



Feminism and Indian Response to Kamala Das' *My Story*

Dr. Swati Vandana

L.N.M.U

Darbhanga, Bihar

swativandana1234@gmail.com

Abstract

Kamala Das has been known for her unfiltered and honest style of writing. Her writing has been ahead of her time and has amused the Indian society to a great extent. She expresses her feelings as a woman about the gender discrimination happening in the country. Her writing is based on her observations and experiences that she had growing up in a conservative Nair family, where there were a set of predefined rules for girls. The decision making power was with the males of the family and females were supposed to follow that. In her book *My Story* she talks about her entire life journey and did candid confessions about her life in the Indian society. Starting from her childhood till her last days of her life, she says it all. Her honest confessions have been the topic of discussion amongst the writers and critics. The response to her autobiography *My Story* has been mixed as some researchers have praised her for her honesty and some critics claimed that her writing is full of biases. In this paper we will discuss the essence of feminism as described in her book *My Story* and Indian response to it.

Keywords: Rebel, Feminism, Critics, Patriarchy

Kamala Das (1934-2009) was a bilingual writer whose works were published in both English and Malayalam. Born in an affluent and conservative family, Kamala Das had access to everything in her life, but was still alone looking for companionship. Her parents considered her as a burden and wanted to get her married as soon as possible. She was married at a very young age of 15 expecting the love that she never got in her life. But her search for love and companionship did not stop even after her marriage. She could not find solace with her husband who did not bother to care about her and was only interested in physical intimacy. Her entire life and her struggles had put bitterness in her feelings about Indian society and its discrimination against women. All her feelings have been portrayed in her work *My Story*. She had always opened her heart in her writings and did not care about the critics and responses. Her life struggles had made her a rebel who was ready to face the wrath of anyone in this world. Her works have been critically analysed time to time and have got a mixed response. To explain her writing style, Keki Daruwalla in his essay says that:

“...the addenda to this essay throw a good deal of light on the alleged confessionalism in Das's poetry. “The ‘I’ of the dramatic monologue denotes only the protagonist ... The ‘I’ of the confessional poem stands, quite literally, for the person who wrote it...” The poet speaks to the reader something about his life without the mediating presence of imagined event: something analogous to washing dirty linen in public. This raises the larger question as to the appropriateness of unwisely applying the term confessionalism.” [1]

Researchers have studied her work with admiration and have acknowledged the disparity for women. She has clearly explained the societal norms in her book and talked about her struggles due to those norms. Shahnaz Habib after reading her book says that:

“This early lesson in dislocation may have inspired many of her literary themes — the vulnerable child-woman trying to create meaning in an inconstant world; nostalgia for a serene, rural past; the unfair privileges of caste and wealth; and the contradictions of motherhood.” [1]

Her book depicts the woes of a woman bounded by the rules of the society and the obligations that they put only on a woman. The duties a woman is expected to fulfil as a daughter, a wife and a mother does not allow women to think about themselves. Her life journey has been full of disappointments searching for love and companionship she never got in her life. Her expectations from her parents and her husband and her feelings on their aloof behaviour have been captured in her writings. In her autobiography *My Story* she says that:

““In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence. All her quests for true love end in disasters of sexual intercourse which brings only sorrow and fatigue. Ask me, everybody ask me What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion, A libertine, ask me the flavour of his Mouth ask me why his land sways like a hooded snake Before it, claps my pubis. Ask me why like a great tree, felled, he slumps against my breast, and sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is Shorten, still, ask me what bliss is and what its price.....” [2]

Her book is aimed to make other women aware about her feelings. She wanted women to become free and start thinking about them without any guilt. 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. Researchers have also criticised her confessions in her book *My Story* and claimed that her work is a mere frustration about her life and that does not have to do anything with art and writing. In his research, Sarat Kumar Doley said that:

“...although mainstream literary and literary feminist criticism in India (as well as in postcolonial feminist criticism produced from outside India) offers considerable discussion of sexuality in Das's works; such discussion continues to be almost exclusively on heterosexual relationship in these texts. In particular, the material in *My Story* that concerns same sex desire or is otherwise too disruptive or contradictory to be of use to literary feminism is simply dismissed in the criticism as manifestation of Das's stylistic or personal eccentricities that border on artistic weakness.” [3]

It has been critically acclaimed that her work should be seen as a fiction rather than as an eye opener. Critics also claim that her work has nothing to do with feminism and her confessions cannot be generalised on the larger section of society. The researchers and scholars have analysed her confessions in *My Story* and said that:

“...to view Kamala Das as a feminist would be an attempt insufficient to limit her literary ideology within the canvas of feminism, her works never present a woman who weaves a cocoon of self centeredness, her ecstatic literary flights were never on the wings of feminism” [5]

The comments and response from the researchers worldwide has condemned her for sharing her personal life with the public. It is said that washing your personal grudges and wound with the society through writings cannot be appreciated. It can mislead the society and can cause destruction as well. On the contrary, some researchers have said that her honest confessions in her writing style gives authenticity to her work and inspire people of all generations. After analysing her autobiography, Arya P.A. says that:

“This mode of expression suits her as she ventilates her personal experiences and humiliations and also the intensity of her experience. In conformity with the confessional tradition, she talks in poetic terms about her unpleasant sexual experiences. Inevitably her poems become autobiographical and this lends a kind of authenticity to her poems. As she writer in her autobiography that a poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality.” [5]

Her works are full of expressions and feelings and put a question mark on the development of society as a whole. She questions the modern era where women are still seen as a showpiece and an object of possession. Her work has inspired writers all over the world and has made them to research and read more of her works. In an article featuring her life contributions, it was said that:

“...what emerged, in her poetry, was an uncompromisingly honest voice that mapped the ground for a generation of women writers, writing of subjects that were considered taboo for women. “[6]

Her honesty was the key feature in all her writings and enlightened the women of all age and castes about the phases and challenges in a woman’s life. She realised a little late In her life that no matter how much she adjusted herself to become a good fit in the society, the expectations would never come to a halt. She talks about rising of a woman as a free bird. In her research on Kamala Das, Purnima Bali says that:

“To define and salvage herself, to find out who she is and what she has lost to break the fetters of servility, it becomes imperative that she opens up, she ventilates to unleash her innermost pangs of guilt, misery, fears, doubts and anxieties to reinstate her experience as woman, so that she can acquire autonomy over her being and discover her true self. This realization triggers off a journey into the recesses of her being and like a phoenix she strives to rise to be reborn. It is this struggle of self-realization that becomes the text of most women writers. 7]

This clearly explains her desire to fly high like a bird that has no bounding and obligations. She expresses that a woman has to become fearless and guilt free to enjoy her life without any apprehensions. The behaviour of her husband and her married life has been talked about in her book and she has said it all without any filters. Her domestic violence experience, her husband’s carnal desires, her disappointment

about not getting love from him and her inclination towards homosexuality, everything has been explained in her book *My Story*. Santanu Saha in his research said that:

“...Her husband, instead of providing a romantic ambience, engages himself in the continuous distancing by maintaining a cold relationship towards her. He considered her just as an object of carnal gratification. This attitude completely frustrated her. However, it will be my endeavour to show that it was the act of writing poems which helped her to get out of that claustrophobic situation.” [9]

Her revelation in the book states that, a man’s major desire is to fulfil his physical needs instead of thinking about mental bonding with his partner. She questions that how can anyone think of physical intimacy when mentally they are not connected with their partner. She explains that the feeling would never come without the mental connection and bonding. She revealed that men and women might be made differently by God and hence the major difference in their thought processes. She said that encouraged her to explore sexuality even more. She did not feel guilty in not been loyal to her husband and experiencing homosexuality. No matter how much Kamala Das was appreciated by people who acknowledge the differences for women in the society, there are a section of people who dismisses her claims in her book. They said that all that is just a bias and should not be taken into consideration in general. In his research on Kamala Das’ biography *My Story*, Oliver Ross states that:

“Her detractors claim that this was yet another example of her ideological inconsistency. Her admirers, rather than seeing such changeability as resistance to one-sided political interpretations, frequently overlook these “aberrations” in order to co-opt her in the name of ideologies like feminism and anti-casteism.” [9]

She has been claimed as an aberration by the researchers who feel that her work does not carry a neutral point in her writing style and said that this is not a responsible way of writing. Such biased writings can cause destruction to the young minds and can cause a brainwash for the young generation. Critics also say that being a well known writer Kamala Das should express herself more responsibly and neutrally to avoid any hatred or destruction in the society. It is said that a writer is the mirror of the society and that comes with a responsibility which should not be forgotten.

References

1. “The feminine sensibility of Kamala Das”, *The Hindu*, August 2011, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/the-feminine-sensibility-of-kamala-das/article2387481.ece>
2. “Remembering Kamala Das, feminist Indian writer who chose a ‘stern husband’ in Islam”, *The print*, March 2019, <https://theprint.in/theprint-profile/remembering-kamala-das-feminist-indian-writer-who-chose-a-stern-husband-in-islam/214761/>
3. “The real feminists in Indian English writing: Kamala Das and Imtiyaz Dharkar”, *International Journal of English and Literature*, December 2013, http://www.academicjournals.org/app/webroot/article/article1383723499_Tiwari.pdf



4. "FEMINIST CONCERNS IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS", INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, December 2016, <http://www.ijelr.in/3.4.16/153-160%20%20SARAT%20KUMAR%20DOLEY.pdf>
5. "Re-Reading Kamala Das: An Indian Ecofeminist Perspective", Inlibnet, Chapter 3, https://sg.inlibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/184542/1/10_chapter3.pdf
6. "Body and Beyond: A Feminist Reading of Kamala Das' Love Poems" The Criterion An International Journal in English, April 2014, <http://www.the-criterion.com/V5/n2/Arya.pdf>
7. "Kamala Das : Pioneering Feminist Voice in Indian Literature", Europe Solidaire, 2009, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article14376>
8. "Poetry of Protest and Confession: A Study of Kamala Das", Research gate, February 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316430827_Poetry_of_Protest_and_Confession_A_Study_of_Kamala_Das
9. "Unburdening the self: a therapeutic study of Kamala Das's Composition", Journal of poetry therapy, September 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08893675.2016.1176161?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=tjpt20>
10. "Am I Lesbian?" The Contexts of Female-Female Desire in the Work of Kamala Das", Link Springer, 2015, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-137-56692-8_3