

Portrayal of women in Kamala Das' My story

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Abstract

There have been many autobiographies written so far. At a certain stage in life when a person feels that he or she has enough to share with the world and want people to know about the learning they had, a decision of writing a memoir is taken. Here we are going to talk about one such exceptional writer whose bold and unfiltered writing style has shunned the Indian critics and has made all of us to ponder on the biases of patriarchy. And she is none other than Kamala Das who brought a revolution in the writing industry with her honest confessions. This paper would talk about the portrayal of women in her book *My Story* where she has shared her lifetime experiences through this biography. Her experience as an Indian woman has been full of disappointments which she has explained through her creative writing style. The women in her writings have been portrayed as an object for men who are meant to have a purpose or use without any soul or desires. The expectations of society from a woman and the burden of those expectations have been explained in her book *My Story*.

Keywords: Female writer, Confession, Feminism, Biography.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) has tried to bring a sexual revolution in the male dominated society through her work. She wrote her autobiography when she was ill and had a hospital bill to take care of. This whole book has been written during this period and she wanted her readers to know and learn from her life experiences. The book talks about the oppression of women as a weaker gender and aims at highlighting the gender discrimination.

She was born and brought up in the high class society where her parents were ignorant about her presence and expectations and considered her as a burden. That made her think about why she was born in that family. She explains that feeling in her book and says:

“Wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses.” [1]

Getting married at an early age when young girls should think about her career and life, she was premature for that phase of her life. Her husband was not a warm man as per her descriptions in her book *My Story*, where she writes about his indifference to her feelings. She also states that her husband was flirtatious to other women. Grown up in a aloof atmosphere, Kamala had expected her share of love in her life partner but all her dreams were shattered when she got married and saw that her husband just wants aggressive physical intimacy and does not both and care about her. She states that the first thought of rebel came to her at that phase of her life when she decided to not be faithful to him. She confesses the same with honest in her book and says:

“I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him, at least physically.” [2]

Her experience as a wife was disappointing too. She had always been searching for companionship and love in her life. But her search seemed to be never ending. Her bold acknowledgement and honest confessions has inspired the society. Her outspoken persona has made people admire her guts. She had talked about using fiction in her literary work based on her observation in the society. Kamala Das has been honest in her confessions and shares everything with her readers without any filters. Her readers are like her priest listening to her confessions. Her work *My Story* is the bestselling novel not just because of the bold subject chosen for writing, it is also due to the writing style which was relatable to every woman in the country who belonged to that era and even in today's generation. As she says:

“Whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial. What really matters is the experience, the incident. It may have happened to another woman who is probably too timid to write about it. I wanted to chronicle the times we lived in and I had to write about the experience.” [2]

She is candid in sharing her real life experience and says that she wanted other women in the society to understand that they are not the only one. She wanted the women to start thinking about them and warned that the society will never do so. The writer has penned down her emotions about growing up in the Indian society. She explains the high degree of gender discrimination in the country where women are not given much importance compared to men.

“I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
my womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
belong, cried the categorizers.” [3]

She says that society has predetermined norms for boys and girls. Girls are expected to do things which would suit them as per those norms. Everything is decided by the society and girl has no right to make choices. How would she dress, what she would do, how would she behave, everything is imposed and that surpasses the natural thinking ability of females in the society. She explains that even though the women show complete devotion to their family in every generation, they have their desire for true love. Women have many roles to play in their life, the role of a mother who has an unconditional love for her child, the role of a daughter who had to oblige to her parents' decisions, the role of a wife who has to be a support to her life partner for her entire life. She plays all the roles and does not ask for anything. But deep down in her heart she waits for the everlasting love which she deserves. Kamala Das in her work *My Story* says that:

“My worries Doze, Wee bubbles ring my glass, like a bride's Nervous smile, and meet my lips.
Dear, forgive this moment's lull in wanting you, the blur in memory.” [5]

This clearly states her thoughts and her desires of being a woman. She does not want to feel guilty and wants to be forgiven for thinking about herself. She believed that life comes one for all and both men and women had equal rights to live for them. Kamala Das was married at a young age of fifteen years and since then she had devoted herself to the expectations of a married woman in the society at that time. Sometimes, she felt like releasing herself from all these obligations and set her soul free. She felt like living for herself and living her dreams rather than becoming a shadow for a man. She clearly states her feelings in her book *My Story* that the moving adoration words flung from entryway and tea of carve. You tired desire; I will sometime take wings, fly around as regularly petals. Do when outline in air, and you are, only the dismal leftover of a root on twofold – beds. Furthermore, lament. Her desire for freedom was not acceptable by the society at that time and she was obligated to fulfil her duties as a wife, mother and daughter half heartedly. She further states that in Indian Society a woman is trained to suppress her natural desired and are

taught that it is not acceptable for a woman to have such desires which are reserved only for men. She writes in her autobiography *My Story* that:

“Was every married adult a clown in bed, a circus performer? I hate marriage ...I hate to show myself naked to anyone.” [5]

She expresses her distaste for the marriage and says that marriage seemed like a job for women where she had to perform as per her husband’s desires and were expected to fulfil all the assigned duties. They had no rights and all the good things were reserved for husbands. In her preface of the book *My Story* she writes about her situation in which she had written the entire book. She says that:

“My story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought, that writing would distract my mind, from the fear of a sudden death. Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed- out conscience. “[6]

She wanted everyone to know about her life struggles and learning. She wanted to make people understand and become aware about the societal pressures and double standards. She wanted to share her entire life story with no filters before she departed the world. She shares her first experience of pleasure with a female friend of hers where she has highlighted her physical intimacy.

“Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding .She kissed my lips then, and whispered , you are so sweet ,I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling,,,, .It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that, no one, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my ace and my throat all through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot.”[8]

She explained that love comes in all forms. And it need not be in just the love of husband which a woman desires. Her work could be criticised by many readers because of her feminism style of writing but she honestly expressed her experiences in her writings. She felt no inhibition in masking the truth and wanted her readers to know everything she has felt and experienced in her creative way of narrations. She talks about the violence against woman in the houses where men consider their wife as their asset and believe that they can torture her as per their liking. They do not see women as a human being and do not consider their desires at all. She writes that:

“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 [9]

She clearly explains the behaviour of men when it comes to love. She says that men do not believe in having conversations or knowing their partner, their simple desired is physical intimacy which should ideally be the next step of love. She questions the logic on how can anyone get physically intimate without knowing or understanding the other person.

She highlights her bitter experience with her husband where violence was his only motto when he did not get what he wanted in his life or was upset with anything in his life. Hitting her gave him some solace and pleasure which she mentions in these lines. She says that:

“Again and again he hurt me all the while the Kathkalli drums throbbed dully, ’then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack.” [9]

In her book *My story*, she clearly defines her struggle in her married life and the experiences she had at such a young age.

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