



FEMININE ASPECTS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF KAMALA DAS

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In this paper, we studied feminine aspects in the short stories of Kamala Das. The feminist movement in France was initiated by Condorcet, while in England, it gained momentum through the influential work of Mary Wollstonecraft in her book 'Vindication of the Rights of Women'. However, despite its early origins, the movement faced challenges in achieving concrete results due to the absence of strong foundations. Nevertheless, as women increasingly entered the workforce and expanded their horizons beyond domestic boundaries, their demands gained significant traction. Their voices began resonating within the bourgeoisie, a social class that held considerable power and influence. This shift was a consequence of the rapid progress of industrial civilization, which diminished the importance of landed property in comparison to personal possessions. Additionally, the traditional concept of family unity also weakened. The fluidity of capital allowed individuals to own and dispose of property without the constraints of reciprocal ownership. Consequently, the notion of patrimony became outdated, and individuals found themselves in a position where their children no longer bound them together as strongly as property interests.

In 1867, John Stuart Mill delivered a groundbreaking speech to the English Parliament, becoming the first official advocate for women's suffrage. In his influential writings, Mill passionately both the family unit and society as a whole. He firmly believed that social structures that legally subjugated one gender to the other were fundamentally flawed and acted as significant obstacles to human progress. Mill ardently argued for the replacement of these structures with complete and absolute gender equality.

Inspired by Mill's ideas, English women began to organize politically under the leadership of Mrs. Fawcett. Similarly, French women rallied behind Maria Deraismes, who conducted a series of public conferences between 1868 and 1871 to examine the status of women. In 1869, Leon Richer organized the international congress on feminism, further advancing the cause.

For the next thirty years, progress in the feminist movement remained slow in both France and England. Victorian England, in particular, confined women to the domestic sphere, leading figures like Jane Austen to conceal their identities in order to pursue their writing careers. Additionally, scientists of the time propagated the notion that women were a subspecies solely meant for reproduction.

It wasn't until around 1903 that feminism gained significant momentum. The Pankhurst family established the Women's Social and Political Union in London, marking a turning point in feminist activism. This new wave of agitation took on a distinct and militant character. In history, women actively participated in political action as women, lending a unique dimension to the suffragette movement. Over the course of fifteen years, they employed various tactics, initially nonviolent, such as marching with banners, disrupting meetings, and deliberately provoking arrests. They even resorted to hunger strikes and organized marches on Parliament, with women standing side by side. These efforts were accompanied by extensive public meetings and further arrests. Notably, when parliamentary votes on suffrage were taking place, suffragettes paraded in columns spanning miles.

English women eventually secured the right to vote in 1918, albeit with certain restrictions, and gained unrestricted voting rights in 1928. This marked a significant milestone in the history of feminism and women's rights.

From the very outset, American women have exhibited a greater degree of emancipation compared to their European counterparts. During the early 19th century, women in America actively participated in the arduous task of pioneering alongside men. Despite being outnumbered by their male counterparts, their contributions were highly valued. However, over time, their status gradually aligned with that of women in the Old World, where they were esteemed and held a dominant position within the family. Nevertheless, societal control remained firmly in the hands of males.

Around 1830, a group of women initiated a campaign in support of the rights of African Americans. This movement when "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published by Harriet Beecher Stowe three years later, which effectively stirred public opinion in favor of the African American cause. Notably, influential figures such as Emerson and Lincoln lent their support to the feminist movement.

Following the Civil War, feminists made unsuccessful attempts to secure voting rights for women through the amendment that granted suffrage to African Americans. Exploiting a legal ambiguity, Susan B. Anthony and fourteen other women cast their votes in Rochester, resulting in Anthony being fined one hundred dollars. Undeterred, in 1869, she established the National Association for Woman Suffrage, and in the same year, women were finally granted the right to vote.

In the colonies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the struggle for enfranchisement was intricately linked. Across most countries, political parties recognized the imperative of involving women in the freedom movement in order to achieve their objectives. The enlightened leaders of the time understood that any notion of suffrage would remain incomplete unless women were actively included, as they believed that universal suffrage inherently encompassed women's participation. Mahatma Gandhi, a prominent figure in India's national movement, advocated for the inclusion of women, emphasizing that their absence would impede India's progress towards swaraj, or self-rule. Responding to his call, women stepped out of their homes and joined the struggle for freedom. In 1931, the Indian National Congress made a commitment to grant political equality to women.

During the 19th century in India, several Hindu reformers vigorously campaigned against social and legal inequalities, including the prevalent illiteracy among women in Hindu society. Figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Daya Nand Saraswati, Rama Krishna Paramhansa, and Swami Vivekananda played pivotal roles in eradicating practices like female infanticide, sati (widow burning), and child marriage. Furthermore, the latter part of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of numerous remarkable women who became influential social figures.

Feminist literary criticism emerged relatively late in the literary and critical landscape, stemming from the feminist movement of the twentieth century. One of the primary focuses of feminist literary criticism was the examination of the portrayal of women in literature. Works such as Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', Mary Ellmann's 'Thinking about Women', Kate Millet's 'Sexual Politics', and Katherine M. Roger's 'The Troublesome Help Mate' are examples of early studies on gender stereotypes. Mary Ellmann identified various qualities associated with women in literature, including formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, practicality, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and incorrigibility. The main objective of feminist criticism is to reconstruct the prevailing male-dominated narrative by unraveling the threads of male hegemony and challenging conscious and unconscious assumptions about women. Dolores Barrancan Schmidts proposed three potential explanations for the prevalence of certain character types in specific literary works and time periods.

i) Virginia Woolf, in her work *A Room of One's Own*, provides a profound insight into the complex nature of women. She highlights the dichotomy between the imaginative importance of women and their practical insignificance. While women may articulate inspired words and profound thoughts in literature, their real-life circumstances often limit their abilities, as they may struggle with basic literacy skills and be confined to the roles assigned to them by society.

Similarly, in India, the examination of women's images in literature has been feminist literary criticism. This critical approach in India focuses on analyzing how women are portrayed, treated, and depicted in the works of various Indian authors, regardless of gender.

Indian novelists often categorize female characters into three main groups. Firstly, there are women from rural backgrounds who are depicted as poor and uneducated. Secondly, middle-class women are portrayed in novels. Lastly, upper-middle-class or aristocratic women are depicted in works.

Many Indian women novelists focus on addressing women's issues. This has led to a growing interest in and demand for literary works that explore and highlight women's experiences and challenges.

It is important to highlight that the U G C and the I C S S R have put forth a proposal to incorporate women's issues as a subject of study. Furthermore, they have emphasized the significance of adopting a unique perspective on women in society within the realm of social sciences. The ability to express themselves through writing has empowered women and provided them with the means to shape their own realities. The inclusion of women's studies in academic curricula will further assist women in comprehending their own identities. Despite the existence of a male-dominated Indian society, it is crucial to acknowledge that a significant portion of society, particularly the elite class, does not discriminate between genders. The modern woman no longer desires to conform to traditional gender roles and seeks equal treatment and recognition alongside her male counterparts. These schools, rather than representing the diversity of feminist theory, signify its resistance to being confined and marginalized. Feminist theory rejects patriarchal hierarchies and embraces the various strategies employed by feminists to challenge and dismantle patriarchy.

According to Helene Keyssar's book 'Feminist Theatre', the emergence of Feminist drama as a distinct theatrical genre in the sixties can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the resurgence of the women's movement in America played a significant role. Women who had been politically awakened through their involvement in various radical movements, such as the student non-violent co-ordinating committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), came together to challenge sexual inequality. The publication of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, "The Feminine Mystique," in 1963 further dismantled the patriarchal notion of the fulfilled housewife. Concurrently, Gloria Steinem initiated consciousness-raising projects, shedding light on the humiliations women endure in catering to male fantasies. Additionally, the American translation of Simone de Beauvoir's influential work, "The Second Sex," in 1953, exposed the marginalized position of women as second-class citizens. In 1965, Friedan established the National Organization for Women (NOW) in Washington, D.C., to combat the injustices faced by women. As the mid-sixties approached, a distinct movement began to take shape, primarily consisting of middle-class women who were the daughters of the supermoms of the fifties. These women were radical feminists.

It was believed by some that women were the most oppressed group in Western societies, with men benefiting greatly from their sexual exploitation.

Among the male dramatists of the modern era, Arthur Miller received special attention during the early phase of feminist criticism. Kay Stanton's essay, "Women and the American Dream in Death of a Salesman," published in the book "Feminist Readings of Modern American Drama" edited by June Schlueter (1989), explores Miller's play and highlights its heavily masculine nature. Stanton points out that the conflicts depicted in the play primarily revolve around men, and she also examines how the American Dream is defined within the context of the play.

Contrary to Lacan's perspective, Kristeva posits that the primary mode is not lost but rather suppressed. She perceives the semiotic realm, encompassing Freud's preoedipal stage and Lacan's imaginary, as a sphere manifested through bodily rhythms, gestures, nonsensical syllables, and laughter, akin to the Freudian unconscious. This semiotic realm disrupts the semantic system of symbolic language upon its emergence. Kristeva proposes that the dualistic nature of the speaking/writing subject can be partially elucidated by their affiliation with both the semiotic and symbolic realms.

Kristeva diverges from an essentialist viewpoint in her depiction of the signifying process. She regards femininity not as a mythically coherent, fixed sexuality exclusive to women, but rather as a pre-conceptual psychic position—a stage of experience preserved in the unconscious as a marginalized site in relation to the symbolic realm.

Kristeva, Helene Cixous takes a different approach by embracing a biological essentialism that she views as empowering. In her work "The Newly Born Women," Cixous explores texts on women's sexuality that challenge the singular, linear, and homophonic aspects associated with patriarchal consciousness. This exploration is particularly emphasized by the French Feminists, who were introduced to this expressive style through psychoanalysis, while American women dramatists adopted it as a response to the realism of the Experimental Theatre in the 1960s. Cixous, along with Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, demonstrates how the texts of women express biological differences in sexuality. Their concepts are influenced by the theories of Freud and Lacan. Lacan, in his theory of language, argues that when a child acquires language and becomes aware of sexual differences, they transition from the imaginary stage to the symbolic mode, where verbal and syntactical communication aligns with the patriarchal traditions of society. Cixous suggests that these experiences of childbearing offer women a paradigm for connecting with and loving others, urging them to liberate themselves from patriarchal definitions by reclaiming their bodies.

*The multi erotic morphology of the female body expresses itself in a language which is multi focal, fluid, circular, without any closure*²¹.

Marxist feminists, in contrast to cultural feminists, analyze patriarchy and the binary gender categories of Man and Woman through the lens of historical materialism. They believe that women's experiences are shaped by the economic foundation of their society, its political environment, and cultural norms, which are crucial in understanding gender disparities. These feminists argue that merely challenging patriarchy is insufficient; one must also consider the material circumstances that uphold this system. Capitalism, with its distinction between the public and private spheres of labor, plays a significant role in this regard. Men are typically assigned roles in the public sphere of production, while women are confined to the private sphere of reproduction. Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls* (1982), addresses this issue, as do other British women playwrights like Claire Luckham and Pam Gems, who explore various aspects of the intersection of class and gender in their works.

Among contemporary Indian female writers who compose in English, Kamala Das stands out for her profound engagement with the portrayal of women in literature. She expresses dissatisfaction with the traditional roles assigned to women in Indian society in her works. Throughout her writing, Das addresses the social and cultural construction of gender, highlighting her opposition to the marginalization and exploitation of women. She delves into the challenges faced by Indian women in a male-dominated social structure, the societal expectations placed on women, the biased attitudes of men towards women, and the objectification of women. Despite being a product of Kerala's matriarchal society, where women traditionally hold significant power, Kamala Das critiques the treatment of women in broader Indian society.

*K.R. Srinivas Iyengar rightly comments that "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive, largely man-made world". (Satya Dev Jaggi : "A feminine Awareness"*²³

In her collection of stories :

The text "A Doll for the child prostitute" by Kamala Das portrays various images of Indian women. In this work, Das depicts women in different scenarios, shedding light on the exploitation of women by men, the marginalized status of women in society, their roles and positions in relationships with men, and women being typecast as wives, prostitutes, mothers, child-bearers, and primarily as objects meant to please and attract men through their physical appearance. Upon initial reading, these stories expose the disrespectful attitude of men towards women. Through the creation of specific situations, Kamala Das encourages women to speak openly and reveal the hypocrisy of men, their insatiable sexual desires, and the societal ironies, aiming to disrupt the complacency that she finds repugnant in society. Das's autobiography, "My Story," offers a reimagining of female desire. Unlike the Lacanian perspective that views female desire as lacking, an extension of Freudian beliefs that women are inherently different or deficient, the protagonist of Das's autobiography transitions from a passive victim to an empowered individual with a sense of completeness and abundance, only requiring a suitable recipient. However, this assertive, confident, and aggressive female desire is constrained by a socio-political environment that restricts its expression to the realm of sexuality. The exploration of sexuality by the adult Das is within a patriarchal framework that favors men, and the stories of extramarital relationships also expose instances of male mistreatment. Therefore, in recounting her most intense affair, she challenges the oppressive dynamics of her relationship.

*Years after all of it had ended, I asked myself why I took him on as my lover, fully aware of his incapacity to lover I needed security perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change.*²⁵

Here is another acknowledgment of the psychological and spiritual harm women endure due to their gender; the self-destructive justification of ambition, often portrayed as religious development, serves as a stark illustration of detrimental consequences for the female lead. The quest for independence in terms of sexuality and other aspects by the female protagonist in Das's memoir stands out within the realm of Indian literature in English. In the Indian society, female longing is repressed as it challenges societal norms related to marriage and sexual ownership, making it inherently unacceptable and, consequently, even more remarkable.

As French reports it;

[Indian women's] primary duty is emphatic so as to override their children's well-being and certainly their own, is to "make the marriage work" this means that a women must adjust to her husband. Whatever he is or does-if he is cold or cruel, if he is never home, or does not give her money, if he drinks or gambles or has other women, if beats her- is her lot. She is expected to submit, serve, and produce a

son.²⁶

The protagonist in the novel, "My Story," is able to challenge the oppressive patriarchal society she lives in by embracing the myth of her origin in the woman-centered matriarchy of Nalapat House. This myth allows her to step outside of the patriarchal world and critically examine the way in which her sexuality is commodified and valued solely in economic terms. When her husband accuses her of disrespect for reading a prestigious report without his permission, she counters by highlighting the fact that she fulfills her sexual duties as his wife. This exchange reveals her understanding of the transactional nature of their sexual relationship within the confines of their marriage.

By explicitly addressing the economic exchange inherent in male-female relationships, the author, Das, unveils a truth that is often concealed or silenced in both Indian and Western literature. This shift in perspective exposes the protagonist's struggle for autonomy as a woman in a society where sexual relations outside of marriage are not only culturally taboo but also disrupt economic norms.

"My Story" portrays the protagonist as a mediator between multiple and contradictory cultures, reflecting the complex reality of women's lives. The novel incorporates elements of Krishna consciousness to explore the ideological interplay within the Hindu world from a feminist perspective. However, it is important to note that this feminist viewpoint does not necessarily align with a complete Westernization of the text. By positioning the woman as an autonomous sexual subject within her familiar world, the narrator moves away from the image of a beggar seeking abundance and instead presents her as a devotee, highlighting her agency and spiritual connection.

"I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the water of my dreams. I may have gone ecstasy, but not once did I forget my destination".²⁷

Das' autobiography emerges from a similar spirit of rebellion as her other works, despite the later focus on the Krishna theme²⁸. The inclusion of indigenous cultural elements like the kali figure and the matriarchal structure of Nalapat House serves as a foundation for her criticism of patriarchal norms in sexuality. These critiques are central themes in both her autobiography and poetry. Through her writing, Das is able to craft her own narratives, characters, and dialogues, allowing her to connect with her readers on a personal level.

Das' examination of patriarchal systems and her quest for sexual empowerment echo the concerns of Western feminists like de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Helene Cixous, yet she stands out as a unique Indian female writer. The societal constraints that limit women writers from expressing autonomy in sexuality and profession, as depicted in "My Story," are still prevalent in many Asian cultures today, just as they were when Das' book was first published in 1976. Despite facing criticism from Indian women critics such as Monika Varma, Vimala Rao, and Eunice de Souza, Das, along with other candid Indian women writers like Gauri Despande and Mamta Kalia, continue to challenge these norms.

The perceived transgressions of social decorum and traditional behaviour still affect literary evaluation.²⁹

Furthermore, it is possible that Asian women may not resonate with Das's examination of 'female subjectivity as primarily desire-centered' or her portrayal of sexual relationships as politically engaged, congenial, or beneficial. It can be argued that Das's writings have had limited impact on transforming Indian society, especially considering that the majority of India's population resides in rural areas and faces numerous challenges. In reality, Kamala Das vehemently criticizes the societal system in which marginalized and abandoned girls are forced to endure a degraded existence within their districts. Through her novels, it becomes evident that Das is deeply dissatisfied with the prevailing social structure, which is characterized by hypocrisy and immorality. She exposes the fact that those entrusted with upholding societal norms, who should be combatting the flesh trade, are actually the very individuals who own and support brothels. Das expresses her disdain for a hypocritical society that feigns an emphasis on purity, chastity, and morality, while the proponents of these virtues themselves lack purity and chastity. In "A Doll for the Child Prostitute," Kamala Das underscores the fundamental humanity of women coerced into prostitution, highlighting their desire for a normal married life characterized by genuine love, fidelity, and sincerity. The story revolves around Mira, the most beautiful girl in the brothel, who elopes with a college student named Krishan. The woman is exploited physically, emotionally, and financially by him, only to be abandoned after a week. She is forced to maintain a routine of sleeping during the day and being awake at night to cater to the sexual desires of men, derogatorily referred to as "dogs" by one of the prostitutes. In this male-dominated society, women, whether they are prostitutes, mistresses, or stereotyped wives, are expected to prioritize physical beauty to please men and arouse their sensual desires. They are objectified as sexual beings, with emotional well-being. Their "bath was elaborate",

their hair was decked with strings of flowers, and rouge was rubbed into the skin of their cheeks to

make them look more healthy. Beneath the pink powder the base skin was ashen and seemed to have aged prematurely using their bodies as rinds had killed their spirits."³⁰

There are women present in this setting who have accepted their fate and lifestyle, as Saraswati, being a prostitute, is well acquainted with the trade. Consequently, she carries out her job mechanically, efficiently, and devoid of any emotions, attracting men through obscene gestures and engaging in sexual encounters without causing any commotion. On the other hand, other women like Mira possess rebellion, as she elopes with a nineteen-year-old college boy. Sita, desiring to have her own house, tragically dies prematurely due to an abortion, while Rukamani, Sita's friend, also yearns to escape from this place and pleads with the elderly inspector, "Oh, Papa, take me away from here. Otherwise, I too will perish." Ayee, after enduring a long journey, also realizes the tragic wastefulness and wishes to leave everything behind in the hands of Saraswati or Mira, intending to go to Banaras. This same sentiment is expressed in the poem "Lines Addressed to a Devdasi" where Kamala Das conveys the longing and awareness of a silent Devdasi, experiencing a homesickness and recognizing her destiny. However, despite the individual woman's inclination towards rebellion or realization of the futility of her existence on earth, the oppressive societal system that subjugates women persists.

In the novel "A Doll for the Child Prostitute," Kamala Das sheds light on the sexual and emotional exploitation of women by men. She perceives the male body as a catalyst for corruption, a symbol of decay, and the destroyer of feminine purity, as noted by Anisur Rahman³¹. Das harbors a disdain for the male physique and resents male dominance.

In the story "The Young Man with the Pitted Face," Das portrays the life of an Indian woman within the confines of marriage. Despite not receiving love from her partner, she perseveres, yearning for sincerity and affection from another man, which goes against the established norms of married life, often devoid of love. The hospitalized woman in this narrative eagerly awaits the daily visit of a young man, even though her beauty has faded due to excessive quinine consumption. Nevertheless, as Kamala Das states, "Being a woman, nothing but a woman," she applies lipstick to her blue lips and washes her hair daily, leaving it fragrant. The young man's presence in the hospital room, long after the departure of other visitors, provides her with the warmth of touch that she likely misses from her husband. The relationship between husband and wife lacks conversation, companionship, warmth, and love, which, for Kamala Das, signifies a more tranquil connection involving a hand on her hair and a voice in her ear assuring her that everything will be alright (My story, P.87).

But this young man does not come to the woman when she reaches home. She still waits for him and he does not come to her home any more. Obviously, says Kamala Das, he does not want to retain *the strange relationship* which the social values do not allow them. This lack of *emotional rapport* between husband and wife makes them search true love outside marriage because marriage and love generally are mutually exclusive. Kamala Das does not call this search for love immoral. Devindra Kohli comments, *when Kamala Das speaks for love outside marriage she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security.*³²

Alphabet of lust is Kamala Das' first novel in English. It may be studied at various levels: as an unusual story of love and lust, a bitter political satire and a work of fiction mixed with certain autobiographical elements.

One may locate at several places the same suffering woman in the person of Mansi,³³ the husband oppressed in the government machinery in the person of Amol³⁴, the same distaste of sex³⁵, the same craving for freedom³⁶,

She states in her book :

I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessings of all our marriage was fixed'.

In marriage the monotony dismayed her and describing it she writes :

"My husband was immersed in his office work and after office work there was dinner, followed by sex. Where was see the sea or dark buffaloes are the slopes?"³⁸

Furthermore, the degradation of being objectified and controlled as a sexual entity within the household serves to emphasize the superficiality of the marital connection for her. Her inner self resists against the absence of authentic emotional and spiritual connection through communication.

A common element in many of Das's narratives is the presence of a glimmer of hope amidst the misery experienced by her characters. In contrast to the existentialist portrayal of individuals in European literature, Das's characters, despite facing oppressive circumstances, manage to hold onto feelings of love, hope, and aspirations. In "The Little Kitten," a newly married woman relocates to Bombay with her spouse only to realize the profound loneliness in her life. She expresses her desire for a kitten to her

husband, who fails to comprehend her emotional needs and instead spends extended hours at work engaging with his secretary. Initially, the wife loses all zest for life and contemplates death. However, the narrative takes a turn when the husband returns home one day to find his wife radiantly beautiful and adorning herself in front of the mirror. Intrigued by her newfound happiness, he naively inquires about the kitten. The wife responds with a mysterious smile, concealing the fact that she has found a lover. This story subtly conveys feminist undertones as the protagonist cleverly breaks free from despair.

A common approach to analyzing Western women's writings involves classifying the most outstanding ones as the accomplishments of extraordinary women. These women were able to transcend the societal and cultural limitations that confined other women to domesticity and invisibility. By doing so, these exceptional women challenged and redefined established social relationships and gender roles for women. Consequently, their literary works have been given special recognition in the canon of Euro-American women's literature. Aphra Behn, Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, and Sylvia Plath are among the Western women who continue to serve as enduring models of exceptional women for study and emulation.

In recent times, the preferential treatment of exceptional Anglo-American women has come under scrutiny in critical discussions that explore the intersections of race, class, and gender, as well as the socio-political implications of Sisterhood. Bonnie Thornton Dill succinctly highlights the historical presence of white racist and classist biases within the women's liberation movements of white American middle-class women.

contemporary scholarship on women of colour suggests that the barriers to an all-inclusive sisterhood are deeply rooted in the histories of oppression and exploitation that Blacks and other groups encountered upon incorporation into the American political economy⁴⁰

American readers, on the other hand, often lack knowledge about female writers from non-Western cultures, whose literary contributions have distinguished. In Asian societies, the writings of authors like Ding Ling and Kamala Das possess a remarkable ability to empower their readers, allowing them to reexamine social dynamics and actively engage in a transformative shift of consciousness. This transformative revolution, as Julia Kristeva argues in her work "Revolution in Poetic Language," must precede any changes in the materialistic or political landscape. The profound impact of Ding Ling's and Das's works on their readers is comparable to the influence of writings by Anglo-American and ethnic female authors and critics such as Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and Barbara Smith. Within Ding Ling's and Das's writings, one can find themes of women's rebellion and critical exploration of the complexities of women's subjectivity, which are often candidly depicted through the lens of male-female power dynamics that many Western readers primarily associate with Anglo-American feminist literature.

Das' autobiography is a highly publicized piece of work that demonstrates a conscious awareness of its intended audience. Non-Indian readers need to recognize that Das' focus on sexual themes is deeply rooted in Indian, particularly Hindu, culture. Numerous critics have contributed to the portrayal of the female subject in Das' autobiography and poetry, inadvertently fueling a rebellion against the male-dominated notions of sexuality prevalent in her works. These critics have interpreted Das' portrayal of herself in her autobiography as a devout follower of the male Indian god Krishna, thereby endorsing her as a traditional and acceptable figure. For instance, Mohan Lai Sharma argues that Das' literary journey represents a progression towards Krishna worship, and he commends her poetic style for its religious significance, even with its perceived flaws. Sharma's perspective reflects his patriarchal interpretation of Das' work, evident in his choice of dictum, which unconsciously undermines the true essence of her writing.

When Kali danced, we felt in the region of the heart an unease and a leap of 'recognition. Deep inside. We held the knowledge that Kali was older than the world and that having killed for others. She was now lonelier than all. All our primal instinct rose to sing in our blood the magical incantations⁴⁵"

In the initial sections, Das introduced female characters who, similar to the iconic portrayal of Kali, offered a moment of identification for the protagonist as a young girl. In both Ammini and Ammalu, we perceive the woman writer who is equally influenced by both sensual and ascetic desires, a figure reminiscent of Emily from Amherst and Ammalu from Nalapat House. Furthermore, in the grand uncle's wife, we encounter another manifestation of the empowered female. This wife embodies the roles of both a voluptuary and a seductress.

She is never seen even at night without her heavy jewelry, all gem encrusted and radiant, and the traditional cosmetics of the Nair woman (My Story P.19). And the object of her life is to enslave the man with her voluptuous body (My Story P.20).

Helene Cixous asserts in her text, *the Laugh of the Medusa*, Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time⁴⁶

Kamala Das skillfully utilizes body language to portray the intricacies of women's experiences that defy clear definition and certainty. Despite discussing sexual desire in explicit terms, Das maintains an air of innocence prior to marriage. It appears that she has internalized a variety of human relationships, incorporating them into her own psyche in order to present them as her own. "My Story" marks the beginning of Das' exploration into women's experiences, delving into the concept of self-parody. Her female characters are ensnared in a society centered around men. Much like the author herself, they confront societal injustices and come to terms with their roles in a world plagued by false values and crumbling ideologies. The title story, "Padmavati, the Harlot," satirizes the lives of esteemed rulers such as Akbar the Great. India has a rich history of powerful emperors and kings who have shaped the course of nations. Padmavati's realm is her own body, and she is unjustly labeled as a harlot. In her later years, after securing her family's well-being, she finds solace in visiting shrines and ascending the seven hills.

My story, written by Kamala Das, stands out as a unique endeavor among Indian women autobiographers in English. It ventures into unexplored territory by delving into the experiences of one's own body, which serves as the foundation for sociological, psychological, and even spiritual development. Unlike other women autobiographers who shy away from discussing their bodies, Das fearlessly confronts her own with unparalleled honesty and frankness. However, what sets her bold attempt apart is her constant awareness of deviating from societal norms, despite her efforts to suppress the traditional expectations placed upon her as an Indian woman. The cultural construct of being a "woman" looms over her existence, leading her to repeatedly attempt to conform before ultimately realizing that it is not her path to follow. This vacillation between the prescribed role and her personal desire for independence creates an apparent inconsistency in her narrative, for which she has often faced criticism.

At times, the dominant superego of the Anglo writer manifests itself, portraying her as a traditional Hindu woman with a strong aversion to sex and a deep attachment to her feminine role. This inconsistency in her behavior can be justified within the context of her autobiography, as it reflects her true self. Kamala's story offers a valuable opportunity for a psychological analysis of the loveless and emotionally deprived life of a romantic individual who struggled to find fulfillment within the confines of societal norms. The lack of affection and security in her affluent parents' home, coupled with the expectations of her husband's family, shaped her identity. As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "Women are not born; they are made," emphasizing the role of socialization in shaping women's identities. Kamala's experiences serve as a poignant example of this concept, illustrating how her circumstances transformed her from a conventional girl into a rebellious figure. Had she been supported by a more understanding husband, she might have found happiness in marriage. However, her husband's aggressive attitude towards sex, combined with her own insecurities, led to her being unfairly labeled as frigid. This stereotype is often wielded by men seeking to assert their dominance, undermining women who do not conform to their expectations.

Recently, Kamala Das has expressed some remorse for writing her autobiography. This change in attitude can be attributed to the publication of a full-page article in 'Time' magazine. As a result, she has become more cautious in her public statements, even yielding to her husband's insistence. Kamala Das excels in narrating her experiences, a task that even the esteemed Virginia Woolf approached with hesitation. Surprisingly, the analysis of Kamala Das's fiction has not received as much critical attention as her poetry or autobiography. Her short stories, whether originally written in English or translated by Das herself, have been published in various journals Dialogue, Opinion, Quest, Debonair, Femina, Enact, and Blitz. In both her stories and poetry, we witness the same level of skill and talent.

*conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented Universe,*⁴⁷

The poetry of women often explores a recurring theme. Many of these poems delve into feminist perspectives, challenging and dismantling traditional stereotypes of women. These stereotypes include the prostitute, the other woman, and the wife, as well as the portrayal of women as subservient and dependent. Two of the stories specifically break the stereotype of the prostitute. In the title story, we witness the kind-hearted and selfless nature of Padmavati, a harlot who cares for her paralyzed mother, supports her brothers' education, arranges her sister's marriage, and bears no resentment when her own family rejects and forgets her. When she arrives at Timpati to worship at the temple, she embodies the stage described by Das in his poem.

Lines addressed to a Devdasi
 Ultimately there comes a time
 It is then that your desires cease
 And a homesickness begins
 And you sit on the temple steps
 A silent devdasi, lovelorn
 And aware of her destiny

When the sex worker arrives at the temple, she is embraced as a member of the community. Padmavati's unwavering dedication to her profession, driven by her desire to support her family, is regarded as a spiritual practice and symbolizes the soul's quest for ultimate unity, which can only be attained through devotion to the divine. A Doll for the young sex worker offers a personalized and compassionate portrayal of individuals in the sex industry, who are often dehumanized and reduced to mere objects by patriarchal systems that prioritize male gratification over the well-being of women. The novel vividly depicts the daily life of a brothel, exposing its grim reality of exploitation, sadism, child abuse, illegal abortions, and death.⁴⁹

The Sea Lounge portrays a feminist perspective by depicting a woman who gracefully accepts rejection from her lover without being heartbroken. Her dignified and independent decision about her future, which no longer involves him, leads him to regret and yearn for a second chance. The story showcases a woman who can stand on her own, without being subservient or reliant on a man.

Kamala Das' short stories often contain symbolic substructures, with effective use of imagery. Sometimes, the title serves as a metaphor that conveys the theme of the story. For instance, "Walls" illustrates the protagonist's alienation as he isolates himself from life and society. In "A Doll," the child prostitute symbolizes the objectification of women and girls in brothels as mere playthings for lustful men. The tragic death of fourteen-year-old prostitute Sita after an abortion is a poignant moment in the narrative.

Sita lay insinuate like a doll".

Kamala Das's female characters find themselves trapped in a society that revolves around men. Similar to the author herself, they confront the injustices of society and reluctantly embrace their roles in a decaying world filled with false principles and collapsing ideologies. The main story, "Padmavati, the Harlot," serves as a satirical portrayal of the lives of influential emperors and kings who have shaped the destinies of nations. Padmavati's realm is her own body, and as the title suggests, she is labeled as a harlot. Despite reaching middle age and successfully guiding her family to a stable life, she manages to find time to visit the shrines, climbing the seven hills. Through Kamala Das' poetic and evocative language, the journey of the harlot is symbolically depicted, transitioning from the physical and carnal realm to the spiritual and aesthetic. As the story progresses, with its alternating movement between the city and the shrine, Kamala Das delves into the theme of sexuality and desire. Despite being old enough to be their mother, Padmavati is treated with disrespect and becomes a victim of the wandering youths at the foot of the hill at the beginning of the narrative.

*The loafers loitering around approached her and looked at her plump calves with lewd smiles. Shall we help you, lady, they asked her, nothing the red blouse that she wore, the tinsel in her hair and the betel stain on her full lips*⁵².

In the princess of Avanti, Kamala Das presents a satirical take on the concept of Swayamvaram by portraying an elderly woman who deludes herself into believing that she is a princess eagerly awaiting her wedding day. Unfortunately, she falls victim to the deceitful actions of three scoundrels who molest and rape her. It is only when she cries out, "I am not the real princess of Avanti, and I do not wish to get married," that her true identity is revealed (p.18).

This story can be interpreted as a commentary on the idealized notion of love, which ultimately fails to thrive in a society that views women solely as sexual objects. The use of an old, mentally unstable woman as a symbol of the body, rather than a young and beautiful girl, adds to the parody. Through irony and satire, Kamala Das expresses her deep resentment towards a corrupt society.

In her literary works, Kamala Das successfully explores her own sense of self and remains steadfast in being true to herself despite societal pressures. Her autobiography, in particular, showcases her ability to break free from the restrictive and oppressive norms imposed on women. Devindra Kohli notes that her writing is infused with a confident femininity, a trait that is evident in her book, "My Story." In this memoir, she courageously challenges the stifling conventions that often diminish the value of women's writing.

Kamala Das demonstrates her ability to shape her own future within a highly practical framework. She makes decisions based on her individual, mature, ethical judgment by expressing her thoughts openly and accepting the consequences, which aligns with a key feminist principle. Despite her husband's disapproval, Das pursued her writing as a means to channel her emotions of pain, humiliation, and sorrow. She can be classified as a liberal feminist, as seen in her dedication to her children's well-being and her active involvement in their lives. A liberal feminist recognizes the significance of a woman's role in the family and domestic sphere. Education aims to cultivate self-awareness and empower individuals to assert themselves in challenging circumstances. Kamala Das appears to adhere to feminist ideals by acknowledging her desires and aspirations, enabling her to pursue happiness and balance in her otherwise unfulfilled life. In her autobiography, she credits both living and deceased authors for inspiring her to embrace her true self and find courage (My Story p. 134).

My narrative serves as a compelling plea for the rights of every woman to resist and rebel against the oppressive forces present in society. These forces aim to hinder the progress of individuals and perpetuate gender stereotypes. The brand of feminism portrayed in my story encourages others to embrace their true selves without denying or suppressing their femininity. It is a powerful revolt against the fallacy of male dominance. I strive to dismantle the notion of femininity and challenge societal expectations regarding gender roles. I firmly believe that women have always been viewed through the lens of men. I revolt against the prevailing masculine authority by expressing my discontent with women's passive acceptance of subservience. Throughout my novels and short stories, I highlight the existence of an unjust social system that seeks to create a divide between genders. I vehemently oppose this oppression, which positions men as the dominant subjects and women as mere objects or the "Other." I resist the masculine traits that stifle women's growth in all aspects of life. I aim to portray a grotesque image of femininity, shedding light on the brutality inflicted by men. I protest against the dehumanization attempts made by men and the silent acceptance of women who perceive their femininity as passive and inferior. I am staunchly against the enslavement of women solely due to their economic dependence on men. I strive to challenge the established order that perpetuates power imbalances between genders. Even as a child, I displayed my defiance against traditional norms. In my autobiography, I disclose my infatuation with one of my teachers during my time in elementary school.

Kamala Das's restlessness stems from her longing to be valued and loved for who she truly is. Her frustration arises from a deep sense of dissatisfaction. It appears that no man could fulfill all her needs and desires. She expresses her disappointment, stating that she expects her partners to possess god-like qualities, but none of them ever meet her expectations. Kamala Das refuses to accept the notion propagated by men that women are intellectually inferior and inherently irrational. She rejects the belief that women lack imaginative thinking abilities. Instead, she employs creative writing as a means to challenge the sexist culture she is surrounded by. The act of writing her autobiography itself becomes an act of rebellion against societal norms. Her desire for freedom consumes her to such an extent that she declares:

If my parents had talked to me and pointed out the wrong path and the right. I would still have led the life I led, I sincerely believe that knowledge is exposure to life. I could never bring myself to hang my life on the pegs of quotations for safety. I never did play safe. I compromised myself with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all the boats that would have reached me to security. (My Story 220)

As we all know, it requires great courage to challenge the long-established social system for a girl of her socio-cultural background. To our surprise we see that Kamala Das never lacked in courage to be herself even though she knew that

She would have proved herself to be a mere embarrassment to the members of her family, for she is like a goldfish in a well-lit bowl whose movements are kept concealed.

(My Story 217)

Kamala Das exhibits great bravery in asserting her individuality in the face of the limitations imposed by the patriarchal customs. Her memoir serves as a significant appeal for the innate entitlement of every woman to challenge and resist any societal pressures that hinder personal growth. She vehemently opposes the notion of gender stereotypes.

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