



Kamaladevi

An Epochal Life

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IN October 1988 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya passed away at the age of 85 years. The heroine in a play - a caption to one of Kamaladevi's photographs in her biography by the sensitive writer Jamila Brijbhushan (Abhinav Publications, 1976), captures the quintessence of those 80 plus years.

The basics first. Kamaladevi was born on April 3, 1903, educated at St Anne's Convent, Mangalore, and acquired a diploma in sociology from Bedford College, London University. She was the fourth and the last child born to Girijabai and Ananathiah Dhareshwar, Saraswat Brahmins, in the picturesque city of Mangalore on India's west coast.

Two women caught Kamaladevi's fancy in her infancy: her mother Girijabai whose disciplinary stick (including jurisdiction over what to wear, gargling with salt water when you came home, washing of feet before bedtime, the children you played with) sowed the seeds of rebellion in her; and her mother's mother who gripped Kamaladevi's imagination and became her longing, her quest.

The grandmother had a vast inner world. She had a library and was always absorbed in books and discourses with saintly men and scholars. She read aloud from the books while the family sat and

listened. Her scholarship and capacity to be still rocked Kamaladevi's soul. But grandmother was not all scholar. She was an adventurer too. Much before the advent of the railways, she and her husband had travelled all over India. She was ever ready for a journey, the more arduous the better. This "inner recess and outer spaces", the depth

and dimensions of her grandmother were to become not only the title of Kamaladevi's memoirs (Navrang 1986), but also the theme of her life. She was utterly political in the first four decades - the freedom struggle and the struggle of women to be free, and later, till the end came, she was absorbed in politics of a different kind, namely, awakening independent

Family photograph: Kamaladevi is on the right, standing between her father and mother



India's men and women to their glorious future potential through constructive and creative pursuits, rural development, arts, theatre, music, crafts, environment, civil liberties.

She was one of the most determined individuals - when it came to her pre or post independence pursuits, be it the defiance of the British or of Gandhiji or Sardar Patel or government - be it the Nehru era or the Emergency which took India's hard won democracy almost to its funeral pyre.

Her medium: she spoke, she wrote, organised volunteers for *satyagraha*, women for self-liberation, workers in agriculture and industry into cooperatives, artists in theatre groups. She was drawn to the company of the finest of socialists: Acharya Narendradev, Yusuf Meherally, J.P. Narayan, Achyut Patwardhan.

She also acted in a formal sense, on the stage, defying what was a suffocating taboo at the time. Consequently, what were until then mere yearnings for rebellion became manifest. At a farewell function in her school, Kamaladevi was chosen to play Mirabai in a verse drama. The good people of Mangalore could not countenance it. As Jamila recalls, they regarded it as a heinous crime for a woman to act with men on the stage. The cry went up: "The play must be stopped." The protest against the play spread far beyond Mangalore. Even Mrs Annie Besant, a towering personality of the times, was led to advise that the play be given up. But Kamaladevi was adamant. However, the scheduled play could not be enacted -not because the organisers chickened out, but because it was overtaken by an unwritten script: the hero was kidnapped, and Kamaladevi, the heroine, was locked up in a room by her mother when the rumour spread that the life of her daughter would be in danger if she appeared on the stage.

Though thwarted in her first attempt at live theatre, Kamaladevi was to spend a lifetime in the theatre movement and with a vengeance. She became a solid force behind the Indian National Theatre, the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, chairperson of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and president of the Theatre Crafts Museum.

On another plane, too, events moved swiftly, at times cruelly, to prepare her to convert her personal agonies into social causes. Her father, who was a quiet pillar of understanding and strength, died when Kamaladevi was in her early teens. Her mother panicked and for the sake of security quickly got her

Kamaladevi in a play



married. But very soon after the wedding the bridegroom died and "Kamaladevi became a widow without ever having been a wife", says Jamila with deep anguish.

Her lifelong crusade against child marriage drew sustenance from the ashes of her own experience, though she never referred to her trauma. Reflects Kamaladevi in her memoirs that "though the circumstances of one's birth may be accidental, they can be made purposeful. I may never have been able to carve out the kind

of life I did, had I not been born in the family and the social setting in which I was. But the spanning of it had to be my own."

Kamaladevi's exposure to the political world started quietly at home. While in childhood she learnt defiance at her mother's cost, as she grew up it was her mother who opened for her the wide world of politics which dominated her life till independence came. Her mother's reading habits were different from those of her grandmother. Girjabai was interested in political and social issues. She subscribed to two of the staunch nationalist papers of the time, *Kesari* and *Kal*, which brought

Lokmanya Tilak's messages and stories of his trials and tribulations. It saddened Kamaladevi when on August 1, 1920, Tilak died, soon after his release from a long prison stint.

In the same year, during a short visit to Madras, Kamaladevi met Sarojini Naidu's brother, the Bengali writer and poet, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Harin fell in love with her at first sight and his ardour saw them soon in wedlock. Girjabai made one condition - that Kamaladevi's education must

continue even after marriage. But it did not materialise. Harin left for England three months after the marriage and Kamaladevi returned to her mother's home in Mangalore.

But in Mangalore something significant, albeit unexpected, was in store for her, which was to influence her life profoundly. She met Margaret Cousins, a British woman, who had organised the Irish Women's Franchise League, and was involved in England in the suffragette movement which also led her to the royal prison. Later, she decided to come to India to join Annie Besant who had founded what is now called the Benaras Hindu University and was spearheading the National Education Movement. Mrs Cousins was assigned to head the National Girls High School. Says Jamila: "Mrs. Cousins was a seasoned worker and for Kamaladevi she blazoned the trail of women's emancipation and service." This association with Margaret Cousins also brought Kamaladevi a step closer to Mrs Besant, who was a tall figure also in politics at that time, having started the Home Rule League in 1916 and having been the first founder president of the Women's Indian Association.

It was Girijabai who had taken Kamaladevi when she was still a child to meet Mrs Besant. Later, Kamaladevi was to hear Mrs. Besant speak after her election as president of the Indian National Congress. Her stirring oration made a lasting impression on Kamaladevi.

For today's generation it is important to recall, via Jamila, the start of women's franchise:

"During the visit of Montagu, the British Secretary of state for India to this country, Margaret Cousins had organised an Indian Women's delegation to press for women's political rights and for granting them franchise in the new political reforms that were to be introduced in the

country. When the provincial legislatures began to introduce bills to grant franchise to women she was terribly thrilled and Kamaladevi remembers her coming to her house with a newspaper early one morning and reading out the entire debate in excited tones. 'This is a great event my dear', she exclaimed as she caught Kamaladevi in a warm embrace, 'and I want to share it with you.'

"In fact, she shared with her friend every scrap of news about women's movements and one day she showed her a picture of mammoth women's processions led by Kamaladevi Deshpande, the daughter of the well known national leader N.C. Kelkar. The Poona Municipality had



Madame Cama with the flag she designed

resolved to make education compulsory but no references had been made about extending it to girls and so the women of Poona had marched out to show their feeling on the subject."

Kamaladevi was awakened to India and women when she set sail for England to pursue her education and also to join her husband. She was admitted to Bedford college for a diploma course in sociology. What

made an impression on Kamaladevi were the lectures on psychology: "They stand out in my mind as purposefully directed to stimulate the imagination. Luckily, sociology had not then become a bookish discipline and it proved immensely practical and useful to turn me into an efficient social worker." The practicals brought her a lot of exposure to the outdoors - slums, workers' clubs or institutes, corrective institutions and special institutions for the handicapped.

On the return trip to India, a stopover in Berlin brought her close to Harin's brother, the legendary Virendra Chattopadhyaya. Viren, who had gone to study at Oxford, had joined a group of Indian revolutionaries. He was exiled from India. But the British did not stop there. They hounded him from country to country, labelling him "a dangerous terrorist." It was just the spark Kamaladevi needed - "my political horizon widened." Indeed, each contact widened her horizon - as her life story shows, essentially because she was awake, seeking, and engaged in a relentless quest. She was also lucky with her contacts - each one more powerful than the other.

Consider her good fortune in meeting during her stopover in Paris, another legendary Indian - Madame Bhikaji Cama - a Parsi from Bombay. She too had been exiled by the British. She was the first to assert that 1857 was not a mutiny but India's war of independence, and she organised a colourful fiftieth anniversary of the war of independence in London in 1907. The event caused a stir in the British parliament. She settled in Paris and, wielding her powerful pen, edited a paper *Bande Matram* and also contributed to *Talvar*, run by other Indian revolutionary exiles in Europe.

Hugging Kamaladevi, she said "We are sisters in adversity" and reminded her that adversity is the mother of invention which had led her

to devise an Indian national flag to unite all Indian student revolutionaries in Europe. As Bhikaji unfurled the flag she exclaimed:

“This flag is of Indian Independence. Behold it is born. It is already sanctified by the blood of martyred Indian Youths. I appeal to all lovers of freedom all over the world to cooperate in freeing one-fifth of the human race.”

Alas, Bhikaji Cama Place is known to the present generation more for the Chanakya cinema than for Bhikaji. Her stirring words are not inscribed there nor is there displayed a prototype of the flag designed by her -which makes the naming of the building complex after her an empty gesture. We hear much about the Lahore resolution moved by Nehru asking for freedom. But 22 years earlier it was Bhikaji Cama who had moved a resolution calling for complete independence for India.

While Kamaladevi was in Europe, the Madras CID had been getting increasingly perturbed by her doings. They intercepted her letters and noted in their records that she was in contact with Virendra Chattopadhyaya, Nalinakshi Sanyal who had led demonstrations in London against the Simon Commission, and Mehar Ali, the prominent communist leader. The CID noted that she had run down as “disappointing” the viceroy’s pronouncements, and had urged the Congress to recognise that the British were not going to gift freedom to India. She was also credited by the CID with having severely criticised Nehru for entertaining fond hopes that the viceroy harboured goodwill for India. The Madras government professed itself shocked by her “objectionable” speeches, such as calling on the League of Youth, Madras, to wage a war against casteism, communalism and the capitalists and to boycott temples reserved for the rich and the

upper castes; and urging textile workers in Bangalore to struggle against imperial rule to bring a new social order in India.

The Madras CID therefore wrote to the government at Delhi, asking them not to renew Kamaladevi’s passport. The CID argued that Kamaladevi had “incited” audiences at Frankfurt, strongly denounced the Congress decision to accept dominion status for India, and was now stoking the “revolutionary fervour” of the League of Youth, Madras. The CID



With her son, Rama

sported that since her return from Europe, “Kamaladevi had addressed a series of meetings in many places in India and urged the youth to start a civil disobedience movement for securing full and complete freedom and to establish a parallel government.” The CID apprehended that if her passport were renewed she would go abroad and mobilise the League against Imperialism, and establish contacts with communists.

On February 19, 1930, the

government of India issued orders to cancel her passport. But when the police approached her to surrender her passport, Kamaladevi refused. The authorities had not anticipated this response. They then advised all shipping lines and ports not to let Kamaladevi go out of the country. Congress members in the central legislative council demanded to know the reason for the cancellation of Kamaladevi’s passport. But nothing came of it. Later, after the formation of Congress ministries in the provinces, she was issued a new passport in July 1938.

Kamaladevi and her husband Harin staged a play *Returned from Abroad*, and acted in it. Their only child, Rama, learnt singing and as a child actor, he also invariably appeared with his parents. Films were on the rise. Kamaladevi acted in the film *Vasant Sena*. Even as she got more active on the stage, she turned to learning spinning and weaving “to be within the Gandhian orbit.”

And as with thousands of others, Gandhi’s “orbit” steadily widened into oceanic circles. Gandhi’s words “if we are to make progress we must not repeat history but make new history”, reverberated in Kamaladevi’s heart and head.

The Congress Seva Dal had just started a women’s section headed by Umabai Kundapar, who could mix social work with entertainment and had written and produced a play *Swadeshi Vrata* (and *vrata* it was in an abiding sense. After freedom was won, she stuck to her pledge as Desh Sevika and chose to work for the Kasturba Trust rather than accept political positions offered to her). Umabai enrolled Kamaladevi as a Seva Dal volunteer to help at the Belgaum session of the Congress which was to be addressed by Gandhiji.

From this humble beginning as an ordinary volunteer, Kamaladevi was

elected to be the general secretary of the All India Women's Conference. She travelled throughout the country carrying on continuous propaganda among the public for "social and legal changes to give women their rights." Yet, public speaking still gave her a fright. It was Srinivas Shastri, the leading orator of the time (known as "silver tongued"), who encouraged her to share a platform with him at Mangalore to speak on the racist South African regime. Kamaladevi says she was "barely 20, felt weak with fright and got up with trembling feet." That was the last time that she felt fright on a public platform. Indeed, so forceful became her power of speech that she carried the day on two vital occasions, as she recalls. First, at the AICC at Calcutta, when she carried an amendment to a resolution on the political activities in the then Mysore state (what the *Statesman* editorial termed "A red letter day"). The second was again at an AICC session, presided over by Dr Rajendra Prasad where her speech forced the party bosses to accept her proposition of "immediate and full" help to the struggle of the states' peoples, that is, subjects of princely states, instead of the Congress approach of "waiting" till the states peoples' movement became strong.

She stayed on in Delhi to lobby with the central assembly for the Sharda Act - the Bill to prevent child marriage and introduce age of consent. The speaker Vithalbai Patel gave her a corner of his office in the assembly. One day she sat in the visitors' gallery to watch the proceedings. This turned out to be a momentous day in Indian history. Recalls Kamaladevi, "my eyes caught and held a striking handsome man, who looked restless, waiting impatiently for something to happen."

And it did - a big bang, smoke and thousands of leaflets flying. The handsome man was Bhagat Singh. He was hanged, to the eternal glory of India's patriotic history.

The political clouds were thick and black. The Simon Commission was due to visit India to review political reforms. Simon was considered "The coldest legal brain" with a closed mind. Recalls Kamaladevi that "even Jinnah thundered in fury: the Jallianwala Bagh tried to destroy our bodies, the Simon Commission is sent to destroy our soul. The Commission was greeted with massive protests. The mounted police greeted the protesters mercilessly with lathis. Lala Lajpatrai died. Bhagat Singh's bomb in the assembly was to avenge the British savagery with 'a bang' as he called it."

But all that went before, "in the shape of bomb throwing, political assassination, violence, were sporadic eruptions, symptoms of desperation"; to "my generation" says Kamaladevi, "the real political history of India begins with the Gandhi era." She was fascinated by the Champaran struggle: "it was

something in which the real people of the country were involved. Through their organisation, will and determination they stood up to the oppression of the indigo planters who were backed by the British rulers. Exploitation was no vague term, it was concrete and meaningful to my own growing sense of the ills in our society", that is, discrimination against women, Kamaladevi felt. She was drawn to Gandhi, for, he "believed in women's rightful place" and, "more significant, he was a leader who showed to a growing generation a picture of a new life through a programme of action which was satisfying and made politics real to us."

Indigo over, salt suddenly became "a magic word of power" as Nehru put it. Mentally, Kamaladevi was ready. But there was uncertainty whether she would be allowed to march. She recalls "The distance to the seaside where Gandhiji was to break the law was 240 miles, from Sabarmati where he started, and was to be covered by 5th April. As the march progressed it was as though the millions of Indians were marching, keeping pace with him. The whole air became so surcharged, every nerve

Agitating against the Simon Commission (based on a photograph)





Women participating in salt satyagraha (based on a photograph)

in the body tingled. I felt elated as part of one of the most spectacular dramas in India's political history, pulsating every moment to its subtlest nuances.

"Further, other hopes and plans were running through my mind. As batches for the first *satyagraha* were to be selected I asked that women be included. I was told that Gandhiji did not want them as he had other programmes reserved for them. I was flabbergasted. I had built up a whole edifice of hopes of involving women in this great adventure. This was to be their breakthrough. They simply had to be in it, I told myself in desperation. The only course was to get this clarified by the leader himself.

"My conversation with Gandhiji was fairly brief. As I expressed to him the cause of my unhappiness, he cut me short, emphatically disabusing my mind of the suspicion of discrimination. 'The tasks reserved for them are a tribute to the high qualities they possess, such as promotion of *swadeshi* through promotion of indigenous production and their exclusive use; picketing of foreign goods; elimination of liquor from our society. The call for them was not for slogan shouting on marches, but utter dedication, which was a natural quality in women,' he explained patiently. But I had to persist. 'Let them do all this and also participate in direct action. The significance of a non-violent struggle is that the weakest can take an equal part with the strongest and share in the triumph

as you have yourself said. This struggle is ideally suited for them. He readily conceded. 'Are you content', he asked as I rose. 'I have one more request to make. I want you to give a call to the women asking them to join the struggle. I would like to carry the message'. His eyes twinkled as he gave a hearty laugh. 'You don't know your sisters if you think they need a special message'.

"The front line unit to formally break the Salt Law in public in Bombay city was to consist of seven, five men and two women, Avantikabai Gokhale, a well known local social worker and myself (neither of us with any political background) with K.F.Nariman, provincial Congress president as leader. I was yet raw and felt privileged and self-conscious in my spotless *khadi*, conspicuously displaying the badge with the national flag colours : orange, white and green, proud to have a place in the first batch of Law Breakers!"

"Salt was about the only luxury the rapidly impoverished Indian peasant had got reduced to, and now even that had been snatched away from him. A tremor of revolt ran through the land. The cry filled the air 'We shall defy the law.' The sea of women's faces shot a spasm of shame through me - Gandhiji knew the women and I did not and I had boasted that I knew better. How many more such lessons I was to learn in the days to come.

"The police who had looked on at this advancing avalanche of

law-breakers seemed almost stupefied and had to shake themselves as from a trance and enter on the scene."

"We were still guarding our pans. The blows now rained like a blinding shower. They were directed either at the head or the legs, designed in either case to swiftly and effectively fell the people to the ground, and clear a pathway to the pans. I felt sick as I caught a youngster near me with a cracked skull. A rough boot pushed me aside and I came down with my arm right on the burning coals..

"The police had by now forced their way into the inner circle and they struck the flag post down. But before the flag could reach the ground an old lady had snatched it and almost with her last ounce of strength waved it aloft. 'Up up with the National Flag', the cries resounded again. A dull thud. It almost seemed to echo in my own heart. The old lady had slipped and was down on her face. As I reached out to her, I heard once again as in a faraway dream 'Up up with the National Flag!' No, I was not dreaming, there were the three coloured bands up and flying in the breeze."

Till independence came in August 1947, Kamaladevi kept the tricolour fluttering - whether in the streets or in prison or, to be accurate, prisons: the Yeravda Women's Prison, Arthur Road Jail, Hindalga Women's Jail, Trivandrum lock-up, the Women's Jail in Vellore where it was "a complete solitary confinement"

Soon after independence she

plunged into the battles of the second revolution - the social and economic transformation of India. All the spheres of her active involvement were woven around this one theme. She had a creed too. Her association with the Socialist Party was of a relatively short duration, but with socialism it was lifelong. A creed was necessary for her but not sufficient.

The first theatre of service she chose in 1947 was, at the time the most tragic and also the most challenging, the rehabilitation of refugees whose life had been shredded by partition. Realising that the most satisfying and speedy way of rehabilitation was self help, Kamaladevi saw the relevance of the cooperative movement. She sponsored the setting up of the Indian Cooperative Union to help the refugees help themselves in building a new life.

She took the blueprint for launching the Cooperative Union to Gandhiji and sought his blessings. He declined, on the general principle that "a worthy enterprise carries its own blessings." In the next breath, he offered his full support but laid down the condition that his *ashirvad* would

stand forfeited the day her work became dependent on government. She was born with a spine but Gandhi put a little extra strength into it, anticipating the shape of things to come: the increasing servility of society to the state. Through four decades of public work in the post-independence period, Kamaladevi was found always aiding government in its appropriate endeavours but not once bending to what she regarded as unprincipled policies or pressures.

There were many voluntary workers engaged in organising relief for the refugees, but Kamaladevi's concern was about their future: "What are they to do to break away from dependence on doles?" She found there were hundreds of landless agricultural workers in the Kingsway relief camp in Delhi. She proposed that the landless be settled on farm land left behind by farmers who had migrated to Pakistan. But she was horror struck to find that all the evacuee land (as it was called) had already been allotted by government to big *zamindars* who had migrated to India from Punjab and Sind, in proportion to their previous holdings.

"How can you profess socialism in one breath and recreate the *zamindari* system with the other?" Kamaladevi asked the leaders of the government of independent India who were no other than her colleagues in the Congress Working Committee till just the other day. Her query was met with a stony silence. No one had looked at the social aspects of the rehabilitation policy, until she raised the issue. Kamaladevi convened an all-party political convention, under the auspices of the Cooperative Union, and obtained its endorsement for her proposal that rehabilitation policy adhere to the policy of "land to the tiller" and "factory to the workers" - in terms of the ideals of the freedom movement.

Government still dithered. She supported the landless, all of whom were ready to leave the relief camps to go and occupy the evacuee farm lands, and the cooperative union moved fast to organise the wherewithal for them. Simultaneously, she announced that she would lead a march to the constituent assembly (whose membership she had declined and which, incidentally, had been

With Nehru in 1957



given to another stalwart, Durgabai). These swift and firm moves forced government to take a policy decision in favour of the landless.

Kamaladevi fought again, in 1949, when the government proposed to call in contractors to build the Faridabad township intended for resettlement of displaced persons from North-western Frontier Provinces. She, along with Mridula Sarabhai, made Nehru and the establishment reverse the decision and, instead, the work was entrusted to the refugees to build their own homes through cooperative endeavour. The result was that, on the one hand, the houses were built at record speed and most economically and, on the other hand, that thousands of refugees learnt new vocations which have sustained them since. It is difficult to imagine how that population of 50,000 would have learnt to make a living had the decision to engage contractors prevailed. Faridabad thus became another monument to Kamaladevi's foresight and unerring capacity to reconcile practice with ideology.

But hers was not to be a success story all the way. The success of industrial cooperatives (induscos, as they were popularly called) in China led her to develop a network of some twenty cooperative industrial enterprises in Faridabad as part of the rehabilitation programme. Workers actually engaged in production were trained in principles of cooperation and in the art of business management, to be the members and owners of their respective cooperative enterprises.

Alas, when the workers were all set formally to take over the enterprises, the government



establishment stopped the experiment in its tracks. They argued that the workers were penniless and could not be entrusted with the ownership of factories involving substantial government investment, although the investment per factory was scarcely more than Rs 200,000.

This was a crucial battle which Kamaladevi was to lose despite the support she received from other Faridabad Development Board members such as Rajendra Prasad, Zakir Hussain, Hirdaynath Kunzru, Ashadevi Aryanayakam and Sudhir Ghosh. Finally, she gave up when even Nehru could not make the government change its rigid colonial approach towards cooperatives. The factories were auctioned to private enterprises; and the workers who, until an hour before were still hoping and longing to become owners, were reduced to wage earners at the will of the new owners. This was a blow - the shattering of a social dream - from which neither Kamaladevi nor her fond instrument, the Cooperative Union, ever recovered. The success of the worker owned industries would have blazed a new trail and influenced the emerging industrial structure in the country. Here, again, slogans stood for the public sector, but practice....

From 1952 onwards Kamaladevi plunged into the resuscitation of handicrafts, music and theatre forms, which to her were not only a precious heritage to be cherished and developed but also essential for an all round development of personality. The care with which she nurtured these and the attendant success of her efforts are well known. But here too she was not at all at ease. Even two days before she had the fatal

heart attack, she expressed deep distress that, despite official pronouncements, nothing had been done to ensure regular availability of good yarn to the handloom weavers at proper prices.

Kamaladevi was not a solo actress. She was a magnet who drew hundreds of men and women, young and old, to every social movement or cause she stirred or stepped into. All she did was to share the concern and measure the response. For those who showed superficial interest, the encounter was brief, sometimes chilling - she had no patience with passive observers of the scene. But in those who showed even a little spark, she lit the fire: she was all inspiration, light, and rocklike support when the occasion demanded. Kamaladevi's life holds another lesson. She was not an important person, in the commonly understood sense of the adjective. She had no patronage to distribute, she did not attract any sycophants. People flocked to her; but around her they were always a crowd of comrades in a common endeavour. Even a cursory glance at her autobiography (*Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces*) shows that it is more the biography of the times, as also of numerous fellow actors. Kamaladevi herself is more of a narrator than an actor.

For her, human rights were not an abstraction. To her, the concrete expressions of human rights were the means for an autonomous, dignified and creative life as land could provide to the tillers, a factory to the workers and yarn to the handloom weavers. She must be an inspiration, not for the success that she was able to grasp, but for the pursuit of the unaccomplished tasks of India's second revolution to which she dedicated herself with all her heart and soul. □