

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-IV August 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

‘I am Sinner, I am Saint’: Proclamation and Protest in Kamala Das’ *My Story*

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Article History: Submitted-27/07/2023, Revised-20/08/2023, Accepted-21/08/2023, Published-31/08/2023.

Abstract:

Indian English literature has evolved significantly in the last few decades, earning recognition on a global scale. In fact, the post-independence era is sometimes compared to the modern age in the history of Indian English writing. Given all the factors, it must be acknowledged that the prose and poetry written in Indo-English after the independence have qualities that set it apart from earlier works. From Toru Dutt to Kamala Das, Indian women poets who write in English highlight the remarkable range of themes and styles that poetry is capable of. It is important to keep in mind that poetry by women need not simply be considered from a feminist perspective. Kamala Das, a prominent Indian writer and poet, is renowned for her bold and unapologetic portrayal of her life experiences through her autobiography, "My Story." Published in 1976, the book delves into her personal journey, cultural identity, and societal norms, making it a compelling tale of self-discovery and protest. The present paper explores how Das utilizes her autobiographical narrative as a platform to proclaim her individuality and challenge societal constraints, thus creating a powerful narrative of proclamation and protest. Through an analysis of key themes, writing techniques, and significant events in "My Story," the study highlights the profound impact of Kamala Das' courageous voice in the face of societal norms and expectations.

Keywords: Identity, protest, loneliness, autobiography.

Introduction

In *My Story* Kamala Das remarks that poets,

“A Poet’s raw material is not stone or clay,
it is her personality" (Chapter 37, My story)

Indian English literature has evolved significantly in the last few decades, earning recognition on a global scale. In fact, the post-independence era is sometimes compared to the

modern age in the history of Indian English writing. Given all the factors, it must be acknowledged that the prose and poetry written in Indo-English after the independence have qualities that set it apart from earlier works.

In terms of both theme and style, Indo-English writing is distinctive. It has significantly increased in both strength and variety with the commendable efforts of its skilled practitioners, including Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayant Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, A.K. Ramanujan, Keki N. Daruwalla, R. Parthasarathy, Shiv K. Kumar, and a few others who successfully portray human emotions and existence in their work. By conveying contempt, perplexity, despair, anguish, frustration, hopes, and aspirations, they meet the demands of the current generation. These writers address a variety of subjects, including the search for one's identity, interpersonal relationships, loneliness and alienation, and the struggle between tradition and modernity.

From Toru Dutt to Kamala Das, Indian women writers who write in English highlight the remarkable range of themes and styles that poetry is capable of. It is important to keep in mind that poetry by women need not simply be considered from a feminist perspective. The female writers of the post-Independence and postmodern era started to depict their desires, lust, sexuality, and gestational experiences in rebellious language in their writings. They contributed to Indian English literature with richness a of fresh themes and life experiences. To express their suppressed impulses, they created a fresh, inventive iconoclastic discourse. As a result, these feminine writing developed, and gave Indian English literature a new vitality, diversity, and potency.

The female writers of the twenty-first century have successfully created a new tradition and a "new method of articulation" that is both unique and spontaneous. They have emerged from the romantic attachments and the claptrap of the past tradition. The writing of Sumita Jain, Lakshmi Kannan, Meena Alexander, Vimla Rao, Eunice de Souza, Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, and Monika Varma, represents the sincerity of vital feminine sensibility.

Kamala Das, born in 1934 in Kerala to an aristocratic Hindu Nair family, is one of the most well-known Indian woman writers of the twentieth century. Not all women in Indian society have the courage to express their actual selves publicly as Kamala Das, a woman of great courage who also comes from a conventional and conservative family. Their writings have had a significant impact on the advancement of women's empowerment and development. Kamala Das has contributed to the discussion of many issues that affect the entire women's society.

At the age of 42, Kamala Das published her autobiography. In the most odd circumstances, she wrote this book. During "her first serious bout with heart disease," (My Story, Preface) she started writing it. The doctor believed that writing would help her to get her mind off from the fear of death. And "there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of" as well. And this fear of sudden death made her 'to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scribbled out conscience". So, it would seem that she wrote this book amid a time of financial crisis and the danger of losing her life. This suggests that Kamala Das intended to publish an autobiography that was confessional in nature. This implies that she is aware of her "secrets" and "sins," which she would like to come clean about.

Published in 1976, her autobiography describing not only the author's life but also the lives of most Indian women during that time. The struggles of Kamala Das as a woman and as a writer are detailed in this book, which is divided into many chapters based on the chronological phases of her life. Her primary objective was to reveal the realities and hidden truths about the life of Indian women during the Gandhian time. She reveals that she cannot escape from her own predicament, meaning she cannot distance herself from her own experiences and emotions. As a poet, her life and personality are deeply intertwined with her work, making it challenging for her to separate herself from her creations.

Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them, they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. I was emotional and over-sensitive. (Chapter 37)

Her autobiographical work, is a candid account of her life, reflecting her personal experiences, emotions, and challenges. Born into a conservative South Indian family in she grappled with societal norms that sought to confine her within prescribed roles. Present study delves into how Das uses her narrative voice as a medium for proclamation and protest against these imposed restrictions. Her autobiography serves as a canvas upon which she paints her unique story of self-discovery, rebellion, and empowerment.

It is a unique example of a feminist work in Indian society. Women were not allowed to express their opinions, views, or thoughts. That is also true of her inner self, particularly when it comes to sex, lesbianism, and love outside of marriage. A woman could never openly

express her wish to have men other than her husband. Yet, Kamala Das displayed tremendous bravery by writing down all of her inner thoughts and aspirations.

She wrote her autobiography and expressed herself boldly despite being born into a conservative Hindu Nair family. Kamala Das has proved how her female subjects strive to challenge traditional notions of what it means to be female or feminine in India. Indian women suffer of injustices and social tyranny. She has presented how brown students were discriminated at a European school. She doesn't focus on her relationship with her mother which is typically the main focus in autobiographies written by women.

In "My Story," Kamala Das embarks on a compelling quest for identity and stages a powerful revolt against patriarchy, both of which are intertwined throughout her autobiography. With numerous references from the text, we can explore how Kamala Das navigates her journey of self-discovery and rebellion against the patriarchal norms imposed upon her.

Proclamation of Identity:

Kamala Das boldly proclaims her identity and individuality throughout "My Story." She resists the traditional roles assigned to women and seeks to liberate herself from patriarchal conventions. Her candid discussions about her sexuality, desires, and emotional struggles challenge the prevailing conservative attitudes of her time. Das refuses to conform to societal expectations and bravely asserts her right to self-expression.

She grapples with the complexities of her identity, especially as a woman in a conservative society. From a young age, she feels a sense of displacement and a yearning for acceptance. She writes, "I was a misfit in a world that cared only for well-shaped eyebrows, straight backs, and stylish clothes." (Chapter 2) Her search for identity extends to her cultural and religious heritage. She struggles to adhere to the traditional roles expected of her as a Malayali woman. The conflict between her personal desires and societal expectations leaves her feeling conflicted and confined. She remarks, "I did not want to be a mere Hindu wife, praying for her husband's long life." (Chapter 9)

Through her literary pursuits and later, her bold and candid writing, Kamala Das begins to carve out her unique identity, breaking free from the imposed norms and embracing her true self. Kamala Das boldly accepts and embraces her multifaceted identity. She refuses to conform to societal expectations and rejects the narrow definitions imposed on women. In doing so, she proclaims her right to be herself, unapologetically and authentically. Her proclamation of identity becomes an act of rebellion against the conventional roles assigned to women, and she

challenges the restrictive norms of her society. In the beginning of the story when she feels discrimination among white students she writes,

I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses. Then suddenly like the clatter of pots and pans, harsh words attacked my privacy. "What on earth are you doing here, Kamala?" shouted the teacher. "Why don't you join the others? What a peculiar child you are?(Chapter 3)

Protest Against Patriarchy:

One of the central themes in "My Story" is Kamala Das' protest against patriarchal norms. She recounts instances of gender discrimination, unequal treatment, and limited opportunities faced by women. Through her narrative, Das offers poignant critiques of the deeply entrenched patriarchy prevalent in society. Her protest extends beyond her personal experiences, advocating for a broader change in attitudes and societal structures. She unapologetically discusses her experiences with love, desire, and sexuality, which were often stigmatized and hushed in her conservative society. By proclaiming herself as both a "sinner" and a "saint," she confronts the hypocrisy of a society that adheres to rigid moral standards while engaging in hidden vices and moral judgments. Her protest lies in exposing the double standards prevalent in society, where men are often forgiven for their transgressions, while women are condemned and shamed. At one stage when she got tired of her loveless marriage, she thinks of leaving her marriage life and she writes,

I did not have the educational qualifications which would have got me a job either. I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew that I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards. I was a misfit everywhere. I brooded long, stifling my sobs while in the four tiny rooms of our home slept soundly the husband, the son, the old ayah, the cook and the young maid.(Chapter 25)

"My Story" is replete with instances where Kamala Das confronts patriarchy head-on. Her refusal to accept the subjugation of women and her desire to challenge established norms becomes evident in her writings. In her marriage, she is trapped within a conventional

patriarchal setup, where she is expected to prioritize her husband's wishes above her own aspirations. However, Kamala Das resists such constraints, stating, "I began to feel that I was suffocating inside a gilded cage." (Chapter 10) Kamala Das also addresses the double standards imposed on women regarding sexuality. She expresses her frustrations, saying, "A man can love his wife and keep mistresses too. But a woman must not admit that she loves anyone but her husband." (Chapter 17)

As a woman growing up in a traditional South Indian society, Das confronted cultural norms that often stifled her aspirations. Her unconventional approach to life, choice of clothing, and open defiance of societal expectations invited both admiration and censure. Through her writing, Das challenges the rigidity of cultural norms, urging readers to question and challenge these norms themselves. She fearlessly confronts various taboos and social stigmas in "My Story." She discusses themes such as marital dissatisfaction, extramarital affairs, and her quest for genuine love and companionship. By addressing these taboos, Das aims to shatter the silence around such issues and encourage open dialogue and understanding.

Kamala Das' "My Story" is a remarkable autobiography that encapsulates her journey of proclamation and protest. Through her fearless storytelling, Das breaks barriers, confronts societal norms, and empowers herself and countless others. Her bold narrative serves as an inspiration for those striving to embrace their identities and challenge oppressive forces. "My Story" remains a timeless and relevant work that continues to resonate with readers, offering a testament to the power of proclaiming one's truth and protesting against injustice.

Kamala Das is unapologetic about her sexuality and desires, and her candid discussions regarding her relationships and physical intimacy are a bold revolt against the prevailing societal taboos. She defies society's expectations of women's sexual modesty and secrecy, choosing instead to write openly about her feelings and experiences.

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 wanted to be given an identity that was lovable.(Chapter 23)

This honesty is evident when she proclaims, "I had no shame. I wanted everything." (Chapter 18) By rejecting the imposed silence surrounding female desire and pleasure, Kamala

Das challenges the deeply ingrained patriarchy that seeks to control women's bodies and emotions. Throughout "My Story," Kamala Das's writing serves as an act of rebellion in itself. She uses her literary talent to express her frustrations, desires, and defiance against patriarchal norms.

The act of writing becomes a medium of liberation for her, as she declares, "Writing is my revenge on reality; I want to be truthful." (Chapter 24) Through her bold narratives, Kamala Das encourages other women to reclaim their voices and assert their identities, despite the stifling patriarchal constraints.

Precisely, "I am sinner, I am saint" in Kamala Das's "My Story" represents her assertion of self, her defiance of societal norms, and her willingness to confront the hypocrisy around her. Through her proclamation and protest, she challenges readers to question the conventional definitions of good and bad, exposing the complexities of human nature and the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. It also highlights Kamala Das's inner turmoil and emotional struggle. She grapples with conflicting emotions, desires, and societal expectations. By acknowledging herself as both a "saint" and a "sinner," she reveals her vulnerability and humanity. Her writing becomes a medium of catharsis, enabling her to confront her inner demons and societal pressures.

In conclusion, Kamala Das's "My Story" is a powerful account of her quest for identity and her revolt against patriarchy. Through her fearless and candid writing, she challenges societal norms, defies stereotypes, and reclaims her autonomy. Her journey serves as an inspiration for women to assert their identities and challenge oppressive patriarchal structures in their own lives. In her autobiography she portrays herself as a rebel in various aspects of her life, breaking societal norms and expectations, particularly in the conservative society she lived in. She rebelled against traditional gender roles, the constraints imposed on women, and the societal norms of her time. She talks about her desires, passions, and frustrations, which were not often openly discussed during her time. She was unafraid to express her emotions and desires, defying the norms that expected women to be submissive and silent. Kamala Das's candid and honest writing, along with her rebellion against societal norms, has made "My Story" a significant work in Indian literature, and it continues to resonate with readers as a powerful and groundbreaking autobiography.

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