



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

MY STORY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ICONOCLAST

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Abstract: Kamala Das' feminism was not concerned with women's right. Her feminism involved the concept of a liberated woman or the new woman who enjoys overall liberation in life and manners within the Indian social and domestic milieu. In her writing, she advocated a more liberated attitude towards sex and the sexual frankness, boldness and honesty of her writing shocks and amuses the general readers. She wrote about love, sex and marriage – all within her experience and awareness. Love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects for her and in an uninhibited manner she treated female sexuality. In her widely acclaimed autobiographical novel *My Story*¹ (*Ente katha*), she depicted her intimate conjugal and love life without any inhibition or guilt. The paper explores how Kamala Das express her quest for self-identity, love, sex and freedom through her experience more openly and authentically.

Keywords: Society, Feminine, Identity, Sexuality, Marriage.

Kamala Das chose to write because she wanted to falsify the male view that women are not capable of intelligent tasks. All they can do is produce a body and that too not without male contribution. She was not ready to accept the male idea of the intellectual inferiority and irrationality of women. She could not accept the view that women are incapable of imaginative tasks. The bias against women writings is evident from the fact that Kamala Das had to write under two pseudonyms. She said: "I used to publish poems in the *Illustrated Weekly*, but under the name K. Das, because I suspected the editor to be prejudiced against women writers."² With very distant, sincere and authentic voice, she wrote about the aspirations, desires, yearnings, failures and frustrations of women and their emotional and physical exploitation in this male-dominated world. Through her writings, she has proved that male should not think that wisdom and imagination are their sole monopoly. Sometimes, women feel artistic creation as a form of violation resulting in the destruction of the female body. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that "these phenomena of interioriation mark the woman writers' struggle for artistic self-definition."³ It would seem that the female body is the real force behind woman's writing. She has made brave attempts to revolt against male tyranny, to revolt against the prevailing social conditions that dominates and deforms the 'second sex'. Hence, she faces bitter criticism from society and from her contemporary writers as well, as Simon de Beauvoir say: "The world is too strong and if a woman persists in her opposition, it breaks her."⁴ But that world could not break Kamala Das' world of words. Kamala Das wanted the society to rethink everything; she also wanted women to defy the definitions given by men to them. Being a writer, Kamala Das used her writing rather than any political group to express her ideas and thoughts. If as Virginia Woolf suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, one of the committed woman writers is to transcribe "the accumulation of unrecorded life that comprises most of women's lost history."⁵ Kamala Das belonged to Nair community in Kerala which followed a matrilineal system of inheritance which is the norm for almost all other Indian communities. It helped and moulded a spirit of independence in Kamala Das. *Marumakkathayam* (Matrilineal system) gave women great freedom and status and that was not merely conceptual. They had control over property and could exercise the right of divorce in marriage. The women belonging to such a matrilineal society were brave and confident in their approach to life. They questioned the conventional attitudes, desired freedom in their actions and equality with men. The Nair ethos that gave a sense of liberty to its women is perceptible in Kamala Das' writings, especially in the characterization of female characters in five different ways: idealization of the grandmother and the family house; in her

¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novels in English* (Arnold-Heinemann, University of Virginia, 1974) p. 29.

² "I shall keep writing about the heavens that have been left behind", Akbar Kakkatil's interview with the author Kamala Das in *Malayala Manorama* (Daily) 3rd April, 1993, p. 16.

³ Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Madwoman in the Attic: The woman writers and 19th century literary imagination* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979) p. 50

⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *Second sex* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1953) p. 387.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Hogarth Press, London, 1974) p. 85.

close affinity with the other members of the family including domestic servants; and the several reference to Nair customs, rituals and ceremonies; and the powerful desire to freedom and freedom to rebel; and finally is her essential domestic and religious sensibility and devotion to lord Krishna at Guruvayoor temple in Kerala.⁶

Kamala Das' feminism was not concerned with women's right. Her feminism involved the concept of a liberated woman or the new woman who enjoys overall liberation in life and manners within the Indian social and domestic milieu. She celebrated the joyous potential of the sensuality of the human form. Women of all types – conventional, stereotypes, bold women, servile classes, helpless victims – are all sensitively portrayed by Kamala Das in her fictions. In her writing, she advocated a more liberated attitude towards sex and the sexual frankness, boldness and honesty of her writing shocks and amuses the general readers. She wrote about love, sex and marriage – all within her experience and awareness. Love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects for her and in an uninhibited manner she treated female sexuality. In her widely acclaimed autobiography *My Story*⁷ (*Ente katha*), she depicted her intimate conjugal and love life without any inhibition or guilt. In *My Story*, Kamala Das treated lesbianism – the socially impossible relationship in a very frank manner. Kamala Das narrates her personal experience in her autobiography and the word 'lesbian' is used often enough in it. Kamala Das narrates her first experience of lesbianism as a nine years old girl in a girls' boarding school where she stays with three other girls. Among them, fifteen years old Sharada is the eldest and prettiest one who has many young admirers in the school, Kamala Das writes: "the lesbian admirer came into our room once when Sharada was away taking a bath and kissed her pillowcases and her undies hanging out to dry in the dressing room. I lay on my bed watching this performance but she was half-crazed with love, and hardly noticed me."⁸ When she was fifteen, Kamala Das manages to meet an eighteen years old college student in spite of the warnings of her parents. She feels: "instantly drawn to her.... She was tall and sturdy with a tense masculine grace.... When her eyes held mine captive in a trance, for a reason that I could not fathom, then I felt excited."⁹ Next incident happens in an overnight train journey to her grandmother's house with a group of professors and students. In the night the girl who is different from others lies near to Kamala Das holding her body closely and kissed on her lips: "it was the first kiss of this kind in my life.... I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever."¹⁰ Without any reluctance, through Sharada, she wrote about the woman who derives fulfillment in lesbianism.

The quest for self-identity, love, sex and freedom are narrated through her experience more openly and authentically in *My Story*. Though Kamala Das was emotionally frustrated in life due to the early unhappy marriage and untimely motherhood, she did not stop writing. When she was in pain, she had written this book and showed a great courage to speak the truth. The author-protagonist of the autobiography (Autobiographical novel) hardly fifteen years old dreaming of love as "a beautiful anguish"¹¹ and thinking of life "so young, so happy, and so full of promises."¹² But it was suddenly changed because of her marriage with an older man and subjected to the lust of her sexually impatient husband: "...then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack"¹³ It continues for years: "At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal simply and without exhilaration... The taking was brutal and brier"¹⁴ All the time, the bleeding body and wounded heart of hers longed for a warm touch, a kind word of love and compassion, but all her longings were in vain. Thus, she became bitter and disillusioned about the sexual politics and the institution of marriage.

In *My Story*, Kamala Das describes a period when she had been also affected by a neurotic breakdown. The neurotic breakdown happened when Kamala Das felt threatened by the obligations of marriage and unhappy and unpleasant physical relation with her husband while she longed for mental and emotional link in love. By then she kept herself busy in household things, but her soul wished to "get out of this trap, escape."¹⁵ Her neurotic breakdown was a result of sexual politics, and dissatisfaction at her stereotyped role, aggravated by constant physical abuse by her husband, his indifference and lack of support in treating her non-entity. She longed for death and even thought to commit suicide. But her literary creativity saved her from falling into total madness by involving herself in writing poems and stories. She had found a temporary refuge in neurosis as a way to cope with unpleasant reality of life but later she found a therapy in literary activity. She made use of creative writing as an outlet for the passion and repressed energies within her. But it is Kamala Das' inability to resolve the conflict between a 'feminine' and a 'feminist mystique' that turned her into a helpless neurotic. Here her writing could be seen as defiance against the social restriction imposed upon her. She pointed out the inherent defects of the institution of marriage while at the same time upholding the need for opposite sex in the life of a woman. While deriding the shackles of marriage, Kamala Das was desirous of the warmth and security of a lasting partnership: "In those days I realized that a woman needs the kind of security that can not be provided by her children or her relations since it was that security needed for the well being of her body and the peace of her soul which could be given only by her man who is her solace and her only shelter. For woman, her man is her god, her own Krishna."¹⁶

⁶ K R Ramachandran Nair, *The Poetry of Kamala Das* (Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993) p. 85.

⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novels in English* (Arnold-Heinemann, University of Virginia, 1974) p. 29.

⁸ Kamala Das., *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988) p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988), p.90.

¹¹ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988) p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988), p. 79.

¹⁴ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988), p. 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

In spite of all discordant notes, the marriage survives because of their ambivalent attitude – the combination of a need for domestic security and the desire for an independent consistent with a non-domestic mode of living. Why the marriage endures in spite of all the dissatisfaction felt by the wife is explained by Simone de Beauvoir: “The peculiar nature of her sexuality and the problems arising from an independent life makes a simple husband system desirable to the woman. She can make adjustments and maintain a marriage much more easily than a man can. While intensely desirous of the warmth and nearness of a man, she fears the shackles that marriage may place on her life on the whole with equal intensity.”¹⁷ Kamala Das says that “in childhood, my father was the very foundation of my feeling of security.”¹⁸ After marriage, the symbol of security both emotional and economic is transferred from the father patriarch to the husband. Kamala Das never resented her role as a wife and mother; she only resented her role as a slave, as a sexual object. She considered sex, unaccompanied by love as lust. Woman believes in the institution of marriage because it fulfilled many of women’s innate need like emotional security. This lack of emotional security leads her to seek emotional and sexual fulfillment outside marriage and ultimately she decides to have extra-marital relationship: “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.”¹⁹ A woman seeking love outside marriage is not so uncommon social phenomenon in India. Marriage and love are not need to be mutually exclusive, but for Kamala Das, finding herself in a hollow relationship as for many Indian women, they have proved to be so. Therefore, with a victim vengeance, she falls in love with man one after another without any barrier of age or race. Among them, her Italian friend Carlo who loved her deeply but at some point she finds it distasteful and admits that “like the majority of city dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while but found it distasteful”²⁰ She does hardly enjoy her brief encounter with adultery. In *Sexual Politics and Kamala Das*, Iqbal Kaur tries to prove Kamala Das’ point - ‘distaste for sex’, Iqbal Kaur writes: “I would like to repeat that it is not lust or sex or carnal hunger but rather an escape from all this that drags her from man to man.”²¹ Prof. Achuthan remarks that Kamala Das is one woman writer who frankly discusses the existence of Indian woman who seeks physical pleasure outside marriage.²²

In Kamala Das’ socio-cultural milieu, divorce is treated as a disgraceful thing. In *My Story*, she confesses the thought of divorce from her husband as “a broken marriage was as distasteful as horrifying as an attack of leprosy.”²³ To overcome the bitter experiences of her married life, she tries to find other means of fulfillment – the biological and literary creation. Though her married life was not happy, she becomes a mother and feels: “the best toy that can be given to a teenage girl is live baby, a soft skinned doll that she can bath, powder and suckle to sleep.”²⁴ Along with rearing her children, she concentrates on her writing career and begins to publish her stories and poems in Malayalam and English respectively. But she faces bitter criticism because her writings shatter the so called morality of woman writing and Kerala society as well. She pleads for a new kind of morality and fight against the hypocritical moral attitudes of her society. In all these struggles, her writing gives her solace and sustenance to breath freely. She feels that woman should not sacrifice her own individuality in marriage. All through her tortuous experiences, she firmly establishes her independent identity as a writer and that somehow satisfies her alter ego. As Subash Chandra opines on Kamala Das in *A Feminist Reading of My Story*, he writes: “Kamala Das presents a fine and relevant example by delineating her own traits and tribulations of the possibility of confronting and overcoming the constraints in the way of a woman seeing self awareness and self-fulfillment. 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. Femaleness and quest for self-fulfillment are not antithetical”²⁵

¹⁷ Simone De Beauvoir, *Second sex* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1953), p.422.

¹⁸ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988) p. 168.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²¹ Iqbal Kaur, “Sexual Politics and Kamala Das,” in *Indian Women Novelists Set II, Volume I*, (ed.) R K Dhawan (Prestige Publishers, New Delhi, 1993), p. 162.

²² M Achuthan, *Cheruatha Innale Innu* (D. C. Books, Kottayam, 2007), p. 321.

²³ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1988), p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁵ Subash Chandra. “A Feminist Reading of My Story,” in *Indian Women Novelists Set II, Volume I*, (ed.) R K Dhawan (Prestige Publishers, New Delhi, 1993), p. 148.

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