

## KAMALA DAS'S 'MY STORY' : EXPLORATION OF THE WOMANHOOD

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### Abstract:

*The present article modestly attempts to explore the autobiographies written by women in Indian English Literature with special reference to Kamala Das. Her autobiography is the true manifestation of woman's plea for liberation from the conservative attitude. It is a genuine discourse of a woman that records physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth. Autobiography has become the strong platform to expose the hidden facts of life, inner conflicts, conservative culture, seamy side of marital life, resurgence for the woman's rights. Strong resistance to oppose exploitation etc. Das is a notable prolific writer, known for her candid exposition of private life. Her autobiography is the prototype of an Indian woman that furnishes the unsung tunes of a poet who boldly paves the way for upcoming women writers to raise voice against the imposed social taboos.*

### KEYWORDS:

Autobiography, Kamala Das, womanhood, Indian English Literature.

### INTRODUCTION:

Kamala Das is one of the distinguished trendsetters in Indian English Poetry. Born on 31st March, 1934 in Kerala, she is the daughter of V. M. Nair and Nalapat Balamani Amma. As a bilingual writer, she writes both in Malayalam and English. Her Malayalam poetry is published under the pen name Madhavikutty. She was influenced by her uncle, Nalpat Narayan Menon, a prominent writer and her mother who was a renowned Malayali poetess. She was taught home until the age of 15. At early age of fifteen, she was married to K. Madhava Das. Her marital life was perturbed by the domestic incongruities and differences. She is known for her confessional poetry, short-stories and her autobiography 'My story', which is the milestone of her literary career. Kamala Das candidly explores her feminine self and her inner journey in the autobiography. It is the pungent record of her earnest urges, longings and acute yearnings. Her auto biography becomes a vehicle for voicing the mute suffering of a female living in a male supremacy. Kamala Das's autobiographical writing is marked by boldness, daring and feminist self assertiveness.

The act of writing an autobiography is deeply rooted in human psyche as it is a powerful medium of human discourse to explore the self of a writer. Carolyn H. Heiburn rightly points out the features a woman's autobiography. He writes :

"Where should it begin ? With her birth and the disappointment or reason for no disappointment that she was not a boy ? Do we then slide her into the Freudian family romance, the oedipal configuration, if not, how should we view her childhood ? What in short, is the subjects, relation - inevitably complex with her mother ? The relation with the father will be less, complex, Clearer in its emotions and desires, partaking less of either terrible pity or binding love. How does she cope with the fact that value is determined by how attractive men find her ? If she marries, why does the marriage fail, or succeed ?" (The Women's Press 1988:11)

Autobiography is an endless dialogue with the self. In the later part of twentieth century, the genre of autobiography reached its zenith by the contribution made by women writers in India. The significant autobiographers are Amrita Pritam, Dilip Tiwana, Mrinal Pande, Sharanjeet Shan, Tasleema Nasreen etc. Kamala Das and her contemporary women writers were candid enough to expose the social inhibitions and

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cultural taboos that sapped their individualities. In Andre Maurois's opinion, 'Autobiography is a prolonged speech for the defense.'

Her autobiography explores the chequered episodes of her life. O. J. Thomas rightly remarks : "Kamala Das story is the story of a woman who was denied love when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life - name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is in this background that she writes about love in all her writings." (Bhatnagar 2001:183)

Kamala Das has graphically depicted the untold facts about Indian woman, particularly Hindu. Mostly Indian women are victimized under customs and traditions. A woman in India is generally submissive, self-less and thoroughly devoted to her family. She exists in the restricted circle, performing the role of a daughter, a wife, and a mother. She hardly gets an opportunity to communicate with her self as a separate identity. Most of them are forced to rely on the men in society. It is the predicament of a woman that compels to forget her inner passions and longings. She is marginalized and exploited in society. Das finds autobiography as a powerful retrospective act of expression. Autobiography of a woman varies from male writer. G. H. Lewes writes, "Masculine mind is characterized by the pre-dominance of intellect and the feminine by the predominance of emotions." (Showalter 1971:174). Thus, autobiography for a female writer is an emotional outlet to free herself from the torturing passions. It is a faithful record of her fantasies, desires, weaknesses, violent conflicts etc. It is a brief saga of her struggle for the existence in male dominated society. Generally, male writers are more conscious about their stereotype image, egoistic nature, diffident attitude etc.

Kamala Das published "My Story" at the age of 42. As a writer, she is known for shocking details, extra marital affairs and uncompromising frank attitude. She writes about her work, "I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My story has given me." (Sodhi 2004 : 101-102) Thus writing an autobiography was a cathartic experience for her as she disclosed the facts of her marital life.

Kamala Das's "My Story" resumes with her factual accounts of her childhood and adolescent period. Her stay at Nalapat house was a pleasurable experience for her. When she was shifted to Calcutta, she was exposed to new world. She studied at a European school in Calcutta where she had undergone discriminating experience as she was Indian among the British students. She had registered this humiliation as her fellow British classmate remarks about her colour, "Blackie, your blood is red." (Das 1975:2) Even her parents were deeply concerned about her black colour. Her father even advised her grandmother to apply turmeric on Kamala's skin. She was a good poet at school who composed poems on dolls. She lacked support from her parents in writing poems. Therefore, she criticizes the attitude of her parents. She writes, "I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses." (Das 1978:9) The city Calcutta had changed her life. Her family encountered the colorized western notions of morality that were opposite to the traditional matriarchal culture of the Nairs of Kerala.

Das's marriage with a man from Malabar proved to be tragic. She married with a with a man who was a couple of years old than her. She was fed up with his insensitive and unromantic ways. She was completely disappointed with her husband who shattered her romantic ideas of love. She writes about her inner feelings of love :

" 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 conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts." (Das 1978:84). Thus, Kamala was searching for an ideal man who would be romantic, caring and protective.

Her accounts of physical relationships shattered the conservative Nairs who were not allowed to speak about sex. She was bold enough to write about the homosexual affair of her husband. She admits that her life drastically changed after the advent of a baby in her life. She enjoyed motherhood as epitome of pure love. Her autobiography abounds with her description of labour pains. She had written about her successive three deliveries at home. Her motherhood brought her to Malabar. She continued to live with her three kids being the mistress of Nalapat house. She lived an independent life tilling her lands. She was not divorced from her husband but she was heart broken, She spent peaceful life at Malabar inspite of her parents and relatives' agitation. She writes about this predicament:

"My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society's reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy." (Das 1978:102)

Kamala's break-up from her husband laid deep impact on her family. Her stay at Bombay proved fruitful for her poetic career. Her conversion into Islam was controversial, Due to prolonged illness, she died on June 31, 2009 in Pune.

Dr. K. B. Bhasin Writes : "My Story" is controversial autobiography by Kamala Das where she

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seized the control of the society's own cultural codes, particularly those formed by dominant religious ideologies." (Bhasin 2008:19)

Kamala's autobiography seems to be the brain-child of her poetic cosmos. Her delineation of the episodes of life intermingles with poems. Her narrative method is very bold and authentic. It seems an honest confession of an Indian woman who is crushed under the customs and traditions. Her candid and bold statements underline the general predicament of a woman. She boldly writes about the marital disharmony, extra- marital affairs, homo-sexuality and physical intercourse. She is an iconoclast of her generation with her uncommon courage and bold style. Her autobiography covers the life- sketches of different people. She has given the best sketch of her grand-mother and younger brother. It reflects her sensitive outlook towards them. Death of her grandmother seems to be painful experience for her. She also confesses that her brother was idol for her. Her autobiography represents her as a domestic housewife, a mother of three kids, an isolated and independent human being. She seems to be rebellious but very sensitive and touchy at heart.

Shubha Tiwari opines about Indian woman's model of ideal womanhood : "The model works twofold - on one hand it anyhow sustains Indian marriages, family structure and thereby social structure. On the other hand, it generates suffocation, hypocrisy, and double speak." (Tiwari 2005:211) But Kamala Das has proved her courage to break Indian socio-cultural matrix by her transparent depiction of marital life. She doesn't justifies her actions or defend herself. On the other hand, it is the true record of her journey to womanhood. She celebrates it with her unique independent attitude, power of woman, being maker of her own destiny and her sincere urge for the upliftment of woman.

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