

RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONFESSIONS OF A SUPPRESSED FEMALE SELF IN KAMALA DAS' *MY STORY*

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ABSTRACT

Literature in any genre is the outcome of a personal experience which becomes public when it affects the reader. Biographies and testimonials make engaging reading materials wherein the writers share their life experiences in order to depict their personal beliefs, lives and their ideals. Kamala Das' *My Story* is her autobiography, in which she reveals her personal life which inspired her to write some of her best poems. *My Story* represents her lifelong struggle against the patriarchal society. The paper attempts a close study of the text and brings out the predicament of the female self. The confessions which Kamala Das makes in *My Story*, though, she later dismissed as not fully 'true' or imaginary is however engaging. The paper also examines the text for details which places Kamala Das as a writer with a Purpose - to voice the suppressed female psyche with authenticity.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, confessions, autobiography, genre, engaging, depict, predicament, dismissed, suppressed, discourses, stereotype, conventional, subversive

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of woman in literary discourses all through the history of creative writing has been predominated by an inclination to stereotype the female experience and roles that women play in the society. The phallogocentric society's tendency to reflect women in set terms has been effectively resisted by the women writers, which was also part of the recent awakening of the feminist consciousness in contemporary literature as well as literary and cultural studies. As Loren Kruger observed, recently women have intermittently made "spectacles of themselves" (49). While the conventional literary studies as well as literature provided outside observations on women as a thing to be represented owing to woman's marked inadequacy to express

themselves, the new women writers opened up portrayals of themselves in an attempt to subvert the existing representative variations of the concept of woman. The literary works that mark this kind of a subversive trend celebrate the uniqueness of female experience and articulate their social position with an immediacy that affirms the universality of patriarchal oppression. They radicalize the textuality of female texts with aspects that were considered banal to women writing by creating what Spivak calls "delicate divergency testifying to the subtle and elusive nature of the feminine practice of writing". In her view, "the delicate divergency of woman's text challenges us to respond with equal delicacy and precision to the small but crucial deviations, the cumulative

weightings of experience and exclusion that have marked the history of Women's writing" (Cited in Showalter 336). In the Indo Anglican literary scenario, Kamala Das is perhaps the most popular woman writer to question the presumptions dominating women in her writing. Kamala Das has recently converted to Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya. She is popularly known as the first Indian Hindu woman to openly confess her sexual and sensual feelings in her works.

A close reading of Kamala Das' autobiography, *My Story* (1976) reveals that her personal life has inspired her to write some of the most famous poems in Indian Writing in English. Her autobiography represents a life long struggle against all attempts to confine her to a separate space, be it socially or physically. The genesis of *My Story* itself has a compelling story. Kamala confesses that she began writing her autobiography only as an escape from the fear of a sudden death. She records in her preface that "the doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of death and besides; there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of" (v). The writing urge in Kamala gave her an opportunity to empty herself of all the secrets of her life that has not been attempted by any other woman writer in India.

Kamala accepts that *My Story*, her unabashed autobiography caused much torment to herself. She writes, "This book has caused 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" (v). Kamala in *My Story* depicts the pre-defined role of a woman by the patriarchal society. She records the occasion of the wedding of her mother when her father did not allow his would be wife to wear anything but 'khaddar' after betrothal. After the wedding, he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, except the 'mangal sutra'. Kamala's mother did not protest, she was afraid of her husband, a stranger, who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. The timidity of Kamala's mother created an

illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the society.

Marriage for Kamala seemed to be the only security for any girl. Parents and elders worried about the future of the girl child only in terms of her marriage. Kamala confesses that her marriage had nothing to do with her opinion. She writes, "I was a burden and a responsibility, neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long" (82). Her uncanny honesty can be traced when she writes about her married life. She tells that even before the marriage she is sexually harassed by her fiancé. She feels hurt and humiliated. The contours of the female body and not the feelings of the woman were noticed by her husband. He took amorous pride in narrating the sexual exploits that he had shared with his maidservants. He takes pride in announcing to his wife that he is a veteran in the art of lovemaking and expects his wife to acknowledge it with a sense of gratitude.

Kamala yearned for a caring companion as a husband. "I had expected him to be all that 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" (84). As a girl of fifteen, she had to accept the designs of her parents and her relatives. Her passivity encouraged her parents. Her father thought that she had finally found her 'mate'. The word 'mate' with its earthy connotations made Kamala uneasy:

I was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps out of our union there would be born a few children...I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony, like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride (85).

Marriage in Kamala's view is only a display of wealth and position. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. The girl was expected to be grateful to her father who had been so generous to spend extravagantly for the wedding. Kamala knew that her unhappy marriage would hurt her father if revealed to him. She knew for sure that her father would never accept that his decision went wrong.

My Story reveals the malfunction of Kamala's marriage, and suggests that her marriage was a flop in the conventional sense. She felt that her marriage had deteriorated her self-esteem and she felt like a mere toy in the hands of her husband: "I could not even feign lust. Leave alone feel it. It needed strong tranquillisers to tear my body into an acquiescent posture beneath my virile mate" (193).

Apart from narrating her own experiences, Kamala records the suppression of women in general. *My Story* describes the pathetic position of women in an androcentric society. Women were treated as pleasure-objects satisfying the carnal desires of their men. Their sole purpose of existence was to please their husbands and take care of the household chores. Kamala remembers the tragic predicament of her aunt who was married to her grand uncle. Her uncle always liked to see his wife glamorised with jewels and flowers. She was married to Kamala's uncle as his second wife because she had leucodermic spots in her body. She thought that her husband had married her out of compassion and used to stomach the insults of her husband by laughing melodiously. As a dependent woman, she had to patiently tolerate her unsuccessful marriage. "A broken marriage was so distasteful as horrifying as an attack of leprosy" (102).

It was customary for the Nair girls to many when they hardly came out from childhood. Their older husbands often shocked them by their sexual haste on wedding nights, which was nothing more than a 'ceremonial rape'. Women of the lower classes of the society were willing victims. Kamala remembers Lazar,

the oil seller who drove his white cow and the three women of his house round his old mill, to extract oil from the copra and the sesame, while he rested, leaning against a tree, abusing them in pornographic language which only amused his victims, for he was always a good provider and they were by nature masochistic (28)

The rich and the influential, in the guise of cocktail parties, exploited innocent women belonging to the middle class, and during such parties the wives of government servants were tricked to drink, and with their husbands helpless and drunk were stripped off

their honour. Such women left with bruised souls and deflowered bodies suffered silently.

Kamala notices that a woman's world is much for herself and she is an intruder into other's space when stepped out. She always wanted to escape from the desolation of her life. As a sensitive poet, she confesses that she cannot remain indifferent to herself. Her openness caused her pressures and torments. She speaks out the constantly tormented self of a woman which bares out only through tears. She writes, "In Bengal the rain falls suddenly with no warning like the hysterical tears of a woman who herself does not know why she must suddenly burst into tears" (72). At several occasions in her works where Kamala talks about her pursuits for love and happiness, desire and experience, she appears to be hysterical in tone. However, as Juliet Mitchel wrote, women writers must always be hysteric. "Hysteria is the women's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism" (Lodge 427).

My Story reveals Kamala's continuous, insatiable search for true love in return for hers. Womanhood seemed a stigma when her love towards her husband turned unrequited. She narrates, "I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breast seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through" (104). Kamala's autobiography identifies the symbolic order existing in her society that excludes woman and develops what is called the 'male gaze' towards woman. The symbolic order existing in the male-centered society defines certain modes of feminine appearances as sexually inviting. She points out an incident when she received a call from a stranger introducing himself as XYZ and declaring his 'love' towards her. She realises that her freak looks may have sexually instigated the man. This often made Kamala introspective about her looks: "I was panic-stricken. I walked up to a mirror to have a long look at myself. Did I resemble a harlot? Did I look an easy prey" (145).

Writing experience for Kamala Das was an attempt to define herself and her identity. Through

writing she tries to create a perspective for women, citing the intricacies involved in the entire female creative process. She questions the system of separating private from public in literature, by making her personal experiences as woman as thematic locus of her creative works. Her autobiography is pregnant with provocative revelations that counter the textuality of a female text. as it is conventionally understood. She asks city fathers and moralists not to forgive her sins and innocence. "Burn me with torches blood red in the night, burn my brown Dravidian skin and burn the tumult at the core, or bury me in your back garden..."(184).

The desire to write and the urge to tell the truth, tells Kamala, had caused her much pain in her life, she believes that a writer has none to love except the readers. She recollects "I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence, when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of all-seeing God they follow me through the years" (206). Kamala is fully aware that she proved herself to be a mere embarrassment to her family for she was like "a goldfish in a well lit bowl whose movements are never kept concealed" (206). She realises that she is a freak and a failure as a wife. But writing gave her happiness and purpose of life.

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