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WOMAN REDEFINED THROUGH GENDER, CULTURE AND CASTE : A STUDY OF
KAMALA DAS'S *MY STORY*

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ABSTRACT

The paper makes an analytical study of *My Story*, the famous fictional autobiography by Kamala Das. In *My Story*, Kamala Das tells her personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her life in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage and her struggle as a woman writer. The paper shows how the author describes the multiple types of oppression faced by women in the Kerala society, especially through the forces of a caste ridden patriarchal society. Besides, she also speaks about the internal dissention produced by members of her own gender on the other. By delineating her personal experiences, she speaks for her contemporary women companions and tries to inspire them for a protest against this marginalisation. Daring to speak the unspeakable, and doing the undoable, she makes her autobiography a strong medium of protest against patriarchy. Through the depiction of sex and illicit relationships, she disrupts the ethical project of good/evil binary propagated by the patriarchy.

Key Words: Patriarchy, matrilineal, sexuality, subjective power, ideal womanhood

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Most post-independence studies on Kerala – in the field of politics, sociology, education or health – have attributed much of Kerala's unique progress to the role of women in both public and private spheres of life. The comparative freedom enjoyed by the women of Kerala, the social permissions they were allowed, their educational background and their health and hygiene consciousness were perhaps some of the major reasons for Kerala's striking progress. What made this tiny state different from the rest of India, was perhaps the importance given to women in its matrilineal societies. In this regard the upper caste Nairs seem to have provided the role model for a vast number of people to emulate. "At a time when the vast majority of western women suffered oppression in silence and fear, the Kerala women lived in a matrilineal society" (Mittapalli 107). Being matrilocal (in which the husband lives with the wife's people), their family house granted them

security and comfort which their western counterparts lacked. The women and their children were assured safety and economic well-being even if their male partners defaulted.

Kamala Das was a member of one of the major matrilineal families in Kerala. Her autobiography provides a succinct account of the changes in social conditions that took place within the narrow purview of her own tharavadu, the Nalappattu House. Though a woman in a Nair *tharavadu* was projected as a much respected member of the society, she still lived within the matrix of patriarchy. In *My Story* Das explains the circumstances that led to the wedding of her 15-year old ancestress, Kunji. "An aristocrat was to be shown to her at Cochin who was to marry her if she liked his face and if her uncles approved of his deportment" (17). Subsequent circumstances led her elsewhere. Years later, when the question of Kamala's marriage was raised, she, a mere 15-year old, was not the one who made the choice, allowing herself to be persuaded by the social and financial requirements of her family. The woman's voice or choice was definitely secondary to that of her *karanavar*, her maternal uncle, the patriarch. Kamala Das's *Valiamma* is viewed as an unhappy person with great capacity for silence. Kamala reconstructs this person's life story from sketchy details gleaned from the reports of various relatives, who are quite reluctant to speak of the unfortunate circumstances:

I learned that Valiamma had been married to a handsome scholar who gave her a son and soon afterwards fell out of favour with her uncle, who threw him out one day asking him never to return. The Nairs, particularly the males, were coarse when their ire was aroused. The young Brahmin walked away not daring even to glance back once at his wife and son. The young woman was, within weeks, married off to her father's nephew who was not sensitive or gentle like the one who had gone away. For days she waited at the fence under the lime trees hoping to see her first husband pass that way but he did not.(31)

It offers a genuine insight into the helplessness of a woman in the matrilineal framework of the Nair *tharavadu*, where the authority of the patriarch or *karanavar* was final. He was a sort of dictator who was expected to look after the basic requirements of his siblings and their offspring. In return, the womenfolk pledged their allegiance to him, accepting his word as final; subverting all contrary pictures of him and idolizing his figure.

Das has attracted international attention by virtue of her bold, uninhibited articulation of feminine urges. Her autobiography can be seen as a document expressing the writer's own ambiguity as a woman asserting subjective power in a traditional patriarchal society. She expresses her protest against the hegemonic gender discrimination.

In *My Story* Kamala Das focuses on oppression of women in the third world countries and she puts her relations with men at the centre of her story. At the age of fifteen, Kamala Das shares the same destiny like most of the Indian women. She feels unhappy about her marriage, as she appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which were held firmly by her parents. She had no freedom in selecting an ideal lover for her. Others did all the planning for her marriage and she was not even consulted on the subject. What hurt her most was this indifference shown to her individuality by her relations. As a modern woman, she never liked the way in which they moved about and fixed an affair as important as her marriage without even trying to know her ideas and aspirations.

Das considered herself a helpless victim. She felt lost and unhappy:

My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the 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 middleclass housewife, and walk along the vegetable shop 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. (69)

Das's only expectation from her husband was conversation, companionship and warmth. But all she got in her marriage was brutality and rudeness. Kamala Das describes her first sexual intercourse with her husband as "an unsuccessful rape" (72). She suffered through her husband's selfishness and neglect of her emotional and physical needs.

Kamala Das's autobiography can be read as a critique of the victimization of women in a patriarchal society. Men always treat women only as an object or a play-thing but women being sentimental, love them with full devotion. For women, love is sacrifice and devotion but for men, love is only lust. Das realizes the powerlessness of the female body and she believes that for the victimized woman in a patriarchal society, sexuality not only makes her vulnerable physically but also makes her vulnerable emotionally and spiritually. Sometimes this leads women to the point of committing suicide.

In Chapter 25, faced with the failure of her marriage and the impossibility of leaving it, combined with her son's illness, and her husband's rejection of her in favour of a homosexual attachment, Kamala finds herself on the balcony attempting to commit suicide. "I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through" (83). However, she does not throw herself off the balcony. Instead, she says:

I lit the reading lamp in our sitting room and began to write about a new life, an unstained future.

Wipe out the paints, un mould the clay.

Let nothing remain of that yesterday... (83)

Das saves her life by telling her life. Das chooses writing against suicide, self inscription against self-destruction. When Das wishes to begin writing, her husband supports her decision to increase the family's income. Actually, writing by women was not acceptable for the society. Women were expected to confine themselves to the realm of the kitchen and a woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything else. Because of this, Das could not use the morning-till-night schedule. She had to wait until nightfall after her family had gone to sleep and would write until morning.

In the rest of the autobiography, we see her accounts of extramarital affairs, sexual flings, and desire for spiritual consolation. After her breakdown and her grandmother's death, Kamala Das becomes a different person. She is no longer a passive object of her husband's actions. She discovers her sexual self. Woman's desire becomes dominant. Although she becomes an active agent in searching for the desire, the sexuality that she explores outside marriage turns in a patriarchal society to the advantage of men. Her narratives about her extramarital affairs are also tales about male abuse. Thus, in the narrative of her most intense affair, she questions the sadomasochistic nature 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 love and I groped in my mind for the right answers. Love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults. I needed security, I needed permanence, I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear. Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change. (146)

Kamala Das is able to stand outside the matrix of the matriarchy of Nalapattu House. She is also able to question the patriarchal world in which she functions only as a commodity. When her husband complains that she has not read the prestigious report of Rural Credit Survey Committee, she answers, "But I let you make love to me every night... isn't that good enough?" (102).

Conceived on mythical models, the Hindu woman is often regarded as the preserver of family and the protector of culture. The patriarchal family consolidates the position of man but relegates woman to the

margins. In Indian society, attitude to women has been ambivalent; it varies between awe and contempt, respect and scorn. Women are treated as inferior to men and made to work in subservience to them. A woman is admired not for her wisdom but for her elegance. Acumen and intelligence seldom count as qualities of recognition for a woman. Patriarchal ideology curtails woman's autonomy and deforms her personality. According to Albert Gelpi and Barbara Charlesworth, the urge for self-knowledge in a woman is "more than a search for identity, it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (90). Man makes woman's life miserable, renders her powerless and helpless and forces her to seek his compassion and to accept subordination as her fate.

The menial domestic duties are nauseating and repulsive to Das. She always describes domestic routine with a tinge of irony or in plain understatement. Das states :

Then I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the buttons on
and darned our old garments all through the hot afternoons. In the
evening I brought for my husband his tea and a plate of snacks. I
kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit
protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape... (79)

The monotonous and demanding routine deprives woman of any self-worth. Robbed of dignity and individuality, woman sees herself as a slave doomed to obedience and conformity. Das expresses her will to leave the magic line of patriarchal control and create an autonomous and fulfilling existence for herself. She registers her resistance by writing about herself and challenging social definitions by openly retaliating against the hegemonic tools that have kept women oppressed. Through her autobiography, Das defies the conventional role of a Nair woman by writing about homosexuality, transgressions, and marital infidelity.

Throughout *My Story*, Das identifies and resists the so-called morality as an oppressive source of gendered ideology that functions through the exploitation of woman's body, sexuality and emotions. She argues that the repression of woman's intellectual and cultural productions in Kerala (frequently cited as a woman-centred culture) exposes the inherent hypocrisy of a phallogocentric society. According to Das, the voices of women are not only unheard but, at times condemned in the name of morality.

Patriarchal ideology prescribes roles for women which results in stifling of their individualities. Women seldom transcend the roles; they give up their personal aspirations for the sake of the family. They can create new roles for themselves if they resolve the inner conflict caused by guilt and anxiety of being inadequate mothers and negligent housewives. But this is seldom achieved, as contemporary culture makes of women consumers of patriarchal ideology. Kamala Das believes that a woman has to wage a double battle; she should resist the external coercion exerted by the patriarchal structures of society on the one hand and the internal dissention produced by members of her own gender on the other. Only her success in this battle can ensure her liberation from the torturous spell of patriarchal culture.

The society built on patriarchal values may find the unconventional ideas expressed by women foolish or mad. Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey remark: "Through Art the individual can express ideas the culture might designate mad and has freedom to speak the truth" (23). The society may disagree with women giving expression to their unconventional thoughts and emotions in art and literature. Kamala Das is conscious of the bane of the creatively inclined women whose search for equality always ends in frustration. Women with creative potential are compelled to lead an isolated and lonely existence. The narrator's husband could not tolerate her self-assertiveness. Once, he prevented her from taking part in a play rehearsal at the terrace of their flat, with the words: "You must remember you are a wife and a mother" (79). Das protested against the senseless restrictions which force a sensitive and intelligent woman to lead a lifeless kind of existence and tried to inspire her contemporary women to join this protest.

As Iqbal Kaur remarks,

Kamala Das did display tremendous courage in revolting against
the sexual colonialism and providing hope and confidence to
young women that they can refuse and reject the victim positions,

that they can frustrate the sexist culture's effort to exploit, passivize and marginalize women. (232)

Das is evidently a writer who champions resistance; her inquiries delve into the exploitive culture she interrogates in order to encourage the improved liberation of the *Malayali* women. In proceeding to confront this challenge, Das meets with the complexity of manoeuvring between conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, Das is persuaded by her desire to highlight the need for unity among women in order to fortify her own resistant voice. For example, in *My Story*, Das draws a detailed genealogy of the women in her family and identifies their shared aims and common goals. Das is also at pains to undermine the amalgamating nature of creating a feminine society by underlining the distinctiveness, fluidity and uniqueness among women.

Kamala Das expresses her protest against women's socialization into an unquestioning acceptance of their destiny in terms of inferiority, passivity, submissiveness and dependence. She protests against the rigid gender divisions that sexist culture wishes to establish – divisions according to which men are superior, God-like, while women are inferior, inert, afflicted with a natural defectiveness. There is colonization not only in terms of social existence but also in terms of sexual domination. Man seems to possess every right to satisfy himself while a woman is supposed to make mute and positive response only. The excessive domination makes the marital bond a mechanical relationship in which self-respect, freedom and independent judgement come to an end.

One of the ways in which Das disrupts the ethical project of good/evil binary propagated by the patriarchy in *My Story* is through the depiction of sex. Das's discussion of her infidelity in marriage and the calculated unreliability with which she writes about sex in her autobiography clearly places her outside the register of the accepted role of a Nair woman. Even Das's choices of chapter headings like "The Brutality of Sex", "A Greed for Love" etc. reflect her desire to be unconventional. Kamala Das shows her exceptional courage in challenging the long established social system. She displays tremendous courage in revolting against sexual colonialism. She has tried to provide courage as well as hope to women that, in spite of the patriarchal nature of culture, they can still transcend the existing reality and can refuse victimization at the hands of men. They must develop their inner strength and should realize their potential to come out of the margins dictated by the patriarchal society.

My Story is a revolutionary feminist work which subverted the idea of 'ideal womanhood'. The narrative is also perceived as a fictionalized confession of a woman. Das attacks patriarchal constructions that show the male as superior and the female as passive. The greatest contribution of Das to her own society is to encourage women to write for empowerment. Finally, it must be kept in mind that by writing, women will be able to express themselves freely and they will find a chance to speak the unspeakable. She manages to speak the unspeakable instead of them.

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