a neglected wife. In Chapter 25, Kamala is struggling with the disintegration of her marriage, feeling trapped within it, and coping with her son's illness. Additionally, she has to accept her husband's choice of a homosexual relationship over her. These immense challenges lead her to a point where she considers the possibility of ending her life while standing on the balcony. She was also told to stay in a closed room with only a little sunlight through a window. It made her very sick, and she had to go to Malabar, where her grandmother's love and care helped her recover. She fondly recalls her grandmother's house as where she felt comfortable and loved.

Das decides to pursue writing as an alternative to taking her own life, choosing self-expression over self-destruction. Her husband, understanding the importance of increasing their family's income, supports her writing decision. However, society at the time did not readily accept women as writers. Women were expected to focus on domestic roles, primarily in the kitchen, and they had to prove themselves as good wives and mothers before pursuing other endeavours. Due to these societal expectations, Das could only write during the day. Instead, she had to wait until night when her family was asleep, and she would write through the night until morning. Das also faced financial hardships. However, when she began earning money from her published works, she used her earnings to purchase books instead of indulging in worldly possessions. Nevertheless, she shared her sorrow about having only one saree to wear when attending parties.

In the subsequent parts of her autobiography, Kamala Das reveals her experiences with extramarital relationships, sexual encounters, and a growing need for spiritual solace. Following her emotional breakdown and the loss of her grandmother, Kamala undergoes a profound transformation. She shifts from being a passive recipient of her husband's actions to a woman who actively explores her sexual desires. Kamala Das felt insecure and disconnected, partly because of her own desires and ideas and partly due to her incompatible marriage. It made her seek love outside of her home. Her search for love led to various challenges. She was sincere and unapologetic about her extramarital affairs. She didn't let traditional expectations for women restrict her and transcended her role as a wife and mother to be true to herself. Das sees love as a remedy for universal problems, describing it as a pleasant cure for human suffering. Love, in the author's perspective, forms the fundamental support that upholds the entire world and keeps life in motion. Kamala Das openly discusses her relationships with men and women within and outside of marriage. These relationships were often fraught with tension and dissatisfaction. Even in her pursuit of pure love, she faced disappointments with each lover she encountered.

Once, she attempted to entrap a young bricklayer working on constructing a modern house for her father, but her plan didn't succeed. She also permitted one of her cousins to embrace her warmly and kiss her for a moment. She describes her attraction to a mature, dark-skinned man she encountered at the airport. She recounts an incident in which a guest from Bombay invited her to his hostel room for breakfast. During their interaction, she noticed that the man's hand initially brushed against her thigh, and she assumed it was accidental. Das also describes a traumatic incident as a rape scene in her autobiography. One night, when she was alone, her elderly caretaker, the Ayah, allowed a drunken stranger to enter her room, leading to an attempted sexual assault in the darkness. The stranger approached her in the night, and as he drew closer, she felt her body go rigid, overwhelmed with nausea. After an unsuccessful attempt at rape, he eventually rolled off her body and lay motionless at the foot of the bed. Later, a handsome young man came into her life, and she fell in love with him. An Italian friend also offered to take her away, but she remained confined to domestic life. She also discusses the homosexual relationship and her encounter with it. She fearlessly recounts her initial experience of sharing a kiss with the girl she encountered in Malabar before her marriage. She also had a strong attraction or admiration for Dr. Mrs. Pankajam Karunakaram. When she was in her nursing home for her treatment, Das talks about her love affairs as a powerful way of standing up against the parts of relationships and life experiences that she never wanted.

Self-Assessment Questions

How did Kamala Das's relationship with her family, especially her grandmother, influence her understanding of love and affection?
(about 400 words)

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- In what ways did her experiences in boarding schools and her relationship with her brother contribute to her rebellious mindset and liberal views? (about 400 words)

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- How did Kamala Das's insecurities about her appearance affect her self-esteem and relationships, and how did societal beauty standards play a role in this? (about 400 words)

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- What were the circumstances that led to her troubled marriage and subsequent nervous breakdown? How did she cope with these challenges? (about 400 words)

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- How does Kamala Das use her writing as a means of self-expression and liberation, and what is the significance of her unapologetic approach? (about 400 words)

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There is a notable evolution in her experience of love. Initially, her concept of love is centred on physical and materialistic aspects, but it later evolves into a more profound and mystical form of love. She sees Lord Krishna as the ultimate symbol of the ideal lover, and she frequently envisions herself as Radha, deeply devoted to him. In the overarching narrative of self-discovery and personal struggle, her union with Krishna is portrayed as a redemptive and transformative conclusion in her poetry and autobiography. After enduring the pain and disillusionment of human relationships, the poetic persona ultimately enters into a mystical connection with Krishna.

"My Story" delves into the author's inner self and sheds light on a male-dominated society where being a woman is considered a sin. Women in this society are destined to endure tyranny, exploitation, and mistreatment by men. The book vividly portrays the harsh reality of women's lives in our society and highlights the injustices they face. It serves as a collection of the author's struggles as both a woman and a writer. In our culture, even if a woman attempts to break free from traditional norms, she often faces resistance and criticism. Kamala Das encountered numerous challenges due to societal conventions, but she demonstrated that women like her could overcome these obstacles and establish their identities.

Kamala Das is a woman with a strong and fiercely independent spirit. She lives life on her own terms without any regrets or apologies. She is a courageous writer who was ahead of her time and has earned a remarkable place in literature.

Although she had concerns and doubts about her husband, she expressed the happiness she experienced in raising her children, engaging with them, and being a loving mother.

As a mother, she takes pride in her son's ability to provide support and emotional availability, qualities her husband lacks. She went on to mention that she has raised a son who is not influenced by toxic masculinity.

Her childhood experiences in the Nalappat house played a significant role in shaping her literary career. The loyalty and affection she received from servants of various castes, witnessing traditional Nair weddings, listening to stories from her grandmother, and the natural surroundings of Nalapat house, including trees and flowers, all contributed to her creative inspiration. She also drew from the observations of eunuchs dancing in the streets, religious beliefs, the struggles of marginalized women, and the portrayal of clever women who could captivate any man.

In the end, Kamala Das found herself facing the realities of life. Her journey into her past reflects a transition from ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, and youth to maturity. Kamala's deep desire for true love, an ideal partner, and a pure, harmonious relationship

remained unfulfilled. Instead, it led her through various stages of what she calls her "endless female hungers."

Self-Assessment Questions

Q.1. How does Kamala Das discuss her experiences with marriage and relationships in her autobiography? (350 words)

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Q.2. What significant issues does Kamala Das address in her autobiography? (350 words)

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4.4 Summing Up:

In this unit, we have delved into the narrative of "My Story," an autobiographical work by Kamala Das. This book comprises fifty chapters that revolve around her personal life experiences. She explores various aspects of her life, including her challenging childhood marked by racial prejudice, her complex marriage, and her evolution as a woman and a writer. Kamala Das's upbringing was heavily influenced by traditional South Indian values, which made it difficult for her to break free from societal constraints.

The autobiography sheds light on her family history and the prevailing societal norms of her time, especially the unequal power dynamics between men and women in her Nair community. Kamala Das's deep longing for the affection she experienced in her grandmother's house underscores women's challenges in a male-dominated society.

She reflects on her teenage years in boarding schools, highlighting her close relationship with her brother, which influenced her liberal and rebellious mindset.

Her troubled marriage and neglect from her husband led to a nervous breakdown and a suicide attempt. She sought love outside her marriage, candidly discussing her extramarital relationships with both men and

women. Despite pursuing what she believed to be pure love, she faced disappointments in her relationships. Kamala Das's writing is brutally honest and realistically portrays the darker aspects of her life, evoking both sympathy and controversy.

Her autobiography challenges traditional stereotypes by sharing her innermost self, expressing love and resistance without apologizing for her choices. Kamala Das's work is a collection of a woman's experiences, which may be considered unimportant in a patriarchal society. Still, it serves as a powerful testament to her unapologetic self-expression.

By the end of this unit, you will have developed an understanding and a deeper appreciation for the diverse perspectives in analyzing the text. The next unit will delve deeper into Kamala Das's writing style and the text's themes to help you gain a more comprehensive understanding of the autobiography as a whole.

4.5 References and Suggested Readings:

"An Autobiography from a Postcolonial Perspective: Kamala Das My Story." Dergipark, 2007, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/217298>.

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Mittapalli, Rajeshwar and Pier Paolo Piciucco. *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd., 2007.

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UNIT- 5

KAMALA DAS (Supplementary Unit)

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 The Title
- 5.4 Writing Style of Kamala Das
- 5.5 Major Themes in “My Story”
 - 5.5.1 Identity and Self-discovery
 - 5.5.2 Love and Relationships
 - 5.5.3 Sexuality and Femininity
 - 5.5.4 Marriage and Societal Expectations
 - 5.5.5 Religion and Spirituality
 - 5.5.6 Motherhood
 - 5.5.7 Writing
 - 5.5.8 Quest for love
 - 5.5.9 Freedom and Liberation
 - 5.5.10 Death
- 5.6 A Brief Summary of some selected Texts of Kamala Das
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives:

This is the fifth unit of Block III. The aim of this unit is to discuss about the significance of the title of Kamala Das autobiography, her way of narration, the key themes within the text and some other texts of Das. After finishing the unit you will be able to

- *explain* the critical significance of the title of Kamala Das’ autobiography,
- *find out* the narrative techniques employed in the autobiography,
- *analyze* the novel in terms of its themes,
- *know* some other text of Kamala Das

5.2 Introduction:

A thoughtful reader is likely to be interested in understanding how a story gets told in a book. It involves looking at things like recurring ideas, patterns that continue throughout the story, and the main themes that run through it. These themes help us figure out what the author cares about most in their writing.

Apart from these themes, it is also essential to know how the author tells the story using specific narrative techniques to have a certain impact. In the next sections, we will discuss in detail the main themes in her autobiography, "My Story," and the specific techniques she uses to tell her story.

5.3 The Title:

Kamala Das, a well-known Indian poet and writer, named her autobiography "My Story." The title immediately conveys the book's autobiographical nature. Kamala Das adopts a candid and confessional style throughout her autobiography, openly sharing her personal experiences, emotions, and challenges. This title emphasizes that the narrative is indeed her own, articulated in her own words.

The title is a clear marker that this is an autobiography, setting it apart from her fictional and poetic works. Das intended to give readers an intimate and unfiltered view of her life. The title effectively establishes the tone for a deeply personal and unvarnished account. By christening her autobiography "My Story," Kamala Das seizes control of her narrative. She rejects the notion of being solely defined by societal norms or expectations, and instead, she proclaims her autonomy by narrating her life on her terms. The title symbolizes her voyage of self-discovery and self-expression. The title implies honesty and transparency within the narrative. Kamala Das was renowned for her fearless and unapologetic writing; she holds nothing back in her autobiography. "My Story" signifies her unwavering commitment to laying bare her soul and disclosing her innermost thoughts and emotions. "My Story" is a title that can resonate with a broad spectrum of readers, as it taps into the universal human experience of self-reflection and self-exploration. It invites readers to contemplate their life journeys and personal narratives.

The title "My Story " is a simple and powerful way for Kamala Das to show that this autobiography is about her life, honesty, and journey. It's a book that many people can relate to, and it's an integral part of Indian literature that shows her fearlessness and unique approach to writing.

5.4 Writing Style of Kamala Das:

A good autobiography is like a journey of self-reflection and self-discovery. The writer needs to use their inner strength to truly understand who they are and honestly share their experiences through self-examination. It's important to remember that autobiographies are often written for personal reasons, as a way to express thoughts and feelings and clear the mind.

Confession is essential in autobiography because it helps authors show their honesty and balance their inner thoughts with their external experiences. Being sincere and truthful is highly valued when using this confessional style in storytelling. Through confession, authors can openly display a positive form of self-acceptance. In the case of "My Story" by Kamala Das, it is evident that the narrative is confessional.

Kamala Das, as a poet, possesses a refined and sensitive way of expressing herself. Her broad perspective on life is heightened by this sensitivity. She can interpret simple events from her past through her imaginative thinking and her nuanced understanding of different layers of meaning. Kamala Das, a poet and a passionate individual, expresses her deep and personal feelings in her writings. These feelings are important not because of what they are by themselves, but because of the emotions and thoughts she adds to them.

"My Story," represents a groundbreaking effort to challenge the prevailing patriarchal norms through the genre of autobiography. She stands as one of the rare female authors who have demonstrated exceptional bravery in candidly sharing her personal experiences as a woman, thereby dismantling the traditional notion of considering women as the "angel in the house" by revealing the reality.

"My Story," provides a look back at her life from childhood to adulthood, with a primary emphasis on her exploration of sexuality and her pursuit of genuine love. Her open discussion of her sexuality and her passionate extramarital affairs, especially in the conservative Indian societal context, can be viewed as a courageous and unreserved revelation of her true self to the readers. A woman facing societal and family expectations due to her gender often has few choices to escape these roles, unless she decides to directly challenge these norms. In Kamala Das' autobiography, her writing is marked by a confessional and confrontational tone. The chapter titles are quite striking, using bold and straightforward language to capture the reader's attention. Kamala Das writes effortlessly, without concerning herself with how her readers might judge her. She is driven by a deep need to express herself and reveals her innermost thoughts and emotions through her writing. She is the central character in all her literary works, baring her soul and sharing her experiences with her audience. She expresses a range of emotions, from tears to laughter, and evokes sympathy from her readers.

What stands out in her autobiographical narrative is her exceptional transparency and honesty in expressing her thoughts and feelings. She demonstrates a keen awareness of her past self and her current self, which enables her to bridge the gap between the two and better comprehend her evolving identity over time.

Kamala Das's autobiography was a product of unique circumstances. She wrote her story while she was on her deathbed. The medication prescribed by doctors, combined with the alternating states of consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as the deep dives into her subconscious memories, all contributed to her process of writing "My Story." She used these experiences to create a sensational narrative. Das uses this mode to reveal her unconventional views as a married woman who confesses to having love affairs. Simultaneously, she acknowledges her shortcomings and failures in fulfilling the traditional roles expected of a wife, especially the societal expectations placed on women in general. In essence, she openly shares her innermost thoughts and external experiences, exposing both her unconventional love affairs and the struggles she faced in adhering to

traditional gender roles. She aspired to live an honest and pure life and to pass away with a clear conscience, which she aimed to achieve through her confessional style of writing.

"My Story" conveys a strong sense of reality, personal experience, and immersion, as opposed to presenting a structured analysis or a carefully patterned narrative. It takes on a confessional style that feels deeply rooted in the author's own life experiences. This means that repetitions, contradictions, gaps, and loose ends, which might be considered flaws in a traditional literary work, actually serve as indicators of the text's authenticity. The primary focus is on conveying the intensity of emotions and experiences, rather than striving for artistic or aesthetic effects.

"My Story" is divided into two parts. In the first part, which includes the first 26 chapters, the author shares her personal experiences in a straightforward writing style. She talks about her life directly and clearly.

In the second part of the book, from chapter 27 to chapter 49, the author presents her personal experiences differently. At the beginning of each of these chapters, there is a poem that sets the tone for the content that follows. The rest of the chapters in this section are narrated in a detailed and expressive way, allowing the reader to closely examine and understand the author's thoughts and emotions. These chapters emphasize the author's journey of exploring her personality and seeking her identity. This exploration is intertwined with both moments of pain and pleasure, which play a significant role in the story.

The text seamlessly integrates poetry, using it to enhance and complement the prose. In this personal history, narrative sequences are interspersed with poems, especially in the later part of the text. Each chapter, starting from the twenty-seventh to the penultimate chapter, begins with a poem that sets the tone and theme for that chapter. These poems are not out of place or incongruous within their respective chapters; they are carefully chosen to fit the context, and there are no signs of haphazard or inconsistent placement.

Kamala Das' autobiography uses forthright and unapologetic language to recount her life experiences, combining both a confessional and

confrontational approach that seeks to captivate and provoke thought in the reader. Das' candid and personal revelations in her writing are complemented by her ability to create a sense of dramatic anticipation. This not only captures the readers' interest but also elicits their sympathy and admiration. She has a remarkable talent for both shocking and provoking readers, while simultaneously captivating and appealing to them. Her language serves to clarify and purify her experiences. It's as if she's weaving a web of genuine tragic empathy, skillfully intermingling feelings of pity and fear with elements of irony and ridicule. She shared this truth with her readers through her confessional writing style. The artistic incompleteness in her work, characterized by the straightforward account of life, was made whole by the artist's confessional expression.

SAQ

- How did Kamala Das's personal life and experiences shape her literary work, and how does she explore this connection in her autobiography? (70 words)

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- How does Kamala Das use language and narrative techniques to create an intimate and confessional tone in "My Story"? (80 words)

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Stop to Consider

Kamala Das authored several poetry collections, including "Summer in Calcutta" (1965), "The Descendants" (1967), and "The Old Playhouse, and Other Poems" (1973). She also wrote an English-language novel, "Alphabet of Lust" (1976), and two notable short stories: "A Doll for the Child Prostitute" (1977) and "Padmavati the Harlot" (1992). In Malayalam, she was known for her short-story collection "Thanuppu" (1967) and her memoir "Balyakalasmarnakal"

(1987), which means "Memories of Childhood." However, her most famous work is her autobiography, initially published as a series of columns in the Malayalanadu weekly, then in Malayalam as "Ente Katha" (1973), and eventually in English as "My Story" (1976). This autobiography is notably intimate and became a classic, even though in later years, Kamala Das admitted that some parts of the book were fictional.

5.5 Major Themes in “My Story”:

"My Story" by Kamala Das is a compelling work that delves into several key themes that are central to the narrative and the author's life. The autobiography explores these themes in a deeply personal and introspective manner, offering readers a unique perspective on the author's experiences. Some of the key themes in "My Story" by Kamala Das include:

5.5.1 Identity and Self-discovery:

The primary theme in Kamala Das's autobiography "My Story" is her profound journey to discover her true identity. In this book, she deeply explores who she is as a woman, an author, and an individual. She grapples with women's challenges and societal pressures in a male-dominated society. Kamala Das courageously challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations restricting women's freedom and self-expression. Her exploration of being a woman is a crucial part of her quest for self-identity. The book also delves into her experiences in her various marriages and relationships, highlighting her search for genuine love and emotional fulfilment within them. Her struggle against the constraints imposed by societal norms, especially within the institution of marriage, plays a significant role in her journey of self-discovery.

Her growth as a writer and poet is closely tied to her search for identity. Through her writing, she discovers a means of self-expression and self-realization. Her poetry becomes a channel through which she explores her thoughts, emotions, and desires, ultimately shaping her identity as a poet.

Throughout "My Story," Kamala Das rebels against societal expectations and norms that stifle her individuality. She rejects the pressure to conform to traditional roles and yearns to break free from the constraints imposed by her upbringing and society. Her exploration of spirituality, particularly her fascination with Lord Krishna, adds another dimension to her quest for identity. She seeks spiritual solace and connection beyond the physical world, indicating her ongoing search for meaning and self-discovery.

The book candidly recounts Kamala Das's personal struggles and challenges, including her battles with mental health, failed relationships, and society's judgment. These experiences profoundly influence her identity, resilience, and personal growth.

In "My Story," Kamala Das uses her personal narrative to explore the many facets of identity and self-discovery. Her journey involves continuously questioning societal norms, a desire for authentic love and emotional connection, and a passionate pursuit of self-expression and liberation, both as a woman and as a writer.

5.5.2 Love and Relationships:

In Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story," love and relationships are central themes. The book explores these themes from different angles, showing how they can be complicated and multifaceted. Kamala Das talks about her experiences in her marriages, especially her first one, which was arranged and lacked emotional connection. She openly expresses her disappointment and dissatisfaction in her marital relationship, highlighting the common issue of loveless or convenience marriages in society. She also discusses forbidden love and extramarital affairs, challenging the traditional ideas of faithfulness and love. Throughout the book, Kamala Das seems to always be searching for deep and genuine love. She often looks for it outside her marriages, indicating that she couldn't find it in traditional wedlock.

The book explores the roles and expectations imposed on women in society, especially in the context of love and relationships. Kamala Das questions these roles and emphasizes the limitations placed on women in matters of love and marriage. Her personal journey of self-discovery

and empowerment is closely linked to her experiences with love and relationships. Both positive and negative experiences contribute to her understanding of herself as a woman and a writer, helping her break free from societal constraints. Kamala Das uses her writing as a way to express her thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to love and relationships. Writing becomes a tool for her to explore herself and express her desires and frustrations.

In "My Story," Kamala Das candidly explores her experiences with love and relationships, shedding light on their complexities, challenges, and personal growth. The book not only reflects her personal journey but also comments on how societal norms and gender roles impact love and relationships.

5.5.3 Sexuality and Femininity:

In Kamala Das's autobiography "My Story," she boldly addresses the themes of sexuality and femininity, which were quite unconventional during her time. She candidly shares her personal sexual desires and experiences, going against the societal expectations placed on women. She doesn't conform to the traditional roles assigned to women, particularly in her roles as a wife and mother. This leads to an ongoing struggle between her individual desires and the societal norms, highlighting the common challenge women face when trying to reconcile their personal needs with what society expects of them. This conflict underscores the difficulties women encounter in a society predominantly controlled by men.

Her exploration of her sexuality and femininity serves as a way for her to assert her own power and freedom. She refuses to be constrained by the rigid norms of society and instead expresses her genuine self. "My Story" also serves as a critique of patriarchal systems and how they negatively impact women's lives. Das reveals the constraints and injustices women endure in conventional marriages and society.

"My Story," Kamala Das fearlessly discusses her sexuality and femininity, challenging the norms set by society and advocating for women's empowerment and their right to define their own identities, particularly in the context of their sexuality and femininity.

5.5.4 Marriage and Societal Expectations:

In Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story," she extensively discusses the institution of marriage and the societal expectations imposed on individuals, especially women. She candidly reflects on her own experiences and the challenges she faced while navigating marriage and conforming to societal norms. Kamala Das perceives marriage as a rigid system that enforces specific roles and demands on individuals, with a particular focus on the expectations placed on women. She delves into her own marriage, emphasizing that it was arranged for practical reasons rather than love.

Within the narrative, Kamala Das eloquently challenges and questions the traditional gender roles assigned to women by society. She steadfastly refuses to conform to the submissive and obedient wife archetype that society often prescribes for women. Her personal struggles vividly exemplify the tension between her own desires and society's expectations.

"My Story" can be interpreted as a critique of the prevailing male-centered values and norms that dominate both society at large and the institution of marriage. Kamala Das exposes the power dynamics that operate within families, shedding light on how women are frequently oppressed within these structures. Throughout the book, Kamala Das explores the themes of marriage and societal expectations, underscoring her resistance to the conventional norms and her unwavering commitment to asserting her own identity and desires. Her autobiography serves as a significant part of her literary and personal journey, illustrating her ongoing challenge of and inquiry into the restrictions placed on women in her society.

5.5.5 Religion and Spirituality:

In Kamala Das's autobiography "My Story," religion and spirituality are important themes. She reflects on these themes in a very personal and introspective way. Throughout the book, she searches for life's deeper meaning and purpose, looking beyond the material and conventional aspects. She questions traditional religious practices and beliefs, especially those that she finds oppressive within her conservative family.

Kamala Das seeks a personal connection with the divine and often turns to Lord Krishna for inspiration. She explores various faiths and spiritual traditions, remaining open to different beliefs. Religion and spirituality, in her view, offer a path to personal freedom and liberation. She uses them as a means to break free from societal constraints, especially those imposed on women.

Her spiritual journey involves a struggle to move beyond life's physical and material aspects. She aims to find a deeper spiritual connection beyond bodily desires. Kamala Das also expresses her spirituality through her poetry, which reflects her quest for a closer connection with the divine. Her journey is characterized by a rejection of societal norms and a search for a more profound and personal spiritual connection.

5.5.6 Motherhood:

The theme of motherhood is very important in Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story." In the book, she talks about her experiences as a mother. She expresses her deep love and strong emotional connection with her children. She describes the happiness and difficulties of raising kids and the sacrifices she makes for their well-being.

She also struggles with the conflict between her identity as an individual and her role as a mother. She discusses how being a mother can sometimes put a stop to her personal dreams and ambitions. This inner conflict makes her exploration of the theme more complex.

Kamala Das also talks about the societal expectations placed on women as mothers. She criticizes the traditional roles and duties imposed on women in Indian society and how these expectations can be limiting. She questions the idea that being a mother should be the main source of a woman's identity. Her relationship with her own mother and her experiences growing up also influence how she sees and experiences motherhood.

The book also touches on the theme of loss and sadness related to motherhood. Kamala Das goes through the pain of losing a child, which is a very emotional and heartbreaking experience that she shares in her story.

In a nutshell, the theme of motherhood in "My Story" by Kamala Das is a significant and multifaceted part of her autobiography. It provides a personal and thought-provoking perspective on the challenges, joys, and complexities of being a mother, and it reflects the broader social context in which motherhood is situated.

5.5.7 Writing:

In Kamala Das' autobiography "My Story," the writing theme is central to the narrative. Kamala Das uses her writing to convey her innermost thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Her literary work becomes a means to divulge her personal challenges, desires, and struggles, allowing readers to gain insight into her emotional world. She harnesses her writing as a tool for liberation and empowerment, breaking free from the constraints of societal norms and expectations, particularly in her frank exploration of gender and sexuality. Through her writing, she asserts her autonomy and identity. Writing functions as a cathartic outlet for Kamala Das, enabling her to release the emotional turmoil she experiences, including the unhappiness within her marriage. Writing serves as a coping mechanism, providing a sense of relief from her pain. Her literary work boldly challenges traditional and conservative societal norms, as she fearlessly addresses taboo subjects like female desire and sexual awakening in a society that often suppresses such topics. Her writing becomes a form of rebellion against the constraints placed on women.

The theme of writing is intricately linked with Kamala Das's quest for identity. Through her literary creations, she endeavours to define herself as both a woman and a poet, liberating herself from society's predefined roles and expectations. Kamala Das employs her writing as a medium for self-reflection, using it to recount her life experiences, both joyous and painful, and to make sense of her journey as a woman, wife, and mother. In "My Story," the theme of writing serves as a powerful tool for self-discovery and empowerment, challenging societal norms and expectations. Her autobiography, facilitated by her act of writing, becomes a platform for her to express herself and shape her identity on her own terms.

5.5.8 Quest for love:

Kamala Das's literary works are characterized by a deep preoccupation with the theme of love. She often portrays herself as a longing female figure in search of love in a world that often fails to understand her. She strongly believes that womanhood involves shared experiences, and she had a bitter experience with a loveless marriage, which is a common institution in society. Her autobiographical work, "My Story," delves into her personal struggles and tribulations during her emotionally disconnected married life, which had a significant impact on her poetry. However, her poetry goes beyond simple confessions; it serves as a powerful expression of her female identity.

In "My Story," Kamala Das explores the central ambiguity surrounding a woman's situation and identity. From the very beginning of the book, Das maintains a consistent theme and expression, which revolves around the quest for self-identity. She openly and honestly expresses her thoughts on her own terms, redefining and liberating herself as both a woman and a poet. She refuses to conform to societal expectations and roles and rejects the limitations imposed on her by virtue of her gender.

When Kamala Das discusses love outside of marriage, she is not advocating for adultery, but rather she is searching for a relationship that provides both love and a sense of identity, asserting her rights as a woman. Analyzing her psychological journey reveals her transition from a focus on the physical aspects of love to the spiritual. She grapples with the temptations of the body and seeks redemption in Lord Krishna, a deity who is often depicted as a bodiless form.

Kamala Das's writings are marked by her deep exploration of love, her personal struggles within a loveless marriage, and her pursuit of self-identity as a woman and a poet. She challenges societal norms, rejects gender-based limitations, and seeks a love that provides both emotional fulfillment and a sense of self. Her journey from a focus on the physical to the spiritual aspects of love is a central theme in her work.

5.5.9 Freedom and Liberation:

The theme of freedom and liberation is prominent and recurring in Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story." Through her personal

experiences and reflections, Kamala Das explores the concept of freedom and liberation in several ways.

Kamala Das' fearless and candid discussions of her sexuality and desires are central to her quest for freedom and liberation. She breaks away from the conventional societal expectations that suppress female sexual expression. By openly acknowledging and embracing her sexuality, she seeks liberation from the shackles of sexual repression that women often faced during her time. Her emotional liberation is another crucial aspect of her story. She refuses to be bound by the emotional constraints of traditional roles as a wife and mother. Her quest for emotional liberation involves breaking free from the emotional and societal pressures that seek to confine her. Throughout her autobiography, Kamala Das strives for independence and autonomy. She aims to live life on her terms and make her own choices, particularly in matters of love and relationships. Her pursuit of economic and emotional independence is a means to liberate herself from societal expectations.

Kamala Das' writing itself serves as a form of liberation. Through her poetry and prose, she finds a channel to express her innermost thoughts, emotions, and desires. Her literary work allows her to break free from the constraints of silence and gives her a voice to articulate her experiences and feelings. She challenges the societal norms and expectations that restrict women's freedom and agency. She refuses to conform to the roles assigned to her by society, thus advocating for her right to lead a life of her choosing. Das also embarks on a spiritual journey, seeking inner liberation and a connection with the divine. This spiritual exploration represents a different dimension of her quest for freedom – a search for inner peace and transcendence.

The theme of freedom and liberation in "My Story" reflects Kamala Das's courageous and unapologetic pursuit of a life that allows her to be true to herself, express her desires, and break free from the constraints of societal norms. Her narrative serves as a powerful assertion of a woman's right to self-determination and the pursuit of a liberated and authentic life.

5.5.10 Death:

In Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story," the theme of death explores different aspects of her life and emotions. At the beginning of her story, she describes her childhood with a sense of innocence and wonder. But as she grows up and faces life's complexities, she loses that innocence, symbolizing the end of a simpler and carefree time.

A central theme in the book is her unhappy and loveless marriage, which represents the death of happiness in her married life. Throughout her autobiography, she talks about her romantic and sexual relationships, and many of them come to an end, symbolizing the death of love and desire in her life. Despite the many losses she experiences, Kamala Das finds a rebirth and emotional release through her writing. Writing helps her process her feelings, express her thoughts, and regain a sense of identity and purpose. As she looks back on her life, she also thinks about her own mortality. The awareness of death and the passing of time is a recurring theme, making her reflect on the temporary nature of human existence.

Later in "My Story," she embarks on a spiritual journey, exploring different religious and philosophical paths. This search for spiritual enlightenment can be seen as her way of finding meaning and something beyond the physical world.

In "My Story," Kamala Das uses the theme of death to reflect on the changes and challenges in her life. This theme adds depth and complexity to her story and helps us better understand her emotions and thoughts. The autobiography is a candid and introspective account of her life, challenging societal norms and celebrating the resilience of the human spirit.

Stop to Consider

Kamala Das, a prominent Indian poet and writer, is known for her unique writing style. Das is renowned for her confessional style, where she openly and honestly explores her personal emotions, desires, and experiences. Her works often feature vivid and evocative imagery that helps readers connect with the emotions

and themes in her poems and novels. She uses an intimate and conversational tone, making readers feel like they are listening to her innermost thoughts and feelings. Love, desire, and the exploration of female sexuality are recurring themes in her works, challenging societal norms and expectations. Kamala Das often presents a feminist perspective, addressing issues of female identity, freedom, and the struggle for self-expression. Her writing is marked by simplicity and honesty, making it accessible to a wide range of readers. Many of her works draw from her own life experiences, blurring the lines between fiction and autobiography.

SAQ :

Q.1. What is the significance title of Kamala Das's autobiography, and why did she choose this title? (about 350 words)

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Q.2. What impact did Kamala Das's autobiography have on the literary and feminist landscape in India? (about 350 words)

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Q.3. Discuss the feminist perspective presented in the book and how it is conveyed through the writing style. (about 350 words)

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Q.4. Explore the themes of love, desire, and the exploration of female sexuality in the autobiography. How do these themes contribute to the overall style and impact of the book? (about 350 words)

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Q.5. In what ways does Kamala Das challenge societal norms and expectations, particularly in terms of female identity and freedom, through her writing in "My Story"? (about 350 words)

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5.6 A Brief Summary of some selected Texts of Kamala Das:

A brief summary of two of her selected texts have been given below:

- *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*

"A Doll for a Child Prostitute," set in Bombay, focuses on the challenges encountered by the manager or head of a brothel house in the city. The story delves into the lives of the women who live in the brothel and the various disruptions caused by the police department. It provides a portrayal of the inmates' experiences and the issues that arise due to law enforcement in the story.

The narrative begins with a 13-year-old girl named Rukmani being taken to a brothel by her mother, , who was once a prostitute herself. Rukmani, a young and inexperienced prostitute, serves as a character who sheds light on life who sheds light on life inside the brothel, which houses a mix of individuals, from those in search of love to the jaded, the modest and the shameless.

Rukmani becomes the favorite of the local inspector, who allows the brothel to operate in exchange for certain services. The story delves into themes of love, abandonment, and death. After the inspector receives the services he desires, he introduces Rukmani to a new doll available in the market, a doll that closes its eyes when laid down and says "mummy" when its stomach is pressed. When he eventually gifts her the doll, Rukmani momentarily forgets her life as a prostitute and immerses herself in childlike play, repeatedly pressing the doll's stomach to make it call her "mummy." This reminds the inspector of his own granddaughter.

- *Alphabet of Lust*

"Alphabet of Lust" is a novel in English written by Kamala Das. It is a work that uses humor, irony, and exaggeration to criticize and expose

the societal foolishness in India, particularly addressing the excessive passion for lust among men. The main character in the novel is Manasi, a poet who serves as a strong representation of feminism. Manasi is married to an exploited government employee and is an unhappy wife. She has a daughter named Suparna, who is studying at a college in Lucknow.

Another important character in the story is Vijay Raje, a corrupt and lustful minister in the state government who wields significant political influence. His connections extend all the way up to the Prime Minister of the country. Vijay Raje, driven by his sexual desires, expresses his intentions to engage in a sexual relationship with Manasi.

In an unexpected turn of events, Manasi agrees to his proposal, and she manipulates her relationship with Vijay Raje to achieve her personal goals. Specifically, she uses her connection with Vijay Raje to secure the prestigious national award of Padmashri, a recognition of her achievements in the field of poetry. Manasi's actions demonstrate her cunning and ambition in using her sexuality as a tool for personal advancement.

However, Manasi's sexual maneuvering does not end with Vijay Raje. She continues to climb the ladder of success, using her sexual allure to gain the attention of the Prime Minister, who is portrayed as another lustful widower. Her relationship with the Prime Minister eventually leads to her appointment as a cabinet minister, solidifying her position and success in the political arena.

Throughout the novel, Kamala Das uses the character of Manasi to express her feminist views. Manasi's actions and manipulations of powerful men underscore the idea that men can become vulnerable and weak in the face of their sexual desires, and that succumbing to lust can lead to negative consequences.

"Alphabet of Lust" by Kamala Das is a novel that satirically portrays the flaws and excesses of Indian society, focusing on the role of lust and sexual manipulation in the pursuit of personal success.

The author's intention is to illustrate the boundless nature of men's desires, which is depicted through the character Vijay Raje in her book. Vijay Raje engages in sexual encounters with a character named Suparna, deliberately choosing to do so in Shimla, at the same hotel and in the same room, where he had previously been intimate with Suparna's mother, Manasi. This repetition emphasizes the idea that men's lust knows no bounds and can lead them to commit morally questionable acts.

What adds further dramatic tension to the story is the revelation that Vijay Raje is actually Suparna's uncle. Suparna is the daughter of his elder brother and Manasi. This unveils a deeply unsettling family dynamic and serves as the culmination of a secretive and inappropriate relationship between Vijay Raje and Manasi in the past.

The author's skillful plotting and the inclusion of these shocking and morally reprehensible elements are designed to highlight the irony of the situation. This irony lies in the fact that Vijay Raje's immoral actions take place within his own family, involving his own niece, in the very same location where he was involved with her mother. This twisted and taboo scenario serves to make a powerful statement about the unrestrained nature of men's lust and the devastating consequences it can have within a family.

Furthermore, the author employs this shocking revelation to create a dramatic effect in the novel. Readers are likely to be taken aback by the revelation of the family relationships and the extent of Vijay Raje's immoral actions. This dramatic effect serves to captivate the reader and underscore the message that there are no limits to the depths of human desire and its potentially destructive consequences. Through her work "Alphabet of Lust," Kamala Das directs readers' focus to the self-centered conduct of men within affluent, upper-class societies.

5.7 Summing Up:

The objectives of this unit are to help you gain a better understanding of the key components for critically analyzing various aspects of Kamala Das' autobiography. Within this unit, we have also discussed the narrative techniques employed in Kamala Das' autobiography, "My Story." By

this point, you should have gained some insight into the themes and Das' way of narrating her life in the autobiography.

Furthermore, this unit will serve as a source of inspiration for you to delve more deeply into the life and experiences of Kamala Das, allowing you to construct your own interpretations of the text. This exploration should enable you to gain a richer understanding of the autobiography and its significance. Additionally, I've also included brief summaries of two other texts written by Kamala Das in this unit.

The purpose of this unit is to help you analyze Kamala Das' autobiography and understand how she tells her life story. You should now have a better grasp of the themes and her storytelling style in the autobiography.

5.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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