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KAMALA DAS’S
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A Bold Assertion of the Self.

“Dress in saris, be girl. Be wife, they said. Be Embroiderer,

Be cook, be a marveller with servants. Fit in, Belong, cried the
categorizers.”¹

Above quoted lines express Kamala Das’s defence against pre
established canons of feminine identity. Formerly women, generally
princesses, political leaders and social workers had been writing their life
narratives but they were not provocative. Such life narratives delineated
of their social-relations, religion, family or at most politics. Several
women writes revolted against the pre-established patterns. But above all
a woman’s autobiography remained a definition of her subjectivity as
against the backdrop of something more powerful. With Kamala Das, we
come across a new kind of woman’s writings which is bold, daring,
tantalising and self assertive. Here is a woman conscious of her
femininity but determined to vindicate it against male supremacy. For
Kamala Das it was important to be a woman and a lover with a body and
a soul. The autobiography becomes a vehicle for voicing an inner
privacy.

Kamala Das’s autobiography My Story reveals that a woman is
naturally creative and if given a room of her own, she can defend her
selfhood and narrate the story of her life boldly. There is nothing
unnatural in woman’s literary creativity, though it can not be a rival to her
biological creativity. The radical feminists are right when they consider
woman’s creativity to be a superior endowment:
“...the literary professions were first to be opened to women, the status of the women writer has long served as an index of a society’s views on female abilities and rights. Although writing has never been regarded as an unfeminine accomplishment. Women writers have always encountered more critical resistance than men.”\(^2\)

Kamala Das too had to confront the critics of her time and negative gazes of so called civilized society. Nevertheless she kept writing candidly about her physical hungers and inner most feelings.

Kamala Das Surraiya was born on March 31\(^{st}\), 1934, in Malabar, Kerala. She has been considered as one of the outstanding Indian poets writing in English. She also wrote poems in Malayalam, her native language. Much of her writing in Malayalam came under pen name Mahdhavikutty. She is the daughter of V.M.Nair, a former managing editor of the widely circulated Malayalam daily ‘Matrubhumi’ and Nalapat Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess. Nalpat Narayan Menon, who was a prominent writer, was her great uncle. Her love of poetry began at an early age through his influence. She was also much influenced by her mother’s poetic fervour and the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nairs. She was privately educated until the age of 15. At the same age she was married to K. Madhava Das. At the age of 16, her first son was born. But she was not mature enough to handle the situation. Her husband often played a fatherly role for both Das and her sons. Having completed her domestic chores, Das used to write at night on her kitchen table. She is probably the first Hindu woman to talk about sexual desires openly and honestly. She has been considered as an iconoclast of her generation. Her conversion to Islam in 1999, led her into the whirlpool of controversy. Recently on April 18, she was hospitalized in Pune and died on June 31, 2009, after a prolonged illness.
In 1976, at the age of 42, Kamala Das published her autobiography, baring the secrets of her heart. It created a lot of interest and controversies among people though not for any literary value. She later confessed that it was after all a work of fiction and not to be taken literally. Acclaimed as one of the 10 best books of 1976, My Story had cascading effects on her life. Conservative society of Kerala was stunned into disbelief when My Story was published. The book was hailed as a “refreshingly candid, poignant and delightfully provocative”, account of her life, as well as the lives of countless tormented and tortured women.

Kamala Das declared in the preface to the book My Story is my autobiography”. She began writing it during her first serious bout with heart disease. She observes: “the doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of sudden death and besides there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of”.³

After the publication of My Story when she went to her home for a short vacation; she was not welcomed with warmth. My Story as well as several others of her past sins began to haunt Kamala Das. She had to confess that My Story was not a truthful account but a mix and match effort.

The critic Meena Sodhi opines that the autobiographical form of writing helps to bring into focus “the search for self delineation” through the “lifelines”. The journey into the past can be proved cathartic and is a ‘catalyst for healing. My Story is one such autobiographical journey which helped Das in coming to terms with her self and proved extremely cathartic:

“I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My Story has given me. I have nothing more to say”⁴
Kamala Das started writing her life story to distract her mind and to recover herself from illness. Nevertheless she did not give a second thought to her private life and “found the courage to move forward into as yet unannounced and unexplored ways of living”. Kamala Das found a voice of her own but only when she realized that she was face to face with death:

“I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed out conscience.”

Autobiography is a never-ending dialogue with the self. It is a depiction of the self by the writer himself. Das’s dialogue with the self reveals her urges, yearnings and her inner longings. She knows that:

“One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end.”

Kamala Das has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner. Nevertheless we are not assured whether this candid nature aims to give fictional account or the factual. Generally for an autobiographer, the factual truth is subordinated to the truth about himself. *My Story* is a life narrative of Das’s inner journey. It is a search for an identity. It is a search for the split self craving for true love. We find introspection and self-analysis in her life story. While searching the true self, she is aware of her being as a woman and expresses the limitations of her gender in the poem 'The conflagration’ in a very acidic tone. She observes: “Woman is this happiness, this lying buried beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive. The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame.”

Thus, Kamala Das, while talking about herself relates herself to women in general. Definitely her autobiographical account is narrated objectively but her self-portrayal is at the centre. Hence, one can say
that there is marvellous self analysis, introspection and to some extent self centeredness in her autobiography.

Memory is the base on which an auto biographer builds up the story of his/her past and connects it with the present. An auto biographer must have powerful memory to recollect his/her story. Digging up her memory lane, Kamala Das begins her story with the depiction of her childhood and adolescent period.

Das confesses that she had a very nice humpty dumpty childhood at Nalapat house. For a few years she studied at a European school in Calcutta. While giving contemporaneous account, Das observes that in those days it was quite normal for a British family to have friendly relations with Indian families. Her father worked at a private firm selling cars. He also had British friends who often visited their house. They had intimate British friends. Nevertheless, at school they were treated quite indifferently by the British and the Anglo – Indian classmates. She has depicted a heart wrenching account of the brown children discriminated in a European school. She narrates that her brother was the cleverest in his class, yet he had been treated very rudely by the British counterparts. Once, a fellow student named William refrained: “Blackie, your blood is red.” Kamala scratched his face in a mad rage but another Anglo Indian supported the white man. Thus, Kamala and her brother always confronted the tortures of the British fellow students.

Recollecting her school days, Das narrates that the Britons were treated with a sense of partiality while the Indians always had a secondary lot. Once, a girl called Shirley Temple was asked to read a poem composed by Kamala Das in an assembly. When the visitor asked who wrote it, the principal said that it was written by Shirley. The Governor’s wife offered her a special kiss considering her beauty with brains.
Das also observes that when the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away. Thus, as an Indian Kamala Das had to face colour bar meted out by the British teachers and students.

As tender kids Kamala and her younger brother always bore the burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features. Not only in her school but also at home Kamala and her brother felt that the colour of their skin might have disappointed their parents. She narrates that her parents never told them that they were disappointed by the colour of their skin but it was evident in their every move and gesture. She recollects how her father roared to make them drink the monthly purgative and told her grandma to apply turmeric and oil on Kamala’s skin.

It is crystal clear that the parental behaviour always affects the kids. Das remarkably notes that her parents were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. Her mother did not love her father. Like a typical Indian wife, her mother’s timidity had created an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied their social circle.

Das’s father was not proud of his kids but only pitied them. He constantly tried to improve their behavioural pattern to fit them in the then developing Indo-British cultural scenario.

Child psychology is much influenced by parental bondage. It appears that Das’s parents did not encourage her poetic sensibilities. In her tender childhood, Das was not only aware of the colour discrimination meted out by the Britons but also about the fact that the Britons encouraged Arts and Literature unlike their Indian counterparts. She remarkably declares: “I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses…..”

Thus, Kamala felt alienated. At school she was a brown child humiliated by the European teachers.
At home she was a naïve girl whose behavioural pattern needed to be mended. Her teachers considered her a peculiarly lonesome kid. Once, when she went to a picnic with her classmates, she felt so lonely that she shared her feelings with the objects of nature: “I went away to the farthest fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely. Oh! I was so lonely that day. No one seemed to want my company, not even my brother who was playing a kind of football with his classmates.” further, when her teacher called her she felt:

“……And the white sun filled my eyes with its own loneliness. The Smell of Henna flowers overwhelmed me. Sobbing, I rose and walked toward my teacher……”

Thus, right from her childhood Das shared her feelings with Nature.

Kamala Das notes that her parents were not aware of the independently developing personalities of their kids. Recollecting her mother’s leisurely hours Das declares that her mother Spent her time lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. As readers we feel that Das had inherited the art. At the tender age of six Kamala Das used to write poems on her dolls. Each of her poems on her dolls made her cry. Nevertheless her parents were least concerned with what she felt. She observes that her parents “took us for granted and considered us mere puppets moving out limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently.” Das’s life–story is centred around her inner self – many a times we doubt the authenticity of her account. Nevertheless she sounds very convincing
when she narrates the experiences of the inner self of a Woman in a typically Conservative Social Scenario. She has remarkably displayed self-Centeredness in her life-story. She has depicted incidents, events and character sketches of other people but her inner self is at the Centre.

How the inner being of a woman grow from a child to the youth and then to the middle age has been remarkably portrayed.

Another remarkable feature of autobiography is the Conflict.

Here is a woman who is at war with the Society and it’s so called standards. She has drawn out rules of her own but she is hesitant to completely throw away the age old standards. Hence, we find internal as well as external conflict in Das’s life-story. Like all literary genres autobiography is also a product of the Conflict. The autobiographical work develops as the author develops. According to A.O.J. Cockshut, a true autobiographer has to answer a question related to the development of his self: “How did I become what I am?” 14

Kamala Das has successfully revealed her true self by replying this question put forth by Cockshut. Talking about her lover, Carlo Das Says: “Society can well ask me how I could become what I became although born to parents as high principled as mine were. Ask the books that I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who Communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. The books like the mother Cow licked the Calf of my thought into Shape…..”15

There must be a certain kind of magnitude in the autobiography. The writer has to maintain interrelation between his past and present and offer a creative and Consistent draft of his life. In autobiography, the author himself is the thesis of his book but he writes as if he were another person. The journeying into the past is very tiresome process where the author has to be very careful in articulating those Special incidents of his life which shaped his personality. Many a times the writer has to
withdraw himself from the society, temporarily to reconstruct his/her past. While recollecting the past the writer discovers the past “I” to be different from the present ‘I’. Das’s autobiography is a marvellous example of the life-story where the past events have played a vital role in making her what she presently is. Here we constantly feel that though she is the thesis of her book, she views herself as a different persona.

Magnitude of the autobiography depends upon the writer’s skill to arrange the past, and present of his/her life in an organic whole. My Story has no dates. The great critic Shirley Neuman opines that a woman’s autobiography ‘has “discontinuity and fragmentation… as opposed to chronological, linear and coherent narrations by men”’. 16 (103, as quoted by Sodhi). The narration of My Story moves back and forth in time. In one episode we find the vannery children’s Dramatic society at Nalapat and in the other Das takes us inside a boarding school where her father admitted her to be a disciplined child. Later in Calcutta, her father employed an art-tutor for her, who was a young Bengali and she often admired his pink ear lobes. This was her first encounter with a man who could attract her.

Kamala Das’s life story is set in the once matrilineal framework of the Nair Tharavad. Colonization and the imposition of western notions of morality upon the native systems influenced her peculiar individual position. From the secure and serene warmth of the Nalukettu, both Kamala and her mother were taken away into the rashness of a city culture. They were not accustomed to their new social set up. From a matrilineal and matrilocal framework that offered complete security to the woman and their kids were thrust into a westernized patriarchal society. Women who were habituated to gentle maternal care and consideration certainly are at a loss in a male centered society. Men folk
of Nayar Tharvad turned out to be efficient to cope up with the emotional as well as economic requirements of their counterparts.

Subaltern structures, supportive of the women’s role in society were broken by patriarchal values. The woman who had once controlled the whole family was reduced to a degraded point. Talking about her mother’s timidity which created an illusion of ‘domestic harmony’ Das narrates:

“She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security.

She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin.”

Such patriarchal rule would have been impossible in the unbroken Nair Tharavad where the woman was economically independent and had a voice of her own. When that matriarchal structure was broken down the norms of a colonial culture overpowered and reduced the power of woman in native structure compared to her female counterparts in the west.

Das’s mother very naturally taught her to accept her puberty. Das too prayed to God to bless her with a son in future just like Kunthi and other mythological figures. Her mother taught her to accept her menstrual cycle as an inevitable phenomenon for procreation. Further more Das also encountered lesbian advances made to her by a college going brutal girl. Afterwards she went to Malabar and met her would be husband. He was a regular contributor to the magazine jointly edited by her bother and herself. At the age of fifteen she married him, who was quite elderly. He was working in the Reserve Bank of India at Bombay. In his pre-engagement visits he used to quote from Huxley and Bertrand Russell.
Das, ‘tongue in cheek’ remarks that when she was a child he used to swing her round and round like a swing. He was thin walking with a stoop and had bad teeth. Nevertheless he looked intellectual. Thus, we find a gap of one whole generation between the couple. Das’s account clearly expresses that her husband was all for lust. He expected Kamala to satisfy his physical needs and to be cowed by him.

According to O.J. Thomas:

“Kamala Das’s story is the story of a woman who was denied love, when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life-name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is in this background that she writes about love in all her writings.”

Das firmly believed that Love is the essence of life for a woman. She longs to receive and to give love. Her romantic ideas about love and home have been shattered by an insensitive husband. Her husband hurt her and evoked a sense of disappointment in her. The very first attempt that he made to express his love and affection towards her produced a negative effect. This point has been clearly depicted in her life-story:

“Before I left for Calcutta, my relative (her future husband) pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was a good bye”.

This ‘good-bye’ suggests life-long lack of communication among the couple. An utter sense of loneliness has been depicted by Das in her conjugal life. Basically, her husband was not a bad man but she could never like him whole-heartedly. One of the reasons behind this aversion was that he was a close relative and they grew up together. Das admired
him almost as a friend and as a brother. Their sudden change of roles turned out to be earth-shattering for Kamala.

Das has also given graphic accounts of her relations with her husband before their marriage. We can better understand the embarrassment with her and showed interest in her as a woman. It is clear that she admired him but we do not find glimpses of her love and affection for her hubby as a man or as a lover. In ‘My-story’ she has expressed her romantic ideas of an ideal lover. She writes:

“\[I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life.\]” 20

Das is unhappy about her marriage. She appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held firmly by her parent she wasn’t given a free choice to select an ideal lover. Her preference was not considered by her parents. She expresses:

“I was burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed”. 21

What hurt her most was this indifference to her individuality, she did not like the way in which her marriage was fixed.

The account of Das’s physical relationship with her husband and his obsession with her body shocked many conservative readers. Right from her childhood a woman is taught to be docile and reserved about her instincts. Kamala Das also observes that woman of good Nair families never mentioned sex. Nevertheless Das is very candid in expressing her relationship with her hubby. She observes:
“The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual progress. Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a eunuch, I said…. Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window and the singers sang of Damyanti’s plight in the jungle”.

Das has been termed as an exhibitionist by critics because of her frank and confessional tone. In her teens she had viewed marriage through the glasses of romance she opines:

“I thought then that love was flowers in the hair, it was the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear… At the end of the month, experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness I grew old suddenly, my face changed from a child’s to a woman’s and my limbs were sore and fatigue”.

Suddenly, Das fell down to the earthly realities from her dreamy sky. Suddenly she had to answer the realistic question. Her husband’s matter of fact behaviour left her gasping for love. She considered herself a helpless victim of a young man’s carnal hunger:

“I was a victim of a young man’s carnal hunger and perhaps out of our union there would be born a few children”.

Further, Kamala Das notes that she was a plaything for her husband. At the time of her marriage she was so much deeply in love with him that she was ready to undergo any tortures made by him. However her body was not ready for love-making. On the other hand, her husband had rowdy ways of sex which he had practised with the maids working at his home.

Further, more whenever her husband came to Nalapat house he was offered bathing water in the dark bathrooms by the working maids. Kamala Das also relates to the fact that her husband had a spicy
homosexual affair with one of his friends from Y.M.C.A. Thus, the age-
difference between the couple played a major role in turning them into an
incompatible pair. After the birth of her first son Das’s life took a new
turn completely. She had found a toy to play with. Her world became full
of colours. She disliked the idea of leaving her hubby to have her first
child at her grandma’s place. Nevertheless, the husband had grown weary
of her temperament and decided to send her to Nalapat. She observes:

“Tearing myself away from the man who did not ever learn to love
me, I went back to Malabar with an uncle who had been sent to take me
home”.25

Her husband was not excited at all after becoming a father. He was
annoyed by the child’s cries at night.

Cynthia Huff in her essay ‘Delivery: The cultural representation of
childbirth’ observes that a woman’s life.

“delineates a significant life event rather than the form of a life
lived, describes an experience which only women can have, and
furthermore, characterizes a cultural phenomenon, which metaphorically
embodies physical as well as textual creation”.26

Cynthia Huff opines that it is necessary to examine the personal
accounts of childbirth. Such personal expressions of women’s
autobiographies depict a woman’s ecstasy of being a vital entity capable
of creating a new world. Bearing a child is a feeling the excitement of
which can be felt by woman alone. For the first time in the history of
Indian autobiographies by woman Das’s My Story signifies “the delivery
of her experience of parturition textually.” Kamala Das her self calls her
experience of child bearing ‘One of life’s major milestones’. Her first
experience of carrying a baby in her womb was who she felt a
‘quickening’ in her womb and knew that her child “had become a live
being”.27
For her the process of labour was just a celebration. She rejoiced the feeling of pain. She observes:

“When the labour began, I put old record on the gramophone and chatted courageously with my cousins who had come to watch me have the baby. All of them sat outside my door, leaning against the verandah wall. The most excited of all was my younger brother who kept asking me every minute or so if the baby was coming out. I was not prepared for the great pain that finally brought the baby sliding along my left thigh and I could not smother my scream.” 28

In India child-birth is not a private event. It is more of familial, social and cultural event. In Das’s family deliveries usually took place inside the home, where the whole family would excitedly await the cry of the new born. Kamala Das has composed textual accounts of her three deliveries in the most effective terms. She had a great craving for alcoholic beverages in subsequent two pregnancies. Her creativity reached its zenith and she sat up throughout night writing poetry. Delivery at home was risky and only lucky women escaped death in the process. They often became victims of puerperal fever and other diseases. Das contracted with such diseases but was lucky to have been nursed by her grandmother and mother-in-law at Nalapat.

It is clear that apart from one or two infatuations in her youth like her attraction for the art tutor and an eighteen year son of her family friend; the only person much closer to her was her Italian lover Carlo. She has also mentioned one grey eyed fellow whom she adored. Her love for Carlo is a bond as pure as that of Radha for Krishna. The critic Devendra Kohli observes: “When Kamala Das speaks of love outside marriage, she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely, searching for a relationship which gives both love and security.”29
She was yearning for love. When her hubby was unable to give her the love she was searching, she decided to seek it ‘Outside its legal orbit’. She made up her mind “to be unfaithful to him (her husband) at least physically.” Das wishes to assert her individuality. If her husband could satisfy his sexual urges elsewhere, then why cannot she? Nevertheless, she is conventional and God-fearing as readers feel that she has deliberately brought in the religious aspect. In one of her poems ‘Radha’ she becomes Radha worshipping her ideal lover,

“O Krishna, I am melting
Melting, Melting
Nothing remains but you...........”

In one of her interviews Kamala Das declared that her love-poems are based on love of Krishna and Radha they are not at all obscene. The lover that she sought after was Lord Krishna. The God of Love for whom Mirabai left her husband and family.

We feel that motherhood brought in a great change in Das’s attitude to life. She shed all her ‘Carnal desire’ and became religious. After the birth of her third child she decided to settle in Malabar, where her relatives did not welcome her with warmth. They thought that her twenty four years marriage was on rocks. It is surprising to know that though her marriage life was ‘flopped’ she did not divorce her husband. She is well aware that she went a strayed from her path. In one of her poems “An Introduction” she observes:

“I am the sinner
I am the saint. I am the beloved and the Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no aches which are not yours I too call myself I”.

In India divorce is not a common feature. A lot of stigma is attached to a divorced woman. Das too is very much bothered about public opinion she sticks to her marriage while suffering within. She was
not educated enough to get a good job and live independently. Furthermore, as a mother of three kids she had to give a second thought to the matter of divorce. The reasons she gives for not getting a divorce are noteworthy. She observes:

“My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society’s reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. If I had at that time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to marry me, for I was not conspicuously pretty and besides there was the two-year-old who would have been to the new husband an encumbrance”.

Having settled in Malabar, where her relatives were not happy to see her Kamala Das cultivated her lands with the field hands and became the mistress of Nalapat House. She wrote very well. However, another illness and that too a heart attack, took her once again to Bombay. Her life had come full circle:

“Illness and my writing helped me to turn into an island. People had to go out of their way to visit me…. I wanted only love and kindness.”

Her pen brought her name and fame. She was also invited by different institutes to deliver lectures on her poetry. Her hungers were “Contented” and her desires were purged. At such a ‘U’ turn of her life. She questioned the validity of her life.

“What did I finally gain from life? Only the vague hope that there were a few readers who loved reading my books although they have not wished to inform me of it. It is for each of them that I continue to write, although the abusive letters keep pouring in. I tweak the noses of the
puritans but I am that corny creature, the sad clown, who knows that the performance is over……”

She is well aware that Death is not the end of the world. Life continues to flow even after our death she has great expectations from the posterity. She feels that her sons shall produce “Brilliant children”:

“My descendants shall populate this earth. It is enough for me. It is more than enough……”

Thus, Das’s life-story concluded with the hopeful note. Nevertheless we can’t say that it is the ultimate conclusion. An autobiography, like other forms of literatures does not have conclusion. It is never complete. We get more information about Das while going through her interview with eminent scholars, published after the publication of ‘My Story’.

So far as truth in the autobiography of Das is concerned one can say that is more of an imaginative rather than factual. My Story has received mixed reactions from the readers and the critics. There are two factors brought up to demean any woman autobiographist:

(1) Autobiography as mere personal hysteria supported by Freud
(2) Autobiography as a fictional construct.

As an autobiographer Kamala Das caters to both these factors and becomes the victim of criticism. She projects herself as the passive female, incapable of action and relapses into hysteria when the surroundings become intolerable for her. She compares herself with house with its lights put out. The same lecherous husband gave her complete liberty to go to any extent in one of her poems entitled ‘compositions’ she remarks:

“When I got married
My husband said,
You may have freedom
As much as you want.
My soul balked at this diet of ash.
Freedom became my dancing shoe,
How well I dance,
And danced without rest,
Until the shoes turned grimy
On my feet and I began to have doubts.”37

The husband who was so liberal and caring can ever be so indifferent towards her kids to shut them in another room to have a peaceful sleep?

In one of her interviews Das has confessed that without the care, support and cooperation of her hubby she would have been a zero. Most of the times Das’s own extra marital affairs appear quite fictitious. They have been narrated in a very hasty manner. Whether it is an infatuation towards an eighteen-year boy or love for Carlo, readers are quite convinced that the auto biographer’s account is quite fanciful. In My Story at one point she says that she returned from her home to Bombay in an aero plane and a few pages later she writes that her financial condition was so weak that she had very few blouses and sarees “two oranges and a green one”.

Dr. Joya Chakravarty observes that My Story is a manifestation of Das’s poems. It is difficult to judge whether Das has derived her life-story from her poems or vice-versa. Das’s poetry is spontaneous, straightforward and simple. Nevertheless it has an alert and inquisitive approach to life. She draws inspiration from the simple, the sad and the gorgeous in the old Nalapat house, the silence around the hanging corpse of a maid servant, the frenzied dance of the eunuchs in the burning Calcutta afternoon, the smell of death in the hospital wards, the Anamalai hills, a brown comrade in a Sri Lankan street, a vigorous but loveless
lover, all inspired her to write. Contemporaneousness is one of the prerequisites of any life-story in unravelling the inner sorrow and desires of a woman. Kamala Das has given a voice to the thousands of modern urban women. For the first time in the history of Indo English literature we listen to the voice of inner urges of a woman. Same is the case with her poems. Her poems in *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *Old Play House and other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems* (vol-1) and *Anamalai poems* deal with her personal experiences in relation to time and space. Four out of the seven poems published in *Indian Literary review* 7, 2 express her concern over the prevailing atmosphere at home and abroad. Apart from these poems, her other poems present her personal ecstasies, sorrows and convictions in a way that could shatter our preconceived ideas of India of her times.

An autobiography must depict several life-sketches of different people. Das is at her best in depicting the picture of her grandmother and her younger brother. In her *My Story* she is unable to tolerate the silence and darkness of her parental home after the death of her grandma. Giving a feministic outlook to her grandma Das notes:

“She was the great grandmother of the women’s lib; upholding the rights of women whenever a controversy cropped up and a female, exploited and pregnant came to our courtyard weeping.”

Another person whom Das worshipped like an idol was her brother. She opines that her brother was her personal hero right from her childhood. Depicting her intimacy with her brother Das observes:

“When we were separated, my brother and I, I felt alone and lost, for between us even in the silence we shared was a pure kind of communication, an interminable dialogue that went on and on like that of the wind with the earth or of the sun with the trees”.

Thus, Das is a master-artist in the portrayal of human relationships.
Whether factual or fictitious Das’s autobiography has carved a niche in the area of women’s autobiographies in India. She has opened up new vistas of autobiographical writings. She has been considered as a writer who fought for the rights of women. Due to her suicidal tendencies she has been also compared with Sylvia Plath. She even questioned her father about the validity of her existence:

“Father, I ask you now without fear
Did you want me
Did you ever want a daughter
Did I disappoint you much with my skin as dark as yours.” 40

Thus, Das comes to the fore-front with the innermost doubts and wishes of the modern Indian woman. The most remarkable point of Das’s life-story is her confessional tone. She is at her best in the exploration of the female self. Her autobiography is the collective repository of woman’s experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Nevertheless, Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

References:
2. Ibid, P. 74.
5. Ibid, P. 102.
20. Ibid, P. 84.
21. Ibid, P. 82.
22. Ibid, P. 90.
23. Ibid, P. 90.
24. Ibid, P. 90.
28. Ibid, P. 93.
34. Ibid., P. 208.