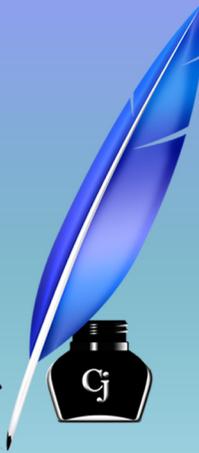


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Redefining Male-Female Relationship: Kamala Das's *My Story*

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Autobiography is a literary genre which unravels the inner most feelings of a writer. It provides self-exploration, self portraiture. Although self exploration is common in all forms, such as drama, epic, lyric and autobiography, writer always unaware makes his own self the medium and the centre of his writing. In autobiography it takes a peculiar, deliberate form, where in the very aim of the writer is to reveal himself from all angles. But can a woman who is taught to be submissive and docile achieve such goal. Women have been suppressed from ages. The public sphere has been dominated by man. Woman has always taught to put man at the centre of their lives. Thus marginalized, they are prohibited to express their anger or even to recognize it within themselves. By simple extension, they have been refused both power and control. The woman's movement in fact began with a discussion of power, powerlessness and the woman's right on her own life. They chose literature as one of their arm to fight back to the patriarchy. Especially autobiographical writings of Indian women writers are propelled by the motive to convince reader to their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm and to authenticate their self image. Women tend to write in straightforward objective manner about their girlhood and adult experience.

Kamala Das is one of the distinctive female writers of her time. Her autobiography *My Story* (1976) is one of the bold, uninhibited self-revelations seen in recent time. *My story* is the only attempt of its kind among Indian woman autobiographers in English to tread the untrodden, challenging area of exploring and sharing one's experience as a body which serves as the foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. Das protests against woman's socialization into an unquestioning acceptance of their destiny as inferiority, passivity, submissiveness and dependence. She finds it difficult to reconcile with man woman relationship in which man is the Subject, the Absolute and woman is the Object, the Other. She tries to view the social set up with a woman's eye and wishes to challenge it. The present paper is an attempt to read *My Story* as redefining male-female relationship.

Das comes to the fore-front 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 the exploration of the female self. Her autobiography is the collective repository of woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self. It follows Kamala Das life through her childhood, her schooling, her marriage, her flourishing literary career, extramarital relationship, the birth of her three children and finally her coming to term with her spouse and writing. Though she is well known in literary circles for her poetry in English, it was the publication of *My Story* that earned Das's popularity among the English-speaking elite in India. It broke all the conventions of women writing in literature and proved to be one of a kind. Here, it is seen

clearly that Kamala Das criticizes Indian marriage as patriarchal oppression. Actually, she is a middle class and a professional Indian woman from a very small minority of Indian society. She receives greater legal and social protection compared to the vast numbers of poor and peasant Indian women.

Autobiography is a never ending dialogue with the self. It is a depiction of the self by the writer himself. Das's dialogue with the self reveals her urges, yearnings and her inner longings. She has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner. While searching the true self, she is aware of her being as a woman and expresses the limitations of her gender in the poem "The Conflagration" in a very acidic tone. She observes, "Woman is this happiness, this lying buried beneath a man? It's time again to come alive. The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame" (Das 12). Thus, Kamala Das, while talking about herself relates herself to women in general. Definitely her autobiographical account is narrated objectively but her self portrayal is at the centre. Hence, one can say that there is marvelous self analysis, introspection and to some extent self centeredness in her autobiography.

Through a deliberately unreliable autobiographical mode of narration, Das defies the conventional role of a woman by writing about homosexuality, transgressions, and marital infidelity. By redefining the ways in which her gender functions, and by refusing the hegemonic demands placed upon her corporeality, Das attempts to expose the constructed subject, the functioning of a father/daughter relationship within her marriage and Nair governance of gender in Kerala's civil society. Das's discussion of her infidelity in marriage, her selection of love objects (women, men and herself) and the calculated unreliability with which she writes about sex in her autobiography clearly places her outside the register of the good Nair woman. The patriarchal conception of the nature and role of women in a Nair society is a conception that governs attitudes and social practices, and imposes on its women an immense burden of fear that limits expression, a turning away from oneself, which in turn is misread/ misrepresented as being good. For example, Das's conception of a relationship and marriage greatly differed from other Nair women in her family who often suffered emotional deadness within marriage for the sake of societal approval as being good. Initially, Das wonders how life would be if she was to follow the normative rules set forth by her caste:

I would be a middle-class house wife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wring faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my children...and then make my thin children...and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of national flag, with wifely pride (Das 96).

While most of her female relatives lived their lives in the fashion described above, Das would rebel against these prescriptive behavior patterns that ideology dictated her to follow. For her mother and grand mother —timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends. For Das's mother, "such —timidity was the response to fear of the hegemonic patriarchal norms that plotted her destiny. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring her a husband who was to provide her with children"(Das 4). Das's —mother did not fall in love with her father rather she simply obeyed him to keep up the façade of a good marriage, "After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the managlsutra. To her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest" (Das 4). This lack of protest (due to fear) coupled with the historical (false) conception of the Nair women to have agency leads to oppression of the female subject in Das's text and connotes the general condition of Nair women

in Kerala. Most Nair women accept this patriarchal custom and lived the rest of their lives in misery. A questioning child, Das too is often told by her immediate family to follow the norms of society, to be a *good* Nair woman. However, Das's claim that she —was drunk with power and spoke her mind. Das advocates that gendered and castist norms should be transgressed if they challenge individual freedom. Of her arranged marriage, Das tells her reader that, "My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim" (Das 85).

She revolts against the fact that the male psyche tends to treat woman as a desirable commodity. It causes her great anguish that men expect total servility from their wives. She protested against the division of world into two spheres, a sphere that belongs to men and another that belongs to women. The one that belongs to woman, she tells, was confined just to the four walls of the house. Kamala Das was expected to, "Dress in saris, be girl. Be wife, they said. Be Embroiderer, Be cook, be a marveller with servants. Fit in, Belong, cried the categorizers" (Das 9). Though the categorizers expected her to fit in, Kamala Das tried to defy the male definitions of femininity. She refused to fit into any scheme, to play the role of a trapped house wife:

My mother-in-law sulked, for she felt that I was spending too much time away from child and my domestic responsibilities. Whenever she said disgruntled things my husband grew angry, and his anger was directed against me and the baby. (Das 103)

Mr. Das could not tolerate her assertion of feminine subjectivity and, "stopped me from going up to the terrace for the rehearsals in the evening. You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said" (103). But she, who was struggling to create a new order, a brave new world where women too could be treated as human beings, could not develop a sense of her invisibility. She reacted against the traditional society's definition of womanhood, against the traditional sex roles and was resolved not to be a stereotype. She writes, "I kept myself busy with dreary house work while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape" (Das 103).

She felt that her refusal to assume the socially defined traditional female role was one way of transcending her femininity which is associated with passivity and inferiority. So, when marriage stifled for her all possibility of autonomy, and divorce did not seem possible in a traditional orthodox society like hers, she decided to put an end to her life. She wants a utopian state of affairs in which the unequal boundaries of gender do not exist. She presents the picture of such a state of affairs when she writes, "When he And I where one, we were neither Male nor female" (Das 136). No wonder, it is almost impossible to concretize this vision. So this desire for a feminist utopia entered into a conflict with the traditional image of femininity – a conflict which drove her almost to madness. She felt that she was a misfit everywhere. She says: "I brooded long stifling her sob" (Das 109). But, in spite on the fact that she had to stifle her sobs, she was not prepared to stifle her need to choose, to act like an authentic being. Literary creativity came to her rescue. It enabled her give an outlet to her unfulfilled desires and provided her need to choose, to act like an authentic being. So, even though there was no other possibility of going beyond her situation, she could still do so by creative writing. Thus, the sense of selfhood which in the case of Kamala Das was too strong to be annihilated got sublimated in writing. Creative writing served as a therapy and helped her confront and transcend the overwhelming realities of life. The writing of *My Story* itself is an act of defiance if one situates her in socio-cultural background. She feels completely satisfied after pouring her anger or disgust in her autobiography as she herself asserts in the preface of the book, "I have written

several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say”(Qtd Sodhi 112).

Das is unhappy about her marriage. She appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held firmly by her parent she wasn't given a free choice to select an ideal lover. Her preference was not considered by her parents. She expresses, “I was burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed” (Das 82). Kamala's case provides an excellent opportunity for a psychological study of the loveless and emotionally deprived life of an imaginative romantic being who could not get what she desired out of any of her usual, socially recognized relationships. The lack of security and love in her well-to-do parents as well as her husband's family made her whatever she became, “Women are not born they are made”(683) said the great French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her thought provoking book *The Second Sex*.

Kamala Das has given a voice to the thousands of modern urban women. For the first time in the history of Indo English literature one listens to the voice of inner urges of a woman. Whether factual or fictitious Das's autobiography has carved a niche in the area of women's autobiographies in India. She has opened up new vistas of autobiographical writings. She has been considered as a writer who fought for the rights of women. She returned to Kerala to lead a simple life. However, on reaching there she found that she was not a welcome member of the family. Her people, scandalized by the salacious stories of her immoral escapades that had reached them, looked upon her as the black sheep who had brought disgrace and dishonor to the family name. They burned with indignation and rage. How dare she ever live her life in such a way, and even if she had to do those things, how could she, being a woman of their family, ever make it public.

But, the end of her autobiography presents her as a happy, contented woman who has accepted death as the ultimate reality of life, “ready to depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience” (Das 9) having emptied herself of all the secrets in her autobiography.

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