

# Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Krupabai Saththianadhan's *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life*

Roshni Patel

Ph.D. Scholar

School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Central University of Gujarat. Gujarat.

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## ABSTRACT

Colonial India became the site on which the clash between tradition and modernity took place. This clash is reflected in the ambivalent attitudes of the nationalists, the reformers, the writers of that period towards colonial modernity. Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia argue that 'tradition' and 'modernity' cannot be categorized as static and monolithic categories (09). As various discourses of colonial times reflect this clash and colonial modern literature is one of them. The novel *Kamala, the Story of a Hindu Life* (1894) by Krupabai Saththianadhan reveals the indigenous customs and traditions oppressing women of the colonial India through the depiction of the life of Kamala as a child bride in the Hindu Brahmin orthodox family. The novel illustrates the continuous conflict between tradition and modernity going on in the mind of Kamala, a colonial modern woman and the conflict is reflected through her inner dialogues. Moreover, the novel also provides various points of view of the characters through their speeches and dialogues. This paper studies the novel *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life* (1894) in the context of Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and tries to understand how the narrator uses the dialogue as a mode to show the inner battle or conflict between tradition and modernity which goes on in Kamala's mind. The paper shows how through the mode of dialogue, on the one hand, the articulation of desire by Kamala marks the emergence of an individuated self in colonial modern Indian novel, and how on the other hand, it quickly vanishes in the name of shame and tradition. The paper thus, studies how Kamala confronts the clash of two voices of tradition and modernity throughout the novel and finally reaches to the conclusion of establishment of her goodness through the final act of denial of her love and desire for Ramchander. In the beginning, it is the voices of Kamala and Ramchander that are dialogized. Kamala's voice which denies the desire clashes with that of Ramchander which wants the desire to be fulfilled. Thus, the paper shows how the colonial modern novel is not monologic but dialogic in nature.

**Key words :** Tradition and Modernity.

'Ask me not that', she said with a shudder. 'It is too much for me to think of... My heart beats in response to yours, but betray me not, thou tempting heart. I am ashamed of myself. Despise me and drive me away from thee.

No! it is the power of love,' said Ramchander. Rise, my love, and be mine.' And he came nearer and lifted her up. But a cry rang from her heart and she uttered the word, Ganesh,' and ran to the house as if mad. Her religion, crude as it was, had its victory (Saththianadhan 155).

This is how Kamala's two voices expressing response to the marriage proposal of her desire and its denial are represented in Ramchander at the end of the novel *Kamala*:

*The Story of a Hindu Life* (1894). Kamala is a Hindu widow. Ramchander is a young physician and Kamala's cousin. This final dialogue between Ramchander and Kamala occurs after two years of the death of Kamala's husband Ganesh. As cousins and childhood friends, Kamala and Ramchander have met many times. In the above passage, Ramchander first declares his unexpressed love to Kamala (154). Then, he proposes to her. In a pleading tone, he tries to convince her to accept his love.

In response to Ramchander's proposal and his arguments to convince her, Kamala firmly expresses her own desire (155). It is the most important moment in Kamala's utterance in terms of how as a modern Indian woman she would articulate her desire. Here, she recognizes and admits her desire for Ramchander as she says: "My heart beats in response to yours". But something stops her desiring this and she says: "I am ashamed of myself". These moments show a clash of two different voices in Kamala's utterances. If this moment of recognition about the desire of the self significantly marks the emergence of the modern individuated self of a woman in the colonial modern period, it also vanishes quickly in the name of shame and 'tradition'.

The novel carries many such instances where Kamala as well as the narrative confronts the clashes between two voices. Thus, this paper attempts to study the

novel *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life* (1894) in the context of Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and to understand how the narrative uses the dialogue as a mode to show the inner battle or conflict between tradition and modernity which goes on in Kamala's mind. The paper attempts to show how through the mode of dialogue, on the one hand, the articulation of desire by Kamala marks the emergence of an individuated self in colonial modern Indian novel, and how on the other hand, through the same individuated self she denies desire and love in the name of shame and tradition. The present paper thus, attempts to study how Kamala confronts the clash of two voices of tradition and modernity throughout the novel and finally reaches to the conclusion of establishment of her goodness through the final act of denial of her love and desire for Ramchander. Thus, the paper attempts to argue how the colonial modern novel is not monologic but dialogic in nature.

The novel *Kamala: The Story of Hindu Life* (1894) by Krupabai Satthianadhan reveals indigenous customs and traditions oppressing women of that period through depiction of life of Kamala as a child-bride in the Hindu Brahmin orthodox family. Kamala lives with her father Narayan, the *sanyasi*. and "granny" in a hut nearby a temple situated on the hillock. Her father Narayan marries her off at the age of eight with an English educated boy named Ganesh. Before one day

of her marriage day, a stranger comes to Narayan. We come to know later in the novel that the stranger is Ramchander, the son of Narayan's sister and that Kamala was earlier betrothed to Ramchander while they were living together. But because somehow Narayan and Ramchander depart and they do not meet again till the day before Kamala's marriage.

After marriage, as she is extremely harassed at her in laws' house, she longs for the atmosphere of freedom which she used to have at her home. Initially, Ganesh takes interest in her and enthusiastically teaches her. But he gets an affair with a mistress called Sai. Kamala and Ganesh settle in the city with their child. But due to the 'other woman' in Ganesh's life, Kamala and Ganesh have lot of disputes. One day, he wrongly accuses Kamala of having an illicit relationship with Ramchander. So she leaves the house and comes to her father in law's house. Soon after Ganesh dies of cholera and later on, the child also dies. Two years after Ganesh's death, Ramchander, the young physician towards whom she had earlier developed unconscious attraction proposes her to marry. She rejects the proposal and prefers to spend her life for unselfish works of charity. This is where the novel ends.

Returning to the discussion of the dialogue quoted in the beginning, the conflict between the two ideals is represented thus: She says in a high tone: " 'No! what you ask is

too much' ". She calls herself "a broken vessel". The metaphor signifies her widowed state. She thinks that she is "fit only to be thrown aside and to be spat on". The state of being married is the contentment of the woman. This metaphor is used to signify her emptiness after her husband's death. As she pleads: "O God!", she wants the grace of god in achieving some purer form of individuated self rather than merely surrendering to her passions. She thinks that its achievement is possible through the very denial of her desire of love. And thus, she urges to God to help her to overcome her passions and desire.

Throughout the dialogue between Kamala and Ramchander, the tone changes frequently. It is also important to look at the tone in terms of the way Ramchander urges her. In a firm tone, he utters: " 'Come, Kamala make up your mind' " (154). In a low tone, he talks about his spiritual life as a sanyasi. He urges her to accept him and freedom. He reveals his desire of creating a world living with her where he will entertain nobody's interference (155). His desire reveals his modern self which prefers the individual's desire over others. He uses all the reasons and weapons for convincing her to accept the marriage proposal.

It is also important to note how the authorial narrative voice interrupts Kamala's utterances. When Ramchander comes near to her to lift her up, she cries out and utters the word "Ganesh". Their dialogue ends with this

cry. Then the authorial narrator comments that this cry reflects her agony because of the defeat of her desire over the victory of the voice of “her crude” religion and tradition. Here again, authorial narrative voice is interrupted by the mode of psycho-narration, and her inner thoughts are revealed. She feels relief from the misery which would have resulted from the fulfillment of desire and love and thinks that it is good for her that tradition has won over her desire. It indicates her faith in tradition which makes her preserve her attribute of good womanhood by denying desire and satisfaction. She feels a sense of freedom which she gets by overcoming the influence of the man before her. She realizes the happiness of being loved by someone and this is narrated through the mode of narrated monologue: “Ah! It was happiness to know that someone loved her, loved her for her own sake, despised as she was, and degraded in the sight of the little world in which she lived” (Sathianadhan 155). Here the voice of tradition wins over the voice of modernity.

Thus, two of them depart from each other forever and live their lives in their own ways.

Ramchander spends his whole life in helping the needy and suffering people. Kamala spends her money in the unselfish work of charity and her life in helping the poor and unfortunate. It is also mentioned that she does not get rid of her love but the man and it

signifies Kamala asserting victory over her passions. The novel *Kamala* ends here at this significant moment. Kamala is constructed as an emerging individuated self who chooses to live at the stake of the killing of her desire. She also feels: “It is true that the love could never be hers, and yet in a way it was hers forever, and she was satisfied” (154). The notion of her goodness as a woman is achieved through the sacrifice of her desire i.e. denial of love for herself, but translated into service to people. Both these moments can be seen as the instance of the emergence of a strong sense of self and desire, and the simultaneous suppression of them in the name of ‘shame’ as well as for a higher spiritual goal.

Furthermore, it is possible to note that in the dialogue between Kamala and Ramchander, there is a tone of disagreement. Two individual voices disagree with each other in the colonial modern period. Though both of their voices reflect the possibility of fulfillment of their desire, Ramchander’s voice favours modernity whereas Kamala’s voice favours tradition. More importantly, the modern self of Kamala makes her the agent of her own desire and it is through this self, she articulates her favour for the tradition. This apparent contradiction is at the heart of the novel. Moreover, the novel uses dialogues between the characters who debate on various issues of the particular period. The novel provides various points of view of the

characters through their speeches and dialogues. It is thus useful to take some insights from Bakhtin's idea of dialogism in the novel. He states:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.... Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel, each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized) (Bakhtin 262).

The novel *Kamala* is written in English language and the writer does not use the speech types like dialects. However, according to Bakhtin, the stylistically individualized speech of characters is but one of the type of compositional unity of the novelistic whole (Bakhtin 262). In the passage discussed in the beginning, it is the voices of Kamala and Ramchander that are dialogized. Kamala's voice which denies the desire clashes with that of Ramchander which wants the desire to be fulfilled. In *Kamala*, speeches of characters are one of the fundamental unity through which many social voices are brought out.

As the novel proceeds the conflict between tradition and modernity becomes

more complicated as Kamala struggles a lot in deciphering the good moral code from tradition and from an individuated self. For example, the narrator describes how Kamala has learnt "the great lesson of humanity, love for others and the need of doing one's duty at any cost" from "heroic tales of Seeta, Rama and the Pandavas", from "Sanskrit shlokas", from the story tellers who told her the stories "in the manner of fables with a moral" (Sathianadhan 58) and it is the "the sum and substance" of Kamala's moral code, which gives her "an impetus to be good".

But there was another kind of teaching mingled with it all and that was that whether she was good or bad, whether she enjoyed pleasure or suffered pain, she ought not to grumble but accept it meekly, for it was her fate. This gave her very little consolation... She wished to be exemplary like Savitri, Seeta, and other noble women; but even they had to submit to fate and did not get their due in this world. So Kamala reasoned while she bore meekly all the taunts and hard words of her sisters-in-law and wondered why she ever felt happy at all...(58-59).

Clearly, the passage shows a clash between two voices. The voice of the tradition tells Kamala to bear all the pains meekly and silently, and it clashes with the voice of the modernity which compels Kamala to question

everything. On the one hand, she refers the ancient past to determine her “moral code” which teaches her to be “good” and on the other hand, her modern individuated self disagrees with the idea of all the time surrendering to fate. Her modern individuated self compels her to think about her desire and not surrendering everything to one’s fate. Here, there is no actual dialogue but various voices of Kamala are dialogized and they are depicted through the narration of Kamala’s consciousness with the use of the mode of psycho- narration. The voice of modernity which gives preference to reason questions her voice of tradition. Thus, the dialogue as a method brings out the complexity of thoughts of the colonial modern individual who continuously struggle between tradition and modernity.

It is also important to look at how the narrative undergoes a conflict in the description of Kamala’s desire for Ramchander. After listening the story from his father about her relationship with Ramchader, Kamala now understands why she feels such power of Ramchander over her (126).

Once, but only once, a wish intruded itself in the deepest and most sacred chamber of her heart- a wish which made her blush at her boldness and cover her bosom with her hands as if to hide it from herself. Would, she said to herself, that Ganesh had been more like

Ramchnader. Such a wish, though natural it may seem, was shocking in the extreme to a Hindu girl, who must never allow herself to compare her husband with anybody else (126).

In the above passage, Kamala’s inner desires are revealed through the mode of psycho-narration. The desire of having Ramchander as her husband is so much for Kamala that she “cover(s) her bosom with her hands as if to hide it from herself”. Though the novel gives scope to reveal her desire through the mode of psycho- narration, the narrator comments that such a wish is “shocking” in a Hindu girl. This again reveals the conflict between tradition and modernity which is at the heart of the narrative.

The final dialogue between Kamala and Ramchnader which is quoted in the beginning is important as it is the moment of full realization of her desire which immediately results into her denial of the fulfillment of that desire. The dialogue is used as a method to articulate the individual desire by Kamala and Ramchnader. It is through the same individuated colonial modern self, they express their desire. However, their desire clashes with each other. Ramchander argues for the fulfillment of the desire whereas Kamala argues for the denial of desire. Priya Joshi argues: “for her gender was not simply a site of change in a transitional period; rather, gender was a crucial actor negotiating between tradition and modernity during a

century of reform, and Sathianadhan chooses the novel to depict the complexity and contrariness of the transactions” (203). Throughout the novel, the dialogues between the tradition and modernity go on in Kamala’s mind and they do not provide simple and straightforward answers. Rather it is important to see how as a colonial modern individual, Kamala recognizes her desire but at the same time, the same self denies the desire.

In the light of Bakhtin’s idea of dialogism, it becomes clearer that the novel *Kamala* has a distanced narrator. It does not show preference for a single voice rather it allows various voices to establish the dialogue. It can be observed that the novel *Kamala* is dialogic in nature. This idea is useful to understand the manner in which the characters in the novel speak. Moreover, Kamala’s consciousness narrated through the techniques like, psycho-narration, quoted monologue and narrated monologue provide

another way to see this novel as establishing the dialogue. The novelist doesn’t give preference to one voice. Just like Kamala the novel itself shows the continuous turmoil of two voices and the novelist attempts to represent the continuous conflict between tradition and modernity going on in the colonial modern people which is unresolved.

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And while the law of competition may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department.

Andrew Carnegie