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A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das' *My Story*

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Kamala Das

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Abstract

My Story is a best-selling woman's autobiography in post-independence India. It follows Kamala Das' life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favored by the colonial Indian elite; through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extramarital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and, finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality.

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The objective of this paper is to present the readers a kaleidoscopic view of *My Story*, encompassing the multifarious world of emotions a woman experiences. In the point of view of the narrator, the readers get an opportunity to travel through the story, giving us a glimpse of every event that happens in her life.

As the novel proceeds, we come to know about Kamala's several contradictory accounts of the genesis of *My Story*. In her preface to the autobiography, Kamala claims that she began to write the text in the mid-1970's from her hospital bed as she grappled with a potentially fatal heart condition. She wrote the autobiography, she states, "to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the lime came, with a scrubbed-out conscience" and in order to pay mounting hospital bills. Since the publication of her autobiography, Kamala has repeatedly changed her stance on this topic in interviews and essays. However, calling Kamala Das queer in itself provides no grand resolution to the myriad challenges posed by her work; rather, it serves as an initial vantage point from which one can glimpse the changing English-language literary terrain of this new century.

Keywords: Kamala Das, autobiography, kaleidoscopic.

Kamala Das' Statement on Her Autobiography



"*My Story* is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that

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writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of.... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience... The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband...This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it.” (Das, Preface in *My Story*)

Full of Intense Personal Experiences

The above lines clearly express Kamala Das’ state of mind, when she began writing the most controversial Autobiography ever written by a woman. Though she is well known in literary circles for her poetry in English, it was the publication of *My Story* that earned Kamala Das national recognition and notoriety among the English-speaking elite in India. It broke all the conventions of women writing in literature and proved to be one of a kind.

Kamala Das has presented herself as either too bohemian to care about revealing her sexual adventures and her periods of mental breakdown or the submissive wife following the dictates of her husband. And yet, at every opportunity Kamala reverts to the convention that she is India’s most unconventional woman writer with no regrets about her work or her foci. In *My Story*, Kamala Das, a poet famous for her honesty, tells of intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home.

The Formal Structure of the Book

Chapters in *My Story* are short. Each of them is about three or four pages. It is fragmented and not in any chronological order. It is typically all about Kamala Das’ domestic life, her relationship with her parents and her close relatives, her husband and her lovers. Chapter titles are self-explanatory. They inform the readers about the happenings quickly even before reading it. For example, ‘Each poem of mine made me cry’, ‘I prayed to the sun God to give me a male child’, ‘Passing away of my great-grandmother’, etc.

Das talks about the domestic details of food, familial relations, marriage, childbirth, sexual liaisons, and the internal and external struggles of one woman in a repressive world. She also talks about her struggle in public life as a poet. Das tries to remain at the center of her story.

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Childhood in Colonized India

In the opening chapter, a picture of a colonized childhood can be seen. Das is alienated because of living between indigenous and colonized cultures. This alienation can be seen in the title of the first chapter “The humiliation of a brown child in a European school”. From the first line, it is understood that India is still under the rule of Britain.

Kamala Das was a little child growing up in Calcutta. She says, “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”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 1)

The discourse of colonial power is felt in the description of a ceremony that takes place at Kamala Das’ school every day:

“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.” (Das, *My Story*, p.3.)

Father and Mother

Kamala Das is unhappy as one of the few brown children in a white school. She thinks that white parents support their children more than Indian parents, because in their tradition a girl child has different responsibilities in their lives and they do not need education. In the following chapters, she describes her ancestral home in Malabar which is called Nalapat House and the women who are living in that house.

Generally, in autobiographies that are written by women, the central theme is the relationship between the author and her mother. However, Kamala Das does not prefer to talk about her relation with her mother. It seems that she does this intentionally. Das focuses on Third- world women’s oppression and she puts her relations with men to the centre of her story.

Only in the first chapter, there is some information about her relation with her father and mother. She describes her father as a man always busy with his work. He is not very affectionate and because of this Kamala Das and her brother grew up neglected. She calls her father “an autocrat”. In ‘My Childhood Memories’, she describes him as a stern father before whom his children like street-dogs had to shy away, tucking their tails. But later in her poem ‘Too Late For Making Up,’ which she wrote after his death, she laments,

“Should I have loved you, father
More than I did,

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That wasn't so easy to do
If I have loved others, father,
I swear I have loved you the most." (Das, 1973)

On the other hand, her mother is a vague and indifferent woman who spends her time lying on on a large four-post bed, writing poems in Malayalam. It can be understood from here that Das' mother is also an exceptional woman. She was not a caring mother figure. Child psychology is much influenced by parental bondage. It appears that Das' parents did not bring up Kamala Das and her brother with parental love and affection.

Apparently, this could also be one of the reasons for Das' eternal quest for love in her life. Later as we run through the pages of *My Story*, at the age of fifteen, Kamala Das shares the same destiny like most of the Indian women. She marries K. Madhava Das. It is an arranged marriage by her parents. Kamala did not have any right to say something about the marriage. She feels herself lost and unhappy. She looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. She enters her conjugal life with legitimate expectations and innocent dreams:

"I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life." Das, *My Story*.

Kamala's only expectation from her husband is conversation, companionship and warmth. She wants him to treat her as her father treats her. But all she gets in her marriage is brutality and rudeness. She suffers through her husband's selfishness and neglect of her emotional and physical needs.

After the birth of second son, at the age of twenty, she has a nervous breakdown while she and her husband attempt reconciliation after an early separation. Here, it is seen clearly that Kamala Das criticizes Indian marriage as patriarchal oppression. Actually, she is a middle class and a professional Indian woman from a very small minority of Indian society. She receives greater legal and social protection compared to the vast numbers of poor and peasant Indian women.

Failure in Marriage – the Blood-stained Moonlight

Chapter 25, titled as 'The blood-stained moonlight', clearly expresses her failure in marriage and the impossibility of leaving it. Later, Kamala Das finds herself on a balcony attempting to commit suicide: "I felt a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts

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seemed to be crushing me. My private parts was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through." (Das, *My Story*, p. 97)

However, Kamala Das does not throw herself off the balcony. At this juncture, we are reminded of Sylvia Plath, another woman writer who also underwent the same trauma as Kamala did. Their stylistic and thematic concerns are similar, as far as form and content are considered. Both writers express themselves as victims of patriarchy, both use confessional voices, both are victims of authoritarian father figures, both are let down by husbands, both show a remarkable love for their children, both are prone to nervous breakdowns and show suicidal tendencies.

Traditional Religious Imagery



Another feature that is explicit in Das' *My Story* is the use of traditional religious imagery to sustain and dignify herself. She claims to search for an incarnation of the god Krishna in her love affairs and worships the god when the real men turn out to have flaws. Once, calmly facing death before a potentially fatal heart operation, she pictures herself as the goddess Durga and she titles one of her chapters "I Was Carlo's Sita," in which she tells about one of her affairs. Das reaches into her own religious tradition to find support for her defiant individuality. To an Indian woman, the love for Krishna is not forbidden. Hadn't Mira Bai, a historical figure turned into a mythical one with her infinite passion for the dark-skinned God? Hadn't she been revered, worshipped for her mad devotion to Him? A woman may be ostracized if she falls often in love with ordinary men. But it may be different if she loves the element of Krishna. Consequently, Kamala who falls in love regularly declares that she yearns only for the mischievous, eternal lover in men. In *My Story* she describes an encounter with one of her lovers:

"You are my Krishna. I whispered kissing his eyes shut. He laughed. I felt that I was a virgin in his arms. Was there a summer before the autumn of his love? Was there a dawn before the dusk of his skin? I did not remember. I carried him with me inside my eyelids, the dark God of girlhood dreams..... Oh Krishna, Oh Kanhaiya, do not leave me for another.

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..... we stood together to look at the sea. The sea was our only witness. How many times I turned to it and whispered, Oh, sea, I am at last in love. I have found my Krishna..." (Das, *My Story*, p. 89)

A Never Ending Dialogue

Autobiography is a never ending dialogue with the self. It is a depiction of the self by the writer himself. Das' dialogue with the self reveals her urges, yearnings and her inner longings. She knows that:

"One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end". (Das, *My Story*, p. 102)

The Magnitude of an autobiography depends upon the writer's skill to arrange the past, and present of his/her life in an organic whole. *My Story* has no dates. The narration of *My Story* moves back and forth in time. Kamala Das's life story is set in the once matrilineal framework of the Nair Tharavad. Colonization and the imposition of western notions of morality upon the native systems influenced her peculiar individual position. From the secure and serene warmth of the Nalukettu, both Kamala and her mother were taken away into the rashness of a city culture. They were not accustomed to their new social set up. From a matrilineal framework that offered complete security to the woman and their kids, they were thrust into a westernized patriarchal society.

A Fictional Account of the Factual?

Kamala Das has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner. Nevertheless we are not assured whether this candid nature aims to give fictional account or the factual. Generally for an auto biographer, the factual truth is subordinated to the truth about himself. *My Story* is a life narrative of Das' inner journey. It is a search for an identity. It is an identity of the split self craving for true love. We find introspection and self-analysis in her life story.

Essence of Life for Women

Das firmly believed that Love is the essence of life for a woman. She longs to receive and to give love. Her romantic ideas about love and home have been shattered by an insensitive husband. Her husband hurt her and evoked a sense of disappointment in her. Das has also given graphic accounts of her relations with her husband before their marriage. We can better understand the embarrassment with her and showed interest in her as a woman. It is clear that she admired him but we do not find glimpses of her love and affection for her hubby as a man or as a lover.

In *My story* she has expressed her romantic ideas of an ideal lover. She writes:

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“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 84)

Das is unhappy about her marriage. She appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held firmly by her parent she wasn't given a free choice to select an ideal lover. Her parents did not consider her preference. What hurt her most was this indifference to her individuality, she did not like the way in which her marriage was fixed. The account of Das' physical relationship with her husband and his obsession with her body shocked many conservative readers. Right from her childhood a woman is taught to be docile and reserved about her instincts.

Kamala Das also observes that woman of “good” Nair families never mentioned sex. Nevertheless, Das is very candid in expressing her relationship with her hubby. She observes:

“The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual progress. Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a eunuch, I said.... Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window and the singers sang of Damyanti's plight in the jungle”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 90)

Kamala Among Women Writers

Most of the women writers make meager journeys into the outside world. But the lengthy entourage into the innermost caverns of their minds compensates for the shortness of the distance they travel in kilometers. The fascinating sights they see 'within' and their experiences clothed in colorful imagination, churn out literature, which sometimes soothes like the gentle breeze and sometimes scorch the flesh. However, the magic lies in transforming the minor irritants of daily life into dazzling pearls of priceless literature. Perhaps, Kamala Das can be taken as the best representative of all women writers who availed of no formal education and who consistently draw from their own lives to write. Writing about one's own experiences is hazardous in the sense that one is constantly at the risk of contradicting oneself. Perceptions vary at different times, thoughts evolve and opinions change.

Kamala Das has been charged with outrageous inconsistency, fickleness of the mind and even with waywardness. No doubt her mind, like a kaleidoscope, offers different images of the same object or person on different occasions. Evidences are plentiful if one wants to charge Kamala Das with inconsistency of feelings for her near ones- father, mother, brother etc. But whether she merits the criticism is doubtful. It is only natural to forgive the shortcomings of our

dear ones after they are gone. That which is lost becomes dearer. Maybe, the understanding of a father who put on a very stern exterior was not easy for Kamala Das in her youth.

Several women writers revolted against the pre-established patterns. But above all a woman's autobiography remained a definition of her subjectivity as against the backdrop of something more powerful. With Kamala Das, we come across a new kind of woman's writings which is bold, daring, tantalising and self-assertive. Here is a woman conscious of her femininity but determined to vindicate it against male supremacy. For Kamala Das it was important to be a woman and a lover with a body and a soul. The autobiography becomes a vehicle for voicing an inner privacy.

Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story* reveals that a woman is naturally creative and if given a room of her own, she can defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life boldly. There is nothing unnatural in woman's literary creativity, though it cannot be a rival to her biological creativity. *My Story* is one such autobiographical journey which helped Das in coming to terms with herself and proved extremely cathartic:

“I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say.”
(Meena 2004: 101-102)

Das' life-story is centred around her inner self – many a times we doubt the authenticity of her account. Nevertheless she sounds very convincing when she narrates the experiences of the inner self of a Woman in a typically Conservative Social Scenario. She has remarkably displayed self-Centeredness in her life-story. She has depicted incidents, events and character sketches of other people but her inner self is at the Centre. How the inner being of a woman grow from a child to the youth and then to the middle age has been remarkably portrayed. Das' autobiography is a marvelous example of the life-story where the past events have played a vital role in making her what she presently is. Here we constantly feel that though she is the thesis of her book, she views herself as a different persona.

According to O.J. Thomas:

“Kamala Das's story is the story of a woman who was denied love, when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life-name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is in this background that she writes about love in all her writings.” (Bhatnagar 2001: 83)

To Conclude

Whether factual or fictitious, Das' autobiography has carved a niche in the area of women's autobiographies in India. She has opened up new vistas of autobiographical writings.

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She has been considered as a writer who fought for the rights of women. Thus, Das comes to the forefront with the innermost doubts and wishes of the modern Indian woman. The most remarkable point of Das' life-story is her confessional tone. She is at her best in the exploration of the female self. Her autobiography is the collective repository of woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Nevertheless, Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

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