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Kamala Das - My Story

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Abstract:

Kamala Das often distinguishes herself as a unique prose author, and her most famous work, *My Story*, is credited with being her well-known prose work, first published in *The Current Weekly*, published in Bombay, before being published under the current title in 1973. The importance of her autobiography (*My Story*) lies primarily in the fact that, in addition to being an independent work on Kamala Das's life, it also acts as a guide to understanding her internal suffering for her own identity and also guides to reading her poems to help them understand them in context for their proper evaluation. Nonetheless, the book's generic identity has been highly controversial since its publication, and scholar's views on the subject are divided, as many of them are not inclined to believe that all the poet's juicy stuff and multiple sexual relationships described in *My Story* can be an accurate autobiographical material.

Keywords: Kamala, das, Story, unique, famous, autobiography, identity.

Introduction:

Kamala Das was born on 31st March 1934 at Pannayarkulam in the coastal area of Malabar, Kerala. Kamala Surayya, formerly known as Kamala Das, was one of the leading writers of Malayalam. She was a prominent English poet, leading novelist, and short story writer of Malayalam. Her mother, Balamani Amma, was a renowned Malayali poet, and her father was V.M. Nair, former managing editor of *Mathrubhumi* newspaper. Her real name was Madhavikutty. Das wrote in English under the pen name Madhavi Kutty in the Malayalam language of Southern India. She earned the label "The Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry."

She received the poetry award of the Asian P.E.N. Anthology in 1963 and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1968. At 42, she published her daring autobiography *My Story* (1973), initially written in Malayalam and titled *Ente Katha*. Later, she translated it into English, added more text, and rewrote many parts titled *My Story*. She embraced Islam at the age of 65 and was named Kamala Surayya. She

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received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1985, the Asian Poetry Prize in 1985, and Honoured D. Litt. by the University of Calicut in 2006.

Kamala Das often distinguishes herself as a unique prose author, and her most famous work, *My Story*, is credited with being her well-known prose work, first published in *The Current Weekly*, published in Bombay, before being published under the current title in 1973. The importance of her autobiography (*My Story*) lies primarily in the fact that, in addition to being an independent work on Kamala Das's life, it also acts as a guide to understanding her internal suffering for her own identity and also guides to reading her poems to help them understand them in context for their proper evaluation. Nonetheless, the book's generic identity has been highly controversial since its publication, and scholar's views on the subject are divided, as many of them are not inclined to believe that all the poet's juicy stuff and multiple sexual relationships described in *My Story* can be an accurate autobiographical material.

Kamala Das' *My Story* (*Ente Katha* in Malayalam) was originally a series of columns published in the weekly *Malayalanadu* in 1973. The author wrote it as she lay recovering at Bombay Hospital and looked back at incidents and milestones in her life. Written with truthfulness, the book became a bestseller and was eventually translated into 15 International languages. *My Story* draws readers' attention to the silent cry of women, which is often neglected by their life partners, family, or society. *My Story* (1976) is one of the bold, unrestrained self-revelations seen in recent times. It is an account of a woman who tries to live traditionally but is forced to break social rules to satisfy her instincts.

Kamala's childhood was spoiled by color discrimination and cultural taboos. Being brown, she faced discrimination in European schools. She was treated rudely by British students and also tortured many a time when visitors came to school. She was discretely hidden away. Being Indian, she had to face the color bar meted down by British teachers and students. Her father often used harsh methods on her and her brother to fit them into the British cultural scenario. She declares: "I wondered why I was not born to a white couple who may have been proud of my verses."

She had also faced gender discrimination at a very tender age when she saw her mother obey her father timidly and create an illusion of domestic harmony in the social circle, while in reality, their marriage was a mismatch. From the secure and serene warmth of the Nalukettu, Kamala and her mother were taken away into the rashness of city culture. They were not accustomed to their new social set-up. From a matrilineal and matrilocal framework that offered complete security to the women and their kids, they were thrust into a Westernized patriarchal society. Women habituated to gentle maternal care and consideration were significantly lost in a male-centered society.

Women autobiographers have subverted the importance of the concept of

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marriage. Kamala was never interested in getting married and binding herself within the confinement of domesticities. She was interested in study and career. Kamala was given a proper education, but her father was quite orthodox. At the age of fifteen, Kamala was forced to marry a person double her age. *My Story* offers insights into Kamala Das as a writer and poet and her unusual relationship with a gay husband, whom she married at the very tender age of 16 when he was 36. The marriage lasted for 43 years until Madhav Das' death. She comments, "I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore, with the blessings of all, our marriage was fixed."

After her husband's sudden death, she came back to her village to live like an ordinary woman; even then, some orthodox villagers tried to empoison and kill her to save the family's honor. Her life shows the tests a woman has to pass throughout her life. Das talks of love affairs very frankly. Kamala expresses her inner urge:

"A writer moves away from family, old relationships, very far, with the speed of a falling star.... Otherwise, the writer is destroyed, and only the family members remain the mother, sister, daughter, and wife,she will have to write against her loved one, put him under the microscope, dissect him, and analyze and analyze his thoughts and words. After a while, he is no longer the man you held in your arms at night. You have cut him in little silvers; everything is burst open; he is seeds, pulp, and juice."

Das firmly believed that love is the essence of life for a woman. She longed to receive and to give love. An unfeeling husband devastated her romantic ideas about love and home. Her husband hurt her and evoked a sense of disenchantment in her.

Das comes to the forefront with the deepest doubts and wishes of the modern Indian woman. The most noteworthy point of Das' life Story is her confessional tone. She is at her best in exploring the female self. Her autobiography is a collective storehouse of women's experiences that would ordinarily be treated as unessential. Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her private self.

Kamala's autobiography is a literature of personal revelation, and its main interest lies in conscious or unconscious self-portrayal by the author. The writer must not give an account of his external life, mainly in chronological order. Still, she must account for her inner life, awareness, consciousness, and the ideas and emotions that keep hovering through their conscious self and the unconscious. Both this external and internal life should find a literary expression, and this need not only command over language but also artistic self-control and ordering of material. Different social, cultural, scholarly, and political matters that have gone into the making of the author's personality are expressed genuinely. It is an autobiography full of truth, philosophy, psychology, and history. It exposes the ever-changing reality of life inevitably reflected in literature. The position of women in society is no exception to literature. The status of women all over the world, particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. Women, defined as the center of culture, are imprisoned

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in the family's walls and shackled by tradition. She now looks at herself from a different angle. The Asian women writers have voiced their feelings through their sensibilities and their awareness of feminine problems. The male society compels her to choose her roles according to its convenience. She is forced to act as either an enslaved person or an idol. Indian patriarchal social set-up makes writing autobiography indeed a challenging task for a woman writer, keeping in mind the social and cultural constraints.

My Story is an attempt at redefining male-female relationship. It is a challenging account of the writer's mental and physical urges. It is an account of a woman who tries to live conventionally but is forced to break social rules to satisfy her inner urge. Kamala Das's life story is more significant, bolder, and better understood when peeps into her battered emotional love life. Sorrow played an essential role in her life. Being brown, she faced discrimination in European schools. She was treated rudely by British students and also tortured many a time when visitors came to school. She was discretely hidden away. Being Indian, she had to face the color bar meted down by British teachers and students. Her father often used harsh methods on her and her brother to fit them into the British cultural scenario.

According to O.J.O.J.O.J. Th, "Kamala Das' Story is the Story of a woman who was denied love when she valued nothing but I all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing, and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life—her name, fame, and a degree of wealth—but she could never get love, and she saw it. In this background, she writes about love in all her writings."

Kamala Das' early marriage throws light on the evil of child marriage in Indian society. In India, children are married at a very unripe age, when they know nothing about marriage or physical and emotional. Kamala Das was in a dilemma over her marriage. She has realized that it was not love but sex that marriage as an institution legalized. She was ready to defy subverting the traditional expectations of women. She felt that women had the right to satisfy their needs like men.

In India, divorce is also not a standard feature. A lot of stigma is attached to a divorced woman. Das, too, is very much bothered about public opinion. She sticks to her marriage while suffering within. She needed to be educated enough to get a good job and live independently. Furthermore, as a mother of three kids, she had to give a second thought to the matter of divorce. The reasons she gives for not getting a divorce are noteworthy. She observes:

"My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively by our society's reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. If I had at the time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to marry me, for I was not conspicuously pretty, and besides, there was the two-year-old who would have been to the new husband an encumbrance."

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Thus, Das comes to the forefront with the innermost doubts and wishes of the modern Indian woman. The most remarkable point of Das's life story is her confessional tone. She is at her best in exploring the female self. Her autobiography is the collective storehouse of a woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as unessential. Nevertheless, Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

Her *Story* gives us a feeling of the identity of her inner urge for freedom, self-assertion, autonomy, and establishment of her identity. She could not reconcile herself to a subsidiary situation in her life. Her husband could not satisfy her poignant needs, and she had to seek compassion outside her marriage for her emotional needs. She had deliberately turned to several men in the hope that she would one day be able to find an ideal lover who would love her for her own sake and who would not treat her as a sexual object. She has searched in her life for pure and unconditioned love.

Women's life narratives generate new possibilities of being read. Whichever be the genre, women's life narratives seek affirmation in the correcting mode. By bringing their personal life into public, these women challenge and articulate gender concerns, caste, and religion. Therefore, they cannot be reduced to 'narrations of pain and sorrow' or 'memories of a hateful life' but go beyond. These reading women's life narratives without a political ideology stand the risk of making a spectacle of women's suffering and pain. The narrations bring new insights into male-dominant academic institutions, which assume importance in curriculum construction. The subject provides a platform for discussion of women's life narratives to explore links between the historical devaluation of women, their writing practices, the exclusion of their writing from the canon of traditional autobiographies, cultural biases in defining selfhood, revising the prevailing concept of autobiography, and other perspectives.

Conflict is one of the most significant factors in autobiography. According to D. G. Naik, "Certain autobiographies enable us to know the history of certain periods in a far better way than the actual books of history."

As Das writes in *My Story*: "Poets die many times their deaths. They die especially repeatedly in the obituaries. They live again, so they not when their poems are printed after their deaths."

Dr. Joya Chakravarty observed that *My Story* manifests Das' poems. Judging whether Das has derived her life story from her poems or vice versa is difficult. Das' poetry is unprompted, straightforward, and simple. Nevertheless, it has a watchful and curious approach to life.

Kamala Das is an iconoclast who asserts her identity and the universal experience of self, love-despair, anguish, failure, and disgust in her autobiography against the traditional mode of gender manifestation held through a feminine Indian awareness.

Kamala Das belongs to the first generation of modern English writers who

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evolved new poetics for themselves and made a new start in theme and technique around the 1960s. The first phase of Indo-Anglican poetry ended in the 1950s. To the poets of this period, the spirit of modernism was almost alien. Their main preoccupation was the spirit of Nationalism and the war of Independence, the partition of the country. Kamala Das is one of the most influential voices of this post-colonial era. Even in Kamala Das' poetry, we find the best expression of feminine sensibility, its suppression in a male-dominated society. Her autobiography bears the best parts of her poems, and most painful and pessimistic poems are autobiographical. Her poetry is confessional and autobiographical to a great extent, but she sometimes universalizes what is personal. In her autobiography, she rebels against the conventional restraints of society meant to exploit women in this artificial world. She challenges the accepted notions of the female and redrafts the general opinion of the feminine mystique. She shows the passion of an undaunted rebel, not to retreat and not to fail. The intensity and articulacy of her life and poetic triumph have astonished the male chauvinists and left her female counterparts in soaring spirits inside the social, cultural, and religious set-up and outside it. That is why her life story makes a fascinating study in the crushing reflection of the exploitive prescriptions against the freedom, dignity, and respectful living of women, especially in Indian society. She confirms our conviction that socio-cultural and socio-religious restrictions on women have robbed them of all their potentialities, leaving them not only physically and mentally handicapped but also psychologically wrecked age after age.

As a creative artist, Kamala Das progressively involves herself in the fundamentals of thought and action: skepticism, opposition, and criticism. Ever since Frederick Nietzsche envisaged these three characteristic properties of modern thought and action, many revolutionary ideologies like the leftist philosophy and the feminist revolution in European countries came to the forefront. Kamala Das successfully poetizes the modern Indian feminine psyche's violence and rebellion by the celebrities of the twentieth-century Western women's liberation movement, like Simone De Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. Being an Indian, Das progressively introduces the Indian woman's predicament by considering four prominent aspects differentiating women: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Her sensibility is filled with painful circumstances of feminine dilemma and the resultant anxiety. This anxiety and anger eventually transform into violent poetic outcries that are directed towards a society that constantly and continuously cold-shouldered feminine sensibilities and violated the freedom and aspirations of women.

Kamala Das is concerned with the exclusive problems women generally face in the context of traditional life-giving institutions. Regarding taking issues and quarrying with man and his masculine preoccupations, Kamala Das is justified in her violent fury against the autocratic manner in which man behaves in his relations with women and with nature. A certain amount of self-centeredness, hypocrisy, envy, and

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hatred entered into the ego-centric province of man, and it is tough to say when he started becoming a grudging rival of the very essence of femininity.

Kamala Das witnesses the process of liberating women by openly declaring her grudges and concerns about the self-centered nature of man in being an authority for himself without understanding women's relative importance and rights. Her complaint is based on the fact that this supremacy of women was never allowed to take the form of a culture by man and his humiliating tendencies of dictatorship. Kamala Das enhances this feminist argument by poetically expressing the authentic texts and contexts of Indian women. Her autobiography has since been evidence of her unique personal temper and temperament. Kamala Das thinks that given freedom and transparency in thought and action, Indian women can also come out of their world's seemingly unassertive and obedient calm and quietness. K. Satchidanandan rightly observes:

"She [Das] refuses to glorify the historical past. She rejects the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero-cult, violence, war, mindless exploitation of man and nature, the misuse of intelligence, and the supremacy of reason and theory over sensitiveness and experience."

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