

MY STORY



Kamala Das



Kamala Das

MY STORY



DC Books

English Language

My Story

Reference

by **Kamala Das**

© D C Books/Rights Reserved

First Published May 1988

First E-book Edition July 2012

Cover Design

Design Studio, D C Books

Publishers

D C Books, Kottayam 686 001

Kerala State, India

website : www.dcbooks.com

e-mail : info@dcbooks.com

Although utmost care has been taken in the preparation of this book, neither the publishers nor the editors/compiler can accept any liability for any consequence arising from the information contained therein. The publisher will be grateful for any information, which will assist them in keeping future editions up to date.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-81-264-3786-3

D C BOOKS - The first Indian Book Publishing House to get ISO Certification

Rule Britannia

When I was a little child growing up in Calcutta, the British still ruled India. But in good society they behaved like our equals. It was normal for a British family to have one or two close friends among the Indians with whom they were on visiting terms.

My father's superior at that time was a balding, redfaced gentleman named Ross who called my father "my good friend Nair" whenever he came to our house, thrilling all of us to our very bones.

When we went once to Malabar for a month's stay with my grandmother, we lent our cook to Mrs. Ross so that she might teach him the rudiments of European cookery. With every vacation that we took, our cook advanced more and more in the culinary arts until our eating habits had to be altered to suit his sophistication.

Instead of the rice and curry, he served us soups, cutlets and a stew. For my mother he cooked a plate of rice and lentils because he felt that it was too late to change her tastes. My father ate with a fork and knife. The children, my elder brother and I, eating early and unsupervised, ate Western meals with our little brown fingers, licking our hands, enjoying all that was served on our plates while the cook stood by, frowning. He thought us savages.

My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls Royces, Humbers and Bentleys to the Indian princes and their relatives. My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. We had no full-time maid at that time. The cook took us to the European school a furlong away and brought us back in the afternoon.

He was not of an affectionate nature. So we grew-up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young, there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate who pushed him on a hand-cart when they went on their begging rounds.

My brother was plump and dark. His eyes were bright and circular. Although he was the cleverest in his class, the white boys made fun of

him and tortured him by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril. One day his shirt-front was covered with blood. He was stunned by the cruelty but even the tears seemed inhibited, staying suspended on his lashes while William the bully exclaimed "Blackie, your blood is red." I scratched his face in a mad rage, but was soon overpowered by the tough Anglo-Indians who were always on the other side, fighting for the white man's rights. We did not tell our parents of tortures we underwent at school for wearing, under the school uniform of white twill, a nut-brown skin.

Occasionally the school would get a distinguished visitor, a bird of bright plumage alighting for a short while, a Governor's wife, a white moustached admiral or a lady in grey silks claiming relationship with the family at Buckingham Palace.

I do not know how our lady-principal, whom we called Madam, managed to lure such august personages in. Ours was not a big school. Perhaps it was because we sang the National Anthem, Rule Britannia, louder than the others. In the morning while Madam sat at the grand piano on which stood the tinted photograph of the British royal family and we raised our voices in song, singing 'Britons never never shall be slaves', even the postman slowed his walk to listen. King George the Sixth (God save his soul) used to wink at us from the gilt frame, as though he knew that the British were singing in India their swan song...

Shirley Temple was the rage then with her golden ringlets and her toothy smile. All the little girls copied her. Our school hung her picture on the wall behind the piano. We had in my class another Shirley. A Scot with pink cheeks and yellow ringlets. When the dignitaries arrived, it was always Shirley who carried up the bouquet.

Once she was asked to read a poem that I had composed and when the visitor asked who wrote it, our principal said, Shirley of course, she is a combination of beauty and brains, and then there was from the Governor's wife a special kiss. What a bright little moppet, she said.

When the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company. None of us looked too pretty in those days. There were six in all, counting Louis the black Anglo-Indian who could not make up his mind which side to take. If we were hated by the white children, poor Louis was hated more but he followed them about, clowning to put them in good humour, barking like a dog and braying like an ass...

The Park Street Home

In the year 1928 when my father got married, Mahatma Gandhi's influence was at its highest. The simplicity that he preached appealed to the middle classes. My father soon after the betrothal stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off-white.

After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the 'mangalsutra'. To her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest. She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin.

The Nalapat family's financial position at that time was precarious. All the jewellery had been sold for fighting off litigation and bankruptcy. My father was not an idle landlord. He worked for his living in Calcutta. This was a point in his favour.

When the young couple left for Calcutta my grandmother went along with them to get them settled. My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends. Out of such an arid union were born the first two children, my brother and I, bearing the burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features.

We must have disappointed our parents a great deal. They did not tell us so, but in every gesture and in every word it was evident. It was evident on the days when my father roared at us and struggled to make us drink the monthly purgative of pure castor oil. This used to be one of our childhood nightmares, the ordeal of being woken out of sleep before dawn to have the ounce-glass thrust into our mouths and rough

hands holding our lips closed so that we swallowed the stuff and sank back on our pillows with tears of humiliation streaming from our eyes...

Gradually our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight, to hide in the vicinity of the kitchen where we could hold together the tatters of our self-respect and talk to the scavenger or the gardener who brought for the brass flower vases of our drawing room bunches of marigolds or asters every morning, plucking them from the old European cemetery behind our house.

We lived on the top floor of the repair-yard of the motor car company. One had to climb thirty-six steps to reach our flat. Midway, there was to the right an opening which led on to the servants' quarters where night and day a faucet leaked noisily, sadly. There was a stench of urine which made one pause precisely on that step of the staircase wondering where it came from.

But upstairs in the drawing room where visitors came so rarely there was the smell of starch and flowers. We had white Khaddar curtains that were taken down and changed every fortnight. My brother and I on holidays sat near the full-sized windows looking out and at times dangling some rubber toy on a string to intrigue the passers-by. If someone tugged at the string, we pulled it up in a hurry and hid in the bedroom fearing deliciously that he may come up to grab us. It was an enthralling pastime.

We had only one good friend, just one friend who liked to touch our hands and talk to us about life in general. This was a burly gent named Menon who worked as the Stores Manager of the Motor Car company. When our mother slept in the warm afternoons we slipped out of the house to visit him while he sat at his table ordering long tumblers of frothy tea which he drank blowing on it and wetting his handle-bar moustache.

At that time there was a Malayali family who were friendly with ours. They had two sons and the youngest of them, a puny, pale child had a doll's house which he once showed off when we visited him. Of this I spoke to our friend Menon and perhaps he felt moved, for in a month's time he brought for me a large doll's house complete with dainty furniture which he had whittled all by himself. This was placed on the round table which had the brass top, and at night when the lights were switched on, it shone in all its varnished glory like a Taj Mahal. The friend's house was a hut compared to ours. Off and on we ran into the drawing room to take just another peek into the dining room, or to smell the red paint of the roof.

When the western windows of the drawing room were opened the corrugated roof of the factory came into view. On this, noisily pattered the feet of the monkeys who lived on the trees of the cemetery. Occasionally one of them would creep into our house and steal a coconut or a loaf of bread from the kitchen. One day while the cook was shouting obscenities at the thieving ape the scavenger said, "Thakur, don't speak so to any monkey. He may be Lord Hanuman himself, come to test your devotion."

The cook was not at all religious. He made fun of all the Hindu Gods, hurting the sentiments of the occasional maid and the scavenger. One day the scavenger said that the cook ought to go to Vilayat and settle down there, he was such a Saheb. "Yes, I will," said the cook. "Mrs Ross, the white Memsahab will take me to England as her cook if I tell her than I am willing to leave this country." The scavenger gave a sceptical smile. Ram Ram, he muttered, drinking tea in an enamel mug that was kept aside for him...

The Bougainvillae

On our way to school on some privileged days the cook used to get for us the narrow limp strips of Nestle's chocolate which came in wrappings of glazed red paper with a coloured photo of the British royal family tucked inside its second layer. We collected enough to be able to demand an album from the dealer.

We had also the habit of collecting cuttings from the newspapers for a political album. This contained all the photographs of Hitler and Mussolini who were undoubtedly the greatest heroes in our eyes at that time. The newspapers gave their speeches maximum coverage, built them up into supermen. We secretly hoped to be like them when we grew-up.

At this time my brother thought it a good idea to start a manuscript magazine. None of our contemporaries could turn out essays or poems because they felt diffident about their spelling. So the responsibility fell on my shoulders.

I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem of mine made me cry. My brother illustrated the verses and wrote faintly political articles.

We had two tutors. Mabel, a pretty Anglo-Indian, and Nambiar, the Malayalam tutor. The cook was partial to the lady, served her tea on a tray with tiny sandwiches laid out on a quarter-plate, and to Nambiar who came much later in the evening he gave only a glass-tumbler of tea and a few sardonic remarks. Nambiar, in our house, moved about with a heavy inferiority complex and would hide behind the side-board when my father passed through the dining room where we had our Malayalam lessons. We learnt our vernacular only to be able to correspond with our grandmother who was very fond of us.

One day all the children of our school were taken to the Victoria Gardens for a picnic. We were given sugarcane juice and ham-sandwiches which, being vegetarian, I threw away behind the flowering

bushes. The young school-mistress kept shrieking out "Oh Archie, Oh, Archie" every now and then to the dark history-teacher while he tried most unsuccessfully to grab her and kiss her. She ran round the trees escaping his clutches, all the while laughing gaily as though it was a big joke.

I went away to the farthest fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely. Oh I was so lonely that day. No one seemed to want my company, not even my brother who was playing a kind of football with his classmates. Helen, the only girl who could dance, was telling the others of the film called "The Blue Bird." I wondered why I did not join the girls who crowded around her.

I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses. Then suddenly like the clatter of pots and pans, harsh words attacked my privacy. "What on earth are you doing here, Kamala?" shouted the teacher. "Why don't you join the others? What a peculiar child you are?" And the white sun filled my eyes with its own loneliness. The smell of Henna flowers overwhelmed me. Sobbing, I rose and walked toward my teacher. The children stared at me. The teacher laughed and as though it was a signal for them to begin laughing too, they broke into high laughter. The birds on the trees flew away...

In the afternoon occasionally I slipped out of the gate while the fat watchman slept soundly on his charpoy and walked to the old cemetery. The tombstones were like yellowed teeth and even the writing had faded with the rains of half a century. But it was thrilling to read the words that had not faded and to know that Elizabeth Hardinge was born in 1818 but died in 1938. Who was Elizabeth? Who was Roger Upton who died only at the age of eighty-three? Who was Rosamund? Except for monkeys I was the only living creature there, but the red bougainvillae, gaudy as spilt blood, that had climbed the minarets, swung in the breeze. The marigolds dipped their heads in curtsy. The monkeys ignored me and suckled their young.

I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living. I could even go up to the unknown Rosamund and confide in her. From the dead no harshness could emanate, no cruelty...