

NO MORE ON THE EDGE: A KALEIDOSCOPIC REPRESENTATION OF SELF-ASSERTION IN KAMALA DAS'S *MY STORY*

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Abstract

The journey of a creative writer involves the development of her 'womanly self' into a 'writerly self'. The crisis of life and deep anguish caused by extreme suffering prompt a woman to wield her pen. A woman creative writer writes using her creative potential to cathartically pour out her pain and mental anguish through her writing. Creativity alleviates the pain resulting from some bitter life-experiences that require an outlet to counterbalance the pressures of living. This paper analyses how the 'self' of Kamala Das is torn apart between the traditional domestic roles ascribed to a woman by the patriarchal society and her dream role as an artist, and how she asserts her 'self' seeking refuge in literary creation as a means to escape from patriarchal oppression.

A discourse on the representation of self in Kamala Das's *My Story* requires a discussion on the manifestation of the word 'split-self'. The term 'split-self' denotes an inner conflict between two aspects of the self: the role of a self ascribed by the essential demands of social and cultural prescription stereotyped on the basis of gender and the self searching for space to rise above this stereotypical pigeonholed role in order to show its unique creativity. This paper analyses how Kamala Das's *My Story* predicates a candid assertion of the evolution of her inner self that is torn apart between the traditional domestic role which is always respected and hailed high by the patriarchal society: the role of a daughter, a wife and a mother, and her dream role as an artist whose literary creation is an agency of escape from sexual violence.

Das has sincerely played the role of a traditional woman concerned with her familial duties and domestic responsibilities. As a Nair woman, whose self is heavily embedded in her culture, she loves to wrap herself with a white sari, adorn her body with thick gold jewelries and worship goddess Kali and the popular snake shrine. She is often nostalgic about her native place and has often expressed her jubilation amidst the natural beauty of her ancestral house. In the process of construction of her domestic self, Kamala Das has paid respect to her matrilineal tradition, especially to Kunji, her grandmother, Ammini, Ammalu and has given a thorough description of her Nalapat House in Kerala and her ancestry. Therefore motherly responsibilities towards her sons are inherent in her. The divinity of her motherhood is distinct when as a teenage mother she longs for a baby like Karna. In one incident she describes that she went on praying to Guruvayur's Krishna, sitting by the side of the sick-bed of her son Monoo, when, as an innocent child, he consumed some castor seeds and was hospitalized. She writes: "Childishly I vowed that I would remove all my ornaments and lay them at the idol's feet if the child was saved" (*My Story* 110).

The domestic self of Kamala Das that has evolved in her autobiography is different from the selves of those traditional females who are bent under the incumbent of patriarchy and have earned respect in the world of men by remaining within the four walls of the household. Unlike her passive mother who had tolerated and suffered under her father's authority and supremacy or the second wife of her granduncle who has compromised with her highly educated husband's scorn, Das has debunked

the inactive stature of the feminine mystique and declared protest against her sexual victimization that she has undergone after her marriage. Iqbal Kaur writes in this context:

She protests against women's socialization into an unquestioning acceptance of their destiny as inferiority, passivity, submissiveness and dependence; against society's expectations that a woman should conform to her 'Angel in the House' image. ("Protest Against Sexual Colonialism: Kamala Das's *My Story*" 224)

Devoid of parental love and affection, with a workaholic father busy in maintaining his status in accordance with the standards of the British and a poet mother, who would love to dwell in the realm of imagination – leisurely lying down and writing poetry, the self of the author seeks a space for her own where she could get some love. Apart from her grandmother, there was dearth of love in every sphere of her life.

Thinking of getting love after marriage, Kamala Das too soon to be a bride, tied her wedding knot with a man thrice of her age who knew nothing except his carnal hunger and hyper sexual cravings. Her body became a plaything at the brute hands of her rapacious husband that could quell his lust. Before she could interpret the meaning of sexual pleasures in a marriage relationship, her feminine self received a huge blow. She was shattered to find that the person to whom she has married was not a man who could live up to her emotional need. As a timid teenage girl she could not respond and meet the expectation and barbarities of her unaffectionate husband, and consequently it occurred to him that Kamala was frigid and sexually unresponsive. It made her husband to turn his coquettish paw towards her prick teaser cousins. Thus she lost her faith in the institution of marriage and in its bonds, and blatantly declares: "I hate marriage" (*My Story* 72). Iqbal Kaur writes on this issue:

The male manufactured definitions of femininity nauseated her. She detested the male gaze because it situates woman as an object. The sexual politics that prevailed in the relationship between her mother and father and several other couples around her also shaped her views on marriage. The power politics in sex-relationships was repulsive to her. So, she wanted to escape marriage — the bond. ("Protest Against Sexual Colonialism: Kamala Das's *My Story*" 227)

At this point Kamala Das turn out to be bold and determined to become "unfaithful to him, at least physically" (*My Story* 99), and therefore desperately involved herself in love outside marriage. But unfortunately, she developed an antipathy towards physical love as it was lust and carnal hunger of men she found every time she has asked for pure love.

Thus circumstances made her resolve to end her life. Recurrent references of attempt to suicide are there in her autobiography, as she writes: "I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements" (*My Story* 227). One such circumstance is at the night of her birthday when she was in utter despair and unnerved to see her second son fell ill, but her husband instead of carrying out his fatherly responsibilities to save his son, locked himself in a room with one of his male friend to quench his sexual hunger through a homosexual relationship in order to show Kamala her sexual frigidity. She writes: "They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while wondering what two men possibly do together to get some physical rapture..." (*My Story* 110). The self of the author is constructed in complete dilemma. She could not tolerate the situation and was missing her peace and comfort. It led her to reach the terrace of their multi-storeyed building from where she decided to jump and die. Suddenly at that moment, her mind conceived a poem out of this gloomy and forlorn atmosphere that changed her mind and altered her fate. In the darkness of the night, she came down the stairs with mind full of optimism and a heart full of desire to live. The evolution of a bold and courageous poetic self of the author took place. Sitting at the writing table, Das jotted down her first poem that came to be printed in the issue of the following month in the journal of the Indian P.E.N.: "Wipe out the paints, un mould the clay/ Let nothing remain of that yesterday..." (*My Story* 111). She sought solace in her writing. She expressed her pain in the Preface of *My Story*: "This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I had written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me".

To establish her lost identity through her writing, Kamala Das eventually brings her body into discussion. It is her body that ultimately stood thick and thin amidst all the hackles of her life, and this corporeal suffering is the witness of the fangs of social atrocities that women of our society endure

every day. Kamala Das is bold in her attitude and knows no limitation in exposing her physical torture. Her husband's lust for her body to quench his sexual thirst is so barely pictured in her autobiography that it compels her readers to realise the issue. But Kamala Das's open deliberations and her challenge towards the social norms by bringing her body at the centre of the discourse has blackened her reputation as a female entity. The patriarchal stand that has been battered and enraged, created chaos and controversy and consequently commodified her creativity. Lucy Irigaray states on this issue: "It is legitimate to expose the oppression, the mutilation, the 'functionalization' and the 'objectivation' of the female body, but it is also dangerous to put the female body at the centre of a search for female identity" (*The Sex which is not one* 218). But in case of Kamala Das her body is the powerhouse of her literary creations and the genesis of her self. It is the canvas that has received all the blistering stimulus of her life and has provided her with the ingredients required for her art. Das has written prolifically about her body in her life narrative from the point of view of an artist and has tried to annihilate the existing power-structure. Regarding this issue, Kamala Das replied in an interview to Eunice De Souza, "The only myth that you will want to retain is: 'I am different'. I am an entity. It is only as that entity that you can write, produce art.... I use my body in assessing my lines" (*Talking Poems* 34).

Lack of love from her parents, lack of adjustment with her husband, her innumerable extra-marital affairs and dearth of pure love that she went on imploring throughout her life lead her to hold her pen tightly denouncing everything, as it occurred to her heavily that it is only creative writing which can give her immense pleasure, name and fame. She has re-created her self that was duped, fractured and fragmented, and has survived through her writing. The recognition of her self as a writer and its concomitant happiness has several references in *My Story*. She writes: "Whenever a story appeared in a journal I ran with it to my bedroom to lie down and read it, for my heart used to thump so with excitement to see my name in print" (*My Story* 144). Her exultation rises high as she writes: "When the *Mathrubhumi* published my stories, I began to get letters from my readers in Bombay who expressed their admiration. Each letter gave me such a thrill" (*My Story* 132). Her pen apotheosized her to the status of a paragon before her readers, who she says, "liked me and liked my honest approach" (*My Story* 218). Their encouragement in any form augmented her perseverance that made her withstand the whirlwind of controversies in the outer world, her wounded marital relationship at her home and her state of unrest and mental queasiness from her within. Her readers were so dearly that, she writes:

Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time I walked to my lovers' houses dressed like a bride, my readers have walked with me. I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of an all-seeing God they follow me through the years. (*My Story* 217-18)

Her autobiography has unlocked her inner self. It has divulged her feeling of hypochondria, discomposure, estrangement, isolation, social anomie, insularism and hyper annoyance as it is born from the womb of her trauma, depression, mental anguish, social exclusion, and rejection from family, friends and relatives. It has helped her to get rid of her thanatophobia.

At this moment, she notices many adorers around her and her longing for love finds fulfillment. She writes: "Although there were tears in my sarees I had people to crowd round me as listeners" (*My Story* 158). With the heartiest love of her readers and the amorous proposals from men belonging to different spheres, the artistic self of Kamala Das discovers its full bloom. What her poetic self through her creative writing achieved, her traditional domestic self could not accomplish that. At this point of time she fell in love with her life. Her suicidal tendency suddenly vanished. She writes in her autobiography that she wanted to live her life to the utmost – to live with a purpose, to live for her readers. Feroza Jussawalla writes in this context:

This is the freedom the writer's true self hungers after.... Finally...she finds the self she has been in search of, the self as writer. She has spent long years trying to locate her 'mind/Beneath skin....' But she has known her desire all along....It is at this point that the search of the poet for her true self culminates. Also the search of her 'feminine sensibility' or the personal self finds what she has been looking for—love and adoration: "I had realized by then that the writer has none to love her but the readers". ("Kamala Das: The Evolution of The Self" 59-60)

It was her writing that allowed her to cross the limit of femininity and to establish her autonomy and free-will as an independent human being.

Having written down her autobiography Kamala Das became a blot in the face of her Nair community. She writes: "I was an eye sore to my relatives who thought me to be a threat to their respectability" (*My Story* 210-11) and so "They took their grievances to my parents who were embarrassed but totally helpless, for it had become clear to them that I had become a truth addict and that I loved my writing more than I loved them or my sons" (*My Story* 211). There was none to support her. With courage she tolerated their bedevilment as she writes: "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). To live the life of a creative writer became more meaningful and significant to her than to live the life of a conservative Nair woman. At this juncture, her artistic self overrules and prevails over her domestic self.

Kamala Das is physically no more with her readers. Her body has perished. But she has immortalized her self through her writings. Her artistic self has gained the state of permanency in the heart of her readers. Her writing has smashed down all the conventional norms and social taboos to establish her own autonomy. Das has bravely wiped out the thorns that were laid in her way and has never dared to raise questions whenever she finds a flaw in the social setup. She has written in order to neutralize the pressures of her living. She has written in order to unburden their heart clogged with pains, resulting into repeated ailments and consecutive nervous breakdown. She has written in order to escape from the loads of worries of this mundane world that a woman is compelled to bear. Her too much frank confession has led the readers in Indian scenario to be flabbergasted as no other Indian woman writer previously had the courage to do so. Her confession straight-from-the-shoulder has taught the Indian society that a woman too has tales to tell; she can be bold and forthright in narration and society should change its outlook towards the stature of a woman. *My Story* has emerged as a priceless treatise for the posterity and has established the name of Kamala Das as the propounder and torchbearer of the anti-conventional women creative writing. Her dissension and discordance with the harsh realities of life and her decry of the forceful imposition on women in the name of tradition substantiate that she has objurgated the patriarchal norms through her writing. Her voice is the voice of her subjugated counterparts who are duped and dumped at the periphery of human conglomeration, silently suffering under the cruel and dominating fangs of patriarchy, fearful to open up their soul and are assaying to set forth their own identity. Kamala Das's *My Story* has always been an inspiration to them. The depiction of her pains through her life story has taught women to wage the war of life with their pen, to show the almightiness of their pen, because the process of writing can save women from self-subjugation and stabilize her identity. Kamala Das has shown that a pen can relieve the pain of a woman and is a formula of self-empowerment.

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