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**Depiction of Womanhood in the Selected Autobiographies of  
Kamala Das, Prabha Khetan and Baby Halder**

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## Abstract

The present study analyses the images of women in the selected autobiographies from India. Though there are many differences in the style and construction of these writers. But the issues discussed by them have the same intensity. Their methods of dealing with the women's issues, their suppression in the male dominating society are very different in their respective styles. Yet their purpose is to reform society by getting insights through the autobiographies. Prabha Khaitan has a retrospective style of writing and the reader audience is left with the brainstorming over the issue when the autobiography ends. They never suggest the solution to the problem. Kamala Das is very bold and aggressive in presenting the problems of women in Indian middle class families and makes the reader audience restless at the end of the autobiography. They delve deep into the psyche of both man and woman in the middle class society and bring out the hypocrisy hidden in the social norms and culture based on male domination. All the writers intend to bring change in the attitudes of people leading to equality and social justice for all human beings. The autobiographies of all the writers comprise of the elements which connect the patriarchal society and the issue of a place of women in society. Also, there is a controversy reflected through the plots of the autobiographies, whether women should follow the duty or the self esteem. The issues of free will, political powers, upbringing of elite class women and their psyche, male domination as the inevitable issues are the major issues that have been analyzed through the study. The autobiographies are analyzed from a feminist point of view. Feminism is a belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men has been taken into consideration while studying the women images in the concerned autobiographies. The four major streams of feminism, namely Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism and Social Feminism are referred to the analysis. The feminist concepts such as patriarchy, woman as a subject and as an object, personal is politics, woman's subordination, suppression, oppression and woman as other and the like are taken as the touch stones. The issues of division of labour based on gender discrimination from the ancient times to the present are studied taking the social context into account. The reasons of male superiority over women and the factors that determine the social construct of images of man and woman have been inspected. The analysis of the autobiographies does not aim to compare the positions of women in the autobiographies, but to show, how it is an extension of the same issues related to women's even after hundreds of years till the present. The autobiographies selected for the study by Kamala Das are, My Story (1973), Prabha Khaitan's 'Anya Se Ananya' (2007) and Baby Halder's 'A Life Less Ordinary (2006) are selected for the study. The



autobiographies by them have been translated into English.

**Key Words:** Autobiography, Womanhood, Male Domination, Gender discrimination, Patriarchy

## 1. Introduction

Women have been presented in various ways in Literature since times immemorial, the depiction of womanhood acquires a new benchmark after coming of women writers in the scene. Refuting the patriarchal norms, these female writers have given a new meaning to self-assertion and establishment of identity of women. The Indian female writers, writing in English and other languages like Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali etc. have established their own brand of feminism while advocating their cause of “womanhood”. The depiction of Womanhood in Indian female writers, however, is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Each writer has developed her own brand in keeping with her philosophy and vision of life. The present research-work aims at evaluating the autobiographies of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan, and Baby Halder from the perspective of feminism by analyzing the female protagonists who struggle to assert their individuality and establish their self- identity in a male- dominated socio-cultural set-up. These writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural practices that restricted their freedom. In most cases, the writings are in a confessional and personal note, where their composition acts as a social document as they are themselves sufferers and also agents of social revolution. Though there are many differences in the writers. The issues discussed by them have the same intensity. Their methods of dealing with the women’s issues, their suppression in the male dominating society are very different in their respective styles. Yet their purpose is to reform society by getting insights through the autobiographies. All the writers intend to bring change in the attitudes of people leading to equality and social justice for all human beings. The autobiographies of all the writers comprise of the elements which connect the patriarchal society and the issue of a place of women in society. There is also a controversy reflected through the autobiographies, whether women should follow the duty or the self esteem. The issues of free will, political powers, upbringing of elite class women and their psyche, male domination as the inevitable issues are the major issues that have been analyzed through the study. The autobiographies are analyzed from a feminist point of view. Feminism is a belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men has been taken into consideration while studying the women images in the concerned autobiographies. The four major streams of feminism, namely Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism and Social Feminism are referred to the analysis. The views of the great feminist critics like Toril Moi, Simon De Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millett and



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Elaine Showalter, about being a woman and feminism are taken as the guidelines for analyzing the women images in the selected autobiographies.

Autobiography is a form of literature in which the author writes the story of his own life and achievements. Its aim is successful presentation of personality and, in the best examples, of the period to which the author belonged. It obviously must suffer from the congenital defect; it can never be complete, for it must always come to an end before that depth of the writer. Dr. Johnson, nevertheless, preferred Autobiography to Biography. Every man's life, he said, is best written by himself: "The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another." Again from the psychological point of view, no one can know as well as the autobiographer himself what motives prompted him at decisive moments, what his secret hopes and ambitions were, and how far his career fulfilled his real aspirations. As Longfellow said, "Autobiography is a product of first-hand experience, Biography of second hand knowledge." Stevenson, himself so subjective a writer, though he did not live to tell his own story, said, "There is no truer sort of writing than what is to be found in autobiographies, and certainly none more entertaining." The writers prepared a fertile background of contemporary Indian English autobiography and skillfully presented the socio-cultural, political, social problems and conflicts in their plays. The present proposed research aims at exploring feminine and feminist sensibility in the selected autobiographies of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder. It will be a minute study of weak and strong female characters from the selected autobiographies. The selected autobiographies show a sordid picture of patriarchal social structure and the sham moral standards of Indian society where women undergo a series of sufferings as the victims of the hegemonic power structure. The selected autobiographies represent an environment of social structure with two different facets of women's personality. Some of them apparently look silent sufferers of intrigue, hypocrisy, greed, brutality of male dominated society while some of them are quite rebellious, bold, revolutionary and courageous in nature. They continuously raise their voice against injustice, gender inequality and gender based exploitation. The collective efforts of all the writers genuinely attempts to study and explore the root cause of gender inequality in the dominated tendencies of men through their autobiographies. Also their autobiographies underline the spirit of women for individual rights, respect, independent life, self identity, quest for completeness and emancipation from agonies of life-long tortures.



The corpus of the study will be the selected autobiographies of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder.

## **2. Title: Depiction of Womanhood in the Selected Autobiographies of Kamala Das, Prabha Khetan and Baby Halder**

### **3. Review of Literature:**

One can notice that writers in their autobiographies unveil two major tendencies of the Indian society: male dominance and feminine frailty. Women are projected as suffering a lot at the hands of their male-counterparts. They do not have equal status with men and, sometimes, part with their individual dignity, too. They are exploited both socially and economically. Although men are largely responsible for the exploitative and oppressive nature of society, women remain contributory to it. Here, the autobiographies seem to attack the Indian women's conservative minds, which do not allow them to show guts in encounter with their male-companions. Furthermore, they even provide them with an emotional support in a period of crisis. The tendency of enduring exploitation is so deep-rooted in their bones that even the thought of rebellion does not arise in their minds. They are hardly assertive and, at times, seem so slavish that their love and loyalty towards their husbands and families do not allow them to raise any voice against them. The women characters, projected in these autobiographies, thus, appear to be the mute witnesses of the womankind's endless suffering in Indian society for centuries. Their women betray Nora's courage and understanding, become rebels and by their protestations declare their independence. In this sense of being "free", they are really "new women". It is observed that the characters are sharp contrast with other female characters in the different autobiographies. Hostile circumstances play little, negligible role in shaping the good fortunes of such dominant people. The depiction of triumph over her rivals signals the inauguration of Women's Empowerment.

**3.1** Works done on Kamala Das Bhasin and Srivastava (2013) minutely analyze the poems of Kamala Das in "Pragmatic analysis of Kamala Das Poetry" which reflect the subjugation of woman, as a man wants, to keep alive the myth of his superiority which leads to bias against women in all spheres of life. According to Kamala Das, even the act of sex itself has the male as aggressor and women as recipient. Several of her poems point to the implicit gender bias that affects the lives of women in all spheres of life, all over the world. Kamala Das longs for true love and affection. Throughout her life, she dared to stand on her own and



express flawlessly her physical need. She reveals how her life has been long drawn battle against cultural and religious orthodoxy. With a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context, Kamala Das expresses her need for love. The uniqueness in her poetry is the frustration of a woman devoid of sexual satisfaction. Kamala Das rejects the way of fellow female writers who try to tackle the problem of existence avoiding any task about their bodies and confronts her body with unparalleled boldness and honesty. Her woman is strong and weak, whores and mother, lovers and wives. Kamala Das portrays herself into her female protagonists.

**3.2** Works done on Prabha Khaitan seek to focus primarily on the psychological exploration of the inner mind of women characters. The writer being a woman dives deep into the inner mind of the repressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and brings to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psychological and emotional imbalances. She talks about domestic relations with the son and mother relationship. Often she compares the present with the past and shows that even in the modern context there has been no change in the relationship. She sometimes sarcastically comments on the situation. She points out how with a style marked by economy, brevity, concentration and vivid clarity, Prabha Khaitan presents the life of upper class Indian women in her autobiography. The changed post modern society and the adjustments that a woman has to make to fit into the paradigm, with a comparatively traditional cultural outlook is wonderfully presented by Prabha Khaitan in her creative writing. She says Indian women, unlike their western counterparts, have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated against a male dominant social set-up. Any attempt by a woman to rise above the oppressive forces rooted in the middle class margins has either been curbed mercilessly or ignored in the name of social dignity. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women seriously in her autobiography.

**3.3** Works done on Baby Halder portrays the effect of existential problems on a sensitive mind that intends to grab tightly the closeness and magic of nature, the identity of a female soul in a cruel world. Her last employer, writer and retired anthropology professor Prabodh Kumar and a grandson of noted Hindi literary giant Munshi Premchand, living in Gurgaon, a suburb of capital New Delhi, seeing her interest in books while dusting his book shelves, encouraged her to first read leading authors, starting with Taslima Nasreen's autobiographical *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) about a tumultuous youth and deep anger on being born a woman in a poor society. This deeply moved Halder and turned out to be a turning point, as it was to inspire



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her own memories, later on. She soon zealously began reading other authors. Subsequently, before going on a trip to South India, he bought her a notebook and pen and encouraged her to write her life story, which she did late at night after work and sometimes in between chores, using plain matter-of-fact language and writing in native Bengali. When Kumar was back after a month, she had already written 100 pages.

After several months, when her memoirs were completed, Kumar also aided in editing the manuscript, shared it with local literary circle and translated it into Hindi. This version was published in 2002 by a small Kolkata-based publishing house, Roshani Publishers. Much to their surprise, the book turned out to be a best-seller from the start. It immediately got extensive media attention as it threw light on the hard lives led by domestic servants in Asia, and within two-year it had published two more editions. The Bengali original, *Aalo Aandhari* (Light and Darkness) was also published in 2004. A Malayalam version appeared in 2005 and the English translation was published in 2006, which became a best-seller in India, while *The New York Times* called it India's *Angela's Ashes*. Soon it was translated into 21 languages, including 13 foreign languages, including French, Japanese and Korean.

The book has been translated into German in 2008. It is expected that the author herself will be visiting Germany in the company of her publisher, Preeti Gill of New Delhi, India to present the book to audiences there and explain to them the present situation of women in India. The prestigious Georg-August University in Goettingen, Germany has arranged for a seminar to be held with the author and her publisher on 23 October 2008. Further seminars are being arranged in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Krefeld, Halle, Kiel, Berlin and Heidelberg. Her second book *Eshat Roopantar* in Bengali was also well received.

#### 4. Aims and Objectives of Research:

The aims and objectives of proposed research are as follows: The research work is undertaken with the following objectives:

- i. To conduct exhaustive literature review in the area of feminism.
- ii. To depict feminist sensibility of women who reacts as revolutionary, rebellious, social-aware, liberal, rational, and aggressive for equal rights and in search of self entity.
- iii. To understand the female psyche in the selected autobiographies in relation with traditional orthodox principle of religion and social structure where they live and how they dare to face tragic problems of life.



- iv. To create ground for the empowerment of women thus giving them their due status which they so greatly deserve.
- v. To study the place and position of women in male dominated Indian society represented by Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan, and Baby Halder.
- vi. To add to the existing pool of knowledge in the area of Feminism in general and Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan, and Baby Halder in particular.

## 5. Research Methodology:

The research method to be adopted will be followed in the critical study of literature or criticism. In short, it will be one of descriptive, exploratory, and interpretative nature. The study material will comprise the texts and personal interviews of the scholars related to the concerned field. The basic methodologies that have been implied in carrying out this research work are the following:

1. In order to apply the analytical and descriptive methods to the research, the primary sources such as the original works of these writers as well as the secondary sources available in the form of criticism would be used.
2. Some of the important libraries of university in Gujarat would be visited to accumulate a large amount of study material and to encompass the views of the various researchers.
3. In addition, interviews and views of leading critics and other authors writing about same subject would be taken into consideration and such inputs would be utilized in completing the proposed work.
4. The subject matter would be analyzed in the perspective of feminist theory.

## 6. Hypotheses:

The present research focuses on following hypotheses:

1. It is believed in the Indian society that woman essentially need male support for her smooth life. She has no entity without her male-counterpart in society.
2. It is the tragedy of woman since ancient to modern times that she has been used as only a tool to fulfill all demands in family and society.
3. It is one of the principle of the male - dominated society that woman must do household duties





without any complain. In addition she must follow the principle of chastity, customs and norms in the family.

4. Emotions, feelings, zeal of love, her quest for perfection, her futile effort of being self-reliant, the spirit of defence has less importance in the oppressed social structure of society.
5. Feminist sensibility in the selected autobiographies underlines women's striving for acquiring freedom, equality and privileges as human being.

## 7. Scope and Significance of the Study:

This study, to sum up, will arrive at some significant inferences. The writers aim at bringing to light some of the most complex and vital issues of our existence, inner and outer. One can approach these autobiographies from various points of view, such as psychological, sociological, politico-cultural, existential, feminist, etc. A brief, cursory but analytical treatment will be given in the study to all these aspects or dimensions of their autobiographies with a focus on the feminine and feminist sensibility. Women will be projected as a class, performing a major role in shaping the society. A modest, sincere attempt will be made to present Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder with their variegated aspects. The analytical study of these autobiographies reveals that the writers have a desire to strive tirelessly for perfection of life where there are no barriers of caste, class, sex, etc., in society. They can dream, of freedom, equality, and social justice for one and all.

## 8. Tentative Chapter Scheme:

### Chapter I: Introduction

It is designed to give a brief introduction to the status of women in the Indian Society and the evolution of feminism with a view to evaluate and analyze the prominent works of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder. This chapter is expected to outline the literary theories and parallel political movements in India for the emancipation of women. Part II of the chapter plans to deal with a brief history of Female Indian English Writers with special focus on Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder and their contribution to the world literature. Also their position in the history of Indian English Literature would be taken into account.



## **Chapter II: A representation of women characters in the works of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan, and Baby Halder**

This proposes to represent the women characters as have been portrayed by these writers. The portrayal is likely to be unclouded by false beliefs or misconceptions. Kamala Das's 'My Story' would be taken into account for the study.

## **Chapter-III: A comparative study of the impassioned quest for Identity**

This Chapter is planned to focus on the heroine's unquenchable thirst for identity in the works of all the four female writers namely Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan and Baby Halder and makes a comparison of the same. All the women protagonists reveal a fervent quench for their own identity. They use to think, mother – father – brother -grandparents as their culprits– but the new realization make them understand that the problem is embedded in socio-cultural norms formulated by religions and politics of the world. Kamala Das gives a realistic portrayal of her own hopes, aspirations, frustrations and ranting in her autobiography. Her open and candid treatment to the female sexuality without any sense of guilt or shame makes her a bold and daring poetess. She makes no attempt to conceal the sensuality of the human form; her works celebrate their joyous potential while acknowledging the concurrent dangers. She urges the women to give their men, what makes you a woman. She leaves no stone unturned to expose the subjugation suffered by all women in patriarchal society and also reveals that it is not only she who is in quest for true love but every Indian woman has the same fate. Her negative and dismissive image of a man in her mind as an instrument of corruption, a symbol of corrosion and the demolisher of the female chastity, is not hers alone but holds true for every Indian Woman.

**Chapter-IV: A comparison of the struggles of the writers in gaining their individuality.** This chapter is formulated to deal with the struggles of the protagonists in gaining their individuality. A comparison of the struggles by the protagonists in the works of all the writers would then be made and analysis would be done to see the similarities and differences in the types of struggles faced. It is expected to show how hard they struggle for the same undeterred by the opposition that they face from their near and dear ones. They learn to lead their lives in their own ways.



## Chapter-V: Conclusion

This chapter proposes to conclude the contribution of all these female writers to feminism. It is a significant statement on the feministic issues taken by these writers and their relevance to the present times. The chapter is also expected to encapsulate the major points of the four writers that the study would reveal.

### 9. Limitations of the Study:

This study would be limited to the depiction of womanhood in the selected autobiographies. As autobiography is a larger form of literature and it covers a most of the writers personality and his writing skills so the study will be limited to only three autobiographies by three writers.

### 10. Probable outcome of the research

The research is expected to investigate various aspects such as themes, craftsmanship etc of Kamala Das, Prabha Khaitan, and Baby Halder so as to establish the nature of feminism in the works of the above authors. It is envisaged that exploring the different facets of feminism in the author by throwing more light on certain unexplored arena of her genius establishes her feminist credentials even more firmly.

The writer's portrayal of her protagonists in the perspective of Indian Concept of Feminism is expected to be brought into critical discussion. In the light of the autobiographer's perception and portrayal of various issues related to Indian women, the research work is also expected to analyze and assess the modern Indian society with special reference to the condition of women therein. The thesis is sure to add significantly to the existing pool of knowledge on feminism and will contribute towards establishing Indian Writing in English in its rightful position in the contemporary word Literature.



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