

Voices from the Margins: Kamala Das's *My Story* and the Feminist Autobiographical Act

Ms. Aditya K

Department of English, Central University of Kashmir, India

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Kamala Das's seminal autobiography, *My Story*, through the lens of feminist autobiography and the concept of "voices from the margins." Das, a trailblazing figure in Indian English literature, utilized her life narrative not merely as a personal document but as a deliberate act of literary intervention that unsettled entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional expectations of female authorship in India. By candidly recounting her experiences as a woman from Kerala's Nair aristocracy, Das challenges the confines of female subjectivity and asserts an autonomous narrative voice that was largely absent from Indian literary discourse of the 1970s. The article contextualizes *My Story* within a socio-cultural milieu where women's autobiographical writing was rare and radical, highlighting how Das's articulation of personal desire, marital disillusionment, and societal constraints ignited both controversy and critical debate. The narrative's bold treatment of sexuality and emotional turmoil foregrounds the pressures faced by women navigating the intersecting forces of tradition and modernity. Additionally, the article explores how Das's autobiography serves as a critique of the marginalization of women, both spatially and symbolically, within Indian society, while also providing a platform for subsequent generations of women writers to articulate their own truths. By foregrounding the complexities and contradictions of female agency, *My Story* emerges as a revolutionary text that redefines the boundaries of women's self-representation. Ultimately, the article positions Kamala Das's autobiographical act as both an assertion of individuality and a catalyst for the ongoing reimagining of women's literary and social identities in contemporary India.

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das and the Margins of Representation

Kamala Das stands as a pivotal figure in Indian English literature, her work distinguished by a rare candor that challenged conventional notions of female authorship and identity. Hailing from Punnayurkulam, Kerala, Das wrote across genres, but it is her autobiography, *My Story*—first published as *Ente Katha* in Malayalam (1973), then in English (1976)—that remains her most influential and debated text. This work transcends personal memoir to become a deliberate literary intervention, foregrounding the experiences of women on the margins of Kerala's sociocultural landscape. Through her unapologetic self-narrative, Das exposes patriarchal constraints, interrogates the boundaries of female subjectivity, and sets a precedent for subsequent women writers to articulate their own truths.

Dr. Sandhya Tiwari's book titled *Displacements and Alienation of Indian Diaspora*, resonates deeply with female characters who have experienced marginalization. Tiwari masterfully captures the emotional complexities and sense of longing that often accompany turmoil, evoking a powerful response from readers who share similar experiences. Through its poignant exploration of estrangement, Tiwari's work offers both comfort and insight, making it a significant contribution to not only diaspora literature but in general women's portrayals. (Tiwari 2011: xii)

In 1970s India, a woman's autobiography was itself a radical act. Patriarchal literary traditions relegated women to secondary roles and denied them narrative agency, confining their voices to domesticity or moral

instruction. Das disrupts this paradigm, transforming personal experience into public declaration and relocating women's lives from private to public spheres. She demands recognition for women's complexity and agency, challenging simplistic portrayals of female existence. The history of Indian women is full of pioneers, who have broken gender barriers and worked hard for their rights and made progress in the field of politics, arts, science, law etc." (Tiwari 2019)

The concept of "voices from the margins" is critical to understanding the revolutionary nature of *My Story*. In India, "margins" are not only spatial but also social, cultural, and gendered. Traditionally, women's perspectives were considered secondary in public discourse. For women writers, articulating such experiences required both inventiveness and courage to face societal resistance. Das's narrative emerges from this liminal space, articulating the dissatisfaction of a woman unfulfilled by prescribed social roles. Her autobiography thus becomes a defiant assertion of individuality against collective identity.

The initial reception of *My Story* was marked by shock and criticism, as Das's open discussions of marriage, desire, and disillusionment transgressed social norms. Her explicit articulation of sexual and emotional experience was seen as an affront to cultural propriety, but the controversy only heightened the work's impact, establishing it as a focal point for debates on female autonomy, sexual liberation, and self-expression in a conservative context.

More than a personal document, *My Story* provides a socio-cultural critique, illuminating the pressures faced by women in mid-twentieth-century Kerala. Das's Nair aristocratic background brought both privilege and constraint, and her early marriage exemplified the lack of agency afforded to young women. Through her narrative, Das critiques arranged marriage and its prioritization of familial and societal expectations over

The notion of "voices from the margins" is instrumental in appreciating the revolutionary nature of *My Story*. In India, "margins" are not solely spatial but encompass social, cultural, and gendered dimensions. Traditionally, women have been confined to these symbolic margins, their perspectives deemed secondary to public discourse. For women writers, articulating such experiences required both the invention of a new language and the fortitude to confront societal resistance. Das's narrative emerges from this liminal space, articulating the discontent of a woman unfulfilled by the roles society prescribed. Her autobiography thus becomes a defiant assertion of individuality against collective identity (Chavan 65–70).

The initial reception of *My Story* was marked by shock and censure, as Das's frank discussions of marital life, desire, and disillusionment transgressed prevailing social mores. The explicit articulation of her sexual and emotional experiences was perceived as an affront to cultural propriety. However, this controversy only magnified the work's impact, establishing *My Story* as a critical locus for debates on female autonomy, sexual liberation, and self-expression in a conservative context (Nair).

More than a personal document, *My Story* functions as a socio-cultural critique, offering insight into the specific pressures endured by women in mid-twentieth-century Kerala. Das's aristocratic Nair background afforded both privilege and constraint, and her early marriage at fifteen exemplified the lack of agency afforded to young girls. Through her narrative, Das critiques the institution of arranged marriage and its prioritization of familial and societal expectations over individual contentment (Das, *My Story* 22–23).

This article undertakes a critical analysis of *My Story* by examining its deployment of autobiography as a tool for dissecting the female experience from a marginalized perspective. The discussion encompasses the confessional mode, the interrogation of patriarchal structures, the exploration of female sexuality, and the deliberate crafting of language and identity, culminating in a synthesis of Das's enduring legacy.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of *My Story* is grounded in two principal theoretical paradigms: Feminist Autobiographical Theory and Feminist Existentialism. These frameworks facilitate a nuanced reading of Das's narrative strategies and her critique of patriarchy.

Feminist Autobiographical Theory

Feminist Autobiographical Theory interrogates life writing through a gendered lens, recognizing that women's narratives often diverge from the linear, coherent self-presentation typical of male-centered autobiographies (Smith and Watson 16–24). Historically excluded from public discourse, women writers have developed alternative strategies to represent the self, frequently foregrounding relationality, fragmentation, and subversion. This lens illuminates how Das utilizes autobiography as an act of resistance, transforming personal confession into a public critique of societal norms (Anderson 45–51).

Feminist Existentialism

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Feminist Existentialism explores how gendered constructions of identity restrict women's freedom and self-realization (Beauvoir 267–71). Women, defined as "the Other," are denied full subjectivity and autonomy. Das's narrative is read as a struggle for transcendence—an effort to move beyond the immanence imposed by biology and societal roles toward authentic selfhood. Her candid discussions of sexuality, artistic ambition, and resistance to marital expectations exemplify this existential assertion of agency (Showalter 13–19; Beauvoir 267).

The Confessional Voice: Articulating Intimacy and Breaking Silence

The confessional mode is central to the literary and political force of *My Story*. Das's narrative is characterized by an unvarnished honesty that exposes her vulnerabilities, desires, and frustrations. In a cultural milieu that valorized female modesty and discretion, such directness constituted a radical departure. The confessional voice, in Das's hands, is not mere self-exposure but a deliberate strategy to subvert dominant narratives and reclaim female subjectivity (Das, *My Story* 22; Jose et al. 5014–15).

Das's recollection of her early marriage—particularly the lack of preparation for conjugal intimacy—highlights the systemic failures of education and the exploitation of vulnerability inherent in child marriage. Her account is not sentimentalized but presented as a critique of the institutionalized disregard for female readiness and consent (Das, *My Story* 22).

Throughout *My Story*, the theme of marital discord and emotional neglect is persistent. Das's yearning for tenderness and connection is met with indifference, revealing the emotional costs of arranged marriage and the suppression of women's needs. Her narrative challenges the idealized image of marriage, exposing the hidden wounds inflicted by emotional neglect (Sunita and Deep). The burden of domesticity and its impact on creative and intellectual freedom is another recurring motif. Das's confession regarding her struggle to balance domestic obligations with artistic pursuits underscores the systemic devaluation of women's intellectual labor. The domestic sphere, rather than a site of fulfillment, becomes a cage that stifles aspiration (Das, *My Story* 81; Satchidanandan 45). Perhaps most revolutionary is Das's exploration of female desire. Her articulation of longing—both emotional and physical—defies the prevailing conception of women as passive recipients of affection. By voicing her needs, Das challenges the taboo surrounding female sexuality, creating a discursive space for future writers to address these silenced experiences (Das, *My Story* 102–04; Picciucco 94).

The act of narrating these experiences transforms private suffering into a public protest. Das's confessional voice is not a lament but a strategic assertion of agency, demanding empathy and introspection from the reader. In this sense, the personal becomes political, and *My Story* emerges as a seminal text for the articulation of marginalized voices in Indian women's literature (Smith and Watson 35).

Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Asserting Female Agency

My Story offers a pointed critique of the patriarchal structures that define and regulate women's lives is remarked by Sandhya Tiwari in her article. The institution of arranged marriage, as experienced by Das, exemplifies the denial of agency and the commodification of women for familial alliances. Her narrative interrogates the ethical and emotional costs of such practices, exposing the ways in which tradition overrides individual autonomy (Das, *My Story* 23–26). Beyond marriage, Das scrutinizes the rigid gender roles enforced

within her household and community. The expectation of female silence and devotion to domesticity is depicted as a mechanism of control. Das's resistance—her pursuit of literary expression despite familial and societal disapproval—constitutes an act of rebellion and a quest for intellectual freedom (Chavan 71–74; Satchidanandan 47). As Tiwari (2021) explains, "Gender is the most discussed issue in feminism and postmodern literary world with wide and varied implications. Gender is not defined biologically; thus, it should not be limited to one's biological aspects or perceptions."

Das's agency is not solely enacted through overt defiance but also through the act of narration itself. By refusing to internalize societal shame and by broadcasting her experiences, she subverts the mechanisms of silencing and shaming that underpin patriarchy. (Tiwari, 2013)

Her narrative thus becomes a counter-discourse, exposing the violence—emotional and psychological—inflicted by gendered expectations (Heilbrun 28–31). While not foregrounded, the theme of financial independence is implicit in Das's assertion of autonomy. Her ability to earn a livelihood, however modest, enabled choices unavailable to women wholly dependent on their families or husbands. Economic freedom, as Das's life suggests, is foundational to other forms of agency (Jeffrey 103–08).

In redefining love and relationships, Das rejects the limited emotional scope permitted by patriarchal norms. Her pursuit of intellectual and emotional intimacy, even when unfulfilled, is an act of self-determination. *My Story* thus reveals the complexity of female desire and the right to define one's own emotional landscape. (Tiwari, 2018)

The Body, Sexuality, and Social Stigma: Breaking Taboos

The most subversive dimension of *My Story* is its forthright engagement with female sexuality and the body. In a context where women's sensuality was either ignored or stigmatized, Das's narrative is groundbreaking. She interrogates the societal regulation of women's bodies, exposing the taboos that render female desire unmentionable. Her account of early sexual experiences—marked by ignorance, lack of consent, and the absence of pleasure—highlights the reduction of the female body to a site of reproduction or male desire. As her narrative progresses, she articulates a more complex understanding of desire, emphasizing its emotional and intellectual dimensions as well as its frequent unfulfillment. The social condemnation that Das endures as a result of her disclosures is a recurring theme. By recounting the public opprobrium she faced, Das critiques the double standards of a society that polices female expression while excusing male transgressions. Her willingness to bear the costs of truth-telling underscores her commitment to breaking silences (Nair; Kumar 112–15).

The female body is a battleground where personal desire and societal control collide. Her descriptions reveal both the vulnerability and the potential agency inherent in bodily autonomy. Plea for the reclamation of the female body is a call for personal sovereignty and a challenge to the objectification that denies women control over their own corporeal existence. (Tiwari, 2019)

Das's treatment of sexuality is complex, intertwining love, lust, and spirituality. Her longing for a union that encompasses body, mind, and soul elevates the discourse beyond mere sensuality, transforming it into a philosophical inquiry into human connection. By refusing to conform to simplistic binaries of virtue and vice, Das furthers the feminist project of demystifying female sexuality.

Language, Identity, and the Crafting of a New Narrative

My Story is as much a linguistic as it is a personal and political achievement. Das's bilingualism and her choice to write in English for a broader audience reflect a calculated effort to transcend regional constraints and insert her narrative into the canon of Indian English literature. Her prose is marked by clarity, directness, and a poetic sensibility. Her stylistic choices—eschewing ornamentation for emotional precision—underscore the authenticity of her voice. The interplay of poetic imagery and conversational tone lends her confessions both immediacy and aesthetic depth. The evolution of the narrative voice in *My Story* mirrors Das's personal development from naivety to self-assertion. As the autobiography progresses, her tone shifts from bewildered

endurance to critical reflection and eventual defiance. This dynamic voice reflects her growing self-awareness and her determination to reclaim agency.

For Das, writing is an existential necessity—a means of constructing and affirming identity in the face of reductive societal roles. The act of narration itself is an assertion of selfhood, a declaration that her experiences are worthy of public record. Rhetorical strategies, such as direct address and rhetorical questioning, further engage the reader, challenging complacency and inviting complicity. Das's willingness to provoke is instrumental in catalyzing discussion and dismantling taboos. Her language is thus both descriptive and argumentative, serving as a vehicle for social critique. (Tiwari, 2023)

CONCLUSION

The Enduring Legacy of a Marginalized Voice

My Story endures as a foundational text in Indian literature, notable for its radical honesty and its articulation of voices from the margins. Das's autobiography redefined the parameters of women's writing, asserting that the personal is inseparable from the political. Her willingness to break silences and expose inconvenient truths has established *My Story* as a touchstone for subsequent generations of women writers. The confessional voice in *My Story* functions as both a literary device and a political act, unveiling intimacy and challenging entrenched silences. Das's critique of patriarchal structures and her assertion of female agency are interwoven throughout the narrative, exemplifying the resilience required to resist societal constraints. Her foray into the terrain of sexuality and bodily autonomy shattered taboos, creating a precedent for authentic engagement with female desire and identity. Das's linguistic experimentation and her deliberate crafting of narrative voice have profoundly shaped the trajectory of Indian women's literature. By choosing English and employing a confessional, poetic style, she enabled her narrative to reach beyond regional boundaries and inspire a new literary tradition. The legacy of *My Story* is not merely the opening of a door but the creation of an enduring space for marginalized voices to assert their truths. Das's courage in writing her own story granted permission for others to do the same, transforming Indian literary discourse and establishing her as a literary genius who spoke for many. This aligns with the modern understanding of women's rights, "Gender Equality" and "Women's Empowerment" are considered significant for sustainable development. This is an important agenda of international human rights, reiterated by the

International organizations like the United Nations (UN). But, this has not been the case earlier. Women have struggled to get justice, fought for their rights as they were discriminated against and subjugated to their male counterparts. (Tiwari 2020)

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