CHAPTER II
Chapter II

Voicing an “Inner Privacy: Kamala Das’s My Story

Kamala Das is a distinguished figure in Indian English Literature and one of the best-known contemporary Indian women writers, poets and litterateurs. Born on 31st March 1934, at Punnayurkulam—a village in Malabar in South Kerala—she had her schooling in Calcutta and Punnayurkulam.

Kamala Das’s autobiography My Story was first serialized in The Current Weekly of Bombay from January to December, 1974. It was published as an independent work in 1976. The next year, Das published a sequel to this autobiography entitled, Alphabet of Lust (1977). In addition, she has to her credit two collections of short stories in English: A Doll for the Child Prostitute (1977) and Padmabati- the Harlot and Other Stories (1992). Her Collected Poems were published in 1984. She too wrote extensively for various popular magazines and periodicals, such as Opinion, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Poetry East and West, Debonair, Eve’s Weekly, Femina, Imprint, Weekly Round Table, Love and Friendship, etc. She has written the essays like “I Studied All Men”, “What Women Expect out of Marriage and What They Get”, “Why not More Than One Husband?” and “I Have Lived Beautifully”. They are controversial in nature and tend to consolidate her image in public as feminine yet straightforward, unconventional yet honest, jovial yet tragic, impetuous yet insecure – an image also projected by her poems. By converting herself to Islam in the later phase of her life and adopting a different identity as Kamala Suraiyya, Das lived up to her popular image as a “mover and shaker”. Perhaps she loved to find herself in controversy and sensationalism often caused by her forceful assertion and dazzling frankness. However, personal idiosyncrasies never outweighed the public concerns of her art, which assumes greater significance through its rich sub-texts.

Kamala started her writing with poetry at the age of six. Her first poem was, as we gather from My Story, about a doll that had lost its head and “had to remain headless for eternity” (8). The poetry becomes more accessible in the light of her autobiography. Kamala lived long in the metropolitan cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi and wrote much about them. Finally she settled down in Trivandrum, Kerala and Mumbai. She wrote in both Malayalam and English. Eleven of her books are written in her mother
tongue while four in English. Her poetical collections in English are: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). She collaborated with Pritish Nandy in *Tonight: This Savage Rite* (1979), a collection of their love poems. Das has been given a prominent place in all the leading anthologies of Indo-English poetry. She has been the recipient of such famous awards as the Poetry Award for the Asian P.E.N. Anthology in 1964; the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for *Thanuppu*, a collection of short stories in Malayalam; the Chaman Lal Award for fearless journalism in 1971; the Asian World Prize for literature in 1985, and Indian Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Award in 1988. Das passed away on May, 30, 2009, at the age of seventy six.

Kamala Das wrote several memoirs, the most famous of them is her autobiography *My Story*, written in English and published in 1976. *My Story* is a masterwork by Kamala Das. She raised many topics in this book, which are still under cover. She was much ahead of her time and this book is the perfect example of her farsightedness. *My Story* recounts her childhood in an artistic but emotionally distant family; her unfulfilling arranged marriage to an older man shortly before her 16th birthday; the emotional breakdowns and suicidal thoughts that punctuated her years as a young wife and mother; her husband’s apparent homosexuality; and the deep undercurrent of sexual and romantic yearning that ran through most of her married life.

*My Story* is rightly looked upon as the best-selling woman's controversial autobiography in post-independence India. Kamala frankly talks about many untouched topics such as homosexuality and extramarital affair in this autobiography. This book has a chronological order and it is written in a realist style. It follows Kamala Das's life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favored by the colonial Indian elite; through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extramarital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and, finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality.

Kamala’s maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were Rajas, a caste of Hindu nobility. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her maternal great-uncle, Narayan Menon, a prominent writer, and her mother, Balamani Amma, a well-known Malayalam poet. Das was also deeply affected by the poetry of the sacred writings kept by the matriarchal community of Nairs. Das's father, a
successful managing director for a British automobile firm, was descended from peasant stock and favored Gandhian principles of austerity. The combination of “royal” and “peasant” identities, along with the atmosphere of colonialism and its pervasive racism, produced feelings of inadequacy and alienation for Das. Das began writing at age six and had her first poem published by P.E.N. India at age fourteen. She did not receive university education. She was married in 1949 to Madhava Das, an employee of the Reserve Bank of India who later worked for the United Nations. She was sixteen years old when the first of her three sons was born; at eighteen, she began to write obsessively. Although Das and Madhava were romantically incompatible, Madhava supported her writing. His career took them to Calcutta, New Delhi, and Mumbai, where Das's poetry was influenced by metropolitan life as well as by her emotional experiences. In addition to writing poetry, fiction, and autobiography, Das served as editor of the poetry section of The Illustrated Weekly of India from 1971 to 1972 and 1978 to 1979. In 1981, Das and her husband retired to Kerala. Das was elected for the Indian Parliament in 1984. After her husband died, she accepted Islam and changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya.

Kamala Das is a confessional writer and a poet. As A. N. Dwivedi rightly pointed out in “Kamala Das and Her Poetry”, she “pours her very heart into poetry. She is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche” (3). Das herself says about her ‘self-exposure’ method of writing:

... by confessing
By feeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul....
I shall someday see
My world de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded...
(“Composition”, 7)

Irshad Gulam Ahmed writes in Kamala Das: The Poetic Pilgrimage: “Das believes that just as God leaves a potent fragment of himself in His creation so does the poet”. 48) This potent fragment of the poet represents His personality. This is why, in My Story Das Asserts: “A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay but her own personality” (165). It is the escape from the personality of the creator into the
personality of the created that in turn becomes a kind of "objective correlative" for the emotions and experiences of the poet. Das cannot accept Eliot's this divorcing of the man who suffers from the mind that creates. To her, poetic creation has its roots in the poet's personality that becomes its raw material. She makes a clear distinction between poets and other human beings and affirms the vital role of the poet's personality in one of her oft-quoted passages from My Story:

> Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shop-men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them feel the pressures and the torments (165).

However, it must be born in the mind of the poet or the writer his own personality and the 'raw material' of the writers writing and by implication, not the final product. So in the process of the aesthetic transformation the depicted experiences and emotion can hardly match those of the poet. It is the escape from the personality of the creator into the personality of the persons, which brings the argument once again to Eliot's distinction and its partial modification to suit the psychodynamics of Das's creativity" (Ahmed: 15-16). As Kamala observes in My Story: "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 inward, will realize his route has no end". (159)

Kamala Das's childhood accounts read like any other autobiography by any other woman. It is only after marriage that her "self-revelation" becomes bold and she bares it all to her readers. She was married to a relative working in the Reserve Bank, after the country gained Independence. Her romantic ideas of life with a man were shattered soon after her betrothal; there was no tenderness in her fiancé who only wanted to maul her body. After marriage his behavior was insensitive and purely physical and she calls it a kind of rape; in the process she suddenly grew up:

> "A coldness took hold my heart then. I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable" (95).

Kamala's experiences as a mother have an endearing quality; she was happy looking after her son. Her husband used to feel irritated with the baby around the house; his callous behavior made Kamala Das decide to be "unfaithful to him, at least physically" (19).
No other woman autobiographer has dared to reveal such intimate details about her physical body, her sex-relationships or her extra-marital affairs. But Das describes her disgust at her husband’s homosexual activities and says that she often contemplated suicide. She reconciled to her plight and decided to mould herself into a new being. She resolved not to live a loveless life and began looking for a right man to love her. She met men of different ages and of various types and most of them loved her to satisfy their own needs. A serious illness made her write her autobiography to meet the doctor’s bills. People could not understand her unnatural yearnings to look for happiness outside marriage. Her narration breaks down all the cultural barriers of feminine modesty, which at times shocks the conservative readers. There is no mother-in-law to torture her; no customary family responsibilities to hinder her progress; it is only the conflict within her, which does not allow her to be at peace with herself. Her own hopes and aspirations to gain something more out of life bring about the turmoil in her existence.

Kamala Das’s *My Story* reveals her individuality. Like Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Urmila Haksar, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sudha Muzumdar, Cornelia Sorabji, Sita Rathnamala and Dhanwanti Rama Rau, Das too writes about her own development in her autobiographies. With the publication of *My Story*, there emerged a new kind of woman’s writing, which was not only bold, daring and tantalizing but also self-assertive. She is the writer who defies all conventional models to retaliate against the wornout social values and traditions which forever hinder and retard the development of a woman’s personality, emotional and intellectual. Her autobiography aims at redefining the male-female relationship and is not only a challenging account of the writer’s experiences of her life only, but of her body as well. The autobiography defines the personality of Kamala Das as it had been made by the dictates of the society. Thus a “good” girl is made to rebel against the established socio-cultural barriers of feminine modesty which at times shocks the conservative readers. The frank and confessional language, which helped in transcending her “marginal self”, prompted her critics to brand her as an exhibitionist.

Kamala Das gives the authentic picture of her feminine sensibility and she introduces herself as a daughter, a mother, a wife, a poet; but above all she is conscious of her woman’s identity which is an amalgam of all these personalities. Identity to Kamala did not mean fitting in a predefined slot;
Dress in saris, be a girl.
Be a wife, they said. Be an embroiderer, be a cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers
(“An Introduction”, 27)

Kamala Das learnt to defy these pre-established canons of feminine identity; for her 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” and a protest against the senseless restrictions which force a sensitive woman to lead an insipid life.

A significant and important aspect of My Story is the description of such experiences, which only a woman can have. These are the personal accounts of childbirth. Das’s autobiography has three such textual accounts of physical creations, narrated probably for the first time in the history of Indian women writing in English. The writing was started to distract her mind, to help her recover from a grave illness and also to take care of hospital bills. The time had come when she found a voice of her own, but it was 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” (Preface).

Autobiographical writing can prove to be cathartic as it can help the writer in coming to terms with herself. Das’s autobiography gave her “the courage to move forward into as yet unnarrated and unexplored ways of living” (Heilbrun, 21). It also gave her much happiness in the process. “I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure to me as the writing of My Story has given me. I have nothing more to say” (Preface). The writing of an autobiography involves the process of reinventing one’s self. Kamala Das did it again by her conversion to Islam. Nabeeesa Ummal’s comment on this act is telling: “I challenge her to write a book like My Story now. She will face the same fatwa and fate as Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen”. (India Today, December, 27, 1999) But Kamala Das looked at the “burqa” as a symbol of “protection”. The freedom, which she enjoyed as a Hindu, will not be allowed to her now. “Who needs freedom?” retorts Suraiyya. In an interview given to Times of India (19 December, 1999), she tells that she was wary of freedom:

I don’t want freedom. I had enough of it thrust on me. Freedom had become a burden for me …..I want a master to protect me. I
wanted protection and not freedom. I want to be subservient to Allah. (http.www.timesofindia.com/191299/19einim3.htm)

The earlier days of Kamala Das have gone. As she remarks, “Before I was the rebellious type I used to move around a lot, involve myself in various activities; most of the time taking risks and living dangerously. Now I have changed. I have become a virtuous, clean woman. A Puritan in all senses who prays daily, wears white clothes and is conservative in thinking” (Ibid).

However, she had been transformed into a woman who said she loved the orthodox lifestyle of Muslim women:

I want guidelines to regulate and discipline my life. I want a master to protect me ......My husband died seven years ago and I am now a lonely widow who is 67 years old. When he was there he provided me with protection. I had not to bother about getting tickets, passport, visas and such other things. I just had to follow him. (Ibid)

She found freedom an encumbrance and needed the solace of a protective religion like Islam and a merciful God like Allah. Her comments in her other writing seems to suggest that she might have longed for a more circumscribed existence for some years then. Nevertheless what needs to be questioned is the sincerity of her decision not only now but in her earlier life too. How genuine were her expressions in My Story and how sincere are they now? They may be “bold” and “unconventional”, but somewhere in the mind of the reader there lurks the doubt to regard all her statements and actions, flamboyant gestures as publicity gimmicks.

In her Preface, Kamala Das tells us that she began writing her autobiography while seriously ill, that the serialized version in an Indian journal brought much embarrassment to her family, and that she derived great pleasure from emptying her soul. Kamala claims that she began to write the text in the mid-1970s from her hospital bed as she grappled with a potentially fatal heart condition. She affectionately remembers time spent with her grandmother at the ancestral home, knows her marriage to a distant relative at age fifteen is everything but a union of love, and struggles to understand this silent man whose bed she shares.

In her constant search for love, Kamala Das often falls in love, as a child with students and teachers, as an adult with men who take the time to know her. It is her sons
and her poetry that give meaning to her life. Enveloped by loneliness and sadness that last through years of nervous breakdowns and heart problems, she expresses her feelings of grief through poetry. Das explains the reasons of writing her autobiography and the first reactions about it as:

*My Story* is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of.... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience....the serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband.... This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me (Preface).

Despite the emphasis on autobiography and the aspects of personal confusion by Kamala Das, one must be aware of the work's fictional element. The very title itself — *My Story* — gives us an indication of the fictional aspect of the work. It was marketed as “The compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian writer.” This is well in keeping with psychoanalytic theories of autobiography. Reviewers viewed the work as one that would appeal to the male gaze and tickle their sensations:

- “The chapter headings accentuate the Excitement”...There is enough in it to give...readers the “sizzle” and “spice”...[The Times of India]
- *My Story* describes a life of frolicking on sex...The book has its accent on titillation...[World Literature Today]

Before Kamala Das arrived on the literary scene, women, generally princesses, political leaders, social workers had been writing their life-narratives. But these autobiographies were not provocative and delineated the women and their lives lived in the shadow of their husbands; their roles were well-defined on the basis of their relationships with others, especially with the men in their lives. A couple of women had
revolted against the pre-determined life-partners; but by and large a woman’s autobiography was a definition of her subjectivity as seen against the backdrop of something more powerful. With Kamala Das emerges a new kind of woman’s writing, which is not only bold, daring and tantalizing but is self-assertive. It retaliates against the worn-out social values and traditions which forever hinder and retard the development of a woman’s personality, emotionally as well as intellectually. In order to analyse and interpret the essence of Kamala Das’s nostalgia, past recollections of self-discovery i.e. revelations of the self, it is imperative to consider her autobiography *My Story*.

*My Story* shocked mainstream Kerala with its candid accounts of her encounters with men. As an artist, her paintings included nudes. In this piece of work, Das clearly depicts the intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. While at home, the rich families try to kill her with magic because they fear that her writing will reveal their immorality. She was very honest and never felt scared of anything.

Yet there is nothing conspiratorial about the writing; it is almost disappointingly bland. The narrative presents two conflicting images of the author – Kamala Das as iconic of the sexless and victimized is juxtaposed with Kamala Das as the highly desirable, emancipated, women. She claims to be "ready for love, ripe for a sexual banquet" (21). Numerous male cousins grab and kiss her; she receives attention from her husband's colleagues. Lesbianism and rape are also played out at predictable intervals - in school, young girls fall in love with her and while travelling in a train, a college student creeps into her berth. She is also chaste, demure and misunderstood by husband and relatives. She frequently weeps and her companions rush to comfort her. But a pattern does emerge from this somewhat inconsequential series of anecdotes: Kamala never takes the initiative – she is vulnerable, gentle, passive and incapable of denying another pleasure.

For Das, every fluctuating mood and private whim is worthy of being articulated so that her prose, particularly her autobiography, is an erratic record of meandering, discursive fantasies. But even when she is at her most professional, she has always used her literary pursuits to embroil the public in her household disputes. As with the writing so with the recent conversion, it is essentially a personal choice sensationalized to make
it a subject of public debate. To what extent her conversion is a matter of conviction remains to be seen. ‘Suraiyya Begum’ claims that she had been yearning to convert to Islam for 27 years; she is lonely, finds freedom an encumbrance and needs the solace of a protective religion like Islam and a merciful God like Allah.

*My Story* begins with her childhood experiences in Calcutta with her affluent and modern family, though she claims it being nothing more than middle-class. She briefly gives us a picture of the racist treatments she and her brother had to endure in the British school, which openly preferred whites and degraded Indians and blacks, their society with a few English and Anglo-Indian neighbors and friends, and the anglicized cook who scorned at the children’s table manners.

In Chapter 10, Kamala describes her experiences as a nine-year-old in an all-girl boarding school where she shares a room with three other girls. The eldest and prettiest of her roommates is 15-year-old Sharada who has many admirers among the young schoolgirls. The chapter ends with the following passage that also provides the title:

> The lesbian admirer came into our room once when Sharada was away taking a bath and kissed her pillowcases and her undies hanging out to dry in the dressing room. I lay on my bed watching this performance but she was half-crazed with love, and hardly noticed me (14).

In Chapter 19, Kamala, a 15-year-old, is herself enthralled by a series of older women, unmarried aunts, teachers, women who are family friends. Chapter 20 begins with Kamala being warned against associating with an 18-year-old college student. Of course Kamala goes on to describe how in spite of the warnings, she felt “instantly drawn to her....She was tall and sturdy with a tense masculine grace....When her eyes held mine captive in a trance, for a reason that I could not fathom, then I felt excited” (34). In the summer of her sixteenth year, Kamala’s father arranges for her to make an overnight journey by train to her grandmother’s house, in the company of a group of professors and students. “As luck would have it,” Kamala writes, the “girl who was different from others” is part of the group (42). Kamala describes the seduction on the train:

> I hate the upper berth, she said. She looked around first to see if anyone was awake. Then she lay near me holding my body close to hers. Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a
gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered you are so sweet, so very sweet; I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling.... It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that no one, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot (51).

A friend of Kamala’s family meets the group at the station where they have to change trains, and another family friend invites the whole group for lunch. The college student coaxes Kamala to bathe with her and to allow herself to be powdered and dressed by her. “Both of us,” Kamala writes, “felt rather giddy with joy like honeymooners” (Ibid). By the time they join their group, the meal is well underway, and their host, Kamala, wryly says, “seemed grateful to me for having brought into his home a bunch of charming ladies, all unmarried” (Ibid). Kamala continues in the same passage to blend this romance with the girlfriend into the romance with her husband-to-be. This chapter ends a page later with this description of their first kiss:

Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Don’t you love me he asked me, don’t you like my touching you.... I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was ‘goodbye’ (82)

In the next chapter (titled “His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin”), Kamala writes of the visit of Madhav Das, her cousin and now her fiancé, to her home in Calcutta during their engagement:

My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Don’t you feel any passion for me, he asked me. I don’t know, I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. 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 conversations, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts (67).

Right after the passage Kamala says:
I did not know whom to turn to for consolation. On a sudden impulse, I phoned my girlfriend. She was surprised to hear my voice. I thought you had forgotten me, she said. I invited her to my house. She came to spend a Sunday with me and together we cleaned out our bookcases and dusted the books. Only once she kissed me. Our eyes were watering and the dust had swollen our lips. Can’t you take me away from here, I asked her. Not for another four years, she said. I must complete my studies she said. Then holding me close to her, she rubbed her cheek against mine. When I put her out of my mind I put aside my self-pity too. It would not do to dream of a different kind of life. My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. ... I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children...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 national flag, with wifely pride... (84).

We never hear of this girlfriend again, either in the autobiography or in any meaningful way in the many critical responses to this text.

Chapter 22 is titled “Wedding night: Again and again he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully.” What Kamala records in this chapter is her initiation into heterosexual intercourse via marital rape, unsuccessful attempts at first and then, after a fortnight of attempts, successful. She becomes pregnant almost immediately and by the time her first son is born, Kamala has few illusions about her relationship with her husband.

Chapter 27 begins:

During my nervous breakdown there developed between myself and my husband an intimacy which was purely physical ... after bathing me in warm water and dressing me in mens’ clothes, my husband bade me sit on his lap, fondling me and calling me his little darling boy....I was by nature shy... but during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing.

He talked about homosexuality with frankness. Many of us pass through that stage, he said (89).

In Chapter 32, Kamala writes of her trouble with a “women’s problem” for which she requires hospitalization. Here she is tended to by a woman doctor who saves
her from bleeding to death when she hemorrhages after surgery. Kamala falls in love with her and keeps going to see her in the clinic, kissing her, watching her, smelling her. She writes: "I kept telling my husband that I was in love with the doctor and he said, it is all right, she is a woman, and she will not exploit you" (89).

When Das wished to begin writing, her husband supported her decision to augment the family's income. Because Das was a woman, however, she could not use the morning-till-night schedule enjoyed by her great uncle. She would wait until nightfall after her family had gone to sleep and would write until morning: "There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing" (Warrior interview). This rigorous schedule took its toll upon Das' health, but she views her illness optimistically. It gave her more time at home, and thus, more time to write.

As her career progressed, her greatest supporter was always her husband. Even when controversy swirled around Das' sexually charged poetry and her unabashed autobiography, her husband was "very proud" of her (Ibid). Though he was sick for 3 years before he passed away, his presence brought her tremendous joy and comfort. She stated that there "shall not be another person so proud of me and my achievements" (Ibid).

My Story recounts the trials of Kamala's marriage and her painful self-awakening as a woman and writer. She became an icon for women, in India and elsewhere, struggling to liberate themselves from sexual and domestic oppression. Though it was supposed to be an autobiography, Das later admitted that there was plenty of fiction in My Story. In the many roles that she spun around herself, Kamala Das was only the best known of them; there was one that she enjoyed the most, that is in constantly defying expectations. For an apparently free-spirited woman who had celebrated every physical detail of her body from the "musk scented sweat" that attracted her so-called lovers to the slithering emanations with which she described the indignities of childbirth as they took place in her ancestral home in Kerala.

Das is a confessionalist who does not hide her sufferings, her traumas that starts from her teenhood and then goes on and on. She finely depicts the feelings of an innocent girl who is molested in her very young age when knowing nothing about sex. Even her husband takes her only as a body possession to satisfy his libidinous desires.

(61)
Das has not only described her husband’s shortcomings but even she freely calls herself a freak. What a strange life she has gone through and the appreciating part of her is the courage with which she brings it in front of whole world though she has been criticized for it many a times as according to some whatever she wrote, whether of her private hours, was against Indian customs and culture. But what will these customs do where women are not given that respect which is their very own right. Through her book Das is true in saying that a woman is always subordinated first to her father, then husband, and finally her children.

Hence, 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 work, such discussion continues to be almost exclusively on heterosexual relationships 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 manifestations of Das’s stylistic or personal eccentricities that border on artistic weakness.

The autobiographical form of writing helps to bring into focus “the search of self definition” through the “lifelines”. The journey in the past uses the skill of remembering, and proves to be cathartic and is a “catalyst for healing”. My Story by Kamala Das is one such autobiographical journey which was not only for the cathartic for the poetess, it also helped her in coming to terms with herself and providing abundant happiness in the process: “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” (V).

In the preface to her autobiography in Malayalam, Ente Katha Kamala Das states:

Let my blood flow into these papers. Let me write with that blood. Let me write like a person who can write without any burden of the future. Let me write each word, harmonizing it with eloquence and beauty. I would like to call it poetry...

(Translated)
P. K. Ravindra Nath of *Asia Week* in an article “Oh, Kamala” states:

*Ente Katha* was an instant shocker even by the standards of India’s most literate state. Kamala wrote uninhibitedly about her husband’s sexual omissions and commissions, about her lust for the doctor who attended her, about her lurid affairs with various men. Kerala’s reading publics were first scandalized, snatched up as soon as they hit the newsstands. The literary fraternity marveled at her way with words, the young relished every steaming episode, old women kept copies under pillow (9).

Kamala Das describes in her autobiography *My Story* in detail the shockwaves it created in Kerala:

The Serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the book stalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband. Why, I had even confessed that I was chronically falling in love with persons of a flamboyant nature. (Preface)

It was shocking to the people that a woman from the aristocratic Nair family was writing in this manner, but though the people openly criticized whatever she had written, they did not forget to buy a copy and keep it under their pillow. Though they described it as pornography, they waited with bated breath to get the next installment of the story. Kamala Das sarcastically writes about the men who brought the book. “They brought the book as if they were buying condoms” (Preface).

Kamala openly criticized the social customs and practices of Kerala:

They had grown up as components of the accursed feudal system that prevailed in Malabar until two decades ago and had their own awesome skeletons in the cupboards of the past. Being members of affluent joint families, they had had ample leisure to nurture their concupiscence, feeding it with the juices of the tender daughters of their serfs and retainers. They feared that I would write of their misdeeds, of the accidental deaths in the locality and of the true immorality which takes shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of our own society (200).

The custodians of morality clamored for her blood. They wanted to silence her at any cost. In Kamala Das’s words:

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 own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer (Ibid).

But Kamala Das was happy for writing such a piece for she “scrubbed, cleaned her mind of all that was pricking her mind”. She herself had no control over her writings. She writes: “I myself had no control over my writings which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seas (Ibid). She never expected negative reaction to her writings. More than that she was very ill and did not expect that she would recover from her illness; but fate decided the other way. She survived the illness and had to face sharp arrows of criticism. The people spread lush scandals about her way of life. Her enemies increased day by day. Kamala relates:

A few of the elderly men of my village came to visit me slyly, when the evening had darkened and sat on the easy chairs, smiling vacuously and in silence. I had gone there without my husband and besides, had I not confessed in my writings to have had a couple of love affairs? They came with whetted appetites and looked like sick hounds. I had to get my old maid-servant to assist me in getting rid of them without much fanfare (202).

Kamala Das was ostracized by the society and the reaction of the people was more than she could handle. She writes: “With words, I had destroyed my life. I had used them like swords in what was meant to be a purification dance, but blood was unwittingly shed.” (Ibid).

Her opponents tried various ways to stop her from writing. She writes:

While I was away in Thiruvananthapuram, ....they buried an urn somewhere in my yard hoping to kill me with the rites of sorcery. One day I found on the ledge of our well, a decapitated cat on inspecting it minutely, I found my name engraved on a copper piece, an egg, some turmeric and a lot of stuff that resembled vermillion stuffed inside its body (200-201).

They even tried to bribe her servants. She says two of her servants accepted the bribe and attempted to poison her; but they could bring themselves to administer the poison only in insufficient doses. Kamala notices that they were greatly relieved when they found her alive and normal.

(64)
Kamala Das refused to listen to any of her critics or deny what she had written. She freed herself from all that was in her mind, which suffocated her very existence. She had to throw propriety and decorum to the winds and she exposed her private sorrows, frustrations and anomalies of society. It was a difficult task, to fight against century-old beliefs and falsehoods which the law makers had made to suit their purpose. She refused to conform to the limits set by them. The entire society was up in arms against the writer who honestly put in words what she felt was right. Kamala Das suffered, devoid of trusted friends and relatives, with questions and advice. Some of the men who thought Kamala Das was easily available, were disappointed when they found she was upright and dignified. So they tried to malign her. She moved away from all. She became ill. She says:

As I wrote more and more, in the circle I was compelled to move in, I became lonelier and lonelier. I felt my loneliness was like a red brand on my face. In company when there were dinners at any friend’s house, I sat still as a statue, feeling the cruel vibration all around me (176).

Kamala Das expresses her agony through these words again:

I withdrew into the cave I had myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all around me, but no friends to give me well-meaning advice, no relative telling me of my discrediting my family name, by my unconventional ways of thinking... (Ibid).

Why had Kamala Das written a sensational autobiography? Was it to shock the conservative society of Kelara? She wrote it for the millions of women of India, who are exploited in the names of marriage. She, through her writings, stood for a marital life based on mutual love and respect rather than domination of one over the other. The book opened up hitherto unknown areas of women’s psyche.

It was believed that women have no sexual feelings. Kamala Das exploded the myth. The fact is that men have suppressed the sexuality of women to cover up their puffed up ego or selfishness. It was humiliating to be called a frigid woman because it is a reflection on her femininity. It made her feel inferior, inadequate and worthless. So far frigid women used to blame themselves. She brought out the fact that the fault lay with the men. Nature had given both men and women the capacity to experience sexual pleasure, but men are to be blamed for depriving women of this natural pleasure over
the centuries and making them sexually anesthetic. In India feminine sexuality has been severely suppressed.

Kamala Das says in her autobiography, “women of good Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their practical phobia”. She adds:

Until my wedding night I did not have the slightest knowledge of what went on between man and woman in the process of procreation. Sex was not a fashionable world then as it is now, but its followers were not inactive (24).

In Kerala it was customary for a Nair girl to be married when she was quite young and it was a practice for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night. It is interesting to note that Kamala Das identifies herself with the only heroine whose sex life seems comparatively untumultuous, Radha, the mythological character and heroine of Krishna. In her autobiography Kamala Das points out that poor women born to the peasant stock are used to a clumsy, rapid mating like that of the birds, for their men have very little time for niceties of any kind.

Kamala Das's complete disregard for the hypocritical society and her courage to stand up against it can be seen in these words:

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 a mother cow licked the calf of my thought into shape and left me to lie at the altar of the world as a sacrificial gift (152).

Kamala Das was forever looking for the ideal lover. Throughout her multifarious relationships, she was in quest of her spiritual lover, the eternal companion of her soul, her divine mate, her Krishna. She describes herself as a person overflowing with emotions, and looking for real love. She describes her search for love in the following words:

Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for it a receptacle. At the hour of worship even a stone became an idol. I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the water of my dreams. It was to get closer to that bodiless one that approached other forms and lost
my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination (118).

As Mohanlal Sharma writes in *The Theme of Love in Kamala Das’s Poetry*:

In spite of all the hazards of going astray, stands her eternal lover guiding her footsteps, the creature being led to the labyrinth of this world towards meeting face to face with her creator. Kamala Das had undertaken her journey towards her destination sometime through the byways unapproved by the orthodox and conventional guardians of religions and morality. Even while enacting the love play with the human counterpart of the divine, she was in fact yearning for the divine. Krishna lurks behind masked figures. We can clearly see the pilgrim’s progress. While reading *My Story* one feels that the experiences being narrated are not merely historical, but there are structured imaginations involved in them. This is the highest peak that love can experience, can arrive at according to the Vedantic tradition, the point where the lover and the beloved merge into one infinite identity.

The progress of the soul from gross physicality to sublime spirituality may appear eccentric or illogical to the superficial readers. Nevertheless this is the only proper and valid ‘route’. The spirit moves through the sneers of the world; its temptations and the despairs, and only by this journey does one enter into the precincts of the ultimate reality. Kamala Das’s quest for love becomes all the more authentic, subsuming all the shades of experiences it does, and the agony and the ecstasy of the physical and mental bouts do strengthen her spiritual fibers. This spiritual consummation at the end is thoroughly genuine for having passed through all varieties of experiences the gross and the carnal. Through all vicissitudes of her love with different persons in different places, it is the lure of the blue God which is constant, and the unconscious urges of her heart are providentially directed towards the ultimate destination. Finally she writes: “I am at peace. I likened God to a tree which has as it parts the leaves, the bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree, the whatness of it (218).

After all, the primary instrument of experience that we have is the body; she celebrates the body as the vehicle of the most intense experience, which builds up the soul. Kamala Das is of the opinion that we should go beyond the body consciousness not by the path of negation, but through the path of expansion. Kamala Das celebrates the skin-communicated ecstasies. She does not deny that, but merely skin-
communicated pleasures may not be enough to satisfy the deeper cravings of the soul, and that is why she refuses to identify them with love. Kamala Das makes it very clear that her ultimate destination is Krishna:

My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to his desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey...

(186-187).

The love of Krishna is so constant in her mind that she calls Him by several names, Hari, Vishnu, Narayan, Rama, Purushotham and Mohan. The love of Krishna is a source of perpetual joy for her. So there is no need of any jewels for her to adorn herself. She identifies herself with Radha. The following words express her disappointment that she can have him only in imagination, when Radha had him physically:

But illogical that I am, from birth onwards, I have always thought of Krishna as my mate. When I was a child I used to regard Him as my only friend. When I became an adult, I thought of Him as my lover. It was only my imagining that He was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give him pleasure. Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all the women, for did she not have His incomparable body in her arms... We do not have Him physically to love us; we have to worship a bodiless one. How are we to get close to Him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us in establishing a true contact? Now in the middle age having no more desire unfulfilled I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with the years, a house holder and a patriarch. And illogically again, I believe that in death I might come face to face with Him, hence the shehnai can begin, the birds can sing, the river can start its lullaby...(Femina June 6, 1975: p. 19).

The poet’s search for ideal love often takes the form of Radha’s yearning for Krishna. In the words of Sunanda P. Chavan: “The Nair lineage of Kamala Das with its tradition of sexual freedom in spite of later rigidity, explains the frankness of her attitude to love in terms of sex. Kamala makes it very clear that she was scrupulously honest to herself” (24).
Kamala Das writes in her autobiography:

I have no secrets at all. Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time I walked to my lover’s house 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 (206).

She writes about the negative impression her book had created:

My articles on free love had titillated many. So I continued to get phone calls from men who wanted to proposition me. It was obvious to me that I had painted of myself a wrong image. I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant my husband to make him happy. A few of our acquaintances tried to touch me and made indiscreet suggestions. I was horrified. When I showed my disgust at their behavior they became my bitterest critics and started to spread scandals about me. If I were really promiscuous and obliging I would not have gained the hate and the notoriety that my indifference to sex has earned for me (192).

When she started writing her autobiography, people advised her that a person, who had not completed forty, should not write an autobiography. Kamala Das completely disagrees with this view. She says it does not matter whether a person lives up to a hundred and twenty, sixty or thirty years; her life as a human being is complete. There is a beginning and end to it.

Chapter 21 continues with her philosophy of morality:

There is a reason for my decision of ignoring the ideas of morality of society, because it is based on the perishable body. Morality should be based on the thoughts in one’s mind. Society’s ideas of morality are very strange. Morality is a slaughter house of an old grand-mother called society. The old grand grandmother protects and guards with her blankets the dishonest people, liars, betrayers, and those who abort the children and the hypocritical people. The old woman laughs at those people who realize the worthlessness of the perishable body. She does not protect the truth addicts and those who have a clear mind (Translated)

Kamala writes: “Whenever a snatch of unjustified scandal concerning my emotional life reached me through well meaning relatives, I wept like wounded child for hours, rolling on my bed and often took sedatives to put myself to sleep”
It is difficult to explain her behaviour without referring to the dominant patterns of her culture. She asserted the right of the free-conscience to create its own values. She defied the concept of purity. She tried to defy the Nalapat norms, to deviate from them, to taste the forbidden fruits. In fact, she was ready to sacrifice everything to be unconventional, to be unorthodox that is to break from the traditions of her culture.

She sees herself as a symbol of the new generations and argues that her frank approach reflects a widespread yearning for truth and honesty.

In a recent interview given to *Savvy*, (December, 1990), she says that the Young generation of Kerala have accepted her, calling her “Amma”. Women too are beneficiaries of her literary thrust. She abhors male hypocrisy, but is scornful of the kind of women’s liberation rampant in the West. Women agree that Kamala Das had made impossible things possible. Kamala said to P. K. Ravindra Nath of *Asia Week* that her work had “enabled Indian women to come out of their age-old shackles imposed by orthodoxy and tradition, and given them a wider outlook on life and an understanding of the realities of life.” As far as women are concerned Kamala Das is a harbinger of modernization. To them she is a ‘father figure’ who raised her voice against the social exploitation of the woman by the man for his self-gratification. She revolted against the marital obligation, devoid of love and human understanding, where the spirit of women is made to bleed at the altar of male supremacy.

To know why Kamala Das had revolted against the customs and traditions of society we have to go deep into the customs, practices and traditions of society in which she was born and brought up; also the literature and the events which had moulded the thinking of men and women of the society in which she lived. Kamala as a young child was fed on Epics, Puranas and Mythology just as any other child. A majority of the men and women of India had their thinking process governed by the Epics and the Puranas. The concept of an ideal woman in the mind of the Indian male is Sita. Men expect their wives to be like Sita. Men derive their role models and ideals from the Puranas and Epics. All the religious thoughts have systematically deprived woman of her identity as a person, reduced her as a mere object. In India, all the religious scriptures which formed the major base of our feeling and thinking process have gone ahead with relegating woman to the secondary position. Woman has been fed on stories of women
who sacrificed their pride and self-respect at the altar of their husband’s monstrous ego. She is trained right from childhood to play a submissive role; but Kamala Das refused to fit in this traditional role of a woman.

Kamala Das writes about Indian woman’s commitment to reality and the existential pressure generated during her journey from tradition to modernity. She writes with characteristic sincerity about her own trauma and tribulations of an oppressed existence, of constant humiliation, of being treated as a second class human being. She has a firm and comprehensive grasp over the working of a woman’s mind and her behaviour pattern. When she portrays a woman character it has a glow of compassionate understanding. She knows the textual flavour of each single word she uses. She handles it with intense sensitivity and chiseled sensibility. She, as a woman writer, is in a better position to paint the landscape of a woman’s psyche.

Kamala Das became aware of her inferior status, when she mixed with children of other children of other nationalities at the British school in Calcutta. Most Indian women had not got this exposure, during that period. She wanted to convey her individual awareness, to society, risking negative criticism. In India, a female child is taught early in life the need for adjustment and submissiveness. In the patriarchal society, there was this fear that education would alienate women from their traditional roles and make them more independent.

It is interesting to examine the feminist views of four generations of women in Kamala Das’s family. We can see a striking contrast in the themes of poems of Kamala Das’s mother, the famous poet Balamani Amma, and that of Kamala Das herself. She explores the bond between mother and child in her autobiography. She affirms through her poems also that motherhood is a woman’s fulfillment. For her, mothering is actual worship of God. The sublime love for the child makes her the mother of the whole world. The love for the child transforms the mother’s relations with society. It brings about a near perfect union between husband and wife.

Though Kamala Das adores her children she does not share her mother’s views of extreme devotion to children. Though she is not averse to the idea of motherhood, she advocates that it is better for a creative writer to remain single, so that she can concentrate only on writing. Kamala Das could not appreciate the timid nature of her mother. In 1928 when her parents got married, Mahatma Gandhi’s influence was at its
highest. The simplicity that he preached appealed to the middle classes. Due to this influence her father stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but khaddar, the colour preferably, white or off-white. Kamala Das observes:

After her wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person except the ‘mangalsuthra’. To her it must have seemed like taking to widow’s weeds, but she did not protest. She was afraid of the dark stranger and afraid of her uncle who conspired to bring, for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin (4).

She adds: “My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched’ but my mother’s timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends” (4-5).

Though her mother was superior to her father in many ways, she was submissive and obedient to him. Kamala resented this passivity and submissiveness of her mother. On the other hand, the rebellious great grandmother impressed Kamala Das very much. She describes her great grandmother, Ammukutty Amma as a feminist, in her childhood memoirs, in Malayalam, Balyakala Smaranakal. When her great grandmother was nineteen years old, she came back to the Nalapat family from her husband’s house, carrying her small child in a palanquin. When her great grandmother announced that she would not go back and her child would grow in the Nalapat family, no eye brows were raised. Kamala Das, describes her as a proud woman, who valued her self-respect more that the luxury and security of her husband’s royal family, Chiralayam.

As a child, Kamala Das used to spend a lot of time with her great grandmother. Years after the incident when Kamala Das asked her the reason for the decision, her great grandmother told her that she “could not forgive”. She could not tolerate male domination in any form as she returned to the simple lifestyle of the Nalapat family with her self-respect intact, forsaking the riches of her husband’s family.

Surprisingly, the small child, who clung to her feminist mother’s stomach when she came back to the Nalapat house, Kochu Amma, the grandmother of Kamala Das, was very feminine. She was a devoted wife and found bliss in serving her husband. Her helplessness, delicate nature and femininity made her very attractive to her husband, Chitangoor Valia Raja, who was manly and loving. The kind, soft spoken Kochu Amma complemented his manliness. She became a widow at the age of thirty six. She told
Kamala Das that a wife should always try to please her man, and after the death of her husband a wife’s status is lowered to that of a servant.

Kamala Das wanted in her marital life, companionship, conversation, warmth and real love; but she felt disillusioned, lost and unhappy when she realized that her husband married her for financial gain and social status. She describes his brutal way of love making in the following words: “At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him for his vassal, simply and without exhilaration” (94). She says her readiness to offer him her pure love was like giving a blind man a hundred rupee note. Her husband was “terse” and “impatient” with her. Then she realized that “I would have looked outside the legal orbit” for love. She kept herself busy with “dreary house work, while my spirit protested and cried to get out of this trap, escape....” Though she was angry, annoyed and frustrated at her inferior position she made no serious effort to escape from it, she gradually accepted it. When she was asked direct questions about why she was living with the husband she did not like, she replied that she was not the divorcing kind and further explained that in an Indian situation when a girl marries a boy, she marries a whole family, his traditions and customs. How a revolutionary like Kamala Das would subscribe to such a view is difficult to believe.

In the marital life of Kamala Das, we see a conflict between the images and expectations of a traditional wife and the disinclination of the educated, intelligent wife to accept the dual moral code. She maintains that, to highly imaginative and sensitive women, married life is nothing but a prison. The burden mars their peace of mind. When they happen to be imaginative, they try to withdraw to their childhood or to some fantasy arena, the brainchild of their fancies. Kamala Das’s writings are the result of the social environment and discrepancy between what she aspires to in life and the harsh reality confronting her plunges her into anguish. The harsh world fails to understand her crisis, labels her as a misfit. Anyone who failed to conform is branded as unfeminine. Can a woman retain her individuality and ambition?

The conflict between a convention-bound man and a sensible woman are vital elements of feminism in Kamala Das’s writings. To Kamala Das a woman is neither a Devi nor a Devil. She is a human being with all human emotions. The intense urge to escape from the problems that torment her found expression in her writings. She welcomes the freedom she gets. She makes other women also aware of their ridiculous position in family and society. Innumerable women who have undergone her
experiences, at some juncture of their life, empathise with her, for vocalizing their blottled-up feelings. She uses her pen with a cathartic effect and her tears become her strength.

When we analyse the feministic view points of four generations of women in the Nalapat family, we get the picture of a defiant, feminist in the great grandmother, who refused to conform to the dual moral code, a devoted, grandmother who pleased her husband by selfless service, and love which was mutual, and the humble totally obedient and submissive mother, Balamani Amma and the rebellious Kamala Das. While her grandmother had the courage to denounce the luxury of her husband’s house and disregard public opinion, Kamala Das did not put into action her rebellious ideas due to the following reason:

I could not admit to all that my marriage had flopped. I could not return home to the Nalapat House, a divorcee, for there had been good will which I did not want to ruin. My grand uncle, the poet Nalapat Narayana Menon had married from my husband’s family and besides my best friend in the world, Malathi was a member of that family (101).

She further states:

A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. If I would have listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to find another, who would volunteer 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 (102).

Kamala was impatient with her mother’s attitude of total acceptance of domination. She tried to fight for the rights of women at an intellectual level. Kamala Das thought that her mother was far superior to her father, and still she was mortally afraid of her husband. They were horribly mismatched. Her mother could maintain “domestic harmony” because of her submissive nature. Her mother in fact, is a Sita image, but the writer, who is a feminist has a keen desire to ‘dethrone the myth of feminity’ and detests this Sita image of woman. She would like to think of women not as ‘Sita’ but as ‘Shakti’. She detests the man-woman relationship in which the male stands for the ‘subject’ and female for the ‘object’. Kamala, a girl with a strong masculine component, and will power was thus bound to be rebellious towards all adult authority. She condemns the dominating attitude of the parents: “They did not for a
moment think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses" (77).

The uncaring and demanding attitude of her husband had created disgust in her. In order to take revenge she decided to be unfaithful to him at least physically, “My husband faded into an unreal figure, became a blush on the horizon after the sun set.” So she is not Sita or Damayanthi, who would suffer silently, whether mother expected her to take up household duties, she refused: “I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out his trap, escape…” (98).

According to the prevalent social system the husband and mother-in-law imposed restriction on her. She resented and rejected their domination. She refused to play the traditional feminine role and conform to the social norms. She writes, “I became miserable like a trapped animal”. The bitterness she felt at the domination of the men made her hate her female body. She thought femininity is associated with weakness and helplessness. The reaction is manifest in these lines: “I felt then revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breast seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through” (104).

Her rejection of femininity is also manifest in the expression “The silly female shape”, “The clumsy gadgetry that always, always damaged bonds”. She rejects femininity because it expects her to renounce her claims as a sovereign subject.

The absolute honesty of expression gives a quality of uniqueness to her poetic expression and her autobiography is a poetic experience expanded in prose. The poet’s psyche is tormented by the deprivation of love. Her husband’s inability to understand her, to give her spiritual fulfillment leads her to dejection. The young bride felt cheated and defeated by the conventional social order. As a result, love is reduced to the mechanical act of bodily union:

......... isn’t each
Embrace a complete thing a
Finished jigsaw, when mouth on mouth I lie,
ignoring my poor
moody mind (“In Love”, 36)

Kamala Das was a severe critic of the status of women in pre-independent India where women had “A silently suffering, sacrificing, shadowy, supine existence” (102).
She tried to challenge the society in which man is always superior and woman is always inferior like a master and a slave. The feeling that she was living in a male-dominated world developed early in her life, because of her father’s and uncle’s attitude towards their wives, to which she was a witness from childhood. She refused to accept the status of a passive object. She must control, she must struggle to transform the circumstances which try to transform her. She has a fundamental belief in autonomy and a keen desire to overthrow external domination of any kind.

If we conduct psychoanalysis of the personality of Kamala Das, we find her personality is as she states:

Like currency, devalued, we have a complex
About our shabbiness ("Daughters of the Century", 140)
All her psychic problems, conflicts and confusion originated from her acute awareness of being a neglected child:

So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young; there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for this mate who pushed him on a hand cart when they were on their begging round (2).

While Kamala was a child, India was under the British rule. Her father was working in an automobile firm, Walford Transport Ltd, an American firm in Calcutta. Kamala Das writes in her autobiography:

My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls Royce, Humbers and Bentleys to the Indian princes and their relatives. My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly on a larger four post bed (Ibid).

Though her father was treated as an equal by most of his British friends, the experience of Kamala Das and her brother was one of humiliation and torture. She writes in her autobiography about the cruel treatment to her brother, by the British classmates. Although he was the cleverest boy in the class, the white boys made fun of him and tortured him by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril. She states:

“One day his shirt front was covered with blood. He was stunned by cruelty but even the tears seemed inhibited, staying suspended on his lashes while William, the bully exclaimed, “Blackie your blood is red” (Ibid). Kamala Das being a rebel was filled with
rage and scratched the face of the boy who made fun of her brother, but was soon overpowered by the Anglo-Indians who were always on the side of the British children. Kamala comments on the discrimination she meted out to them when distinguished visitors came to school:

“When the visitors came to school the brown children were discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridors behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company” (3).

The humiliation at school coupled with the lack of affection from her parents created in her a deep sense of inferiority:

They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our 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. Like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of the crevices of ancient fortresses (74).

Kamala Das and her brother had “swarthy skin” and “ordinary features” which had greatly disappointed her parents. In their gesture and words it was evident to them. So they made it a point “to keep away from the lime light to hide in the vicinity of the kitchen where we could hold together the tatters of our self-respect and talk to the scavengers or the gardener” (4).

Kamala Das wondered why she was born to Indian parents instead of a white couple. Her friends and relatives made rude comments about her nut brown skin.

The racial prejudice and the parental neglect tormented the little soul. The racial neglect and the snobbish attitude of the British troubled the child’s sensitive mind. The child found that one reason for the segregation was the colour of the skin, the brown colour; she found herself like a ‘leper’ in such a society. Added to this the British had a strong sense of superiority and considered Indians as an inferior race. Kamala Das herself felt that her cultural group was inferior because it was a puritanical and orthodox group, which did not allow her free expression of her natural and normal desires. She lacked sophisticated social behavior and manners. She was aware of the social, racial, economic, physical and sexual inferiority of her race, for she says: “The little village called Punnayurkulam which I had left behind clung to me like dirt under my finger nails” (120). The child desperately longed for affection, acceptance and recognition; but
the rejection and the mental agony intensified her sorrow, sense of inferiority and loss of self-confidence.

The British used to make fun of the eating habits and religious beliefs of the Indians. Kamala Das’s father sent their cook to a British family to learn cooking. The cook who thought himself to be sophisticated considered Kamala Das and her brother as ‘savages’. She says that the cook “was not of an affectionate nature”.

Kamala informs: “With every vacation that we took, our cook enhanced more or more in the culinary art until our eating habits had to be altered to suit his sophistication” (1). She also states that instead of the rice and curry he served them soups, cutlets, and stew: “The children, my elder brother and I, eating early and unsupervised, ate Western meals with our little brown fingers, licking our hands, enjoying all that was served on our plates while the cook stood by frowning. He thought us savages” (Ibid).

Kamala experienced discrimination at the hands of teachers, classmates and society. She hardly found any recognition at home either. The deprivation of love and recognition intensified her anguish. The child craved for love and social acceptance but everywhere she was met with rejection. She was deprived of the gratification of the basic requirements. She was very much depressed to know that she was a member of the “neglected class of society”. The lack of love and understanding of the child’s psychological need resulted in a disastrous breakdown of the relationship between the parents and the hypersensitive child. When she says, “not even my grandmother bothered to kiss me,” we understand the child’s longing for love.

Kamala Das felt deprived of the loving warmth of her mother’s love. The disturbed father-daughter relationship, combined with the awareness of social and cultural inferiority, gave her a morbid sense of emotional insecurity. Added to this, she was a victim of economic inferiority, which made her say: “I had four sarees in all, and a couple of cotton blouses which I prettied up with embroidery” (120). She further writes: “Seeing me always in my brown khaddar sari, the shop-men and the drivers loitering me for a comely “ayah” and whistled at me” (121). She felt her economic inferiority added to her physical inferiority. One observes this in her words: “I had no jewellery at all. I thought it is my way of dressing that ruined my first love and made it unrequited” (63). About the financial position of her family, she says: “The Nalapat family’s financial position at that time was precarious. All the jewellery had been sold
for fighting litigation and bankruptcy” (4). The awareness of Kamala’s economic situation and cultural poverty made her burst into tears. She was conscious that she could not do anything with grace and was an awkward savage. She also felt that, there was nothing that she could do without a measure of awkwardness. All these factors added to her woes and sense of inadequacy.

Kamala Das’s wedding was the most expensive wedding of the year. She speaks about the marriage: “All this guilt made me feel cheap and uncomfortable. Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth of families like ours” (87). She further adds: “The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue” (Ibid). Kamala Das felt that she did not at all match the grandeur and magnificence of the wedding decoration. So she says: “The backdrop deserved a more elegant bride, one who was glamorous and beautiful” (Ibid). So the young relatives cried out in disappointment: “You don’t look a bride, you are too plain to be a bride” (88). The cruel remarks created in her a feeling of inferiority. To appear beautiful was a way to emerge out of her feelings of inferiority. She realized beauty has great value.

After marriage Kamala Das pinned all hopes on her husband. She was deprived of parental love; she sought a father substitute in him. She longed to be loved and cared for, but marital life was a disappointment to her. She speaks about her wedding night: “...my body was immature and not ready for love making. For him such a body was an embarrassment, veteran that he was in the rowdy ways of sex which he had practiced with the maids, who worked for his family” (90).

Kamala says her husband was obsessed with ‘sexual love’. The girl of fifteen who looked for the union of two souls, love and companionship was dismayed and shocked by her husband’s attitude. She felt desperate and disillusioned. The humiliation in marital life led to deprivation and alienation. She looked at the ladies of the neighbourhood who basked in the warmth of their successful marriage, but Kamala Das felt miserable. She had lost whatever emotional contact she once had with her husband who was at that time busy preparing for his superiors, a Rural Credit Survey Report and had no time at all, for his family. She describes herself like a house with all its lights put off. She was desperately in love with her husband, but she did not get his love. At night she lay clutching her husband’s feet but felt: “His love was never mine. It had luckier takers” (104).
Kamala felt desperate and embittered like a trapped animal. This made her think about ways to escape from her predicament. For her, divorce is out of the question for there had been goodwill between their two families for three generations which she did not want to ruin. More than that, she could not admit that her marriage had flopped. She found the possibility of getting married with another man very difficult, for she was not very pretty. The chance of getting a job also was bleak, since she was not qualified and even opting for the life of a prostitute was a problem: “I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew I was frigid and the love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards. I was a misfit everywhere” (103). The male-dominated world in which she lived gave her a feeling of sexual inferiority. The constant humiliation and neglect made her a neurotic. She says, her husband was too busy to think of taking her anywhere and he was not exactly rich either. Her husband was always busy with his office work. He left for his office every morning before nine and returned at ten in the night.

Kamala’s husband was so immersed in his works that he even deprived the children of fatherly affection. She informs: “There was no opportunity for the father to get to know the child, or to learn to regard him as a distinct personality” (100). As a mother her husband’s lack of fatherly affection towards the children had pained her. The tormented soul of the writer is in search of her identity: “I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape…” (98) She expresses her feeling in the following manner: “A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy” (102). At last she made an unsuccessful effort to escape from the drudgery of household work and her fear of desertion by her husband, she ran away from her house at Khar. But her husband’s friend found her and pointed out to her, “You are not educated, you are not qualified. In a place like Mumbai you can only end up in the red light area” (99). So she went back home.

The rebellious Kamala Das was determined to break the fetters of customs and tradition. She decided to give shock treatment to her society which blocked the growth of an individual. She had an inherent desire to rule, to command, to be a Noorjahan, a Draupadi, and refused to be submissive and silent. She is the one who should assert, must defy, must challenge. She must fight for her rights as an individual and establish
her identity. Through her writing she gave a tough fight to the external factors which curtailed her growth as an individual. She finds an outlet to her sorrows and frustration through her writing. She writes:

My grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets on my desk. My sorrows floated over the pages of magazines darkly, as heavy monsoon clouds do in the sky...I withdrew into a cave I had for myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all around me, but no friends to give me well-meaning advice, no relatives telling me of my discrediting my family name, by my unconventional ways of thinking... (176).

She found it difficult to strike a balance with the outside world and tried to withdraw into a world of her own, the world of writing. She refused to fall in with the course of life planned by her parents, relatives and friends. They expected her to behave like any other middle class house-wife. She expresses this as:

....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 national flag, with wifely pride... (85).

The lack of love and understanding and the neglect of the child’s psychological needs resulted in a disastrous breakdown of relationship between the parents and the hypersensitive child. When she finds that it was difficult to get love and understanding from the people around her, she turns to the dead and starts making occasional visits to the cemetery; she says: “I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living. I could even go up to the unknown Rosamund and confide in her. From the dead no harshness could emanate, no cruelty...” (10).

Kamala Das found at a very young age that literary expression is one way of coming out of her anguish when she found that getting love was an impossible dream. She turned to creative writing as a means of self-expression and self-identification. She says: “I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons” (200). In her preface to My Story, she says: “I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty...
myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came with a scrubbed conscience”.

Her fierce individuality was something to which the Indian readers are not accustomed, but against which they could not protest. In a male-dominated world the earlier generation of women poets rarely felt the subdued position they had been allowed. Kamala Das rebelled fiercely against the unjust domination of the so-called ‘stronger sex’; and if critics have found the recurrent sex theme only, it is rather unfortunate. It can only be said that they had entirely missed the very point of her protest, for sex is not the vital aspect of life activity; it is the suppression of sex. Love gets its supreme expression in sex, which is an activity when you give yourself away wholly. She writes in “The Looking Glass”, “Gift him all/Gift him what makes you woman/endless female hungers”. Giving away wholly has to be mutual. It is only then that it becomes an activity of the soul. It is only then that “the answer emerges from within”.

Readers of My Story as well as her poems might have wondered at her frank confessions of varied experiences. A careful reading of My Story and her poems reveals that her varied experiences are her desperate attempts to search for the ultimate meaning of life. Centuries of suppression has killed what ought to have been only natural, and she is fully aware of it, which is her tragedy. So the writings of Kamala Das are a revolt against a society which deprived her of love as a child, as a young bride, as an adult woman, and it is also a revolt against her physical, economic and social inferiority.

Venu Gopal C. V., in An Anthology of Critical Essays writes:

Of all the Indian English women poets of the last few decades perhaps of all the poets, none has been so much talked about or written about as Kamala Das.... Of all her contemporary writers it is Kamala Das who touches us immediately. The frank manner in which she reveals her inner most feelings, an activity suppressed for centuries together and her conventional style, charged with impatience, tenderness and sensitivity, startle us and compellingly draw us towards her (271).

The autobiographical journey by Kamala Das is a peeling of layer upon layer of her conscience; the writings have psychological overtones and provide a privileged insight into the autobiographer’s unnarrated past. The mysteries of the self are revealed,
as are the creation; for her the act is a deliverance from the ghosts of the past, which otherwise would have continued to haunt her. The scrubbed-out conscience” is attained only after reaching her destination:

All the ancient hungers that had once tormented my little body were fulfilled. Not even the best-looking man in the world would any longer arouse in me an appetite for love. If my desires were lotuses in a pond, closing their petals at dusk and opening out at dawn at one time, they were now totally dead, rotted and dissolved, and for them there was no more to be a re-sprouting. The pond has cleared itself of all growth. It was placid. (209)

Kamala Das spent the happiest days of her childhood and life in her hometown in Malabar in the Nalapat house. The inherited richness of her family was in a sharp contrast to the condition in which she was born. The journey to and fro from Calcutta and Nalapat were well-defined and underlined the impact of the two cities on her. Calcutta made her feel unwanted and inferior whereas Nalapat provided the security and confidence not only in childhood but also after her ill-fated marriage. These voyages from the metropolitan to the serene Nalapat are described frequently in My Story and help in focusing the swift, sudden changes and development which took place in Das’s personality on reaching the two destinations. The journey motif might have been deliberately employed by her to accentuate the changes taking place in her personality. All these journeys involved a search for her identity, with contradictions, happiness and sorrow forming a large part of the narrative.

My Story has no dates, which is not unusual, says Shirley Newman; for a woman’s autobiography has “discontinuity and fragmentation... as opposed to chronological, linear and coherent narratives by men” (2). The autobiography marks the various stages in Kamala Das’s character development: the time of the awakening of a carnal desire, her consciousness of being born in a particular religion and being a Hindu, some of her friends being Muslims. But the most significant aspect of her personality and its unraveling is described in her loveless marriage to a cousin who found her “cold and frigid”. The account of her physical relationship with her husband and his obsession with her body must have shocked many conservative readers. Since a woman is taught to be docile and reserved about the details of her sexual relationships, she cannot indulge in revealing such accounts in her writings. But with Kamala Das no
such inhibitions could shackle the outpourings of deeper feelings on her journey of “female psychological development” (2).

The frank and confessional language, which helped in transcending her ‘marginal self’, prompted her critics, to brand her as an exhibitionist. She had viewed marriage through tinted glasses of romance:

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 (90).

Her husband’s brutality left her gasping for love. To the other members of the household, her marriage was a show of richness and wealth and the “bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue” (87). The essence of My Story is its authenticity about the autobiographer’s feminine sensibility. In it she introduced herself as a daughter, a mother, a wife, a poet; but what was more important was that she was conscious of her woman’s identity which was an amalgam of all these personalities.

Kamala Das learnt to defy these pre-established canons of feminine identity; for her 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”, and a protest against the senseless restrictions which force a sensitive woman to lead an insipid life. My Story, like her poems, interests us due to its naiveté and sincerity.

The personal narratives in women’s autobiographies are expressions of her birth experience, they could either be of a woman giving birth to a child or helping in the process of delivery. Kamala Das’s My Story signifies the experiences of her inner life. These are described by Kamala Das as “one of life’s major milestones” (92). Her first experience of carrying a baby in her womb was when she felt a “quickening” in her womb and knows that her child “had become a live being” (Ibid). Later the process of labour is briefly narrated:

When the labour began, I put old records on the gramophone and chatted courageously with my cousins who had come to watch me to 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 prepared for the great pain that finally brought the baby

(84)
sliding along my left thigh, and I would not smother my scream (93).

Childbirth in India is more of familial, social and cultural significance rather than a private event and in Kamala Das’s family, deliveries usually took place inside the homes, where the whole family, with aunts, uncles, grandfather, grandmother and cousins, would excitedly await the cry of the newborn. These were the culturally recognized events and Kamala Das’s *My Story* has composed textual accounts of three such physical creations. The subsequent two pregnancies made her temperamental with her cravings for alcoholic beverages. Her creativity would be at its zenith and she would sit up all night to write poetry.

After the birth of her third child she decided to settle in Malabar, where her relatives were not too happy to see her without her husband and thought that her twenty-four-year old marriage was at rocks. But she could not have cared less. She dressed traditionally in “the white blouses and heavy gold jewelry.” She cultivated her lands and fields with hands and became the mistress of Nalapat House. She wrote extremely well. However, another bout of illness, this time a heart attack, took her once more to Mumbai. 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” (208). Her hungers were “fulfilled”, her desires were purged and 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 (209-210).

Death, she realized, would not be able to end the world; the world and the life in it shall go on, her sons shall produce brilliant children: “My descendants shall populate this earth. It is enough for me. It is more than enough…” (219).

Thus, Kamala Das, in *My Story* recounted the trials of her marriage and her painful self-awakening as a woman and a writer. She became an icon for women, in India and elsewhere, struggling to liberate themselves from sexual and domestic oppression. Though it was supposed to be an autobiography (and indeed was provocatively subtitled “the compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian
Das later admitted that there was plenty of fiction in *My Story*. Kamala Das’s autobiographical journey proves to be rewarding. Her heart may felt liberated after recounting her past.

Though Kamala Das’s autobiography was on her loneliness and alienation, K. Satchidanandan writes about her that there were the moments of joy too in her life:

Not that she did not have moments of joy as when she was in her ancestral house when her husband faded into an unreal figure; she found pleasure in moon-gazing her baby-son’s face, listening to the bhajans of Meera on the gramophone, being admired by her cousins, discovering herself in her lyrical stories or confessional poems or finding ephemeral mirth in the hands of a lover from India or abroad, like being decorated with white flowers by her ‘grey-eyed friend’, watching the Gulmohurs burning the edge of the sky, or feeling like a virgin in the hands of lover with eighteen mirrors in his room into which she dipped her ‘hot brown body’ like into eighteen ponds, receiving fan mail including letters of infatuation, why, even the proud, in brief, physical intimacy she developed with her husband during her nervous breakdown in Mumbai when the contours of her world had blurred - but the overall experience was what she sums up in the sentence: ‘I was like a house with all the lights put out.’

She passed through months of intense depression and even contemplated taking her life when she found herself ‘dancing on the most desolate pinnacle of the world’. She wept like a wounded child when shreds of unjustified scandals concerning her emotional life reached her through well-meaning relatives (14).

Dr. Sharad Rajimwale, in his article “Kamala Das: Need for Re-Assessment” states that “Kamala Das could not escape from her own personality: 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. And Kamala Das’s inner world has not remained her personal demesne, it has acquired profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered womankind (9).

Kamala Das became more philosophical as she grew. K. Satchidanandan writes on her philosophical views as:

She says how it was necessary for her body to defile itself in many ways so that the soul turned humble for a change. She realized too that love had a beginning and an end, while lust has no such faults. She found that the body was a clumsy gadgetry that could damage
all bonds. In her poem ‘Suicide’ she says: ‘Bereft of soul, / My body shall be bare; / Bereft of body, / My soul shall be bare’. The Anamalai poems are full of references to the tortuous inward journey. ‘There is a love greater than all you know / that awaits you where the red road finally ends.’ She began more and more to identify God with her lover. ‘The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He ... In many shapes shall I surrender to Him’ (71).

The last paragraph in his Relocating My Story, expresses K. Satchidanandan’s view about the autobiography of Kamala Das “I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman’s inner life in all its sad solitude, its desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colours and its turbulent poetry” (Ibid, 72).

The Indian women writing in English today is more concerned with the man-woman relationship than with any other issue. Indian women writers portray woman as an individual in search of freedom, self-assertion and longing for fulfillment of her desires. But as she is trapped between tradition and modernity and is crushing between the outer forces and her inner urge, her strife for individuality and quest for satisfaction result in breaking up of family and the relationship of age-old institution of marriage. She gets frustrated and nervous and her desire for freedom and fulfillment is shattered. Kamala Das, disillusioned and frustrated in conjugal love, tried to seek love, pleasure and satiety outside the marital relation. Her poems express this quest and resulting frustration in her marital and extramarital relations. As Vrinda Nabar observes: “My Story and her responses to my questionnaire suggest that she began seriously writing verse because of her intense unhappiness in her marriage” (19).

Kamala Das’s writing is an escape from the reality of her frustrating relationship. Majority of her poems are confessional which express anguish and agony in marital love. As Harimohan Prasad observes, “her poetry is an autobiography, and articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot’s distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating” (35).

A sexual humiliation is the central experience in My Story and this finds poetic expression in The Sunshine Cat. The woman in the poem pines for establishing a relationship with her husband to feel the warmth of love, but her husband “neither loved
her nor/used her, but was a ruthless watcher” (25). Her desires for deep emotional contact sway her and she turns to other men but none of them could satisfy her. Das in *The Freaks* mentions her lover’s ‘sunstained cheek’ and ‘his mouth, a dark cavern where stalactites of uneven teeth gleam’ (23). The image of ugliness here focuses on her rejection of her husband. She is there only because as a wife she must submit herself to the lust of her husband. Her anguish and frustration is exhibited in these lines:

Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in Love? (11)

The insatiated wife’s heart like a ‘an empty cistern’ fills only ‘with coiling snakes of silence.’ The husband and emptiness and sterility in the life of the wife narrated in the poem can be identified with the poet’s personal life told in *My Story*.

The anguished and insatiated woman in *Composition* talks about her relations as completely frustrating and disgusting. She says: ‘I have learnt that friendship/cannot endure/that blood-ties do not satisfy.’ She, however, continues making contacts ‘with every interesting man’ she meets and says:

I must
Most deliberately
Whip up a froth of desire
A passion to suit the occasion (5).

In the poem *An Introduction* she passes through the same agonizing path of rejection, dejection and frustration as has been written of an event in *My Story*. The woman in the poem recalls:

I asked for love not knowing what else to ask
For he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman body felt so beaten (26).

*The Descendants* generalizes her personal experience of depression, frustration and wistfulness and says: ‘we were the yielders/yielding ourselves to everything’ and
The Looking Glass mirrors a realistic image of the lustful relationship between (every) man and (every) woman and also the inevitable frustration that follows. The woman in the poem asserts:

Oh, yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced (27).

With Kamala Das it is essentially a matter of attuning our critical vision to “the hidden vistas” of her inner world which has so much to offer to our perturbed, questioning mind. For her poetry is not “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” as Eliot asserts (421). To her, “A poet’s raw material is not clay or stone; it is her personality. I could not escape from personality…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” (V).

To conclude, Kamala Das’s autobiographical writing has not remained her personal demesne. It has acquired profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered womankind.