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Kamala Das's *My Story*: An Embodiment of Marginalized Voices

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Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story", displays the writer's various perspectives regarding the subjugation of women. Here, we see her rage against the male dominated patriarchal society, which is expressed through various voices, the voices of an Indian woman, a mother, a child, a lover, a wife, a writer and many more. It is a feministic approach for the protection of womanhood and femininity where the writer honestly explores the body and psyche of a woman. The writer's self-determination in throwing her voices against the internal and external struggles in a socio-politically repressive world has been beautifully reflected through the book.

"My Story", the autobiography of Kamala Das is a beautiful revelation of her love of womanhood and femininity. It is an honest exploration of the body and psyche of a woman. Unlike the common Indian woman who obeys and follows the rules made by the male dominated society, Kamala Das always tries to redefine the marginalization of woman by an assertive and self-determined behaviour.

K. Satchidanandan says that "My Story" is a polyphonic text with different voices. –Here is a wife, mother, sister, daughter, lover and writer, a middle class woman seeking freedom from the bourgeois definitions of women's intellectual and imaginative abilities and a public woman defying patriarchal descriptions to open new avenues of personal and professional experiences for women. In this autobiography, each and every chapter provides a clear and vivid picture or theme and at the same time, together, the chapters provide reasonable emphasis on the domestic details of food, marriage, childbirth, familial relations, sexual liaisons and the internal and external struggles of woman in a socio-politically repressive world.

The opening chapters of the book portray the picture of a colonized childhood, which has been echoed in the later theme of oppressed womanhood. The poet's father, a Rolls Royce and Bentley salesman, is an embodiment of the middleman between the British corporation and the Indian upper class. The characteristic alienation being suspended between indigenous and colonized cultures is shown by her. Like the few brown children studied in the white school, the young girl wondered, "Why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses" (My Story).

"My Story" echoes the voice of a child, who is devoid of parental love and care. The writer and her brother were not lucky enough like the common children to get the loving care of the mother. Her mother is an exceptional woman without the bond of love with her daughter. Kamala Das's eternal quest for love in her life may be the result of such neglected child psychology.

It is significant that her mastery of the English language, a symbol of the colonial power, provoked the psychic chasm between herself and her parents. This split, between the poet as a master of a colonial language and her Indian parents prefigures the later split between the woman writer in English who is engaged in her own subjective autonomy and a traditional patriarchal Indian society.

In her autobiography as well as in many of her fictions and poems, the dominant female figure is presented as a desiring subject. Desire as embodied in “My Story”, is an embodiment of a range of female roles. She presents herself in turn as a child, but a girl child with a crush on a teacher, the naïve object of lesbian exploration, an innocent child bride, the victimized wife, loyal and loving wife, adoring mother, sexual tease and spiritual goddess, seeking union with the divine. Kamala Das lives out these stereotypic roles.

It is significant that the narrative of the autobiography first provides the reader with a series of empowered female subjects. For example, Chapter 4 of the book is a rewriting of Das’s matriarchal past, legends surrounding her grandmother’s home, Nalapat House, a symbol of the way in which the contradictions in traditional Indian women’s roles can be resolved. The narrator traces her lineage to her ancestress Kunji, a wealthy aristocrat, who at the age of fifteen, fleeing from the war between the English and the Dutch; but she was made to change her life by an amorous chieftain by bringing her over to his village and marrying her.

The use of delicate phrasing envelops the sensational probabilities of rape, abduction and forced marriage. But instead, it suggests a romantically blurred portrayal of a male figure, who was well versed in Astrology and Architecture and who set his bride in a magnificent house, Nalapat House. The narrator’s maternal home was dominated by the old women consisting of her grandmother and her two sisters.

However, there were two male figures intrude in this woman world; one is that of the political saint, Mahatma Gandhi and her grand uncle, Menon. The uncomprehending girls saw Gandhi as a brigand whose diabolic aim was to strip the women of all their finery so that they became plain and dull. On the other hand, her uncle Menon was seen as lonely and indigent. The child Kamala Das was under the influence of her aunt Ammini, an attractive woman who kept turning down all the marriage proposals that came her way. Love was a beautiful anguish and a thapasya, and it is ironical that it was sensed for the first time by Kamala Das only through the influence of this aunt.

It is quite significant that the narrator tries to portray one of the most important embodiments of woman empowerment through the deity of Kali, the most feared deity in the Indian pantheon, the goddess to whom powers of death and destruction are attributed. In the memory of Kamala Das, this Indian goddess occupies a good area and she devotes her longest description to her worship. She confesses that when kali danced, they fell in the region of the heart unease and a leap of recognition. In their heart’s core, they held the knowledge that kali was older than the world and that having killed for others she was now lonelier than all.

Here in this autobiography, Das’s wrath against the social institutions have been well presented which are echoed in the narrative of her arranged marriage. She was considered as a burden and a responsibility- neither her parents nor her grandmother could put up with for long and so, she was married to an older man. Like most of the Indian woman, her fate was to marry a man at the age of only fifteen years and to tolerate all the brutality from the side of her husband in the name of a bond. In her autobiography, she is violently daring to open up all the smooth and delicate feelings of an Indian woman, the hope, desire and expectations from a near and dear one:

“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.” (My Story)

However, her wedding night was an unsuccessful rape by her husband. She suffers through her husband's selfishness and neglect of her emotional and physical needs. After an early separation, she and her husband attempt reconciliation when they move to Bombay, but she has a nervous breakdown at the age of twenty, after the birth of her second son.

Kamala Das tries to examine the place of class in her society by going beyond the economic and sexual bond. She examines the lives of the working class and poor who surround the protagonist and comments the protagonist's fascination with the poor. She comes across the liveliness of lives of the poor, who live in the builder's colony behind the 'large new structures'. Finally, as she writes, 'unable to control myself any longer, I dragged my husband to the colony one evening'.

In the squatter's welcome for her, she is able to revise her subjective perspective—"I was pining for yet another settee for the drawing-room while these grand men and women were working from morning till dusk carrying cement and climbing the scaffoldings. And yet they had more vitality than I had of optimism. My gloom lay in its littlest corner like a black dog. I had had the idiocy to think of myself as Kamala, a being separate from all the rest and with a destiny entirely different from those of other." (My Story).

Here again we find the double voicedness narrative. The protagonist attempts to break the psychic isolation of a middle class marriage, but the attempt on this occasion, dragging her husband with her, is licit and legal and serves to underline her identification with the larger Indian society.

The restrictions of the society on women writers trying to express the kind of sexual and professional autonomy as found in 'My Story', are as strongly embedded in many Asian cultures today as they were in 1976, the year when 'My Story' appeared. 'My Story' is an exceptional piece of revolt against patriarchal oppression. It proves the writer's keenness in establishing women empowerment.

Kamala Das's poetry as well as her autobiography, presents her emotion regarding her sterile and uninspired love relationship with her husband. In the poem, 'A Relationship', she asks, 'Betray me?/ My body's wisdom tells and tells again/ and even death nowhere else but here in /My betrayer's arms..'. The same tone is echoed in "My Story", "My husband thought that it [her special oil] had the sexiest scent of all. He was obsessed with sex. If it was not sex, it was the Co-operative Movement in India, and both these bored me."

But there is another voice with the mystical experiences of Lord Krishna, which always tries to console her inner voice. It provides her peace and mental satisfaction, makes her forget the bitter experiences of her married life as in one of her poetry, "O Krishan, I am melting, melting, melting/Nothing remains but you...". There are many instances where the writer's keen desire to be with Lord Krishna is presented. "Free from that last of human bondage, I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He Came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up, but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter he dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat cross legged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise."

Kamala Das's writings have influenced many feminist writers in the postcolonial period, particularly in the context of India. The consideration of subaltern structures of family hierarchy

where the woman often occupied a position of prime importance, is always a matter of consciousness from her side.

In a paper, titled, “A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das’ My Story” R. Tamil Selvi, compares Kamala Das with Sylvia Plath “... 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.”

Kamala Das’s unsatisfied married life and her exploration of the same in an anguished spontaneity reflect only the pain and desire of a woman, other than a poet or a writer. She wants love and longs for it throughout her life. She is a beautiful embodiment of Radha, melting herself only in the love of Krishna.

Kamala Das’s polyphonic voices are marginalized voices in a patriarchal society. My Story is not only her story, it is the story of the Indian women, where there is a keen desire to revolt against the pre-established patterns. She paved the way for other feminist voices with her bold, daring and self-assertive nature. “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.” (A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das’ My Story” R. Tamil Selvi).