

## BEYOND GENDER AND RELIGION: A STUDY OF KAMALA AND SAGUNA BY KRUPABAI SATTHIANANDHAN

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### Abstract

*Krupabai Saththianadhan (1862-1894) is regarded as one of the first women authors in English. Her two novels, Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life(1894) and Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life (1895), are remarkable for their construction of a Indian female heroines caught between different cultures (Indian and English, Hindu, and Christian, traditional and modern).I would like to work on her novel Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life which is a poignant story of Kamala's experience as a child-wife, mother and widow, one of the earliest instances, in women's fiction in English, of the Indian woman as the protagonist and also see how the author's intrusions shape the form of this novel. I would also like to look at the social landscape the novel places itself in, and try to argue the evolution of the protagonist as she moves from the private sphere into the public sphere. We see the incipient "New Woman" protagonist blossoming out of the traditional role-identity in the background of Indian-British cultural hybridity.*

**Keywords:** Krupabai Saththianandhan, Kamala, Saguna, Culture

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‘**N**ovel is a sole genre that continues to develop, that is yet uncompleted.’ (Bhaktin. 6) Being the flag-bearer of a constantly evolving form, Krupabai found herself juggling with the ideologies of two diverse cultural milieux and yet caricaturing works that are centered on her own identity as a modern woman in colonial India. Krupabai Satthianadhan’s two novels *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895), present women protagonists who are trapped between the binaries of Indian and English, Hindu and Christian, traditional and modern. She was born to Haripant and Radhabai, the first converts to Christianity in the Bombay presidency. She stood out from the other women of her generation as she attended the Madras Christian College, one among the first colleges in India to admit women. Even though she could not complete her studies due to her physical conditions, she was remembered by all as the best student in class securing the highest marks in almost every subject. Her own academic excellence is mirrored in the unusual educational exuberance of her protagonists. The colonial period and the author’s high status in the society must have been the trigger for the liberal views related to caste and race expressed through both her texts.

[Krupabai’s accounts] are interesting because it is one of the earliest extant accounts of the everyday interaction between the races in the nineteenth century India. The fine eye for detail, significant in the politics of such exchanges, and the satiric voice, no less devastating because of its understatement are typical of Krupa’s Writing. (Tharu and Lalita. 276)

Women writers started out on the same sphere and yet, the process and reception of their writing greatly varied. I argue that the cultural portmanteau of Krupabai’s times and her identity reverberate through her works refusing to fixate on a single ideological apparatus. This fluidity is apparent throughout the text resulting in round characters. Kamala’s in-laws who like her at first slowly start becoming mean to her. Her husband who we think is starting to fall in love drifts apart. In the end the author gives Kamala a chance to find her feminine individuality and rise above the shackles of tradition but the same cultural schizophrenia binds her to the middle ground, trapped between two cultures, in which she finds herself unable to cross over and accept the love she deserves.

It has been a common point raised by feminist critics that classics embodied the stereotyped image of women fixating on a universally accepted male bias. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Anne Ferguson in *The Images of Women in Literature* (1973) focus on the representation of women in mainstream literature to show this bias. Hence, the feminist literary critics of the 1970s pointed out that only literature by women will bring out the real images of women. This idea can be linked to this paper on Krupabai as her writing focuses on the inner turmoil of a woman's life and not merely represent them as a prop to the development of a male character. The book offers a psychological insight into the mind of the protagonist. Krupabai, being the forgotten archetype of the feminist author in English from India, brings the ugly face of patriarchy to the forefront. She creates a social novel faithfully presenting the society and its gender roles, thus presenting a realistic portrayal of an Indian woman's life to the English audience who were till then familiar only with the romanticised versions of the orient.

'[The husband and the wife] have not the same liberty of speech and action that are accorded to them usually in European countries.' (Sathianadhan. 62) The trajectory of the novel by women in India can be traced and patterns can be drawn. But how should the first novel be located at the point of origin? The origin of a panoramic shot has to be dealt with in itself and not with the support of its successors, for; the successive frames were not visible at the time of the original. It is not sure if the author realised the importance of the foundation stone she was about to lay, but her books with strong female protagonists much ahead of their times show that Krupabai was aware of her larger responsibility to her gender. In *Kamala* she creates a female protagonist who is clever, inquisitive and well mannered. Even though *Kamala* is mistreated, she stays firm to her roots. Through this the author gives us a rather realistic portrayal of her times when women, however educated or matured, bear their scars silently rather than protest against it. The New Woman is only at the initial stage of development. *Kamala* is the archetype of the New Woman born out of a cultural amalgamation. The later women novelists take this figure forward into the modern day models. Krupabai's novels *Saguna* and *Kamala* attained widespread popularity at the time of their release both among the British as well as the educated Indian audience. The Queen herself is said to have read *Saguna* and instructed any further books by the novelist to be sent to her. These books which were widely read at that time vanished from the public eyes for almost a hundred years. Even now these books are not well known even in the literary circles. It is, however, clear from the elaborate explanations of traditional Indian rituals by the author that the book was written keeping in mind a western audience.

It is written in the introductory memoir by H. B. Grigg (ii) that her works have been reviewed in flattering terms in leading English journals. Grigg also quotes Sir Alfred Croft,

the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal 'To these difficulties may be added the belief, perhaps more widely felt than expressed, that the general education of women means a social revolution. The extent of which cannot be foreseen.' This view that was popular in India at that time is reflected in Kamala. Ganesh's family are appalled by his idea of educating Kamala. His mother believes that it might raise the woman to the equal status of a man and hence finds the idea horrifying. His father who initially favoured Kamala now stops talking to his son. The colonial rule introduced a new modern sensibility among the Indian audience who had earlier restricted their education to the ancient scriptures. This new English educated class of the colonial India now found themselves split between the modern European sensibilities and the traditional Indian practices.

Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as 'the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite.' (Bhabha. 126) Ganesh, Kamala's husband, an English educated man is seen to imitate the cultural practices of the west in educating his wife but after the initial phase the societal pressures stops the process. An educated Indian is thus placed at a cultural impasse in which he cannot move back or forth towards any one culture. This inability is shown by Ganesh's gradual decline of interest in Kamala's education. This defines the period in which Krupabai writes. The liberal views are not restricted to the British community. Kamala's father, a Brahmin priest educated in Sanskrit holds a more liberal position than his English educated son-in-law.

'Your mother read with me, with bewildered eyes, books that were never put into women's hands... nothing came between her and me, and as her understanding unfolded, her love for me increased.' (Saththianadhan. 120) Through counter characters like this Krupabai dispels the earlier notion that educating a woman might lead to problems. The older generation seems to be more concrete about their views while the generation that consist of Ganesh and Sai oscillate from one point to the other unable to take a stand. This indecisiveness, I argue is due to the instability that arises out of the new born cultural crossbreeding of their times. The main point of disturbance in the lives of the characters is Kamala's education by her husband Ganesh who is educated in English. He became enthralled by the idea of an educated wife.

He found her, moreover, eager to get information about everything, and wonderfully quick of comprehension, and with the English idea he had imbibed regarding women's love and education he thought of striking out a new line and developing Kamala's mind and so training her to be a real companion to him. (Saththianadhan. 73)

'English has attracted support because of its perceived malleability.' (Boehmer. 210) The language has managed to bring the cultural baggage it carried along with it. The

language thus infuses the collective consciousness of its formulators into the cultural consciousness of the new speakers leading to a hybrid conscious developed primarily due to the language.

'The Anglicised Indian, as the ultimate product of mimicry, must impersonate the English without ultimately threatening the English authority.' (London. 97) The emergence of a Women's literature in India has not been a natural process. It has been a rather difficult path for women writers who had to conquer the hurdles of society, caste and most importantly gender and reach the finish line. From the poems of Buddhist nuns of the sixth century to the first English novel by an Indian woman, these works reflect the experiences of Indian women. History has left many gaps in archiving the lives of these brilliant women. Elleke Boehmer points out that (24) the focus was on the imperial domination and the rest of the world was ignored in the mainstream realist novels of the colonial period because the rest, the non-West, was assumed to be marginal and secondary to the metropolis. Krupabai goes against this trend in Kamala where the imperial is never an entity. While her first novel Saguna features many Britishers, Kamala sticks to the Indian terrain and to the Indian people. Krupabai has constant interactions with the colonial officials. The book is dedicated to Lady Her Excellency Lady Wenlock due to the interest manifested by her ladyship during the writing of the book. This proves the author's close associations with the prominent colonial officials and yet Kamala remains aloof from this crowd. The book does not mention or even hint an existence of a community beyond the native Indians and yet does not part with the modern ideals of the British.

A work which laid the foundation of a new genre quickly disappeared under the huge structures that came after. It cannot be identified if the women novelists who succeeded Krupabai were influenced by her but she is among the few novelists who attained popularity during her own times. The writings before the emergence of the concept of the New Woman presented females as adjuncts to males. They were presented as that additional piece which completes the male characters. Krupabai on the other hand gives us the Kamala, the genesis of an evolving consciousness, the incipient New Woman protagonist of a century of Indian women's English fiction. She makes her male characters complementary pieces to the elaboration of a patriarchal society. Kamala is given the sole responsibility of taking the novel forward. Even in presenting her traditionally as a subset of the male patriarchy, the author goes against the conventions to give her the voice. Even while she is rendered voiceless in the fiction, she is given a voice in reality.

The public sphere was constituted in discussion which could also assume the form of consultation and of sitting in the court of law, as well as in common action, be it the waging of war or competition in athletic games. (Habermas.19)

Kamala's life constantly moves back and forth between the private sphere of her family life in which she is restrained and bound; and the public sphere where she and her friends constantly engage in the free discussion about their lives. The private sphere becomes a place of suffering for her where she is either left all alone or she has to suffer the torments of her in-laws. Kamala is happy and free in the public spaces offered by the well behind their homes or the party she attends or the pilgrimage she undertakes with her friends. 'The freedom and innocent pleasures such journeys afford are in striking contrast to the dull, artificial surroundings of the Hindu homes.' (Sathianadhan. 67)

The clear favouring of the public space by the protagonist shows the patriarchal nature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century private sphere. While the political atmosphere of the nation led to the formation of a public sphere, a parallel public space is seen to emerge- one inhabited by the females. This notion of a gendered public sphere finds place in Krupabai's writings. 'The public sphere saw its first traces of emergence in the Indian scenario as late as the beginning of the Nineteenth century which also marks the establishment of British rule in India.' (Tiwari. 645)

The emergence of the Indian New Women caught in the cultural in-betweenness of British modernity and Indian traditionalism is well expressed in her works. This notion of the roaming mind in a restricted body defines the Indian new woman of the 1850s to 90s.

The literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture. (Watt. 217)

As Watt elaborates, the stress on the idiosyncratic aspect of the novel is what provides newness to it. The figure of the author thus becomes important to the understanding of the central figures of the story. Traces of an underlying alter-ego of Kamala who wishes to break free from the strands of orthodoxy are present in the text and yet, the novel binds her to the traditional conditioning till the end. The author's experiment with the novel form cannot take a giant leap with the gender question so early. Hence the author provides the readers with different scenarios and even makes the reader imagine the possibility of a happier end but she does not forget the reality of her society and ends the novel on a sad reality of forced widowhood.

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