


# Narratives of Self-Discovery: Examining Kamala Das's Autobiography in the Context of Women's Empowerment

Dr. S. Sujitha, M.A., M.PHIL., Ph.D., Dr. A. Arun Daves, M.A., M.A., M.PHIL., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 03 Jun 2023; Received in revised form: 01 Jul 2023; Accepted: 07 Jul 2023; Available online: 15 Jul 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p>  <p><b>Keywords— Autobiography, Kamala Das, Self-discovery, Women's identity, Self-assertion</b></p>	<p><i>This research article examines the significance of autobiographical works as a means of self-expression and self-portrayal in contemporary society. The study explores the genre of autobiography, its historical development, and its psychological implications. The research focuses on Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story," as a case study to analyze the themes of self-realization, self-assertion, and the struggles of Indian womanhood. The article highlights the role of autobiographies in challenging societal norms and advocating for women's rights and individuality. It explores how Kamala Das's autobiography defies patriarchal expectations and explores themes of love, sexuality, and personal growth. The research also addresses the impact of Kamala Das's work in reshaping feminine personas in Indian English fiction. Overall, the article contributes to the understanding of autobiographical literature as a powerful medium for self-exploration and social critique.</i></p>

Humans, throughout history, have continuously sought to convey their inner emotions, desires, and aspirations through the medium of art. In the present day, this yearning for self-expression has grown immensely, prompting an increasing number of individuals to explore diverse methods of self-portrayal. Consequently, such artistic endeavours have evolved into autobiographical works. Autobiography entails an author penning the narrative of their own life and accomplishments. Roy Pascal, an early critic of this genre, posited that individuals write autobiographies due to the growing fascination among readers for delving



into the private lives of various individuals. The secrets, beliefs, convictions, intentions, and interests of these individuals captivate readers, who feel privileged to be granted access into the intimate circle of the autobiographer.

In 1982, Philippe Lejeune provided a widely quoted definition of autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning their own existence, focusing on the development of their personality" (2 Anderson). In the book "A Background to the

Study of English Literature for Indian Students" by Birjadish Prasad, Meena Sodhi defines Indian autobiography in English as "an account of the writer's life and personal experiences written by themselves" (Prasad 159). Autobiographies allow authors to share their life stories and achievements from their own perspective.

From a psychological standpoint, an autobiographer is the best authority on their own motives, the pivotal moments that shaped their life, their secret hopes and ambitions, and the extent to which their career fulfilled their aspirations. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, autobiography is born out of first-hand experience, while biography relies on second-hand knowledge. The term "autobiography" is often attributed to the nineteenth-century poet Robert Southey, who is believed to have coined it in 1809.

Before the nineteenth century, the writing and rewriting of the self through constant revisions or serial modes was common in various forms of autobiography. This challenges the notion that there is a definitive or fixed version of the self, as the concept of self-development is socially and historically specific.

Breaking down the word "autobiography," James Olney highlights three components: "auto" refers to the self, the "I" that is explicitly or implicitly present and without which the work would lose meaning; "bios" represents the life, encompassing the individual's entire existence up to the time of writing; and "graphie" signifies the act of writing, which assumes great importance as it gives the self and the life a specific dimension and image. Autobiography becomes a process of self-examination, a discovery and imitation of the self through inner assimilation, ultimately resulting in an artful representation of life.

The purpose of an autobiography is to capture a specific period in one's life that holds particular interest or significance and convey one's sense of self. The events and characters in the author's life are portrayed in a true-to-life manner, revealing their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours. Characterization is used to convey the attitudes, psyche, and behaviour of individuals. Autobiographies are subjective in nature, as they are told from the author's

perspective or point of view. In first-person point of view, the author reflects their own thoughts, feelings, opinions, and biases, while third-person point of view allows for the reflection of multiple characters' perspectives. Omniscient point of view is used by an all-knowing narrator who can reveal the thoughts and feelings of all characters.

Autobiography is an ongoing dialogue with oneself, a depiction of the self by the writer themselves. Kamala Das's famous autobiography, "My Story," serves as an example of this self-dialogue, revealing her urges, yearnings, and inner longings.

Kamala Das's autobiography, "My Story," is indeed a significant work that reflects her struggles as a woman in a doubly colonized world. She wrote the autobiography to assert control over her life and gain power in a patriarchal society. Despite facing criticism for her unconventional actions as an Indian woman, she achieved great success. Kamala Das became a mirror for other marginalized women, amplifying their voices.

"My Story" provides a sense of factualness, personal immersion, and intense emotions, rather than presenting a structured analysis or conclusion. The inclusion of repetitions, contradictions, gaps, and loose ends, which might be considered flaws in traditional literary texts, actually enhance the work's authenticity and its intention to communicate deeply felt experiences. Kamala Das embarked on a lengthy journey to discover her own world and express it through her writing.

The quest for women's identity is a contested issue in literature not only in India but worldwide. Women's self-awareness and self-assertion have often been challenged, as they have historically occupied a secondary position to men and faced suppression by patriarchal systems. Many women writers have taken up the search for their own selfhood as a means of addressing their oppressive and secondary status in society. This pursuit is explicitly portrayed in the post-independence literature of female writers.

Indian women have long endured suffering, grappling with social issues such as the dowry system, molestation, sati (a historical practice of widows self-immolating), sexual

harassment, and a male-dominated society. Even in the 21st century, where education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals and society, women's suffering remains a pressing issue. Indian society often perceives women as weak beings, and women fulfil roles as mothers, sisters, and wives, dedicating their lives to serving others like unpaid servants. However, when they become old or unable to tend to men's needs, they are often considered liabilities and abandoned by their loved ones, for whom they have tirelessly toiled.

In autobiographies written by women, the relationship between the author and her mother is a central theme. However, Kamala Das intentionally avoids discussing her relationship with her mother and instead focuses on the oppression faced by third-world women. She places her relationships with men at the centre of her story. Only in the first chapter does she provide some information about her relationship with her father and mother. She portrays her father as an autocratic figure, always engrossed in his work and lacking affection. Kamala Das and her brother grew up neglected, as her father's stern nature intimidated them. Her mother, on the other hand, is portrayed as indifferent, spending her time lying on a large four-post bed and writing poems in Malayalam. Kamala Das's parents did not raise her and her brother with parental love and affection, indicating a lack of compatibility between them.

Kamala Das, both as a writer and an individual, vehemently protests against the physical humiliation and degradation endured by women. Not only is the individual identity of a woman devalued, but the collective gender identity of the female community is also regarded as inferior. Women are often objectified and seen as mere objects of sexual desire, their lack of a strong individual identity exploited and misused by society. Kamala Das's autobiography serves as a bold confession, revealing the emotional turmoil experienced by women and shedding light on the injustices perpetrated against them. She explores the feminine psyche, delves into man-woman relationships, and fearlessly expresses her opinions on themes such as infidelity, love, and sex. While she portrays women in traditional roles as caring mothers, loving sisters, and understanding daughters, she

also highlights their rebellion against injustice and their determination to live life on their own terms.

Indeed, Kamala Das faced difficulties and disappointment in her married life. She yearned for both receiving and giving love, but her romantic ideals about love and home were shattered by an insensitive husband. Her husband's actions caused her pain and deep disappointment. This aspect of her personal life further fuelled her exploration of relationships and the complexities of love in her writing.

Kamala Das shares her views about her marriage.

*All the gult made me feel cheap and uncomfortable. Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue..." (90)*

In Kamala Das's autobiographical work, "My Story," she attempts to piece together the fragmented feelings of women through artistic visualization and expresses her concerns about the independence and individuality of Indian womanhood. After her marriage, she endured physical suffering. Kamala's expectations and longings were common among women, but all she experienced was hardship. She candidly expresses that her husband was driven by lust, expecting her to fulfil his physical needs and submit to him. Das was deeply unhappy in her marriage and felt like a puppet controlled by her father. She was not given the choice to choose her husband, and her preferences were disregarded by her parents.

Although Kamala Das had higher expectations for her husband and ultimately faced disappointments, she never lost her confidence. The birth of her first son brought a new twist to her life, and she found solace in motherhood. Despite enduring numerous sufferings, she refused to surrender and revolted against her hardships. These sufferings did not break her spirit or lead to failure. Instead, they propelled her on a journey of self-realization.

The discovery of self and the assertion of selfhood marked a revival of Indian womanhood.

In "My Story," Kamala Das realized that she was oppressed and exploited by society and her own family members. She resisted and fought back to assert her individuality and claim her rights. This depiction of Indian women, who transitioned from passive acceptance of subjugation and sacrifice to actively seeking personal gratification and self-fulfilment, represents a positive development and self-realization.

Women are often viewed solely as objects of desire, lacking individuality of mind and soul. Men's overwhelming greed and lust overshadow their ability to consider their actions as moral or immoral. In "My Story," Kamala Das engages in introspection, leading to self-analysis of her life. While searching for her true self, she acknowledges her existence as a woman and expresses the limitations imposed by her gender. Kamala Das relates her experiences to women in general, and though her autobiography is narrated objectively, her self-portrayal remains at the centre. Her introspective journey is self-centred, yet it ultimately leads her to a profound realization of her true self. She masterfully depicts the growth of a woman's inner being from childhood to youth and then to middle age in her life story. Overall, Kamala Das's autobiography delves into the introspective exploration of self, the struggles of Indian womanhood, and the quest for personal identity and fulfilment. It highlights the transformation of women from passive victims to empowered individuals seeking self-realization and asserting their rights.

Kamala Das's dissatisfaction with her arranged marriage, her inability to challenge it, and her unpleasant experiences with sex further deepened her repulsion towards the patriarchal system. She acknowledged that her destiny was determined by a paternalistic ideology and authority, but she devised her own means of resistance. She grappled consciously with her identity as a woman in a patriarchal culture and her complex relationship with gendered selfhood. On a personal level, she sought to challenge negative and exploitative experiences by seeking true love outside the confines of marriage. She engaged in unconventional relationships, embracing perversion and deliberate self-

abasement, stepping outside the bounds of societal norms.

Despite being unable to escape her predetermined fate, Kamala Das displayed tremendous courage in defying the traditional image of the "perfect woman." Through her journey of self-realization, she carved out a comfortable space to assert herself in the patriarchal world. In her youth, she had one or two infatuations where she found true love and affection that was absent in her marriage. Her love for Carlo, an Italian lover, was as pure as Radha's love for Krishna. It is important to note that when Kamala Das speaks of love outside of marriage, she is not advocating for adultery or infidelity, but rather searching for a relationship that provides both love and security.

Kamala Das's self-discovery and self-assertion in "My Story" originated from her unhappy married life, which led to a forced detachment from her true self. She became trapped in a dissonant and disturbing new life imposed on her by her marriage to Madhav Das. She recounts her initiation into sexual intercourse through marital rape, a common experience for many Indian women. She attributes this to sexual violence and the sanctioned rape that husbands inflict on their wives. This was, in a way, her way of retaliating against her husband's indifference and asserting her physical self. Her search for love outside of marriage was not solely for sexual gratification, but for emotional connection, understanding, and companionship where the union of minds was more important than physical union. She remained unaffected by society's disapproval and had the courage to assert herself against all odds. Her infidelity was a means of questioning the sexual liberties that men often take for granted. Kamala Das did not conform to the submissive Indian woman who obediently followed orders and adhered to societal subjectivity. She constantly sought to redefine the marginalization of women through assertive and self-determined behaviour.

Writing became an outlet for Kamala Das to establish her individuality. Through her writings, she transcended the limitations of her actual life and voiced her silent struggles through abrasive and violent outbursts. She

aimed to dismantle existing social power structures and create a new world for women. It can be argued that Kamala Das succeeded in establishing a new order of feminine personas in Indian English fiction.

In her poem "An Introduction," Kamala Das portrays the forceful traits that society imposes on women:

*"Be wife they said. Be embroiderer, be a cook. / Be quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh, / Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit / On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows"*

Indeed, Kamala Das redefines old archetypes and establishes a bold new woman who defies patriarchal norms and asserts her selfhood. Through self-realization and self-worth, she undergoes a transformation from self-alienation to self-assertion. Das encourages women not to be self-sacrificing but instead to cultivate self-awareness, self-worth, and strongly assert their individuality. She shows that embracing one's identity and priorities in life does not mean restricting self-growth or losing individuality. Women can find peace and happiness by adapting to changes and developing their identities.

Self-development leads to personal growth, which helps in understanding and asserting one's rights and authority. Das emphasizes that women are elevated to a higher level of dignity and status when they become mothers, as witnessed by the change in her husband's attitude upon seeing her pregnant belly. The protagonist's independence and individuality also flourish, overcoming initial anxieties about her husband's homosexuality once her pregnancy is confirmed. She becomes more self-reliant.

Motherhood brings about a significant change in Das's attitude towards life. She sheds her carnal desires and becomes more religious. Divorce is not common in India, and there is often a stigma attached to divorced women. Das is concerned about public opinion and chooses to stay in her marriage despite suffering internally. She was not educated to pursue a career and live independently, and as a mother of three children, she carefully considers the option of divorce. She finds solace and fulfilment

in her writing, which brings her name and fame, and she is invited to deliver lectures on her poetry.

Das's life story concludes on a hopeful note, but it is important to recognize that an autobiography, like other forms of literature, does not have a definitive conclusion. It is an ongoing narrative, continuously evolving and never truly complete.

In the book *Kamala Das A Feminist Study* Smita Padmanabhan she says *"Talking to Kamala Das at length about her childhood, family, her passion for art and literature and her perspective, one gets a very clear insight about the genuine woman in her."*(163)

In this interview Kamala Das sends a message to Indian womanhood:

*I have always wanted woman to be self-sufficient. In India people are reluctant to give up their old belief and adapt to the new. The secondary status of woman should be altered and she should be given an independent identity and place in society. She too should make an effort to establish her own self and achieve a respectable position, for which I believe education and financial independence is a must. (166 Padmanaban)*

Kamala Das's life experiences and sufferings played a significant role in her journey of self-realization and asserting her individuality. Through her writings, she fearlessly expressed her materialistic and sexual needs, breaking the boundaries set by patriarchal norms in Indian womanhood.

According to Kamala Das, women are often exploited by the politically powerful patriarchy, who view women as objects to satisfy their lust and maintain their power. She herself felt like a puppet in the hands of her family and society. Dissatisfied and frustrated with her life, she decided to break away from passivity and actively express herself as an independent individual.

Kamala Das tackled the theme of sexual violence with skill and presented the physical, mental, and psychological trauma she experienced. Writing became a tool for her to discover her own identity and assert her

individuality. She sought true love outside the boundaries of marriage but found that the men she encountered were still influenced by the myth of male sovereignty. They tried to fulfil their own desires but failed to offer her unconditional love in return, leaving her in a more frustrated state of mind.

Her writings emerged from her own life experiences, including a cloistered childhood without maternal care, a turbulent adolescence marked by a mismatched marriage, and the harsh conditions faced by women in her family and society. She aimed to depict an honest and genuine portrayal of women's lives without artificiality. Kamala Das rejected falsehood and took on the task of accurately representing women's predicaments, shedding light on women's issues in India where education and development for women were unheard of, and marriage was often seen as the ultimate goal.

Through her open presentation of women, their perspectives, aspirations, and lives, Kamala Das asserted her own identity and conveyed the message of a new awakening for Indian women. Autobiography served as a powerful genre for her to analyse her own life and achievements. In "My Story," Kamala Das used this medium to narrate her sufferings and the process of her self-realization. Her autobiography goes beyond the conventional boundaries of the genre, becoming a document of her personal history and a platform to record and represent the struggles and sufferings of Indian womanhood.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Das, Kamala. *My Story*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1977. Print.
- [2] Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- [3] Padmanaban, Smita. *Kamala Das: A Feminist Study*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2009. Print.
- [4] Prasad, Birjadish. *A Background to the Study of English Literature for Indian Students*. Calcutta: Macmillan, 1972. Print.
- [5] Shukla, A. Bhasker. *South Asian Women Writers*. Jaipur: Vital, 2008. Print.
- [6] Kumar, Ramesh. *Encyclopaedic Biographies of Indian Laureates*. Vol. 3. New Delhi: Anmol, 2008. Print.
- [7] Mahanta, Dipti. "Kamala Das My Story: A Critical Perspectives." Malayalam Women poet.com. List of Indian poet, 26 April 2013.
- [8] Selvi, Tamil R. "A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das' My Story." *Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow*. Vol. 11, 7 July 2011: 276-285. Web. 25 January 2013. <http://www.languageinindia.com/july2011/tamilselvikamaladasfinalpaid.pdf>