
Exploring Cultural Politics of Self in Kamala Das' Autobiography *My Story*

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Abstract

Kamala Das' *My Story* was published in 1973, and it was first published as *Ente Katha* in Malayalam. In her autobiography she has laid bare her own personal experiences with ultimate frankness in order to find her own self. She also explores the banality of the Indian culture which is used as a pretext to hide the institution of patriarchy so that exploitation of women can be easily carried out. The autobiography covers a long period of time of Kamala Das' life in different places with minute details. The prominent themes in her autobiographies are sexual exploitation, unhappy marriage, gender discrimination, betrayal, struggle for self-identity, patriarchy etc. *My Story* depicts the different phases of the author's life, from her childhood and adulthood to her last breath. Her confessional attitude helps the readers to understand how the personal experiences merge with the unnumbered women who suffer terribly under the institution called patriarchy. This paper explores the tussle of Kamala Das to assert her identity in the patriarchal world as described in the autobiography.

Keywords: Self, Cultural Politics, Patriarchy, Identity.

Introduction:

Kamala Das a well-known poet and short story writer, hailing from a conservative Nair family of Kerala has serialised her life story at a time when she is seriously ill. Her autobiography is titled as *My Story*. She is therefore, desirous of confessing all that has happened to her. *My Story* offers a glimpse into the events and forces that shaped Kamala Das' life and beliefs. She uses her courage and audacity to speak her mind and resist the insults of a male-dominated society. Her life is an open book of controversy. Her parents were artists, but from an early age, she was the kind of girl who defied authority and rebelled against colonial ideas of injustice, cruelty, and discrimination. Some sympathize with her, some condemn her brazen behaviour, and some wonder whether all this could have happened to her.

In Kamala Das' *My Story* the freshness and authenticity of the descriptions of childhood and the nostalgic fondness for the Nalapat house give way to fantasizing and mythification in the latter parts, distancing the reader by the artificiality and insincerity of the narration.

Kamala Das's *My Story* does not fall into the category of a typical woman's autobiography. For several reasons, her autobiography is considered as a notable one written by an Indian woman. She has revealed the bitter truth of life in a stunningly simple manner. The contribution of her memoir to women's autobiography in general and specifically to Indian women autobiography is also significant. She, while narrating her life without much apprehension, has crossed the gender boundaries of what is correct for a woman. Moreover, the autobiography reflects the life of an artist, giving us an insight into the creative development of one of India's controversial woman writers

who seems to be compassionate about the possible protest of Indian women as extremely exploited agent in the social and domestic circumstances. She strongly protests victimization in her autobiography. Her protest is directed against the injustices and the persecution to which woman in India have always been subjected to. *My Story* brought Kamala Das to prominence for being exceptionally vocal about her most private experiences.

Kamala Das passed her childhood very nicely at Nalapat house with the host of relatives around. She studied in a European school in Calcutta for a few years. Her father used to work in a private firm. She mentions that at that time British families had friendly relation with Indian families. So, her family too had close connection with several British families. But Das's experience in school with the British and the Anglo-Indian classmates was not good at all. She and her brother were treated very rudely by the other students. They were made fun of their colour. Kamala was called as "Blackie". She also realised that the white students were given priority in everything. Once, a poem written by Das was given to an English girl called Shirley Temple to be read in the assembly saying that the latter wrote it. Though her parents never expressed their disappointment over their colour, but her father made them drink a monthly purgative and insisted her grandmother to apply turmeric and oil on Das's skin.

There are so many other things that affected young Kamala's mind. For instance, she was conscious of the reality that her parents were awfully incompatible. Her mother never loved her father, and only because she was a typical Indian wife who never raised her voice that domestic harmony prevailed in their household. Her father never articulated any word of appreciation for his children, which affected her as well as her siblings. Kamala felt a sense of alienation at school and at home also. The life she led all throughout might also have been affected by her childhood experiences. Both of her parents were busy in their way and could not take care of their children or make time for them. Kamala and her siblings lacked emotional support and parental care during childhood when their metabolic state needed it most. Women are said to conserve energy, so they are passive, conservative, sluggish, and stable. Kamala and her siblings were lacking in childhood when they needed emotional nourishment and parental care the most. Their father was not a loving character, so we grew up more or less neglected, feeling like neglected children in the social circle who ruined our youth, and a strong bond of love developed between us. Loneliness is a state of mind that develops either an inferiority complex or a cynical outlook on life. But in the case of Kamala Das, it made her stronger, strong enough to protest all forms of injustice

She found a way to channel her emotional hunger in her poetry. Lack of parental love affects the child's psychological needs and needs. When she craved her mother's warmth and affection, she was unable to provide her child with the comfort she so desperately needed.

She didn't like her mother's shyness. She understood that she was shy because she was born into a male-dominated society where men try their best to establish supremacy and sovereignty over women. She describes how her father imposed Gandhian principles on her mother shortly after her engagement, forcing her to remove all jewellery, without even asking for her consent.

"Women have always looked to men for their livelihoods, and never thought to protest the injustices they suffered. Because of their docile nature, "harmony within the home reigned," says Kamala. No matter how great women's abilities are, they are inferior to men and must conform to patriarchal notions of gender relations and hierarchy. Her father's autocratic nature takes a new twist in her life when she decides to marry Kamala to an older man, Mr. Das. What she hated most was her father's authoritarian nature. Neither her mother nor her father cared about her feelings. She was very sad and unhappy because her life was no longer in her hands. It was planned and planned by her parents and relatives. She married Mr. Madava das when she was fifteen years old.

Her marriage proved to be an absolute failure because her husband treated her merely as a

means of providing sexual gratification while giving her no love and affection. She has described her husband's unemotional and mechanical way of performing the sexual act with her, which undoubtedly satisfied her sexual urge but denied her the love and affection which every woman expects from her husband. After her marriage to an indifferent husband who is always preoccupied with sex and his job, all of Kamala Das's hopes and desires of a loving and caring husband shatter. At a point of time when she even thought of a divorce, which she could not initiate. She reasons about it as:

I could not admit to all that my marriage had flopped. I could not return home to the Nalapat House a divorcee, for there had been goodwill between our two families for three generations which I did not want to ruin. . . My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society's reaction to any action of an individual's broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy.

It shows that in an Indian society the institution of marriage rests on many things other than the bonding between two individuals. The communication gap with her husband, the loveless marriage confined only to lust, makes her life miserable and she leaps into a few relationships outside her marriage, for which she is criticised extensively by the society. Her straying thus becomes an escape for her from the unfulfilled desires of being loved.

On the other hand, her husband's heterosexual and homosexual relations with maids and his friend respectively leave her more devastated. Once, while she finds her husband and his friend becoming intimate in her presence, she expresses I felt like revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breast seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the souls wound showing through.... It shows her helplessness as well as the pride of an individual soul which forbids her from demanding any explanation from her husband. Such hostility of her husband towards her prompts her to search for love and companionship outside her marriage. She had a severe nervous breakdown for which her husband took her out of the town according to the doctor's advice. While remembering that period, she recalls:

During my nervous breakdown there developed between myself and my husband an intimacy which was purely physical....after bathing me in warm water and dressing me in men's clothes, my husband bade me sit o his lap, fondling me and calling me his little darling boy....I was by nature shy....but during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing.

Das is iconoclastic in her straight discussion of sex, especially the lack of sexual fulfilment for Indian women trapped in rushed arranged marriages. She describes sex as "the principal phobia in Nair women" that claims that women are constantly indoctrinated with the idea of sex as illicit, brutal and above all physically unsatisfying. She illustrates her own wedding night as "rape" It shows that Kamala Das brings forth her experiences of womanhood, which the other Indian women do not discuss in reverence to social norms. She, in fact, constantly seems to refuse to remain silent and discusses her feelings of longing and loss at length.

After the demise of her husband, she got married to a person much younger to her age, which seems to be the outcome of her constant search for true love, the one that she visualised as "flowers in the hair...the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear...". She even converted to Islam at the age of sixty-five and remained a Muslim till death confronting all the controversies that entailed it. She chose to convert as she wanted to marry the person whom she thought loved her. But later she realised that she should not have done it when she says "I fell in love with a Muslim after my husband's death. He was kind and generous in the beginning. But now I feel one shouldn't change one's religion. It is not worth it." It seems her love life that she envisaged remained unfulfilled till the end of her life.

The Indian social norms and conventions are so strong and deep rooted in the psyche of a woman that she hardly dares to be as vocal about her private and personal feelings and experiences as Kamala Das. It is not that she was not affected by the criticism she had to face as she mentions: Whenever a snatch of unjustified scandal concerning my emotional life reached me through well-meaning relatives, I wept like a wounded child for hours rolling on my bed and often took sedatives to put myself to sleep. She indulged herself in drinking too to retain her mental stability. She paved the way for later woman writers to be vocal about their feelings and experiences and break the stereotypical image of an Indian woman. She also encouraged women to write as she holds the view that it could be a strong medium of women empowerment. For her writing was a passion, with which she thought magic could be created.

Kamala Das boldly expressed in the foreword to her autobiography *My Story*, "This turns out to be the 'new woman' in her autobiography, and the image of this 'new woman' is at odds with the image of a woman traditional society gives her. This "new woman" displays masculine indomitable courage and struggles to establish an identity on equal footing with men." Women like Das come forward to challenge male chauvinism. They dare to identify their true selves rather than conform to the false identity of "female" produced by a male-dominated society. Her penchant for establishing a different identity for herself sets her apart from other traditional women in society. She presents a beautiful and apt example by describing her trials and tribulations, the ability to face and overcome the limitations of women striving for self-knowledge and self-actualization.

My Story also throws light on the orthodoxy of traditional Nair families. The women in Nairs are models of neatness and simplicity particularly in their dress, food and living. Kamala Das's great grandmother's younger sister, who was a single, "had a passion for order was finicky about cleanliness and bathed thrice a day" She was a "deeply devout" woman, and her habit of taking three baths a day became the cause of her paralysis. Nair society is basically matrilineal, the members of which owned property jointly, including brothers and sisters. Perhaps this might be one of the reasons behind Kamala Das's daring attitude towards life, as she seems to have the conviction of being supported by her family at the time of crisis. Even history says, Nair women were autonomous, self-reliant, and enjoyed greater personal freedom than women in the rest of India. But Kamala Das credits her awareness to be the product of her 'exposure to life'. Her conscious mind could not accept anything that came her way. The question arises whether the Nair women are endowed with the liberty they are supposed to possess? She witnesses many incidents of the Nair society, which reflects its true nature. For instance, in a typical Nair society, women wear heavy jewellery to show off the wealth of their husbands. Kamala Das in this regard mentions ... My grandfather liked to see woman glamorized with jewels, flowers.... On the other hand, her father imposed his Gandhian ideals over her mother.

After her 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...

This shows how a woman had to submit to the will of her husband for the fear she had for men, be it her husband, father or uncle.

Kamala Das's autobiography is a loud protest of a married woman suppressed in a male dominated society. It illustrates that in a world dominated by man she tries to assert her individuality, to maintain her feminine identity. From this revolt rose all her troubles, psychological trauma and frustrations. It is a search for self through her feminine experience, especially her passionate relationship with different men. She seems to revolt against male supremacy and insensibility particularly in relation to marriage, love, sex and the freedom and individuality of

women. In her own way she comes out with a forceful resistance to gender constraints. While playing her roles of a daughter, a lover, and a wife she fell into the rigid grip of a male centred world. She is proud to be a woman. This is essentially the starting point for all forms of feminism. All feminist literature is based on the assumption that patriarchy is not a fact, but a constructible construct, a historical construct. Writers of feminist literature aim to break down this stereotype of society by eliminating all marginalities that are aimed solely at women. Kamala Das has made hysterical attempts to revolt against the domination of "second sex", as Simone De Beauvoir argues, "The world is too strong and if a woman persists in her opposition, it breaks her.... Kamala Das too was on the verge of becoming insane out of the weight of her frustration." Fortunately, writing was the only machinery which kept her alive and helped her to lighten her soul and she sustained serious nervous breakdown. French feminist theorists such as Helen Cixous, and Luce Irigaray appeals to women writers to construct a language that affirms their subjectivity. According to Lacan, "Subjective identity has no authentic origin in the 'true' unified self. It begins with an illusion or a mirage". The image of women is a cultural and patriarchal construct. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues, "... women as reserved, emotional, and weak, subordinating them to men." Her writings emphasize the dynamism of self-development, and the success of the movement transcends women's own wildest dreams. There are three areas of desire - emotional, physical, and mental and Kamala Das' literary output is a perfect example of these three desires as her writings powerfully express her longings, frustration, sadness, happiness, and her unconscious realm.

My Story gives important insights into the mind of an artist as well as the body of a woman affronting the strictures of a deeply patriarchal society. It was a liberating experience for her, one with which she "could depart when the time came with a scrubbed conscience", as mentioned in the preface. N. V. Raveendran notes about her that "the individual development in the area of women's literature plays a vital role in shaping the sensibility of a writer". He further remarks: "woman's sexual freedom has been the main topic of woman writers for about two hundred years. The tendency has been to demand freedom of self-expression in all fields...". A. N. Dwivedi writes about Kamala Das, Like Austen, Kamala Das also moves within her limited range with grace and skill. The advantage of this range is that it offers the reader only what the writer has personally felt and realized... It thus refers to the fact that through her personal experiences, she tried to reach the broader world. Like Kamala Das, all who grew up in the dual worlds of tradition and modernity, increasingly found themselves vulnerable and unprepared to face the world which is still controlled by patriarchal values. The description of homosexuality in her autobiography infuriated the conservative Indian readers. For her, it seems, writing becomes a way to vent out to the trauma of a deeply unhappy marriage.

Prof. Syd Harrex says, "Kamala Das's poems epitomise the dilemma of modern India woman who attempts to free herself, sexually and domestically, from the role of bondage sanctioned by the past.... In fact, if she would not have expressed herself, emptying her soul, she would become totally insane, as mentioned in *My Story*."

A central concern in Das' autobiography is the conflict between the loss of women's identity in a patriarchal society and the constant struggle to achieve it. When other writers failed to write the bitter truths of her private life, Das used their accounts to create a strong bond between the author and the reader. had a different character. Born into a historically unavoidable male-dominated society, she was sane enough to be aware of her surroundings very early in life.

Undoubtedly, the female body, with prolonged exposure, blurs other factors of female identity, and Kamala's life and work are considered unconventional and unacceptable to traditional society. This autobiography is the perfect vehicle for Kamala Das to assert herself and establish her

subjective identity trying to get out of life. Through her autobiography, she advocates the need for women to be accepted as human beings. She wants society to understand that all women have a desire to establish themselves and identities and reach the pinnacle of joy and success in this world. Because it is built, it can also break and change. Therefore, women are just as capable as men and have every right to live a life of freedom and self-respect.

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