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Arguing the Genre of *My Story* by Kamala Das

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Abstract:

Whether Kamala Das's *My Story* is an autobiography or a fiction has been a highly debated question right from its inception and the author by her wavering stand over the matter has herself been fairly responsible for generating much of the heat. For instance, in the preface of the book she candidly claims it to be an autobiography, while later by her incoherent pleas and odd excuses to defend her own self against the ignominy arising out of her alleged involvement in multiple love-lust affairs, she seems to mystify deliberately the whole issue, giving to the narrative the hue of a fictional creation. It *ipso facto* renders questionable the claim of the writer herself about the book being an autobiography and lends credence to the theory that the incidents described in the book in first person are not necessarily related to the real life of the writer, but are based on the incidents happening around her in the society. In this backdrop, the present paper seeks to examine the contradictory claims of the writer and the arguments advanced by various scholars in respect thereof, supporting or contradicting the two hypotheses to enable us to arrive at a plausible conclusion.

Keywords: Genre, Autobiography, Fiction, Love Fantasy, Burka, Obscenity, Vulgarism, Virtue, etc.

Though essentially a poet, Kamala Das distinguishes herself also as a unique writer of prose and *My Story* has the credit of being her well known prose work, which is first serialized in *The Current Weekly* published from Bombay, before being published in 1973 under the present title. As a matter of fact the importance of *My Story* mainly lies in the fact that besides being an independent work on the life of Kamala Das, it also serves as a key to read her poems to help understand them in perspective for their proper evaluation. Nevertheless, the generic identity of the book has been highly controversial right from its publication and the opinion of scholars is divided on the point, as many of them are not inclined to believe it that all the juicy stuff and multiple sexual relationships of the poet narrated in *My Story* can really constitute a true autobiographical material. Nair clearly says that *My Story* is not a factual autobiography in the literal sense of the term, so one "has to make a judicious use of the information given in it (and) should not pounce upon each juicy bit as if catching the criminal red-handed" (Nair ii). Iqbal Kaur also endeavours to say, "I personally feel that she is a

woman obsessed not with lust and sex but with the concept of purity which she had inherited from the Nalapat women” (Kaur, ix-x, 129), implying thereby that the book studded with lot of obnoxious stuff cannot be of Mrs. Das’s own story. However, while doing so, she fails to appreciate that in the preface of the book the writer has herself categorically stated that the book is an autobiography, which she begins writing during her first serious bout with heart ailment, so that she is able to tell the people all about her before breathing her last, accordingly, she states, “I wrote continually, not merely to honor 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. (Das v) But later during an interview, responding to a pointed question by the interviewer Iqbal Kaur as to whether *My Story* is a factual account of her life or is it the creation of her imagination, Das turns evasive saying “whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial and what really matters is the experience, the incident” (Kaur 164-165). This jittery, enigmatic and somewhat dodging response of the writer has led the critics to make their own speculations about the genre of the book, to suit their own whims and prejudices. Nevertheless, it is indeed relying upon the writer’s latter claim that Mrs. Iqbal Kaur chooses to infer that *My Story* is not necessarily the story of the writer herself, but she “has been liberal enough to hide every woman in the burka of 'I', be it a lesbian, a girl indulging in extra-marital sex, an adulterous woman, a girl running from door to door for love or a raped girl...” and that “*My Story* could not entirely be an autobiography” (Kaur x-xi). Talking in the same vein Devindra Kohli also alleges that “When Kamala Das speaks for love outside marriage she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security” (Kohli 27). Obviously, if one goes by these interpretations, the book rather than an autobiography becomes a reflection of the prevalent gender issues, particularly those related with man-woman relationships, which the writer in her novelty of style has preferred to relate in the first person. It is perhaps the reason why not only Iqbal Kaur, but also many others are not inclined to treat *My Story* literally as an autobiography and one like KRR Nair prefers to call it as a “partially autobiographical fantasy” (Nair 2).

On the contrary, Ranjana Harish hails *My Story* as a true autobiography when she treats the accusation of the author against her husband on its face value and defends all her sexual aberrations, saying, “Driven by sheer indignation Kamala now made up her mind to be unfaithful to him at least physically” (Harish 216). Sunanda Chavan too takes a similar stand in the matter when she says that “the tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfillment from the husband leads her to search for it in extra-marital relationships with other men” (Chavan 61). Likewise, the Malayalam poet and critic K. Satchidanandan also remarks, “I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colours and its turbulent poetry.”

(Wikipedia contributors, 2017). Besides, reviews carried out in several news papers published from time to time also hail *My Story* as an autobiography. *The Sunday Standard* regards it as “a straightforward story (which) has sincerity that strikes an immediate rapport with the reader”, the *Deccan Herald* calls it as a “frank story of Kamala Das” and the *Assam Tribune* reiterates, “Kamala Das does not hide her secrets and does not follow the rules of old morality.” (Wikipedia contributors, 2017). In the same way, a write-up in the *Youth Ki Awaaz* Mondal treats *My Story* as the true story of the writer and remarks, “The entire account written in the format of a novel is captivating with all the intimate details of her childhood followed by her youth and middle age.” (Mondal, 2010)

However, before trying *My Story* on the generic touchstone it is imperative to understand the true import of the expression ‘autobiography’, defining which James M. Cox says that it is the “narrative of a person’s life written by himself” without meddling it with “the fictive and historical aspects of the narrative. (Coax 252-277) The Encyclopedia Britannica in its relevant entry mentions that an autobiography is a “self-written account of one's life and times... the motive of which is mainly a self-scrutiny for self-edification and self-justification” (Benton Vol. II). Accordingly, Sarojini opines that autobiography is a personal revelation of the author, wherein he makes, consciously or unconsciously, a self-portrayal and “wherein the very aim of a writer is to reveal himself from all angles” (Sarojini 199). Besides, the works written in this genre are believed to be subjective in nature, as the inability or unwillingness of the author to recall the events accurately is likely to result into misleading or incorrect information. (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia) However, in common parlance autobiography is a narration of one's life presented in an orderly manner, wherein “the author paints his life with the help of words- the author then stands back and examines this orderly structure” (Chakravarty 2). It is thus obvious that the aim of autobiography is to reveal the truth about one's own achievements- worldly, moral, spiritual and religious, avoiding at the same time, both self-effacement and self-aggrandizement. Besides, the language of the autobiography also needs to be simple, lucid, charming, witty, and balanced, which ought not to be abusive or obscene, so that it does not create a bad taste or vitiate the minds of the readers, as it has some responsibility towards the society, some lessons to give, some morals to preach and some missions to fulfill.

Viewed from the above perspective *My Story* presents a very confusing picture as while going through the book the reader comes across many such incidents and personalities which appear rather fictitious than real, as it is stated, “There is no realistic picture and no concrete details of the time and space in which she grew up” (Chakravarty 2). Besides, its narrative also lacks in connectivity, which spread in fifty disjointed episodes, is not a systematic presentation of the facts and events. Every episode seems to be independent and has some separate story to tell and fresh message to convey. The plausibility of most of the incidents seems highly doubtful mainly in view of the fact that more often than not

an ordinary thing stands blown beyond proportions and the details of some important happenings unnecessarily suppressed, giving rise to many wild speculations. The narrative is also not balanced and trustworthy, which is over-burdened with sensuality presented in a vulgar language often transgressing the bounds of decency. The book also does not seek to serve any worthwhile purpose but seems rather promoting extra-marital relations, which is hardly permissible in any civilized society of the world, as it tends to corrupt the mind particularly of the young readers by arousing their baser instincts. Besides, there are umpteen examples in *My Story* to prove that while writing on love and sex the writer's pen becomes too slippery to spare even her close elderly relations like grand aunt who, she says, enslaved her husband "with her voluptuous body" (Das 23). She is so accustomed of using suggestive and vulgar language that even while depicting a hospital scene she uses expressions like "I put aside my shyness and stripped before her" (Das 135). She describes even her most intimate moments with marked impudence, as she brazenly recounts as to how Mr. Das, then her fiancé, kissed her shabbily and "whenever he found me alone in a room he began to plead with me to bare my breasts... bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin" (Das 84). Besides, she gives a sensual touch even to a mother-son situation as she says that her son would sleep with his "left hand tucked inside my nighties between my breasts" (Das 217). Obviously, the author is keen to depict the female form openly with an extra stress on sex organs, which stands further exemplified when she says: "The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound, showing through" (Das 104). Her over-exposure in this way seems disgusting, about which Vimala Rao remarks "In life such self-exposure is suicidal, in art it is unpardonably boring" (Rao 96). Thus, vulgarism is the most dominating feature of the book and the writer seems obsessed with sexuality, which as a subject matter comes very handy to her. She probably inherited this trait from her grand uncle, who wrote a book on sex entitled, 'Rati Samrajya' which "was an academic study based on the writings of Havelock Ellis and the Indian sexologists" (Das 23).

Apart from being vulgar, the writer is also incongruous in her narration, which she gratuitously tries to flavor with hot spices, based rather on her fantasy than the truth. Thus, relating the incidents of her school days she tells about her one-sided love affair at the age of 14 with one of her teachers (Das 70-72), and with a student leader even earlier (63). She also refers to her instant attraction towards a lady teacher (Das 74) and views even the love and sympathies of an elder female partner in the hostel as a lesbian advancement (Das 40). It shows that right from the very beginning the writer is obsessed with sexuality, which *ipso facto* renders her feigned innocence illogical that until her wedding night she did not have any knowledge as to "what went on between men and women in the process of procreation" (Das 25). Likewise, her ignorance of the advent of menses and her depiction of the first menstrual experience in a crude way is equally absurd and hypocritical (Das 61), more particularly, in view of the fact that her mother

had purportedly “taught her to accept her puberty (and) her menstrual cycle, as an inevitable phenomenon for procreation.” (*Shodhganga*) Similarly, the so-called brutal attack by her would be husband during one of his pre-engagement meetings also seems to be quite exaggerated, narrating which she tells that “Before I left for Calcutta, my relative (her future husband) pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. I felt hurt and humiliated.” (Das 82) She also recalls that the next time when he comes to Calcutta at the invitation of her father, while driving home from the airport to the amusement of the driver he “pressed my fingers amorously and asked if I had changed” (Das 83) Besides, he also allegedly boasts “of the sexual exploits he shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar” (Das 84). Similarly, on an earlier occasion he is also alleged to have referred to “homosexuality with frankness” and as a normal affair (81). Mrs. Das alleges that the conduct of her fiancé distressed her a lot, as she has expected him to be as indulgent as her parents “to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words... 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 84). She again accuses Mr. Das of surprising her on the wedding night “by the extreme brutality of the attack...with my heart palpitating wildly I begged him to think of God” (Das 89). Nevertheless, her husband, as she confides, doesn’t succeed in consummating the marriage; and though he repeatedly tries to hurt her, she is able to remain “a virgin for nearly a fortnight after... marriage” (Das 90). It, however, looks odd to believe that a man, who allows his wife to keep her so-called virginity intact for so long even though sharing a common room with her, could really be brutal and aggressive. Hence, despite her strong persuasions, neither her slurry words spoken against her husband, nor her claim, that at the time of marriage she was quite innocent and knew nothing what marriage was all about, can be taken to be true.

The above details conspicuously reflect that Mrs. Das is disenchanted with her husband from the very beginning, which it is believed “was a case of hate at first sight” (Tiwari 127). She, therefore, regrets that her marriage was settled by her parents unilaterally, where she “appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held firmly by her parents...she wasn’t given a free choice to select an ideal lover” (*Shodhganga*). She also regrets for being treated as if she “was burden and a responsibility neither (her) parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long” (Das 82). Commenting on her plight, O.J. Thomas is quoted to have remarked that the story of Kamala Das is the story of a woman for whom “Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream... She got almost everything in life-name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it” (cf. Bhatnagar, 183). She also tells as to how bitter she feels for her marriage with Mr. Das that once when her father casually asks as to why she looks so thin and has not gained weight after marriage she turns upset, “I wished then to cry and to tell him that he had miscalculated and that I ought not to have married the one I did, but I

could not bring myself to hurt him” (Das 91). In fact, the main reason for Mrs. Das’s repulsion towards her husband is that he happens to be much older than her, allegedly with “a gap of one whole generation (and he) was all for lust. He expected Kamala to satisfy his physical needs and to be cowed by him.” (*Shodhganga*) It is the reason why she feels a sense of loneliness and neglect and though “her husband was not a bad man...she could never like him whole-heartedly” (*Shodhganga*). It is also out of sheer bias that she takes all the pre-marriage boastings of her husband about his masculine exploits on its face value and forms a negative opinion against him, leveling on their basis serious charges against him of immorality, like homosexuality (Das 81, 104) and adultery (Das 84). She, however, concedes that being physically immature at the time of marriage and not ready for availing conjugal bliss proves an embarrassment to her husband, as he is a veteran “in the rowdy ways of sex which he had practised with the maids who worked for his family” (Das 90). Besides, she also accuses her husband that he marries her not for love, but for her “social status and the possibility of financial gain” (Das 95)

It, however, appears that Mrs. Das suffers from a sort of inferiority complex and is envious even towards her maid-servants, whom she finds physical more beautiful than her, as she says, “I was thin, and my swollen breasts resembled a papaya tree. How much more voluptuous were my maidservants” (Das 94). Tiwari rightly believes that “It is this inferiority complex that probably led the poet to entertain a doubt about the loyalty of her husband and to fancy without any solid proof his involvement with the maid-servants” (Tiwari 136). As a matter of fact, at all the stages of her life Mrs Das seems to carry a feeling that she is devoid of a sexual appeal, in the childhood for her dark complexion, after marriage for her tender age and later in life for her poor health. Nevertheless, it may be a ploy used by Mrs. Das deliberately to project herself as a victim of what she calls as “a young man’s carnal hunger” (Das 90). Or else, it may be treated as a vain attempt on her part to vindicate her innocence in a bid to seek an alibi for her multiple sexual adventures, thereby justifying her moral degeneration, declaring categorically that aggrieved by the conduct of her husband she is forced to look for love outside the ‘legal orbit’ and that “I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him at least physically” (Das 95). However, Dwivedi supports this bizarre claim and holds her husband responsible for her awry behaviour of indulging in indiscriminate love affairs, stating that “Her husband had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was ever busy sorting out his files and affixing his signature on them” (Dwivedi 2).

True to her above shameless resolve, Mrs. Das turns so desperate for love that she even goes to the extent of asking her maid-servant to hire a young and handsome brick-layer, then working in her father’s under construction house, by paying him gratifications in gold coin (Das 95). She also confides that she eagerly succumbs to the flattery of one of her cousins and allows him to grab her and kiss her, as at that instant she is so much

“ready for love and ripe for a sexual banquet” (Das 95-96). She really turns into a man-hunter, as she herself says, “...like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for it a receptacle” (Das 118). Commenting on this, Dwivedi remarks that Kamala Das is thus prompted to launch into “a hectic love life with small capital- just a pair of beautiful breasts and a faint musk rat smell in (her) perspiration” (Dwivedi 2). However, her lecherous ways renders her vulnerable to the extent that even a stranger, in connivance with her trusted maid, once gains entry direct into her bedroom and even tries to commit rape (Das 107). Curiously, Mrs. Das herself later attests to the veracity of the above incident, saying, “It was not a creation of my imagination. It actually happened. The ayah was bribed. I remember how miserable I had felt” (Kaur 164). In this way, the list of her lovers keeps swelling to the extent that it becomes well nigh difficult even for her to count their names, as with the exception of one Carlo she describes all others of them only by their professions, or various physical marks, like ‘bricklayer’, ‘grey-eyed man’, ‘the man with a tattoo between his eyes’, ‘the aged man’, ‘the intelligent man’, ‘the old and stout man’, etc. In one of her articles Mrs. Das even goes to the extent of favouring the revival of polyandry of the Mahabharata days, saying, “I plead for the return of a social order that allowed a woman to have more than one husband if she so desired”. (*Eve’s Weekly*, May 1972) But consequent upon her multifarious illicit sexual involvements and love adventures she earns a bad name and is charged for compromising the name of her family, as Suresh Kohli remarks, “...one cannot think of any woman, more so an Indian woman, who would invite abuses, negative criticism and hatred and bring an aura of eroticism around her purely to create sensation-not even the strongest protagonist of women’s liberation.” (*India Today*, March 31, 1976)

It appears that Mrs. Das eventually realizes her mistake of being so offbeat in depicting her sensuality, as she says, “My articles on free love had titillated many. So I continued to get phone calls from men who wanted to proposition me” and tries to explain it away, saying, “It was so obvious that I painted a wrong image. I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband” (Das 192). Reinforcing her defense she also declares that “Not even Mrs. Grundy would have found fault with my morals” (Das 202) Besides, to stay herself clean she heaps all sorts of garbage on her husband as if he is a dumping ground. It, however, appears that the various charges she levels against him, as for being cruel selfish and lewd, are exaggerated, as she herself seems to be contradicting them at several places in the book by praising him for his so many good qualities. Accordingly, she herself describes him as an intelligent man who could deliberate upon literary luminaries like Aldous Huxley and Bertrand Russell with perfect ease, though she later belittles it saying that it “was not a major accomplishment” (Das 83). At times, she displays her utmost concern for the honour of her husband, as for instance once when Mr. Das is harassed by his boss in the office, she turns furious and asks him to resign rather than facing humiliations (Das 195).

However, at the same time she describes him as a weak man, who has no courage to face his tormentor, even though he is physically weaker than him, as she sarcastically says, “My husband when he does not stoop stands six feet without his shoes, whereas the bully who made him lose his self-confidence was a tiny marionette of a man who had the jerky movement of a tin soldier” (Das 195). Besides, it also looks surreptitious that even while showing her repulsion openly for her husband, she wants him always to rally round her, coaxing and flattering regardless of his busy schedule in the office (Das 95). On the other hand, she deems her own duties towards him to have been fully discharged only by allowing him a physical access (Das 102). However, enduring all her misdemeanors and scathing comments against his conduct Mr. Das continues to love his wife ardently, taking care of all her needs and attending upon her attentively during her frequent illnesses, though even in that she tries to discover lust that too “loud and savage” (Das 111-112). Nevertheless, he still adopts a forgiving stance towards his wife and ignores all her ignominious deeds (Das 117-118). He also trusts her fully and always tries to placate her to the extent of allowing her even to enjoy the company of strangers, even though he knows that she often misuses it, betraying the trust reposed in her (Das 151). Nonetheless, she remains ever discontented with her husband, who she says “was immersed in his office-work, and after work there was the dinner, followed by sex” with no time “to see the sea or the dark buffaloes of the slopes” (Das 41). It, in fact, lends further credence to the theory that Mr. Das has distaste for her husband from the very start, as he is essentially different from her in nature and is not a man of her dreams, as while he “always gave precedence to his office work over anything else, she was interested only in the fascinating world of love and sex” (Tiwari 182).

Consequently, to falsify all her love adventures, Mrs. Das even goes to the extent of holding her husband solely responsible for encouraging her to make the book highly ‘sensational and provocative’ (*Savvy*, Dec.1990). It is quite curious that Dwivedi, who justifies the sexual aberrations of the writer at once also accepts her defence, alleging that “when she speaks of love outside marriage, she does not really advocate for infidelity and adultery, but merely searches for a kind of man-woman relationship which should guarantee both love and security to a woman” (Dwivedi 3). However, Mrs Das perhaps still finds her defense weak and insufficient, so she tries to mystify her love stories, projecting her last lover even as the embodiment of Lord Krishna, the giver of universal love and security (Das180). She further claims that only he who goes to Mathura and forgets to return to his Radha “could be an ideal lover for her” (Das 191). She even tries to give her narrative a spiritual hue by describing the physical beauty as transient (Das 209) She also refers to such supernatural elements as god, life and death (Das 216-219). Obviously, it is in view of such enigmatic claims that critics like Iqbal Kaur have been led into treating Mrs. Das as a paragon of virtue and the mouthpiece of the suffering womanhood, believing that all the dirty stories narrated by her in the first person are not

her own but belong to somebody else. It, however, renders the narrative to become incoherent at many places. It also disturbs the rhythm of the book so much so it fails to present the incidents in an orderly manner and also lacks in connectivity. It also suffers from internal contradictions and unnecessary exaggerations, and its language at many occasions is also obscene and filthy. Besides, it also does not address any social concerns directly, or serves any feminist cause, *al beit* it addresses women of different shades in a very uncharitable term, depicting maidservants as mischievous fellows adept in rumor-mongering, coquetry and flirtation ready to compromise their virtue easily (Das 84), and hails majority of the city-dwelling women as adulterous (Das 183), which is indeed a very sweeping remark, the justification of which eludes comprehension. Notwithstanding all these paradoxes the poet hails the book as her most satisfying literary adventure, saying: “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 life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me” (Das v). Curiously, since the book before being published is serialized in a popular Malayali journal and later in English in *The Current Weekly, Bombay* (Jan. to Dec. 1974), it affords the writer an opportunity to know the readers’ reactions bit by bit and to modify its contents accordingly so as to rescue her from an inconvenient situation.

However, the above contradictions render the book wanting in being regarded as an autobiography, particularly in the face of the writer’s own claim that the main purpose of writing the book has been to earn money, implying thereby that various erotic scenes depicted in a vulgar language have been deliberately created to make the book popular among the young and gullible readers so as to enhance its salability. However, because of the deliberate inclusion of imaginary, trash and farcical material in the form of the writer’s explanations to her various love-lust stories, the generic identity of the book becomes quite obscure, which hopelessly impairs its claim to an autobiography and gives it the hue of a fiction, leading the critics like Pashupati Jha to call it an autobiographical novel (Jha 95). Similarly, Nair also believes that “*My Story* is not an autobiography in the conventional sense; it is an imaginative and fanciful rendering of certain autobiographical experiences that affected the poet’s growth from childhood to maturity, from innocence to its loss” (Nair 103). It is perhaps in view of this that Nair believes that the book is not literally an autobiography and that the writer has used the confessional mode, as she finds it rather handy to depict her love experiences and its pitfalls to highlight “the pains and pressures of the modern Indian woman” (Nair 98). However, after a careful scrutiny of the book and the material on record it can be safely surmised that the basic lay out and structure of *My Story* is essentially autobiographical, wherein the main events in the life of the writer, her personal traits and aspirations, her family background, her love-lust obsessions, her wholesale self-exposure, her marital discord and extra-marital cravings, etc. which though earns her a bad name, inviting the ire of her friends and relatives have

been recounted truly. It appears that the writer has deliberately tried to mystify the story to mislead the readers in a bid to save her from unsavory and adverse comments about her personal life from various quarters, nonetheless the status of *My Story* as an autobiography still remains fully intact.

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