

Quest for Self in Kamala Das's *My Story*

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Kamala Das's frank and turbulent autobiography *My Story* which created a literary sensation evoked intense admiration and vehement criticism from the readers. It tells the tale of Das's victimization, agony, abuse and her painful self-awakening as a woman and writer. As the poet and critic K. Satchidanandan points out "I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colours and its turbulent poetry" (Das xviii). Written in deft and confident style the narrative gives a deep insight into the various stages of a woman's life. Being both a victim and survivor she is unapologetic for not paying any heed to the hypocritical society. Unlike Jane Austen, George Eliot, Brontes and other such women writers who internalized the patriarchal norms and values, Kamala Das deliberately broke the man made ideological structures. The confessional mode and the sincere tone denote her creative fulfillment. She rebelliously proclaims in the preface of the Sterling edition, "This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me". The book discusses several issues like her quest for love, her several love affairs, lesbianism, relationships within and outside the family and reflects on the real life of an Indian middle class woman. It gives a picture of Kamala Das – her quest for a space for herself and brings out the various aspects involved in parent-child, husband-wife and the colonizer-colonized relation by highlighting women's experiences. The present paper attempts to examine Das's search for identity in *My Story*.

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, the history of humanity is a history of keeping women in subjection and silence. *My Story* which brings out the unique experiences of women was marketed as a work that would tickle male sensation. *The Times of India* claims that there is enough in it to give the readers the sizzle and spice. As Linda Anderson points out, "It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces differences" (59). Das was made to feel guilty for her fierce originality, bold images and exploration of woman's sexuality. She was compelled to provide an explanation for her controversial autobiography. In the Preface she states that she wrote it to pay the mounting hospital bills and "to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience". She was forced to admit of the fictional element but still she continued boldly. Henry Mackenzie sees autobiography as "the confession of a person to himself instead of the priest" (Folkenflik 5). Autobiographical works often distort and/or exaggerate the self and involve fictional element. The fictional aspect serves to bring out the universality of

women's experience and does not in any way diminish the relevance of her experience. Pain, despair and anguish are woven into the fabric of her narrative that deals with intensely personal experiences. The language used is different from that of men. She writes about her lesbian relationships, rape, the numerous male cousins who grab and kiss her and the attention she received from her husband's colleagues. Regarding the confessional mode she states,

I also know by confessing

By peeling off my layers

I reach closer to the soul

And

To the bone's

Supreme indifference (The Old Playhouse)

In an interview given to Shobha Warrior she declares that her autobiography was no fantasy. She writes in *My Story* that a poet's raw material is not stone or clay but her personality. Woman's writing itself can be regarded as her initial spontaneous step in the discovery of her feminine self. As Helene Cixous states, to write is "an act which will not only realize the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories" (875-893). Das turned to writing to overcome her sense of incompleteness and writing enabled her to find a new direction and meaning to life. Germaine Greer remarks that the recognition of the self leads to self-awareness. She says in *The Female Eunuch*, "She could begin not by changing the world but by re-assessing herself" (4). Das who was a bilingual writer wrote in English and in her mother tongue Malayalam (under the name Madhavikutty). Das was influenced by her great uncle, Nalapat Narayana menon. She sat night after night at the dining table, long after her husband and three sons had gone to sleep, writing until it was 5 and the milkman clanked at the gate, with his cycle and his pails. This rigorous schedule made her sick. But her urge to write was so great that it even made her view the sickness optimistically. This enabled her to identify her true self instead of adopting the false identity as a 'woman' created by society. Christine Gomez points out some of the key issues that confront woman in search of her selfhood. "... her rebellion and protest against opposition at every level, sex-role stereotyping in society, debates about the double moral standards in society, various aspects of female experience such as domestic violence, rape, pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, being single and so on, the evolving of feminine consciousness out of female experience, the internal conflict and ambivalence of women forced to choose between new 'feminist goals' and traditional 'feminine goals', between total independence and the need for romantic love and emotional fulfillment, the bonding between women forming a sisterhood or a mother-daughter relationship and the alienation of woman as an outsider, as an object, as the other" (92). Das's narrative delineated the doubly colonized situation of women who suffered under colonial power and patriarchy. She has also brought in several racial and colonial issues while focusing on her personal experiences.

Examining the impact of colonialism on gender Das brings out the coldness involved in the apparent friendly relations that British share with the Indians. It was quite normal for British family to have friendly relations with Indian families. Her father's superior Ross visited their

house. Though she was fascinated by the Western ways she also narrates the discrimination that she and her brother encountered at British colonial and missionary schools. The friendly relations that British share with Indians can be seen as the result of the Whiteman's encounter with the Other. The white boys tortured her brother by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril. When he bled, the white boy yelled, "Blackie, your blood is red" (2). But Kamala who couldn't accept the white superiority scratched his face in a mad rage. But she was soon overpowered by the tough Anglo-Indians who fought for white man's rights. Her education at the European school made her realize her inferiority. When there were distinguished visitors at the school, the brown children were told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories. Once a girl named Shirley was asked to read a poem composed by Kamala Das. Young Kamala was reminded of her dark skin and felt hurt when the governor's wife offered Shirley a special kiss believing her as beauty with brains. She felt that her parents too were disappointed by her swarthy skin and ordinary features. She states that her father forced them to drink castor oil and asked her grandmother to apply turmeric and oil on Kamala's skin. The atmosphere of colonialism, racism and emotional depravity created the feelings of alienation and loneliness in her. Thus the search for lost self is discernible even from childhood.

Meena T. Pillai points out in "Translating Her Story: A Woman in Quest of a Language" that the problem of identity is closely linked to the language. By positing this self as a fictional construct, by problematising it, Kamala Das actually poses a problem of identity, a problem linked to language, of writing one self in two languages, in the process attempting to evolve a third language for writing the woman into existence" (100). Kamala Das, the daughter of the prominent Malayalam poet Nalapat Balamani Amma and V.M. Nair, the editor of a leading Malayalam daily display remarkable dexterity in handling English language even at a very young age. She wonders, "...why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses" (9). Geok-lin Lim points out that Das's very mastery of colonial language- English is linked to the psychic break between herself and her parents. Lim states, "This separation between English-language child-poet and Indian parents, a consequence of colonialism, prefigures the later rupture between the English-language woman writer, engaged in the Westernized project of claiming her own subjective autonomy, and the traditional patriarchal Indian society" (352).

She exemplifies the way in which colonialism and patriarchy subjugated women by pointing out the way in which Gandhiji's preaching on simplicity was distorted by men to subdue women. Young Kamala sensed the hidden motive behind the 'simplicity' propagated by patriarchal society. She states that soon after the marriage of her parents, her father ordered her mother not to wear anything other than Khaddar. He also made her remove all her gold ornaments except the 'mangalsutra'. Her mother did not protest and her timidity created 'domestic harmony'. Her grandmother told her of the trip that the ladies of the family made to Guruvayoor to donate their jewellery to the Harijan Fund. Das exposes the underlying hypocrisy regarding 'simplicity' by revealing the extravagance involved in her marriage. Even those who claimed to be the followers of Gandhiji could not practice simplicity in the true sense. When her father fixed her marriage at the age of fifteen with Mr. Das, a much older relative she felt that she "was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long" (77). There was nothing remotely Gandhian about her wedding which was regarded as the most expensive wedding of the year. She says, "Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent

half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue...When I remarked cynically on the extravagance, my grandmother scolded me. ‘You ought to feel grateful to your father for arranging such a lavish wedding for you’” (82). Diana Gittins points out that “whenever women have taken public political action, it has invariably been defined as both a threat to the socio-political order and as ‘unfeminine’, ‘unnatural’ and threatening to the ‘family’. Inherent in all such accusations has also been the notion of sexual aberration and ‘abnormality’” (39).

Das analyzes the situation of several women within and outside her family and delineates the various societal factors that entrap and enslave them. In “Composition” she refers to the commonalities of women’s experiences.

We are all alike,
We women,
In our wrappings of hairless skin.
All skeletons are alike,
Only the souls vary
That hide somewhere between the flesh
And the bone

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 6).

The patriarchal society makes a distinction between good and bad women and the evil ones are ostracized. In *My Story*, Das has incorporated the experiences of various women and has analyzed the various situations that oppress and subjugate them. Good Nair women never mentioned sex. They regarded it a principal phobia and associated it with “violence” and “bloodshed”. She exposes the hidden sufferings of several women by taking the case of her great grandmother Kunji, aunt Ammini, great-grandmother Ammalu, her Valiamma, maid servants and numerous other women. Das states, “No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and blood shed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi’s legal husband, Bhima only because he coveted her. It was customary for a Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night” (23). Her ancestress, Kunji while fleeing from the war between the English and the Dutch “was made to change her route by an amorous chieftain who brought her over to his village and married her” (12). Here Das has highlighted the romantic aspect. Yet the possibility of abduction and forced marriage cannot be negated. Das’s association with aunt Ammini made her realize that love was a beautiful anguish and *thapasya*. Aunt Ammini was an attractive woman who chose to remain unmarried. Das often heard her recite the love songs of Kumaranasan. Her decision to remain unmarried seems enigmatic. Six-year-old Kamala’s greatest companion at Nalapat was the paralyzed Ammalu, her great-grand mother’s younger sister. She too chose to remain unmarried. But nobody ever knew the reason for such bold

stance. Ammalu went out only to attend the annual Ekadeshi festival of the Guruvayoor temple. Later when Kamala returned to Nalapat as a middle-aged woman, Ammalu's poems disturbed her. Das universalizes women's experiences and escapes her solitude by trying to construct a group identity. Yet another women victim at Nalapat was Das's Valiamma. She had a "hard face, a shut safe of iron that looked in all the bitterness of her unhappy life" (30). She had a great capacity for silence and serves as the voiceless symbol of male brutality. She was abandoned by her husband following his quarrel with her uncle. Soon the men in her family married her off to an insensitive person. She waited for several days at the fence under the lime trees hoping to meet her first husband. But he never came that way. She was a 'good' Nair woman who never expressed her wants and desires and "had not stepped out of the Nalapat House for over thirty years except to go to the privy that was a furlong away and to the pond for her baths" (33). It was only after her death that Das's grand uncle (Valiamma's son) first displayed his love for his mother. All man-woman relationships in *My Story* reveal that women are regarded as nothing more than mere objects of sensual pleasure. Usually the man who pestered the woman to satisfy his sexual urge escapes while the woman is victimized. Das exemplifies this by pointing out the situation of a servant. Kunhukutty who was the kitchen-maid was a rape victim and received no sympathy even from other women. Even the usually charitable grandmother asked her to "get out this minute" (24). Das's own experiences also reveal her victimization and anguish.

Das and her brother lacked the care and attention of their parents during childhood. Her father's autocratic ways and lack of love and care in childhood created a deep sense of alienation in her. She states, "So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young, there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate who pushed him on a handcart when they went on their begging rounds" (2). She could sense at a very young age that their family lacked love. Her mother was afraid of her father, uncle and her husband. Das felt the need to be recognized as an individual and her need for love was so great that she even missed the presence of "full time maid" in the house. She writes, "... I did not tell my mother what had happened. She never asked any questions. My father too was entirely without curiosity. They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently like sturdy shoots of the banyan grew out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses" (71). At the age of fifteen she was hurriedly married off to an older man. She describes her situation: "I yearned for a kind word, a glance in my direction. It became obvious to me that my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain. A coldness took hold of my heart then. I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit... I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him at least physically" (90). She discusses the role of wife in "The Old Playhouse".

You called me wife

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and

To offer at the right moment the vitamins,

Cowering beneath your monstrous ego, I ate

The magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will

And reason ...

(The Old Playhouse)

Loveless relation was unbearable for her. She says, “I always wanted love, and if you don’t get it within your home, you stray a little” (Warriyar interview). She reveals her craving for love and care and her relationships outside wedlock. Society and tradition stipulated women’s feeling of pleasure and pain as dependent on her husband’s moods and fantasies. But Das boldly proclaims that woman too is an individual with her own needs and desires. The various extramarital relationships only served to intensify her disappointment and frustration. Finally she realizes that no man is capable of giving her true love. She turns to Krishna who can never disappoint the one who turns to Him in love and devotion. “Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beautiful smile of my Krishna. ‘Always, always, I shall love you’... only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine” (87). Her search for love within and outside marriage, betrayal and agony triggers her to fight against established norms to find happiness in the world of her own. As Srinivasa Iyengar notes, the language she uses reveals her split self. He states “... she reveals a mastery of phrase and a control over rhythm – the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly alive. Her characteristic trick is to split phrases and meanings – even the infinitive – between two lines and this is surely symbolic of the fissured, or fractured, sensibility she wishes to communicate” (680). She exposed the suppressed emotions and effectively depicted the essence of women’s experience. The isolated “I” refers to the collective consciousness of women’s subculture. The identity that Das searches for is relational as women’s identity is relational and their identity boundaries are very fluid compared to men’s. *My Story* does not focus on any one relationship of the author. Rather it centers on several traumatic relationships and delineates Das’s progress towards maturity and stability while coming to terms with her self. Her stories on her own experience and those of other women are also tales of male brutality. Her protest against the suffering of women induced by patriarchy paved the way for a major transformation. She brings out the hollowness in husband-wife relations. Woman was regarded as a slave who owed the man for his financial aid and shelter. She writes about the relationship with her husband: “At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhilaration. All the Parijatha that I wove in my curly hair was wasted. The taking was brutal and brief. The only topic of conversation that delighted him was sex and I was ignorant in the study of it” (89). The sincere relationships which she depicts are the relationships that exist among women. Commenting on Das’s relation with her grandmother, Devender Kohli remarks, “It is perhaps in keeping with her general criticism of male character for its failure to give her tenderness and warmth, that the only figure whom she presents as an ideal is her great grand mother... Her ancestry, her background and thoughts of her home have a therapeutic and curative effect on her” (119). Das is fascinated by the Hindu goddess, Kali. The victimized women are contrasted with Kali, the deity associated with empowerment, shakti and the annihilator of evil forces. During the annual ceremonies “when Kali danced, we felt in the region of the heart an unease and a leap of recognition. Deep inside, we held the knowledge that Kali was older than the world and that having killed for others she was now lonelier than all. All our primal instincts rose, to sing in our blood, the magical incantation” (27). Das’s poems about dolls that lost their

heads and her paintings that showed demons mating with snakes all illustrate her split self. Her yearning for a 'presence' in a phallogocentric world is expressed in "The Old Playhouse".

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
 You built around me with morning tea,
 Love-words flung from doorways and of course
 Your tired lust. I shall someday take
 Wings, fly around, as often petals
 Do when free in air

(The Old Playhouse)

Like the 'headless doll' that lacked identity she too was regarded as a mere commodity of entertainment and pleasure. She wanted to break the shackles and secretly wished to be like "Draupadi who commanded her adoring mate to brave the demons to get flowers for her wavy tresses" (29). She wanted to be with Krishna for an eternal everlasting life of love and compassion which she could not attain in the real world. As Iqbal Kaur points out Das's autobiography is the story "of any and every self-determined who in spite of all the odds she has to fight against in a man's world, must make attempts at self-actualization. It projects the struggle of the New Woman determined to establish her identity, her self worth" (144). She assumed that wealth and power would help her to attain a position equivalent to man in Indian society. Man's position as the earning member of the family is a major factor that contributed to male superiority. Das states, "I used to tell my brother that I would take up law. I had heard that lawyers made enormous amount of money and lived in style, keeping more than three cars and a pack of servants. I loved opulence and luxury. Perhaps this was the reason for my choosing the roles of queens and princesses whenever we decided to stage a play. I liked the bewitchment of gems, silks and perfumes. In all my daydreams I saw myself as a bejeweled empress who controlled the destinies of her countrymen. Some kind of a Noor Jehan"(48). Her sexual escapades can also be regarded as part of her quest for identity. She indulged in extra-marital relationships as a rebellion against her uncompassionate husband and conventional society. But all her lovers were incapable of loving her. She encountered lust instead of love. She writes, "I asked myself why I took him on as my lover, fully aware of his incapacity to love and I groped in my mind for the right answers. Love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults. I needed security. I needed permanence; I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear" (178). R.K.J. Kurup points out in his article, "In her autobiography she makes it clear that beyond the body there is a realm of freedom which is so important that it is all encompassing. Viewed in this light one comes to the conclusion that even her sexual adventures are experiments of her search for her true self" (116).

The process of writing liberates and perfects her. She lives through several situations and experiences them and thus attains emotional maturity. In "A Feminist Reading of *My Story*" Subash Chandra states, "An important aspect of her type of feminism which emerges in her book is that it is possible to be one's true self without denying or suppressing one's femininity" (148). Kamala Das yearns for a space for herself, economic and psychological independence. She does

not advocate doing away with men as a solution to women's problems. In her search for self she yearns for a world full of love and kindness where women are regarded as dignified individuals like men. Devendra Kohli states that "Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity" (29). She did what she thought was right though she was ostracized by the society. The unapologetic and direct narration indicates the need for society to change in order to accept her writing. Through her writings she succeeded in creating a space for herself and exhorted other women to emerge from the cocoon of domesticity. She aspired for the dignified position of woman in society. Her courage and determination ultimately helped her to find the light at the end of the tunnel.

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