

Mothering the Mother: A Daughter's Tribute

Dr. Anju Jagpal*

In general, mothers as promoters of traditional patriarchal values of obedience and good behavior are often resisted and resented by the daughters, who are next generation women with different expectations, dreams and challenges to face in their individual lives. Quite often, this largely unconscious maternal collaboration with the existing structure results in self-hate, a sense of inferiority and social impotence in female. If a daughter fights to release herself from this dyad and forges ahead, she carries an unconscious guilt and pain till she comes to peace with herself and her mother. Once the mother is beyond physical reach, the ghosts of anger, resentment, bitterness and acrimony won't allow the daughter respite till she reaches at conciliation with the deceased mother. This volatile and passionate relationship of love and hate survives all the upheavals of life and finally the daughter is intrigued to find herself replicating her own mother for the next generation woman. This perpetuation of self on part of the mother, however, undergoes a change with circumstances and new leaning.

During the course of 19th century India, as Geraldine Forbes observes, "The pattern of women's lives began to change. In reality the concept of the 'perfect wife' was being redefined...As a consequence of changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of the 19th Century; there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile, and increasingly involved in public activities."¹ The path for women in general was not yet smooth; even then many of them started breaking their silence and voicing their experiences in a variety of forms - letters, tracts, diaries, magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, short stories, novels and biographies.

The present article is an attempt to delineate a daughter's deep sense of gratitude towards her mother's untiring efforts to support her construct her future during

the 19th C, when education for girls was still considered an explicit invitation to widowhood and social exclusion. Krupabai Sattianadhan (1862-94) is the first Indian woman who wrote novel in English. Her novel *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* was first published serially in the *Madras Christian College Magazine* in 1887-8 and later published posthumously as a book in 1895 as *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman*² by Srinivasa, Varadachari and CO., Madras. Her second novel *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* was originally published serially in the same magazine in 1894 and it was published in the book form in the same year by the same publisher with a slight change in the title as *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Child-Wife*.³

Born in Ahmadnagar in 1862 to Brahmin parents Haripunt and Radhabai who later converted to Christianity in the Bombay Presidency, Krupabai was the first female students to join Madras Medical College in 1878. Owing to her fragile health she could not complete her studies and in 1881 married Samuel Sattianadhan, a highly qualified man with a University degree from Cambridge. Shaped and sculpted by her mother's quiet yet strong presence and her elder brother Bhaskar's lofty literary tastes and Christian ideals, Krupa joined her husband whole-heartedly in the service of the poor and marginalized. In 1886 she moved to Madras as her husband got a position in the Presidency College. It was the place and time when she started writing the story of conversion of her parents in serialized form to be published in the *Christian College Magazine* in 1889-90.⁴

The daughter is at present sagacious enough to understand and empathize with her mother's predicament and appreciate her dedication as a dutiful wife and a vigilant mother. Though autobiographical, this novel is representative of all those mother-like women who had to follow the footprints of their husbands and did not have any voice of their own. The late 19th Century, a major transitional phase in the history of India witnessed

* Associate Professor of English, Govt. PG College, Ambala Cantt.

many crucial changes. Through her mother's story, Krupa lauds the contribution of her previous generation women who paved way for the progress of the next generation women. Krupa has delineated very poignantly the agony and indecisiveness of the woman who was torn apart within and whose whole life became a saga of struggle and conflict while creating a sense of balance between two religious faiths.

Her mother Radhabai, though converted to Christianity, could not forget her Hindu moorings altogether. All her life, she kept oscillating between her original and adopted faith. Krupa tells us that her father died early leaving his fourteen children "to the sole care of an orthodox mother, who though her faith in her new religion was strong, was still full of Hindu notions of things." (*Saguna*.19) It was to keep her *dharma* as a wife that she follows her husband and implores him to come back to the folds of his own family and religion. It is her husband's sympathetic attitude and understanding that gradually makes her accede to Christianity.

As a woman and a wife, she has no agency to question her husband's decision. Though she is tricked into accepting Christian faith by her husband and feels astute sense of guilt and shame because of her husband's deviation, she remains a faithful wife. When the whole episode is brought to the notice of the Magistrate and

"Radha ... was asked three times whether it was her intention to live with her husband or not. She was not prepared for such a question. According to the customs of her country nothing was so disgraceful as for a wife to say that she would not live with her husband, and so, ignorant of the consequences, she replied to the question put to her in the affirmative." (*Saguna*)

Torn between her role of a dutiful wife and that of a caste Hindu, she relents gradually. Though she "was rebellious and uncontrollable for a long time. She had her idols, kept her fasts and festivals, and gave her husband food outside the house."

Krupa portrayed very vividly the vulnerability, dejection and mental agony of her mother as a young wife, left all alone to struggle with her life. Bereft of her home and surroundings, she finds everything hostile to her faith and person. She finds not even a single soul to come to her rescue and the person closest to her becomes the cause of her chagrin. Describing the hardships of a Hindu child-bride and chronicling the social history of her period, Krupa has also explains that women were not considered mature enough to take decisions on their own. Even a well-read, sensitive and conscientious man like her own father did not take the consent of his wife before taking such a major decision. Her husband feels guilty yet does not doubt his decision which he takes on her behalf till the end. It is her husband's dedicated

service and generosity of spirit that brings Radhabai to the folds of Christianity. In an attempt to reconstruct and understand the life and travails of her mother, Krupa looks back and brings to light the hitherto hidden and seemingly inconsequential episodes of her parents' life.

Rebuilding her past story Krupa narrates how her mother would emphasize and coax her to be trained in the household chores, lest too much learning and freedom should spoil the daughter and leave her unprepared for her future life. She would often call young Krupa to help her out in the kitchen and would say:

"What a girl you are to go and trouble your head with books! What is the use of learning for a girl? A girl's training school is near the *chool*. . ., and however learned a girl may be she must come to the *chool*." (*Saguna*)

Though she is not very harsh and indulges the daughter in her ideas of getting an education, she is still not convinced that a girl can have any other destiny than that of a wife and a mother. However, the daughter's insistence and interest in books makes her concede to the latter's pleas of joining her brothers during their study hours. The mother is seen here beyond the superstition that by learning and acquiring knowledge a woman becomes unnatural and invites widowhood.

Under the sway of Christianity and progressive views of her husband and sons, Radhabai appears to have developed a sensibility that would negate such credulous views yet was not fully convinced about the utility of education for girls. She wants her daughter to have female friends and be in their company. She introduced Krupa to Harni and Prema who were educated with care by their parents and had a good name and standing in the mission circles. While appreciating her mother's concern, Krupa could also perceive the eagerness of newly educated people to imitate English customs and manners in the name of being progressive and civilized and hopes that her countrymen, and countrywomen "in their eagerness to adopt the new will not give up the good that is in the old." (*Saguna*)

Krupa's mother Radhabai lost her mother in her childhood and lived with her elder brother and his wife till her mother-in-law came to take her to her marital home. She remembers how the rich mothers would decorate their daughters during the festivals and fill their heads with vain thoughts and ideas. This departure from the norm is another remarkable feature in the mother's character that prepares the daughter to have a meaningful perspective towards life.

Her elder brother Bhaskar's death leaves Krupa depressed and dejected. The mother understands the void thus created in the life of her daughter. Initiated late into the path of Christianity, the mother knows her own

limitations of not being capable of the same source of strength and motivation for her daughter whose dreams she is hardly able to envision. The daughter is sent to stay in the company of progressive and pious missionary women to continue her learning. She stays there for a few months till she falls sick and is brought back home. The mother feels intrigued and happy to find her daughter all humble and pliable. She had expected some change in her outlook towards the poor surroundings of her home and people, but Krupa is rather happy and feels secure to be in her mother's company. The daughter is able to peel the façade off the missionary women whom she finds living a false life most of the time yet for the mother such an estimation of these angelic figures is nothing less than pigheadedness on the part of the daughter. Later Krupa is permitted formally to take admission in a convent school meant for Christian girls. The mother makes a plea to the teachers:

"My daughter is alone at home. She learns a little too much, so I have brought her here to be more like other girls, to learn a little and to play a little; but you will have to give her a room to herself, and let her be free from the rules of the school at first. Let her join the classes or not as she likes; for she is delicate. I will pay all extra charges." (*Saguna*)

The mother understands the delicate psyche of her daughter. The thought of getting her daughter married at the age she herself was married does not occur even once to Radhabai rather she is anxious about her daughter's physical and psychological health. This change in the attitude of a mother in the late 19th century is quite appreciable. Instead of marriage, the mother thinks about the fulfilment of her daughter's dreams of a constructive life and allows her to pursue the aim of her life. She is prepared to pay extra for the comforts of her daughter which was earlier not even considered important for girls as they were expected to be prepared to face all kinds of hardships in their life. The mother even asks Krupa to accompany her home if she feels homesick but the daughter is determined to stay in the school. This indulgence accorded to a daughter is really remarkable. Krupa is selected in the school for the study of medicines and later in her life she is also granted the liberty to select her life partner. She remembers her mother as a very cooperative and considerate person who supports her daughter in all the endeavours of her life and contributes as much as she could in her progress.

This mother-daughter duo is mutually supportive and their life is porous and open to each-other. There seems to exist a perfect understanding between the two. The mother conceals nothing about her initial struggle and inhibitions after the conversion and her life-story comes

to the daughter without any resistance. Once Radhabai accepted Christianity, she never seems to resent the hardships she faced in her life. Her faith was absolute and the financial difficulties which she faced almost all her life did not deter her commitment nor did she narrate the stories of affluence of her marital home to her children. She made them accept their life as it came to them.

Krupa's second novel *Kamla: The Story of a Hindu Child-Wife* was written mostly from her deathbed while mourning the death of her infant child. It was published posthumously in the form of a novel. The story of Kamala, a Hindu child-wife again is the reflection of Krupa's mother's life and experiences as a child-wife. Kamala lost her mother in her childhood and is brought up by her father who is a *sanyasi*. She is married young. The stereotype portrayal of the cruel mother-in-law and scheming sisters-in-law reflect the social health of Indian society and the helplessness of the child-bride who accepts her fate resignedly. Kamala herself becomes the mother of a daughter but loses her child in her infancy. Chandni Lokuge very rightly remarks "That Kamala is representative of a whole female community ... who, like Kamala, suffer tremendous degradation at the hands of their husbands and in-laws---trapped within an inflexible domesticity, physically imprisoned and brutalized." (*Kamala*). Talking about home as a site of repression and shelter as well, Meera Kosambi says that for woman it has always been very difficult to have a breather. Since marriage is considered the supreme goal of a girl's life, during 19th century in a Maharashtrian home, a girl's life was shaped under the strict regimentation of the normative pattern of role relationships within the male dominated extended family. "A young girl experienced the mother-daughter relationship as informal and usually but not always warm, tinged as it was by the mother's responsibility of disciplining and training her daughter for her future wife-mother role, a task in which the mother's reputation was at stake."⁵ A daughter's relationship with her father was that of formal respect and distance. Kamala on the other hand is a pet of her father who performs the twin role of the mother and father. She is initiated into *puranic* ideology and sense of duty right from her childhood. She accepts her fate as resignedly as any other girl of her age who has been prepared for her future role by a mother. In her marital home, her relationship with her father-in-law is similar to that with her own father in the beginning. As a stereotype, her mother-in-law was a dreaded figure who exercises her complete authority in order to train the young married girl in the ways of her new family. Underlying this strictness was the mother-in-law's possessive love for her son because it was only through him that she could wield power within the household. In addition to it, Kamala's

fair beauty proves to be a cause of vexation for her sister-in-law and a source of suspicion in her married life. Lack of a mother in Kamala's life also becomes a cause of complaint for her in-laws as a father is not supposed to know to endow the daughter with sufficient amount of dowry and gifts for her safe and happy married life. She has to face many a contrivance in her marital home where her educated husband gets trapped in an extra-marital relationship and gets suspicious about Kamla's chastity. Kamala, however, does not accept the allegation quietly and fights for her self-respect. To avenge the insult, she leaves home at the dead of night with her infant daughter and reaches her in-law's home to demand justice. With the turn of fate, she becomes the owner of her mother's share in property and the whole scenario changes with this shift in her financial status. The mother in absentia seems to come to rescue her daughter when she has been left all alone in the wide cruel world. She loses her father, her husband and her daughter. The rest of her life she spends according to the accepted norms of society as an austere Hindu widow rejecting the proposal and promise of liberation and a rewarding life from Ramchander. Krupa makes her protagonist fight for her dignity as a woman and a wife, yet falls short of according her the freedom to cross the thresholds to reclaim her agency and have a life of her own. Women in the 19th century would not have dared to take such a step and be segregated from the rest of the society. It was the time when they just had started making moves towards self-realization and even a single hasty step would have been dangerous for their mission. Kamala would have made her mother proud as

she never crossed any limits of decency and till the end she proved herself a worthy daughter of her parents toeing the lines of *Sita* and *Savitri* as a *patiorata*. In the words of Lokuge, "... the experiences of the child-wives in *Kamala* indicate that the lack of an outlet, such as a career or any interest outside their homes, confines them inextricably in a self-perpetuating cycle of unhappiness. Not being conscious of any other mode of existence, they silently, even willingly, accept their emotional dependence on their men." (*Kamala*)

Saguna had an aim in life and she could follow her desire to achieve her goal with the help and support of her mother whereas Kamala, a Hindu child-wife neither had the support of her mother nor any other option but to accept the given conditions in her life.

Notes

1. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, second reprint 2000.
2. Krupabai Sattianadhan, *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, (edited by Chandani Lokuge.)
3. Krupabai Sattianadhan, *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Child-Wife*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (edited by Chandani Lokuge)
4. *Women Writing in Indian, Vol.1, 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Susie Tharu and K.Lalita. Delhi: OUP, 1991 (275-281)
5. Meera Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007(112).