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CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY AND DESIRE FOR FREEDOM: A STUDY OF TREATMENT OF  
MARRIAGE AND SEX IN KAMALA DAS'S MY STORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the treatment of marriage and sex in KamlaDas's much controversial noted autobiography My Story. Kamala Das originally born as Madahvi Kutty was one of the most eminent Indian English Poet and woman writer to have set foot on the stage of Indian English writing. Hailing from Kerala, Kamala Das is just not a name held with reverence there, but a name which every woman writer of today is familiar with. Having written number of poems both in Malayalam and in English, Das is often considered one such woman writer whose expressions are lucid and writing is full of vigor. Owing to her free and open treatment of many an institutions of the typical Indian society like marriage and sex, she etched her space in her generation just like an iconoclast. Not abusive but honest and straight her opinions infused with power have paved their way in putting up an altogether different picture of the female sexuality and sensibility. Voicing her stand on constructed identity of the male counterpart (woman) and her desire for freedom from such construction, this paper focuses on her writing of her much controversial work My Story – an autobiography written in the most straightforward manner with all honesty and sincerity, exploring the female imagination and putting it on platter for a woman to realize her true identity and for the man to question his.

Keywords: Marriage, sex, identity, freedom, tradition, Indian English writing, womanhood, women writing.

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INTRODUCTION

*My Story* is an autobiographical account written by Kamala Das which was originally published in Malayalam under the title, *Ente Katha*. A book which is often marked as one of the most sensuous life stories ever written by any Indian writer. In a scenario which prevailed the times of Kamala Das, coming forth and writing such an outspoken autobiographical account was applaud able and daring act ever committed by any woman writer in India. Perhaps there have never been woman writers on the Indian writing scene who have come forward with startling revelations about their own marital and sexual life by being so honest and straightforward even on paper as Kamala Das. It is an autobiography that evoked harsh criticism from critics,

as much it drew admiration from its readers. *My story* is just not the story of Kamala Das, her desires, her longing for freedom from the clutches of strangulating Indian traditions but it is the account of every woman's heart who is victimized by the stereotypical and hypocritical norms that define and direct the psyche of its rulers. It is the story of every woman who is devoid of any self-identity and self-respect, for hers is a role often constructed by the society and its manifold codes. It is not just the voice of Kamala Das, but the suppressed voice of every that woman who is capable of voicing her stand but is schooled to not allow her natural instincts to flow from the very inception of her in this society where she is born – as a 'woman'.

#### **Treatment of Marriage and Sex in *My Story***

Marriage, sex, love, desire, trust, betrayal and a quest for some kind of platonic love has often been a recurrent theme in most of her works. In *My Story* too Kamala Das has come up as a confessional poet/writer displaying feminine ethos in its most realistic version. This autobiographical account of Das serves to break the hypocritical veneer of man -woman relationship, as husband-wife, as lovers in the stereotypical Indian Society. She had once confessed publically that she had a kind of hateful disgust for institutions like marriage and sex. Through her writing we see that in her life there was emptiness, a desire for fulfillment of not the carnal pleasures within marriage and sex, but a desire for the spiritual bonding of the souls.

*My story* is a journey of this woman and many such women who move from one man to another, from one mate to another, not in search of lust but a sexless love that can serve to fulfill one's all desires. Shelled in a marital life that did not give her satisfaction Kamala Das desired to free herself from marriage, from sex and from all. She wrote:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon  
You built around me with your morning tea,  
Love-words flung from doorways and of course  
Your tired lust. I shall someday take  
Wings fly around, as often petals,  
Do when free in air ....  
(I Shall Some Day, "The Old Playhouse")

*My story* mirrors her entire life throwing much light on the vain gloriousness of marital bliss or sexual healing. According to Das if at all the body has to indulge itself in anything of sexual bent, it should be used as a means to discover the transcendental unison that holds itself together even beyond that which is physical or of physical need. *My story* is replete with sexual encounters and physical intimacy of Das with her husband and her many love affairs. Through these failed encounters she analyses what a woman's life is like and puts forth a question wherein she asks, "Was every married adult a clown in bed, a circus performer"? Vehemently she goes on to add: "I hate marriage.....I hate to show myself naked to someone".

In the account of her marriage she refers to her husband as a man hungry for carnal pleasures who did not care about her emotional wants but was as hungry for her body every night as is a criminal who waits for the dark (night) so as to commit dark and dirty deeds of crime. And thus his lustful and horny needs and deeds made her a victim of his crime (sex) and she laid there like a young doomed girl, doomed to suffer all this from the very time when she had tied the nuptial knot with him.

She said about her husband that he was very well versed in the art of sex, for he was addicted to it in a brusque and brutal way which she says was evident in his mating techniques even when with her. All such personal and honest statements made by Das in *My Story* points to the agony of her disturbed and loveless soul. Das was lonely and felt deprived of love. She wrote in *An Introduction*:

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love  
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying  
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,  
I am saint. I am the beloved and  
Betrayed  
(An Introduction, "Summer in Calcutta")

According to her, 'Marriage' is a prison to a woman and 'Sex' is the crime that is committed in this prison day and night. Already the murder was done by the murderer, the victim victimized and tortured. What was then left of her when even her soul was ripped apart and was not at peace in that prison?

In a rebellious spirit she points to the society and questions the unconventional ways of this society which when pushing a woman in the sanctimonious dread pool of marriage and sex doesn't bother itself to ask her whether she is happy in marriage or not? Whether she is satisfied physically as well as emotionally or not? She vehemently opposes such society and such sanctity, that which is but so superfluous and dark beneath. In a society like this she felt love did not exist at all- not in marriage, not in sex and neither outside of it. She thus felt disillusioned with the very idea of love and said about it:

Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love  
which only sought for it a receptacle. (*My Story*)

Her marriage had been similar to the marriage of her parents where there was no bliss at all and she defines it out rightly as unfulfilling, dull and lifeless. Her loveless self we witness is not just confined to the realm of her private misery. On the contrary we see a woman so bold to have put her entire life on paper for the public sphere to witness.

Thus, in her treatment of marriage and sex in *My story* kamala das puts forth her state of bewildered separation (idea of a not confused state of mind and separation), a rejection of lust, an unending desire for escape from the prison of lustful life (marriage with no emotional attachment) where she constantly felt asphyxiated by a male (her husband) who acted like a rapist in disguise (in the act of sex) set out to prove his manhood to himself.

#### **Empowering and Liberating Womanhood**

When Indian English writing was born as a new genre of literature even if something was being written about woman it intentionally failed to position woman at the center of the texts of those times. Woman, womanhood was more a constructed entity. They were always non-existent and men ruled in position even in the narratives of the time. Kamala Das's confessional writing style is hailed as a quest for voicing the true definition of female sexuality and womanhood.

As a writer of the female sensibility her language is as fresh as a flower, her expression as lucid as a Prophet's utterance and her vocabulary as rich as the aura around a saint. The canon created by the phallogocentric and patriarchal society is deconstructed by Das through her writing against the grain. Her voicing for the escape that the fair sex desires opens up all the spaces for the rest of the woman writers. It is like not just freeing oneself from the bondage of physical strength but also letting one decide for oneself what one's body and mind wants – thus liberating self from the physical and mental rule of the not so better-half of the female (the man / husband).

As a woman writer and as a woman often writing about woman's plight and suffering kamala das in her writing endeavors serves to illustrate the unending struggle for power and autonomy for women in general and for women writers in particular.

When coming across her works one realizes that her works have a self-affirming way of life for the female protagonists. According to her depiction of women, women are intelligent, self-aware, and confident and have the ability to dictate and take the reins of their lives in their hands- be it on the personal front or on the professional.

As a great writer of the feminist sensibility Das wrote not just for voicing her own opinions, but for many such victims who have no other course or path to recover themselves, their bodies or their identities which are mostly constructed and desire endlessly for an escape. By writing about her escape, her bewildered separation from any man who ventured in her life (her husband/or her lovers) Kamala das have subverted the male ego and she calls out loud to the female ego to realize that, it is the willful desire of the female ego to welcome the male ego and savor its sexuality or reject it. Thus she wants the entire universe to realize that it should indulge its beings in a meeting and mating wherein one attains complete union, derided of any kind of despair, thus living and dying with happiness and peace.

## CONCLUSION

### Un-bewildered separation: Freedom from constructed identity

Besides having drawn considerable amount of admiration for *My Story* from the fair sex, Kamala Das drew much flak from the critics who felt that with her portrayal of a suffering and unfulfilling, lifeless marriage Kamala Das has put forth an obsessed woman longing for a platonic ideal love that is otherwise non-existent. But this cannot be solely deemed as true with respect to her writing because in her writing not just an obsessed woman comes into picture but any that woman who is deprived of love, an emotional attachment, dying every day by submitting to the rules of the traditional hypocritical society which such society has set for her to follow. Reeling under the burden of such stereotypical rules one cannot live and there cannot be any growth, be it of the individual or of the marital cord that unites a man and a woman.

By uncovering such an hideous intention of this brutal conventional society Das wishes to free every woman from any such brusque brutalities and pleads for a self-realization, an awareness of not being ruled under the dead weight of the constructed outmoded values of this society rather rise up in spirit and walk out like a rebel against any such dictum that is hazardous for the growth of an individual especially – ‘a woman’.

Muriel Rukeyser, a well-known American activist once remarked, “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open”. Contrarily we have witnessed in the works of Das that she did venture out in the territory of the prudish masters who framed the codes and conducts of the traditional society, who decided the definitions of what was legal and what was illicit and split open not just the pages of her life but the hollow and demonic side of a reality which lay hidden and covered, thus voicing a firm stand for the freedom of all women reeling under the burden of constructed and framed identities.

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