Chapter 6-Writing the Unspeakable-Kamla Das’ My Story

Kamla Das’ autobiography My Story is remarkable for the boldness in its self-projection. The book courageously depicts experiences like her first menstruation, having crush on her teachers, painful first wedding night, going in for extra-marital affairs- experiences which may not have found place in the Indian woman’s autobiography earlier. Writing about the book in his Indian Writing in English, Prof.Iyengar points out that the book has ‘uninhibited revelations of her feelings and experiences’. M. K.Naik has called the book as ‘almost brutally frank’. Of course, this ‘almost brutal frankness’ may have something to do with the fact that the book was written for monetary reasons. Even then it is remarkable that in a country where moral deviations are often kept under the wraps and where even men are reluctant to publicly acknowledge them, Kamla Das has shown the courage to openly talk about them in details. With this forthrightness in self-presentation, the book may be considered a landmark in the history of the Indian woman’s autobiography.

The introduction reveals the background of the book-it tells us that there were two reasons for writing the book. Firstly, Kamla Das was
suffering from a heart disease and she had been hospitalised for it, when the doctor advised her to write the book, as it would distract her mind from the fear of a sudden death. Secondly, there were a lot of hospital bills to pay. The book was serialised in a journal. Kamla Das recovered and was discharged from the hospital. By that time, the serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal and caused a lot of furore in Kerala. Kamla Das' relatives were embarrassed – they felt that she had brought a bad name to the family by freely revealing her extra-marital affairs. When the writer went to her home-state for a short vacation, she was not warmly received by people- she had to hurry back to Mumbai. In spite of this, the serial was published in the form of a book by Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd., Delhi in 1976.

The book belongs to the post-Independence age- the age which witnessed a lot of improvement in the position of women due to various factors like the rise of female literacy, job opportunities for women, feminism, women's organizations etc. As a result of this improved position, some women became courageous, assertive, independent-minded, unconventional. The background of the book reflects the frankness of the modern woman- it shows that now she has gained her own voice, even at the risk of inviting public censure for it.
The title of the book *My Story* is significant because unlike the title of the autobiography of Ramabai Ranade that refers to ‘our’ life, this one refers to ‘my’ life, which shows the women’s gaining their own voice. Besides, as Iqubal Kaur points out,

> The repetitive use of the personal and possessive pronouns in *My Story*, also has its link with the narcissistic tendencies of the writer. Even the name of the autobiography begins with the possessive pronoun “My”.  

The title is also suggestive. Like all autobiographies, this one is also a combination of fact and fiction- Kamla Das herself has admitted this in an interview. When the interviewer asked her,

> Q. Are any parts of *My Story* creations of your imagination?  
> A. Any book will contain passages which are the creation of the writer’s imagination. *My Story* is no exception. Whether something happened to me or to another woman is immaterial. What really matters is the experience, the incident. It may have happened to another woman who is probably too timid to write about it. I wanted to chronicle the times we live in and I had to write about the experience.

Kamla Das poetic sensibility and critical acumen is reflected by the perceptive remarks she makes regarding poets-

> Poets... can not close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality.

Such perceptive remarks make the writing philosophical. However, Kamla Das has a tendency to make subjective or melodramatic statements and to
masquerade them as philosophical truths. Regarding her return to the serenity of Nalapat after going through the problematic life in Mumbai, she melodramatically declares,

I should never have taken to wearing the coloured clothes of the city. I should have dressed only in white and I should have loaded my limbs with gold. I should never have done house-keeping at a small flat owned by the Reserve Bank of India, or worried about the payment of the grocer’s bill. I belonged to the serenity of Nalapat. Nalapat belonged to me.

Vrinda Nabar has confuted these statements—

Yes, but we all sometimes feel that way, and ‘should never have’ is one of the commonest and most self-deluding of sentimental arguments. When all the talk about primal roots and the call of the land has run its course, we go back to doing what we ‘should never have’ done. It’s not as if there is anything essentially wrong or false about feeling this way. It’s just that Mrs. Das always stops at this point. There is no attempt to analyse such statements, no indication that she is aware of their limitations. They are expressed as some kind of absolute unconditional truths.

She loves nature. Nature is something like a refuge for her—as a child, when she has been neglected by her mother, she lies near a hedge of Henna which has ‘sprouted its tiny flowers’. As Iqubal Kaur observes,

She seems to be trying to seek from the hedge of Henna (at a very tender state of its being i.e. when it had given birth to tiny flowers) all the maternal love, warmth and protection which her real mother fails to give her.
Similarly, at the age of eighteen, when she has got dissatisfied with her married life, she spends every evening by the sea-shore. She has the Byronic tendency of projecting her own feelings into nature—she, thus, projects her own loneliness into the sun. In this way, the book brings out different aspects of man’s relationship with nature.

Kamla Das can easily shake off the influence of her parents, though she inherits certain qualities from them. Her mother is a famous poetess and she seems to have inherited love for literature from her. Thus, even as a school-going girl, she and her brother edit a magazine. Though she has to leave off her school education and get married at the age of fifteen, she continues to educate herself by reading a lot. Her wide reading has enriched her writings. When her first son is born, she is happy that he resembles Lord Byron, whom she admires greatly. She is even ecstatic about a slight deformity in the foot of her son because it seems to make his resemblance to Byron more authentic. Similarly, while writing about her son’s fraternising with an intellectual called Dr. K.N. Raj, she says that she appreciates this move because she believes that one should always associate with one’s own intellectual caste. In this context, she refers to writers like Duncan Grant or Virginia Woolf, who huddled together in the Bloomsbury group. Vrinda Nabar has rightly objected to this comparison between a person whose
intellectual eminence is yet to be proved with a group of eminent intellectuals. Yet it certainly reflects Kamla Das’ wide literary knowledge.

She has inherited poetic sensitivity from the mother. Her sensitivity seems to enable her to identify herself with the characters in her Malayam stories and novels, which makes her fiction very popular.

On the other hand, this intense sensitivity seems to have created some psychological problems for her. As a child, with her extreme sensitivity, she craves for love and appreciation. Unfortunately, just like Krishna Hutheesing, she also suffers from parental neglect, as the father is always busy with his work, while the mother spends all her time lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. The relationship of the father and the mother is ‘arid’ and the mother seems to seek to escape from this reality by continuously writing poems. So both the parents have no time to attend to Kamla Das or so she would have us believe. Whether she has been really thoroughly neglected by them or not is doubtful- for as she herself tells us- her father himself appoints a tuition teacher for her to teach drawing and dance, which means that the parents provide her with some opportunities of realizing her potential. Still they may have neglected her to a certain extent. In spite of being a poetess herself, the mother does not appreciate the verses Kamla Das writes at the small age, which makes
her wish that she were born to British parents, who could have been proud of her verses. The father exercises what may be called as ‘repressive authority’ in Jung’s terminology over her- he wakes his children out of their sleep, roars at them and makes them drink the monthly purgative of pure castor oil. In the view of Jung,

The father represents the world of moral commands and prohibitions.  

Her brother and sisters have been also neglected by the parents and treated with too much strictness by them but with her intense sensitivity, Kamla Das suffers more acutely from this neglect and harsh treatment than they do. So just like Krishna Hutheesing, she develops inferiority complex.

As in Krishna Hutheesing’s case, her inferiority complex transforms itself into superiority complex. Right from her childhood, she seems to be a narcissus and so as a child, she dreams of being ‘Draupadi’ the mythical heroine or Nurjehan the historical heroine. This superiority complex has been fed by the neglect and rejection she has to face at home, school and later on in her married life and so in adulthood, she revels in drawing public attention to herself- in having people ‘deeply infatuated with her’.

Kamla Das’ narcissism gives her a desire to dominate over others. For her, riches always mean domination and so as a child, she dreams of marrying ‘a rich man, a zamindar and living on in the city of Calcutta’.
Significantly enough, as a child, she has Hitler and Mussolini as her heroes and she wants to become just like them after she comes of age. She keenly desires to possess jewellery, which is often a woman’s means of impressing others with her display of wealth.

As there is always a strong link between pride and humiliation, Kamla Das is always intensely sensitive to humiliations. This sensitivity is so intense that she projects her own feeling of humiliation into others. Writing about her child’s being neglected by his father, she writes,

the baby clung to me and I sensed he too felt the humiliation of our position.\textsuperscript{18}

This strong awareness of humiliations also goes with a sense of deprivation. Feeling deprived of the love of the living, even as a small child she occasionally visits a cemetery to communicate with the dead. After her marriage, her inability to get on well with the husband further strengthens this sense of deprivation.

With her strong awareness of humiliations and sense of deprivation, right from her childhood Kamla Das has a tendency to alienate herself from others- to live in a world of her own day-dreams and fantasies. She seems to get love and recognition- something that she longs for and that has been denied to her in real life- in this make-believe world. Just like her mother,
she seems to escape from the realities of life into the world of imagination and so she writes poems at the age of six.

This tendency to alienate herself from others gives her a perpetual sense of loneliness—she feels lonely even while being in company. Her sense of loneliness is so intense that she projects it into the street, the hours, the sky, the mountains, the eyes etc— even Goddess Kali, who is supposed to be a symbol for ‘nari shakti’, is considered to be lonely by her.

In her childhood, if the parental neglect makes Kamla Das bold enough to occasionally visit a cemetery, it also gives her a sense of insecurity and fear, which leads her to seek for parental love in other kinds of relationships. She demands the security of parental love from the husband after her marriage. The husband does not fulfill this irrational demand— instead, he simply neglects her, which further strengthens her sense of insecurity. Thus, she fears the old age because she feels that after being a neglected daughter and a neglected wife, she will again be a neglected person in her old age.

Apart from creating all such psychological problems, Kamla Das’ extreme sensitivity also leads her to intensely resent her mother probably because the mother does not appreciate her and so in her, the mother...
complex assumes the shape of ‘resistance to the mother’. In the view of Jung, in the case of women suffering from this complex,

All instinctive processes meet with unexpected difficulties; either sexuality does not function properly, or the children are unwanted, or the demands of marital life are responded to with impatience and irritation.  

The same happens with Kamla Das, whose sexuality can not develop properly. Besides, her psyche is subtly influenced by the orthodox Nalapat culture from which she comes. ‘Purity’ is one of the most dominant concepts of this culture- sex is the most hated thing and even the mention of sex is a taboo. Though at the conscious level, Kamla Das rejects the concept of ‘purity’ and even makes fun of it, it exercises a lot of influence upon her subconscious mind. The nuns at the boarding school where she has been educated also instill revulsion for sexual matters in her mind and so she associates sex with sin and guilt. For her, an ideal relationship is the one without lust, a relationship in which she will remain a ‘virgin’ even in the arms of the beloved. Even when she has a crush upon her drawing-teacher and she secretly calls upon him, all that she can do is to weep copiously and come back. In her childhood, she dreams of being a Kunti and getting impregnated by the sun, without having any kind of sexual intercourse at all. Later on she finds her ‘animus’ in Lord Krishna, seemingly because that love is without any kind of lust. With her superiority complex, she believes
that it is only Lord Krishna—and not any other ordinary person—who can be her husband. Lord Krishna seems to be a ‘safe’ animus for her, because He can provide her with parental love and protection, without demanding sexual gratification from her. After her marriage, she tries to seek for this kind of ‘divine union’ in the relationship with her husband. She remains ‘cold and frigid’ in the arms of her husband—immediately after he strips her, her shyness seems to stick to her like a second skin, which prevents her from enjoying the love-making. Besides, being married at the age of fifteen, her body is not yet ripe for the sexual act. On the contrary, her husband is obsessed with sex, which makes her relationship with the husband fall flounder. This may also have something to do with Jung’s opinion that in the case of a woman having this kind of complex, it often happens that

... a diabolical fate will present her with a husband who shares all the essential traits of her mother’s character.¹³

Kamla Das’ husband is also as neglectful to her as the mother and this could have also ruined her sexual relationship with him. So she goes in for extramarital affairs but she tries to seek for ‘divine union’ even in those relationships at times. The feeling of guilt that she associates with sex also leads her to invest the affairs with a religious aura. Thus, ‘I was Carlo’s Sita’, reads the title of a chapter regarding her affair with a person called Carlo. It is absurd that she should compare herself with Sita, who is
supposed to be the epitome of ‘pativrata’, marital fidelity, in this matter. Professor Ranjini Obeysekere seems to admire this religious idiom for projecting her extra-marital affairs -

Das reaches into her own religious tradition to find support for her defiant individuality. 14

Nothing is admirable about using religious imagery on this score- it suggests that in the heart of her hearts, Kamla Das feels guilty about her moral deviations and so she tries to give them some kind of religious veneer. Thus, the concepts of purity and hatred of sex, which she has unconsciously inherited from her traditional culture as well as her ‘resistance to the mother’ complex seem to ruin her relationships. This seems to make her eternally restless and this restlessness has been hardly understood by the world around her. Her husband does not understand why she is ‘always dissatisfied’ even when he ‘performs the conjugal responsibility’ very well, ignoring the fact that the wife demands ‘divine’ love, and not sexual pleasure, from him. Later on when she goes in for extra-marital affairs and freely writes about them, people do not understand the restlessness behind it- they simply consider her to be a nymphomaniac and try to seek ‘lecherous hugs’ from her. All this is inevitable in the Indian social, cultural scenario in which the woman is more of an object of desire rather than a distinct individual, with
her own emotional needs and problems. Consequently her restlessness continues till the end.

All such psychological problems seem to have been resolved at the end of the book because of two reasons - a severe ailment that she goes through and her wide exposure to the world of the poor. It may also have something to do with the Jungian theory that a woman with the 'resistance to the mother' complex can attain to a greater consciousness at a later stage in her life.

The woman who fights against her father still has the possibility of leading an instinctive, feminine existence, because she rejects only what is alien to her. But when she fights against the mother she may, at the risk of injury to her instincts, attain to a greater consciousness, because in repudiating the mother she repudiates all that is obscure, instinctive, ambiguous and unconscious in her own nature.  

After watching the artificial and licentious world of the rich at Delhi, Mumbai or Calcutta, she goes to Nalapat and likes the simple life of the poor villagers over there. She notices that while her unconventional writings make the rich spread lush scandals about her, the poor love and respect her. She also realizes that while people like her are always dissatisfied with their lives and they always keep pining for more and more wealth, the poor keep working hard from the morning to the dusk and yet they have more of vitality and optimism than the rich. Having thus gained an insight into the
lives of the poor, she seems to overcome her narcissism—she then comes to realize that she is not apart from others but a part of them. Her desire to dominate over others also seems to melt away in the end. The person who is after riches finally adopts a liberal and sympathetic attitude towards the poor and criticizes the rich for looking down upon them. With the dissolution of her narcissism, her intense awareness of humiliations also seems to vanished. She, for example, does not find any kind of humiliation in sitting on the floor alongside the poor for listening to their songs. After her narcissism has dissolved, she does not seem to feel deprived any longer. As she begins to identify herself with others, her tendency to alienate herself from others and thereby feel lonely also seems to disappear and so does her sense of insecurity. At the end of the book, she calmly tells us that after her death, tears will dry on the cheeks of her sons. The idea that she will be forgotten by her children after her death does not seem to disturb her any more. The person who once lived in the make-believe world of daydreams and fantasies comes to understand and accept the harsh realities of life and with that, her restlessness seems to give way to a sense of peace.

Even though she inherits love for literature and poetic sensitivity from the mother, Kamla Das is far from being a blind follower of the mother. Kamla Das’ mother is a timid woman, who is always afraid of her husband.
and who creates an illusion of domestic harmony to please her relatives and friends even though she does not love the husband. She seems to hide her restlessness, while Kamla Das courageously articulates her restless self. Similarly, in a striking contrast with the mother, in spite of having fear and sense of insecurity, she is defiant by nature. As a child, she hates the parental authority and occasionally slips out of her house in defiance of it. In the opinion of Jung, when parents exercise ‘repressive authority’ over children, it results in dependent personalities or in men and women who can achieve their independence only by furtive means.16

Kamla Das also seeks her independence by ‘furtive means’ by slipping out of the house. Right from her childhood, she is strongly aware of limitations of the culture of the Nayyar caste in which she has been brought up and seems to detest them. Thus, even though the questioning spirit has been discouraged in that culture, she asks questions to an elder like Valiamma. Even though it is unseemly for a Nair child to call an aged relative by name, she calls ‘Ammalu’, an aged relative of hers, by name. At the boarding school, she hates the authority of the nuns and manages to smuggle some ice cream into the school over the wall. Similarly, even though the nuns censor all her letters, she manages to write to her father, begging him to rescue her
from that 'hell'. She rebels against her orthodox culture by refusing to have a 'bridal bath' on the day of her wedding. After her marriage, she loathes the uncaring nature of the husband and rebels against it by remaining a virgin for nearly a fortnight. Later on she rebels against the same nature by going in for extra-marital affairs or drinking wildly. In this matter, she seems to be more progressive than Krishna Hutheesing, who would not have dreamed of being physically disloyal to the husband. Her going in for extra-marital affairs is an act of defiance against her cultural background, which is dominated by the concept of purity and in which, even mentioning sex is something like a sin. Her writing an autobiography, in which she freely reveals her extra-marital affairs, is also a rebellion against her Nayyar culture. In this way, whenever others dominate over her, she rebels against it- she always seems to desire freedom from all kinds of domination. Significantly enough, she does not seek the help of any 'wise old man' while defying any kind of authority.

Of course, this defiance has its own limitations- even though she finds that her husband is not able to love her, she does not go in for a divorce as she is afraid of standing up to the public censure it may invite. This is also because she wants her children to have the shade of parental love and she knows that being 'frigid', she is unable to keep any other husband happy.
Similarly, her mind is subtly influenced by the traditional rural culture of India, as indicated by the abundant use of archetypal images in the book. As a child, she dreams of being Draupadi or Kunti. Even her ‘animus’ is an archetypal image like Lord Krishna and she tries to look for Him in her husband and the other lovers. When she gets pregnant, she dreams of having a child like Lord Krishna. She seems to be obsessed with this primordial image because He has been called as ‘Meghashyam’ or ‘Ghanashyam’-black as clouds- and she herself has suffered from inferiority complex on account of her swarthy skin. Significantly enough, she refers to Lord Krishna as ‘the dark God of girlhood dreams’ and speaks of His ‘his dark limbs’ and ‘the dusk of his skin’. The image of Lord Krishna the child could have fascinated her mind because it represents childhood happiness, which has not come her way. She also seems to appreciate the primordial image of Goddess Kali as Goddess Kali is dark in colour- when Goddess Kali dances, she has ‘a leap of recognition’ in her heart. It is significant to note that she can not do without an archetype even while talking about something as unconventional as an extra-marital affair, which shows the influence of traditional Indian culture on her mind. Similarly, after going through the problematic lives of Mumbai or Calcutta, she returns to the serenity her Nalapat house and feels like staying there permanently, which symbolizes
her return to her traditional roots. After going for extra-marital relationships, she seems to finally realize the futility of it and to find succor in worshipping Lord Krishna. It all means that for all her rebelliousness, Kamla Das is a traditionalist at her heart but she seems to be unable to completely accept her traditional self.

In a striking contrast with the mother who neglects her children, she becomes a ‘good mother’ in the terminology of Jung. As she herself has suffered a lot due to the parental neglect, she seems to have become a caring mother for her children. Once when her son is sick, she childishly vows to Lord Krishna that she would remove all her ornaments and place them at the feet of His idol if the child is saved. However, the book does not comprehensively project this aspect of Kamla’s personality—nor does it vividly portray her sons. This has led D. Maya, who has compared the autobiographies of Maya Angelou and Kamla Das, to conclude from that comparison—

As a loving, caring and dedicated mother sitting by the sick beds of her children praying, she appears more appealing than as the wife with her unfilled cravings. But there is none of the intimacy and rapport transmitted through the beautiful mother-son relationship sketched by Maya Angelou...Kamla Das’ role as mother in shaping the children’s character or the impact of her personality on their individuality are aspects left unmentioned in My Story. Unlike Guy whose presence lends warmth to Maya Angelou’s story, Kamla Das’ children hardly come to life through the
pages of the book.

Like all daughters, Kamala Das has a lot of love for father- when her father suffers from a heart attack at Calicut, she takes the first flight home from Delhi and lovingly looks after him. Kamla Das' father is a man of ideals - at the time of his betrothal, the Gandhian movement is at its height and so he comes under the influence of Gandhi and firmly stipulates that his wife should not wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off-white. After the wedding he makes her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, except the ‘mangalsutra’. He is also a generous man, who has saved an old servant from penury and provided him with an employment. Kamla Das also seems to have inherited something of his generosity and idealism. Her wide reading and exposure to the world seem to have given her social awareness, which is reflected in the references she makes to the Gandhian movement, the Hindu-Muslim riots following the Partition, the Bangladesh war etc. With this idealism, generosity and social awareness, she seems to develop a genuine concern for the poor in the end. During the Ganpati festival, she drags her husband to a place where the poor loudly sing devotional songs and enjoys their singing. At one place, she claims to be a socialist and at another one, she comes up with some remedies for improving the condition of the poor. She suggests that a rupee should be collected from
every middle-class house and low-cost tenements should be built up for the poor with that money or that hoteliers should set aside one tenth of their income to feed the poor.

However, she does not seem to have deep understanding of social or political matters and so the solutions she suggests for improving the lot of the poor seem to be ‘a little naïve’, as Vrinda Nabar rightly calls them. Even though she claims to be a socialist, she does not seem to have properly studied socialism. Her idea of socialism is also a queer one—she believes that socialism means being honest to oneself. She also believes that one should fraternise with only one’s own ‘intellectual’ caste, which is hardly consistent with her self-projection as a socialist. Her idea of ‘intellectuals’ is also rather strange - at a place, she tells us that ‘all the non-intellectuals’ stayed away and only ‘genuine friends’ came to see her. As Vrinda Nabar notes—

You can’t divide people into friends and foes, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, purely on the basis of whether they flatter or criticise. Mrs. Das, unfortunately, comes dangerously close to doing so.

In spite of having love for the father and having inherited something of his idealism, Kamla Das does not have the negative father complex of deeming the father to be ‘eternally right’ in all matters. As a child, she resents the British domination and so when Western meals have been forced
upon her and her brother, both she and her brother eat those meals with their ‘little brown fingers’ instead of fork and knife. In spite of being under the influence of Gandhism, the father seems to have no objection to eating with the ‘fork and knife’, while this little child rebels against it. In defiance of the father’s insistence on Gandhian simplicity, she loves luxury and opulence. She does not like the fact that her father gets her married off at the tender age of fifteen, that too with a person who is unable to love her. She does not like the fact that in spite of being an exponent of Gandhian simplicity, the father lavishes a lot of money upon her wedding. She later on goes in for drinking or extramarital affairs and freely writes about it, which is also a rejection of the father’s Gandhian idealism.

In the ultimate analysis, it may be said that Kamla Das has a lot of independent individuality. Her case shows that a modern woman can be defiant to all kinds of authority in spite of having fear and a sense of insecurity- that her wide exposure to the world can bring her out of the cocoon of narcissism and make her one with others and also enable her to journey from the world of imagination to the hard realities of life. Her inability to reconcile her traditional self with the modern one is the only thing that somewhat mars her individuation. Her world of experience is wider than that of Krishna Hutheesingh. Unlike Krishna Hutheesingh, she
has been sent to a Christian boarding school at the age of nine, which brings her into contact with various girls, coming from different backgrounds. Unlike Krishna Hutheesingh, she also has some experience of editing a magazine, acting in plays or running a badminton team. Unlike her, she also has 'unspeakable' experiences like having a crush on a teacher, getting married off at the unripe age of fifteen and therefore being unable to meet the sexual demands of the husband, going in for different lovers. Naturally enough, the range of her experiences as reflected in her autobiography is wider than that in With No Regrets.

The self-portrait has some honesty—she does not hide uncomplimentary things like the one that she can be vindictive at times— as her husband has neglected her, she feels a sense of spiteful elation over his being tormented by the boss. However, she has a tendency to blame others for everything and to project herself as a hapless victim of other’s cruelty or cupidity, which somewhat mars this honesty. Thus, she blames the insensitive treatment received at the hands of the husband for her going in for extra-marital affairs. Here she fails to reckon with the fact that she herself is to be at least partially blamed for the failure of her married life. She does not acknowledge the fact that it is unethical on her part to be disloyal to the husband even while enjoying the financial and emotional
security offered by him. Her giving some kind of religious veneer to her extra-marital affairs also mars the honesty of her self-portrait.

The self-portrait reveals the maturing of her personality. So it seems difficult to agree with R.Raphael when he compares the autobiography of Kamla Das with the autobiographies of Gandhi, Nirad C.Chaudhari, St.Augustine, Cardinal Newman and concludes from the comparison that unlike these autobiographies, Kamla Das’ does not reveal a sense of growth-

It is not the story of the unfolding of a great personality. There is no element of quest, spiritual or otherwise, no ideological confrontation. The structure of her ‘Story’ may be analogically spoken of as a passage from ignorance of her flesh to a knowledge of it- at the beginning of her story she felt that she was incapable of enjoying sex and looked suspiciously at her husband who enjoyed it. But there soon came a time when she did learn to enjoy orgasmic pleasure. And once she learnt that, she went after quite a number of strong men to satisfy the demand of her flesh 20.

This view is not acceptable on two counts. In the first place, it is not necessary that every autobiography should reveal ‘the unfolding of a great personality’. This amounts to saying that only the great should write their autobiographies. Secondly, as shown above, the book reflects the flowering of Kamla Das’ personality in various respects. So Kamla Das’ beginning to enjoy orgasmic pleasures is not the only kind of growth revealed by the book, as R.Raphael would have us believe.
At a place, Kamla Das tries to probe her subconscious mind-

I was wanted in those days, loved as men love their women, yet I yearned for a change, a new life. I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man’s heart. Otherwise why did I not get peace in the arms of my husband? Subconsciously I hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two.\(^\text{21}\)

Of course, this psychological explanation is not entirely acceptable. As Vrinda Nabar rightly observes, it shows her tendency to mix metaphors—she qualifies the amorphous term ‘the ideal lover’ by firstly referring to Lord Krishna and then to the ‘cruelty that lies in the depths of a man’s heart’. Similarly, it also shows her tendency to project her lovers as ‘cruel’ and herself as a hapless victim of their cruelty. All the same this explanation certainly gives some psychological depth to the book.

The portrait of the husband is comprehensive. Her husband, as portrayed by the book, is intelligent, hard-working, allegedly subservient to his bosses, a licentious person – at least in the early phase of Kamala Das’ married life, a homosexual person who has an odd attachment with a young person, insensitive to the wife and the children in the beginning but subsequently sensitive to them.
The portrait has been drawn with some objectivity but at times Kamla Das seems to be unwilling to acknowledge the good in him. She fails to acknowledge his kindness in comforting her during her illness. Instead, she seems to make fun of it-

... my husband, who had never read a medical book in all his life, told me that I was going to get well.  

Kamla Das should have known that it is not necessary to read medical books to comfort the wife in this way. Similarly, she fails to acknowledge the good in him when he refuses to leave the job seemingly for the sake of his son’s education in spite of being tormented by the boss. Kamla Das also fails to admit his kindness when he takes a casual view of her extra-marital affairs.

As Kamla Das has never been much of an active participant in social and political life and as the focus of the narration is on the self, there are very few other remarkable characters like Narayan Menon, Ammini, Ammalu, Kunji, Kamla’s parents in the book. Apart from being individuals in their own right, some of these characters are also representatives of their age. As Usha V.T. observes, the Nair community in Kerala was matrilineal and matrilocal and so the women in this community enjoyed a lot of freedom and security. Usha V.T. has cited the cases of Ammini and Amalu to illustrate this. Ammini is an attractive woman, with no dearth of proposed
suitors but she prefers to adopt Gandhian ways and turn down all marriage proposals. Ammalu is also a pretty woman, but she remains single and devotes all her life to poetry and loveliness. Both these cases demonstrate the fact that no stigma was attached to spinsterhood in the matriarchal framework of the Nayars.

Some of these characters are parallel and contrasting to each other in some ways. Ammini and Ammalu remain spinsters all their lives and so their cases are parallel to each other. Kamla Das’s parents can not get on well with each other. So their ‘arid union’ is also somewhat parallel to the unhappy married life of Kamla Das and her husband. While Kamla Das’ parents neglect her, Ammalu loves her- her eyes brighten up whenever she sees Kamala. The characters of Kamla Das’ parents and Ammalu are thus somewhat contradictory to each other. Being thus parallel or contradictory to each other, these characters light up each other.

All these characters have been drawn with objectivity, which has been marred by her glorification of Narayan Menon, her great grand uncle. In the Nair community in Kerala, the womenfolk pledged their allegiance to the ‘karanavan’, accepting his word as final, subverting all contrary pictures of him and idolizing his figure. According to Usha V.T., Kamla Das does the same for her grand uncle Narayan Menon when she writes about him-
My grand uncle Narayan Menon was a famous poet-philosopher. He occupied the portico where the easy chairs were placed and the table with the heavy books. There was above his chair a punkah made of wood and covered with calico ruffles, which a servant seated far away could move on pulling its string. Besides his chair was a hookah which my grandfather meticulously cleaned every morning. Grand uncle looked every inch a king, although he did not have enough money even to buy the books he wished to read. ²³

Here Kamla Das is only showing loyalty to her ‘karanavan’ and taking deep pride in his achievements, as the women of her community were supposed to do. Similarly, even though Kamla Das mentions the weaknesses of her granduncle, she highlights his strengths rather than weaknesses. According to Usha V.T., this is also in keeping with the Nayar culture in Kerala, in which women were supposed to exhibit the virtues of their elders and hide their weaknesses in the presence of strangers. Another thing that mars the objectivity in the presentation of these characters is Kamla Das’ tendency to project herself as a victim of others’ cruelty. After telling us that as children, both Kamla and her brother lacked strikingly charming features, for example, Kamla Das goes on to state-

We must have disappointed our parents a great deal. They did not tell us so, but in every gesture and every word it was evident. ²⁴
R. Raphael rightly calls this as 'the most unjust generalization regarding her parents'\textsuperscript{25}. It is hardly believable that parents can be unkind to their children just because they lack strikingly charming features. Similarly, while telling us about her visit to a teacher's, Kamla Das tells us that her parents did not ask her any question about that visit. This gives her an opportunity of projecting herself as a victim of their cruelty-

They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to tugs they gave us. They did not stop a moment to think that we had personalities, that we were developing independently.\textsuperscript{26}

However, her parents might not have asked her questions about her visit because they wanted not to interfere with her activities. As R. Raphael states,

I should think that her parents did not ask her questions about her visit, because they respected her personality, developing independently.\textsuperscript{27}

Kamla Das is selective in giving details. As Iqubal Kaur observes, Kamla Das has used all kinds of sensory images- visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile- in order to create desired literary effects. The book has visual images like 'a white lamp of sun', olfactory images like 'the meaty smell of the vegetable curry', auditory images like 'this cry, agonised as a tortured bird's', tactile images like 'His hand lay like a dead weight in mine'.
Such images make her writings vivid and precise. Besides, they enable her to not only project physical realities but subjective realities also. They also demonstrate the fact that the modern woman is no longer content with presenting physical realities but she is interested in depicting subjective realities as well.

The stylistic device of juxtaposition of opposites is very favourite with Kamla Das. This technique has been used both at the lexical and thematic level. At the lexical level, in a sentence like "... we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young ", the contrasting words 'neglected' and 'pampered' are juxtaposed. At the thematic level, in a sentence like 'Behind the two cottages which were identical was a six-storied building called the Dhunastra which was old and vacant', Kamla Das has contrasted cottages with an old and vacant building. This subtly reveals the fact that while big buildings are lying vacant, poor people have to live in cottages. Iqubal Kaur has noted the advantages that this stylistic feature has given to the book-

A frequent and consistent use of the technique of contrast by Kamla Das in her autobiography is indicative of the poetic mind at work...It is one of the features which give clarity and intensity to her prose. 28
Besides, it also adds some subtlety to the book. It also reveals the fact that in spite of her poetic nature, she has firm grasp of the realities of life. According to Greimas,

We perceive the differences and with the help of this perception the world takes form ‘before us and for us’. 29

So Kamla Das’ abundant use of contrasts shows that the world takes form ‘before her and for her’ very well. It is also significant to note that the self-same person who often lived in a make-believe world as a child now consummately perceives the realities of life.

She has used a number of transferred epithets like ‘grey hours’, ‘happy face’, ‘stony hearts’, ‘sick bed’, ‘weepy letter’ etc. In the view of Iqubal Kaur, it has enriched her autobiography in certain ways—

Most of these transferred epithets show that Kamla Das is inclined to endow lifeless things with life and to make the abstract phenomenon concrete… Transferred epithets also show the creativity and originality of the writer. These show him as ‘a maker of language’. Transferred epithets break the monotony of the language and give it freshness and novelty. A free use of transferred epithets in this text is indicative of a mature and analytical mind. 30

She has used a large number of adjectives in the book. The range of these adjectives is wide- they refer to various things like color, beauty, ugliness, riches, poverty etc. She has often used more than one adjective consecutively, which shows her tendency to describe the phenomenon in
fullness of details. She has used expressions like 'a wide red glow', 'long black boy', 'round smooth breasts', 'loud friendly sounds'. At times she has not even used a comma to divide these adjectives. As Iqubal Kaur has observed, this enables the reader 'to perceive the double signification in a single flash'. Apart from that, it gives some novelty to the book. All such stylistic devices make her descriptions precise, vivid, concrete and picturesque.

Kamla Das also has the novelist's knack of portraying an incident evocatively. This makes her narration very interesting and absorbing.

The narrative-technique is unconventional to a certain extent, even though the book generally relates all the incidents in a chronological order. As Vrinda Nabar points out, no specific dates have been mentioned in the book and this makes the book an impressionistic account of the writer's life rather than a source-book of methodical information about it. Similarly, as an unnamed writer has observed,

For Mrs. 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.

Some of the chapters have been preceded by some lines of Kamla Das's poems. In the view of Mr. A. N. Dwivedi, these lines serve as epigraphs, setting the tone and temper of every chapter.
The writer has dispensed with inverted commas or question-marks at times. A sentence like

"Why should I cry, child?", she said," today is a happy day for all of us".

has been printed as

Why should I cry, child, she said, today is a happy day for all of us.\(^\text{33}\)

Similarly, Kamla Das has used some abnormal collocations like ‘beautiful anguish’, ‘bitter trophies’, ‘ sweet sinner’ in the book. As Iqubal Kaur notes,

Deviance lends charm and freshness to ordinary, prosaic expressions and shows the writer’s dissatisfaction with cliché, her originality, her defiance of the existing norms even at the level of expression. \(^\text{34}\)

While dealing with her return to Nalapat house, Kamla has printed a complete sentence in capital letters-

I HAD UNWITTINGLY SPLIT THE BLOOD OF ITS SPIRIT. \(^\text{35}\)

As Iqubal Kaur states,

The use of capital letters here is... significant and is linked up with her acute awareness of her sense of guilt and remorse on staying away from Nalapat house.\(^\text{36}\)

All this gives some innovativeness to the language-style.
The style is poetic, as Kamla Das has made abundant use of figures of speech. As per Iqubal Kaur’s consideration, Kamla Das has used more than two hundred similes in the text, which shows her poetic mind. Besides, according to Iqubal Kaur,

It is in the use of figure of speech that she can best satisfy her desire for freedom.  

Iqubal Kaur has quoted a statement by Andre Breton in support of this idea-

The image alone gives me by its unexpectedness and suddenness, a full sense of potential liberation and and this liberation is so complete.  

So Kamla Das’ wide use of figures of speech shows her longing for freedom.

All these similes have been also drawn from various fields. A number of similes have been drawn from the zoological world- Kamla Das compares her labor pains with a whale turning on its belly all of a sudden in a sea. Some similes belong to the botanical field- she compares her senses with ‘lotuses that folded themselves into tight buds at sunset hour’. Some similes are archetypal images- Kamla Das has used the primordial images of Pheonix and Virgin Mary, which belong to the universal collective consciousness. Some similes have their roots in archetypal images- a simile like ‘I had shed carnal desire as a snake might shade its skin’ is related with the archetypal image of the snake as something spiritual. In the culture of
Kerala from which the writer comes, there are snake shrines and so naturally enough, the snake has spiritual associations in her mind. All this shows the influence the collective consciousness exerts upon her mind. Some similes belong to the world of anatomy- tombstones have been compared with yellowed teeth. Similes have also come from the world of astronomy- the footlights have been compared with the stars of a wintry morning. The images of babies and children have been commonly used in the book –her granduncle is said to have ‘wept like a baby’. Whenever this image has been used, the child is often crying or helpless, which may be because Kamla Das’ own unhappy childhood makes her associate childhood with crying and helplessness. In this way, the range of these similes is very wide.

They also reflect the expanded world of the modern woman’s knowledge.

Apart from similes, Kamla Das has also made abundant use of metaphors- she describes the maid’s husband as a ‘serpent in disguise’. Such metaphors enable her to precisely and vividly describe things. These similes and metaphors do not render the style artificial- they seem to have naturally sprung from the poetic mind of the writer. As Iqubal Kaur has rightly observed, these similes and metaphors are not used merely used as a ‘fanciful embroidery of the facts’ but as ‘a way of experiencing the facts’. 39
This unartificially poetic style of the book makes it akin to Kamla Das’ poetry. In fact, as Alladi Uma has indicated, both poetry and prose are inextricably mixed up with each other in the book. Alladi Uma has supported this view by quoting some passage from the book, which have been turned into poems by Kamla Das, making only some few alterations in them. This has led Alladi Uma to raise a question- ‘What’s in a Genre?’ Of course, this is a very bold question to ask- even though all literary genres can overlap each other to a certain extent, they have a distinct identity of their own.

In conclusion, it can be said that My Story is certainly remarkable for its bold confessions and unartificially poetic language-style. It registers women’s freedom of talking openly about socially forbidden topics. The next chapter will deal with a book which further explores the innovativeness of the genre.
References

1 Kamla Das. My Story. New Delhi- Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd.,1976. (All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition)


5 As quoted by Alladi Uma in ‘’What’s in a Genre?- Kamla Das’ My Story’’ Literary Criterion, 1996:72.


7 Ibid.176.

8 Vrinda Nabar. ‘’A View of Kamla Das’’ in Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English. Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984.188.


13 Ibid. 91.


19. Ibid.16.


22 Ibid. 195.

23 Ibid. 14.

24 Ibid. 5.


27 Ibid. 74.


30 Iqubal Kaur. *Untying and Retying the Text- An Analysis of Kamla Das’ My Story*


31 Ibid. 173.


37 Ibid. 165.

38 Ibid. 166.

39 Ibid. 165.

40 Alladi Uma.‘‘What’s in a Genre?- Kamla Das’ My Story‘’. *Literary Criterion.* 1996: