



## KAMALA DAS'S MY STORY: BREAKING THE STREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** The tales narrating our culture and society, fix themselves into the reality and become the part of our soul. We start assuming that they reveal an objective truth of the universe, rather than the subjective truth of the culture. We are told repeatedly that women should be desirable, but they cannot desire. The present paper is an attempt to explain how Kamala Das's My Story defies all such stereotypes prevalent in society of India. Though the book is in autobiography format; she, later confesses that there was plenty of fiction in it. She fearlessly describes about her unhappy marriage life, her love affair and her desire for true love- subjects which are still considered taboo for any author to write. This memoir is considered to be far ahead of its time, depicting her experiences that arouse sympathy for her instead of criticism. The paper also aims to study autobiography as a form of literature and women's autobiography in particular. Critics have explored the differences in autobiography written by men and women. A strong social bias against the delineation of women's lives often predominates critical objectivity for most critics consider women's lives to be insignificant. However, Kamala Das seems to break all these stereotypes in her autobiography.

**Keywords:** Culture, Stereotype, Autobiography, Taboo, Memoir etc.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'autobiography' has its roots in the three Greek components, autos- bios- graphein meaning 'self- life- writing'. In brief, it is an account of a person written by himself or can be called self-written life story. The term was firstly used by William Taylor of Isaac in 1797 in his periodical and later by Robert Southey in 1809 when he was describing the work of Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieira. However, the genre had been in practice before a long time. For that, the modern canon of autobiography looks back to the deeply reflective self-analysis of St. Augustine (354-430) in his Confessions. Saint Augustine's autobiography deserves special mention because it is widely accepted as the first autobiography tracing the moments and incidents of his life. The definition of 'autobiography' given by French critic Philippe Lejeune as,

A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence,  
Focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality (Anderson 15)

This suggests that the author's intentions to be truthful defines the truthfulness of a text. Autobiography as a form of literature has been in the center of debate for the long time. Some critics therefore call it literary or creative non-fiction. Its definition is, even then, a matter of controversy and the history of the term has been bound up with ideological struggles about the status of the subject and the nature of authorship. The question that is posed here is not simply about what kind of genre is autobiography but rather how the law of genre works. According to Jacques Derrida,

It is in the very notion of a genre to constitute itself in terms of 'norms and interdictions':  
Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect norm, one must not cross a line of  
Demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity. (Anderson 22)

However, it is also part of Derrida's argument that every time a text designates itself as belonging to a genre- calls itself an autobiography, for instance- it does so through a statement which itself is not autobiographical. The writing autobiography has also become a fashion for celebrities like film and pop stars, sports persons and politicians who publish their autobiographies in the modern time. The reason for the current popularity of this genre are not just historical; but psychological also. Advertising guru Santosh Desai explains,

We are in a world, where sharing is the norm. We are more public about everything we  
Do, people talk and then loose talk about you. Celebrities need to talk straight and put  
Records right once and for all. They have realized that in a digital age one needs to  
Declare, 'this is my reality'. (Wallia 1)

#### KAMALA DAS'S *MY STORY* AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Feminist critics have found an obvious gap in the accepted canon of autobiographical writing. In her introduction to the collection of essays which inaugurated criticism of women's texts, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Estelle Jelinek picked up on a male critic's hostile response to Kate Millet's autobiography *Flying* (1979) with the comment: "Insignificant", indeed expresses the predominant attitude of most critics towards women's lives. An autobiographical novel is defined as a work that merges fiction and autobiographical elements.

Kamala Das's *My Story* was firstly published in Malayalam titled *Ente Katha* and later on translated into English by her in 1976. *My Story* is chronologically ordered, written in a realistic style with linear narrative. It follows Das's life from age four studying in missionary school favored by colonial Indian elite. The text evoked multiple reactions of admirations as well as criticism among readers and critics. The reason could be her bold endeavor to confess in the autobiography about her sexual desire, her search for true love and the depiction of Nair society she lived in. Her work displays feminist ethos. Generally women are taught to suppress their natural instinct. The stereotypical image of the woman is conditioned to sublimate her sexuality in order to achieve innate goodness. And this mindset is somehow the result of our religious belief or the ancient practice. This religion as a society has given us the narrative structure. In that narrative, there is the central figure of woman, a rather ideal figure of woman. They are expected to be modest and conventional. They have been seen, then, as the role model in the society. For example, Sita is always considered as an ideal figure for women in India. But there are some mythologies announcing how women are not allowed to desire or expected to be seen in certain conventions and if they dare to cross such conventions, they are punished. For instance, there is a story of Renuka, the mother of Parshurama, who was beheaded on her husband Rishi Jamadagni's orders because of harboring an adulterous thought for a moment on seeing a beautiful man bathing in the river as she was fetching water. And so the head of Renuka, separated from her body, is an object of worship in many parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka. It is taken around in processions, attached to the rim of a pot or a wicket basket, is a reminder of female fantasy and sexuality. She is viewed not as fallen woman but as the mother-goddess, beyond the control of patriarchal society. Of course, when this tale is retold today, her desires are whitewashed, and focus is given to the restoration of her status as sati, pure and chaste. We have another example of Surpankha, whose nose was cut when she desired for sex. There is Ahalya, who was turned into stone. However, Ahalya is considered 'innocent' as was seduced by Indra not knowingly, she was cursed by her husband Gautama Maharishi for infidelity.

Kamala Das has rebelled against all such prevalent social conventions and bourgeois morality. She has penned down about the conventions and conservativeness of society very clearly. She is not a sort of woman who enjoys being an ideal figure, typically found in any Indian society. She is a free spirit who does not wish to be bound herself in any stereotypes. When she was about to marry a person of his father's choice she thinks,

I was to be a victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children. I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, 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 a national flag, with wifely pride. (Das 69)

She also talks about the homosexual relationship. She had her firsthand experience of homosexuality when she is handed over letters by a plump girl, in her school. In the twentieth chapter of the book, she fearlessly describes about her first kiss with the girl she met in Malabar. She has also narrated an account of her husband's homosexuality. The homosexuality in him humiliated Das. She writes about the same incident in *An Introduction*,

"...when  
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
The weight of my breast and womb crushed me. I shrank  
Pitifully." (Summer in Calcutta, 1965)

She realizes that sex is a big taboo in conservative Malayali (and of Indian in the larger context) society; and not even married women discuss it among themselves as she describes this in the seventh chapter 'Women of good Nair families never mentioned sex' Throughout the book, reading all the chapters, one can visualize very clearly her loneliness and search for true love. Love she expects is not of sexual but also what she could never get from her parents even. As she writes in the very begging chapters that they were 'neglected children in society' as well as in their own home. She needs affection and feelings. She writes,

"My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Do not you feel any passion for me, he asked me. I do not know, I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands, and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother; I wanted conversations, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. (Das 68-69)

Looking at the preparation of her own wedding, she feels everything is put as a kind of show of wealth and the willingness of the bride is not that much of important. This shows hypocrisy prevalent in almost any society where marriage is of prime importance. But the choice

of girls rarely cared about. She searches love outside the marital relationship; as her marriage was not fruitful with Das. There is a little girl inside her who constantly longed for love even after being a wife, a mother, or a writer.

## CONCLUSION

Kamala Das has shown brutal honesty in the description of her life-events. Her writing reflects her sad solitude and her constant struggle not with the society but with herself. She even shows the dark sides of her life in a realistic manner that creates sympathy for her and also has created controversy. There are critics who have argued that much of it is the outcome of her fertile imagination. The question that surprises the most is that how any woman, particularly being Indian would invite abuses and negative criticism for herself. She could give the text some other title as well and could show the book as the work of fiction. She is honest and forthright, extrovert but lonely, ebullient but sad, loving but insecure, witty but unhappy. Love and marriage, desire and fulfilment, trust and betrayal are the major recurrent themes of her autobiography. Her poetry also marks the beginning of poetry concerned with sexuality and the act of writing for self-liberation in Indian English writing.

From the postcolonial era, Indian women writing in English have portrayed multi-faceted aspects of women rather than binding them in any particular 'ideal image' as pativrata (a chaste woman loyal to her husband) or ideal mother. Even the very first autobiographical novel *Saguna* (1895) by Krupabai Sathianadhan shows the protagonist not as entirely docile character but as one aware of her predicament. Kamala Markandya's early novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *Some Inner Fury* (1955) represents traditional images of women who are self-sacrificing and self-effacing, yet are sensitive to their own situation. "There is, consequently, a sexual frankness in their work not so evident in earlier novelists" describes Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in India. Among all, Kamala Das's autobiography is the collective repository of a woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Nevertheless, she has demolished patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

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