

Acid: A Psychedelic Journey for Survival

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Abstract: Choice makes our lives. Whether to make it or not is personal, but the result could complicate and complex one's lives. Even now, the exercise of 'personal' is not entirely personal at all. In order to be acceptable, choices has to be observed and agree with the parameters or the norms and conditions of the society. When identity is also embedded with choices one makes, whether one entails it with confidence or hides it to fall under 'normalcy' is a subject of importance. Choices could end in disastrous results also. In short, it decides our lives for better or for the worst. Sangeetha Sreenivasan in her novel, *Acid* talks about choices – the one fails to make- and its consequences on the life of closed ones. The novel explores how an individual caught enmeshed in the societal expectations and multiple responsibilities, and fails to live life. This paper analyses how an external stimuli for survival, use of psychedelic drugs, would end in self- annihilation. And also, it examines how exercise of personal choice and preferences are important in an individual's pursuit of happiness.

Keywords: *Acid*, trips, identity, motherhood, society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sangeetha Sreenivasan is one of the promising young literary voices from Kerala. Her debut novel *Acid*, originally written in Malayalam and translated to English by the author herself, is a compelling narrative on self-induced trance and its outcome. The novel narrates the tale of two women, Kamala and her same-sex partner, Shaly. Lesbian relationships to use of Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), *Acid* discusses on individuality, motherhood, societal expectations and so on. Regarding her work, in an Interview, Sreenivasan opines: "The book in a way seeks to explore the ultimate truth, the happiness of living. Each character is in search of his or her happiness. Even death comes as a solace, an offer to join the larger, greater spirit of the universe."

Kamala's addiction to psychedelic drugs, falling to frequent "trips", and its melancholic and depressing after scenarios constitutes the turbulent and incongruent story line. 'Trips' or 'tripping' in drug culture denotes to the temporary unconscious state of mind or psychedelic experience brought by the consumption of psychedelic drugs. Kamala, the protagonist, is a single mother, lives with her teenaged twins, Adi and Shiva and her lover, Shaly. Though confident and bold, she builds a troubled life with inner anxieties and insecurities. While enjoying the stormy romantic- lesbian couple-life in Bangalore, Kamala seems unhappy and insecure. She fails to find peace with the past, the choices she made and not. Her sexual orientation and apprehensiveness to admit it, forced marriage with her first cousin, Madhavan, and its eventual failure, concern about her half-paralysed son, Shiva, attachment towards Shaly were some of the matters troubling her most.

II. 'TRIPPING' IN SEARCH OF HAPPINESS

Kamala's initiation to psychedelic drugs was for solace and happiness. "While she was going through one of her first trips, Kamala had hugged Shaly once and said in a jubilant voice, 'This is fun! I am listening to all my favourite audios without really playing them. The music is in my ears! With digital clarity!'" (*Acid* 178). Drugs created a liberating effect on her, she felt herself as free – free from all worries, responsibilities and failures. Her trips often ended badly, but it did not seem to affect her because she was overwhelmed by the feeling of being 'alive'. While getting high, she was at the peak of happiness.

. . . acid took the reins. It designed the maps of convulsed ecstasy under Kamala's tongue. Soon it would travel, numbing whatever it touched on the way until Kamala was numb to the world outside her eyes. Red kangaroos wearing lucky horseshoes would race up to her brain, making her forget present, past and future in the haze of dust their hooves would raise. Neurons would mount on camels obscured by clouds to take her for a short pleasure ride. (4-5)

For Kamala, her initial encounter with drugs and its 'tripping', enabled to embrace a sense of total freedom, happiness and fulfillment. The images of Kamala lying still, focus unmoving, fixed gaze, feeling of nonexistence of body, presence of still water, coolness all convey how she is completely eluded from the physical self and the reality. Her state of oblivion corresponds to the awakening of her free self. Her 'tripping' experiences, the sense of freedom and happiness she seeks in it was akin to her younger self went for solo trips. When over-protective, anxious mother shocked at her daughter's decision for solo travel, the enthusiastic Kamala replied, '...Amma, I want to be happy in life...Our strength lies in our happiness. When we are happy nothing in the world seems to bother us...' (19).

In the beginning, her indulgence in hallucinogens ended happily. Shaly who introduced Kamala to drugs felt herself proud by the way she responded to drugs. Eventually, the dark side of hallucinogens began to conquer Kamala. Her trips began to end badly and she became more depressed and reduced to shadowy figure. Childhood memories started to gnaw her; the thoughts as she was never sincere to herself and was never reliable continue to distress her. Her mind did not have the strength to endure drugs, because bad trips were destroying her.

“... LSD is hell. It need not be a happy trip always. Sometimes, some people may find it exciting as the neurons in their brains become elated. But at the end of the day, be it happy or a bad trip, you are in hell. The repercussions are grave. You get unwanted flashbacks. If your trip is happy, you cannot be happy again unless and until you are on a trip. Your ability to find joy in simple happiness and the beauty of life will diminish. If you are prone to bad trips, you start getting flashbacks even when you are not on a trip. . . .” (30).

Before indulging in hallucinogens, she found her happiness in Shaly. Trapped in a conventional loveless marriage structure, suppressing her sexual orientation, Kamala felt helpless. It was during these hapless times, she met Shaly. Kamala was fascinated by the aura, free spirited charm of Shaly. Shaly as a companion, happiness pill was also not enough for Kamala to accept herself. She scared to admit her identity as lesbian even to herself. It was this distress made her addicted to drugs. Kamala shut her true self from the world and she forcibly tries to put her loved ones also in the closet. In her ancestral home, Kamala asks Shaly to stay in room to avoid questions from relatives.

Kamala's insecurities concerning her identity, its emotional repression was overshadowing in her relationships also. She is possessive about her relationships. Since she carried with herself a shroud of a failed self, she believed she could be easily replaced. She grew suspicious, disheartened when Shaly gets close to children or the children with Shaly. Even Madhavan, her former husband was also not allowed to connect with children. The scary thought of being left alone was all more overpowering when they started living in her ancestral house in Kerala. She felt that space at once familiar and the responsibilities made it seem as indifferent also. Her usage of drugs renewed due to this anxieties.

Sreenivasan alludes 'tripping' as a means to out pour the rage Kamala kept inside throughout her life. Drugs instilled a sense of confidence and self-esteem and, in her hallucinogenic trances she confides with people who caused for suppressing her emotions. Kamala finds 'tripping' as an escape route to all existential worries of her life. The lingering bad trips she encounter even without drug consumption made her even more vulnerable to the situations and prone to its usage again. Her doctor says, '... the truth is that Kamala did not have enough mental strength to deal with the drugs and that is the reason for her present problems, not just her preferences. She was strong enough to handle her biological troubles, but not strong enough to deal with her mind, which was vulnerable to damage, and could be broken very easily' (170-171).

Kamala is upset about being getting old. Reaching her home, thinking about her mother she got tensed up that she will be left out by everyone because of age. Flashbacks lingering in her mind due to bad 'tripping' also asserted that she will be unwanted soon. When the broker for their new apartment asks whether Shaly is Kamala's daughter, she is shattered.

. . . Kamala was also looking at her; she was examining her to see whether she truly looked like her daughter. Was she that young? Or am I just too old to be her friend? Shaly was wearing distressed jeans and a white blouse. Her hair looked fresh and gorgeous. Maybe my appearance has altered a lot, Kamala thought. She glanced at her reflection in the glass window of that car that was parked outside. Yes, she had dark circles under her eyes and fine lines on her face . . . (231)

There were moments which Kamala tried to ascertain her normal self with the help of Shaly. But at those moments, she stumbled upon her role as mother. Her worries about Adi, son who went to Bangalore to experience his own share of life, were symptomatic to her mother's worries about her. She felt motherhood as worst tripping experience. Kamala's younger self always wished to rebel the restrictive, orthodox, over-protective mother. When time passes, her older self feels in complete alliance with her worrisome mother. Kamala even thought that her mother slipped into her body.

. . . Her mother was always her problem, she was always on her way to her, like so many mothers the universe bore. She had thought she would be free once her mother died. But after her death, her mother had thought her this was wrong. No child could be free with the death of its mother. Kamala's mother now slipped into Kamala's body, and killed Kamala who was once her child. The one who died was not the mother but the child. Mothers never die: they keep rolling like money in black markets. They kill the children, they continue, they multiply. . . . Now Kamala's mother, after entering her daughter's body made her believe that it was she, the daughter that was living. (282)

In her hallucinatory trace, Kamala converse with her dead mother. "They talked the whole night. Kamala lay on the bed in the foetal position. Her mother said that was the perfect position for the beginning and the end" (283). Through imaginary conversations, Kamala kept her mother alive. She is scared of losing her mother, Shaly, her sons and even her private space, Home. Though Kamala's ancestral home was offering depressing and distressing stay to all, Kamala remained unaffected. She stayed mostly inside the four walls of her mother's room and she restrained herself from following normal routines of life. Kamala even tried to slow down the proceedings for shifting to a new apartment and at times where her reasoning faculty works she quicken the process, but to move away from a familiar space always blows out her mind.

Her unwillingness a shift to new place was similar to her resistance to come out of her inner closet of her mind. She tried to repress the emotions and whenever it tries to pop-up, she relies on drugs. Thus, unwittingly, Kamala freezes her time and others also. Her hallucinatory travails had repeating images of sand castle in deserts where people trying to attack and dismantle it. This image was a reflection of her condition, her struggling phase with identity, scared of being attacked by society and her insecurity. When Kamala decides to come out of her addiction, her thought process was slowly able to channelize that she could look into the sand castle, the reflection of herself she was inside was frightening and afraid to show it before anyone. Yet, the image conveys that Kamala was slowly trying to accept herself and fight back the odds for her children.

III. CONCLUSION

Everyone is entitled to happiness of living. Kamala's disaster was due to dragging herself to places where she could never find happiness. It was her fragility to exercise personal choices leads to hapless events and chaos. Through the story of Kamala and her annihilation, novel also reminds that life itself is the best addiction and in most times, happiness is a choice, one scares to exercise due to societal expectations.

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