

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY FROM A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE:
KAMALA DAS' MY STORY

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is a well-known and exceptional figure in Indian Literature. She is especially famous for her poetry. In this paper, the focus will be on her autobiographical work, *My Story* as a text written by a third world woman who struggles in a doubly colonized world. Kamala Das writes her autobiography to take control of her life and get power in a patriarchal society. Despite the fact that she is criticized by many people for doing an exceptional thing for an Indian woman, she becomes very successful. Kamala Das becomes a mirror for the other unsilenced women. She manages to speak the unspeakable instead of them.

Key Words: Kamala Das, autobiography, Third World Women

Sömürgecilik Sonrası Perspektifinden Bir Öz Yaşam Öyküsü: Kamala
Das'ın *Otobiyografim*

Özet

Kamala Das, Hindistan edebiyatının iyi bilinen, sıra dışı yazarlarından biridir. Özellikle, şiirleriyle ün kazanmıştır. Bu makalede, Das'ın özyaşamöyküsü Üçüncü Dünya ülkesinde yaşayan, hem sömürgeci devlet tarafından hem de erkek egemen düzen tarafından sömürülmüş bir kadının yazdığı bir eser olarak incelenecektir. Das özyaşam öyküsünü hayatını kontrol altına almak ve ataerkil toplumda kendini gösterebilmek için yazmayı tercih eder. Pek çok kişi tarafından eleştirilmesine rağmen başarılı olur. Konuşulamayanları konuşarak diğer kadınlar için ayna görevi görür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamala Das, öz yaşam öyküsü, Üçüncü Dünya Kadını

Kamala Das is a distinguished figure in Indian Literature. Das is the author of over 30 novels in Malayalam and 3 books of poems in English. She was born in 1934, in Malabar in Kerala. Educated mainly at home, she has been writing verses and prose since early youth that has given her a permanent place in modern Malayalam literature. She has been the recipient of such famous awards as the Poetry Award for the Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best collection of short stories in Malayalam, and the Chaman Lal Award for fearless journalism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have included Kamala Das as the only representative from Asia in their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. Some of her work in English includes the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories, *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), five books of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other*

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Poems (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). In 1999, Kamala Das converts to Islam and renames herself Kamala Surayya. This paper aims to look at Das's autobiographical work, *My Story*, as a text written by a third world woman and her struggle in a doubly colonized world.

Kamala Das wrote her autobiography, *My Story*, in 1976. In the Preface, Das explains the reasons of writing her autobiography and the first reactions about it as:

My Story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience... The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband... This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it. (Das, Preface)

Here, according to Geok-lin Lim, Das locates the origin of her autobiography in the confessional impulse attending the deathbed (350). Das's intention of "emptying [herself] of all the secrets" reminds one of the definitions of autobiography. Henry Mackenzie sees autobiography as "the confession of a person to himself instead of the priest" (qtd.in Folkenflik 5). Her wish for a "scrubbed-out conscience" prepares the reader for representations of sinful or immoral subjects. Meanwhile, Kamala Das reveals that she wrote her autobiography as a commercial publication, a series of articles for a popular magazine, because she needed money to pay off her medical bills. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim states "the spiritual impulse and the commercial intention are both evident in the dialogic, ambiguous, and contradictory features of the text" (350).

In *My Story*, Kamala Das tells her personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Chapters in *My Story* are short. Each of them is about three or four pages. It is fragmented and not in chronological order like most women's autobiographies. It is typically all about Kamala Das's domestic life, her

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relations with her parents and her close relatives, her husband and her lovers. Das talks about the domestic details of food, familial relations, marriage, childbirth, sexual liaisons, and the internal and external struggles of one woman in a repressive world. She also talks about her struggle in public life as a poet. Das tries to remain at the center of her story.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim sees Das's autobiography as a document expressing the writer's own ambiguity as a woman asserting subjective power in a traditional patriarchal society (347). Her female subjects make an effort to change the notions of what is female or feminine in Indian tradition. Das's writing and life show the anger, rage, and rebellion of a woman struggling in a men's world. Das's struggle shows us that life is much harder for the Third World women than men because they are doubly colonized; first, under the rule of colonial power, second by their own male dominated societies. Indian women suffer because of inequalities and social oppression. The families arrange the marriages of Indian women when they are very young. They thus marry men they have not met before. They then move to their husbands' parents' home, where they are, essentially, servants. There are also other problems for women such as; the dowry system, bride-burning, male abuse, the ban against divorce, woman's isolation, job discrimination, female infanticide, poorly paid or unpaid female labour, high female illiteracy, the tradition of sati.

In the opening chapters, a picture of a colonized childhood can be seen. Then, the theme changes into that of an oppressed womanhood. The father, a Rolls Royce and Bentley salesman, stands between the British corporation and the Indian upper class. Das characteristically is alienated because of living between indigenous and colonized cultures. This alienation can be seen in the title of the first chapter. It is "The humiliation of a brown child in a European school". From the first line, it is understood that India is still under the rule of Britain. Kamala Das is a little child growing up in Calcutta. She says, "They behaved like our equals. It was normal for a British family to have one or two close friends among the Indians with whom they were on visiting terms"(1). As Edward Said states "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (36). The discourse of colonial power is felt in the description of a ceremony that takes place at Kamala Das's school everyday:

In the morning while Madam sat at the grand piano on which stood the tinted photograph of the British royal family and we raised our voices in song, singing "Britons never never shall be slaves", even the postman slowed his walk to listen. King George the Sixth (God save his soul) used to wink at us from

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the guilt frame, as though he knew that the British were singing in India their swan song(3)

Kamala Das is unhappy as one of the few brown children in a white school. She thinks that white parents support their children more than Indian parents, because in their tradition a girl child has different responsibilities in their lives and they do not need education. Young Kamala Das wonders, "why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses" (8). As Geok-lin Lim points out, Das's very mastery of the colonial language, English, provokes the psychic break between herself and her parents:

This separation between English-language child-poet and Indian parents, a consequence of colonialism, prefigures the later rupture between the English-language woman writer, engaged in the Westernized project of claiming her own subjective autonomy, and traditional patriarchal Indian society. Das's autobiography, therefore, in its very "doubleness" of commercial and spiritual intentions and of suspension between colonized or Westernized and indigenous cultures, provides a valuable recording of the hybridized, "impure" cultural conditions in which postcolonial English-language writers from non-Western societies often find themselves writing. (352)

In the following chapters, she describes her ancestral home in Malabar which is called Nalapat House and the women who are living in that house. Generally, in autobiographies that are written by women, the central theme is the relationship between the author and her mother. However, Kamala Das does not prefer to talk about her relation with her mother. It seems that she does this intentionally. Das focuses on third world women's oppression and she puts her relations with men to the centre of her story. Only in the first chapter, there is some information about her relation with her father and mother. She describes her father as a man always busy with his work. He is not very affectionate and because of this Kamala Das and her brother grow up neglected. On the other hand, her mother is a vague and indifferent woman who spends her time "lying on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam"(2). It can be understood from here that Das's mother is also an exceptional woman. She was not a caring mother figure.

At the age of fifteen, Kamala Das shares the same destiny like most of the Indian women. She marries K.Madhava Das. It is an arranged marriage by her parents. Das does not have any right to say something about the marriage. She feels herself lost and unhappy. She is going to be "the victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of [their] union, there would be born a few children" (85). Das's only expectation from her husband is conversation,

companionship and warmth. She wants him to treat her as her father treats her. But all she gets in her marriage is brutality and rudeness. Kamala Das describes her first sexual intercourse with her husband as “an unsuccessful rape” (89). She suffers through her husband’s selfishness and neglect of her emotional and physical needs. After the birth of second son, at the age of twenty, she has a nervous breakdown while she and her husband attempt a reconciliation after an early separation. Here, it is seen clearly that Kamala Das criticizes Indian marriage as patriarchal oppression. Actually, she is a middle class and a professional Indian woman from a very small minority of Indian society. She receives greater legal and social protection compared to the vast numbers of poor and peasant Indian women.

For Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Kamala Das’s autobiography can be read as a critique of the victimization of women in a patriarchal society (352). Das realizes the powerlessness of the female body and she believes that for the victimized women in a patriarchal society, sexuality not only makes her vulnerable physically but also makes her vulnerable emotionally and spiritually. Sometimes this leads women to the point of committing suicide. Kamala Das is in a desperate situation. She wants to get a divorce but at the same time she knows that it is impossible:

I could not admit to all that my marriage had flopped. I could not return home to the Nalapat House a divorcee, for there had been goodwill between our two families for three generations which I did not want to ruin. . . My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society’s reaction to any action of an individual’s broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. (102)

In chapter 25, faced with the failure of her marriage and the impossibility of leaving it, her son’s illness, and her husband’s rejection of her in favor of a homosexual attachment, Kamala Das finds herself on a balcony attempting to commit suicide: “I felt a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private parts was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through” (104). However, Kamala Das does not throw herself off the balcony. Instead, she “lit the reading lamp. . . and began to write about a new life, an unstained future” (104). Das saves her life by telling her life. This reminds us of French feminist Helene Cixous who asserts that a woman must write herself to mark “her shattering entry into history which has always been based on her suppression . . . To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political system.”(338). Shirley Geok lin Lim here states that Das chooses writing against suicide, self- inscription against self- destruction and so takes

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the first steps of revolt against a symbolic/ political system that has oppressed her (359). One of the poems that she wrote in this period is as follows:

Madness is a country
Just around the corner
Whose shores are never lit
But if you go there
Ferried by despair
The sentries would ask you to strip
At first the clothes, then the flesh
And later of course your bones
Their only rule is freedom
Why, they even eat bits of your soul
When in hunger,
But when you reach that shore
That unit shore
Do not return, please do not return. . . . (111)

In an interview with her, she mentions the first days of her decision and her husband's reactions against writing. When Das wishes to begin writing, her husband supports her decision to increase the family's income. Actually writing is not acceptable for a woman by their society. Women were expected to confine themselves to the realm of the kitchen and a woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything else. Because of this, Das could not use the morning-till-night schedule. She had to wait until nightfall after her family had gone to sleep and would write until morning. She says in another interview: "There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing".

In the rest of the autobiography, we see her accounts of extramarital affairs, sexual flings, and desire for spiritual consolation. After her breakdown and her grandmother's death, Kamala Das becomes a different sexual person. She is no longer a passive object of her husband's actions and victim of the rapes of various strangers, she is now able to take pleasure and desire. She discovers her sexual self. Woman's desire becomes dominant.

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The theme of female victory continues with the narrative of extramarital affairs. From Das's autobiography and her poems, it is understood that she is in an open marriage. Her husband accepts her love affairs. He does not prefer divorce. However, it seems that being sexually powerful does not satisfy Kamala Das. Das even puts a poem in her autobiography that does not accept the equation of liberated sexuality with satisfaction of female desire:

We lay
On bed, glassy-eyed, fatigued, just
The toys dead children leave behind,
And, we asked each other, what is
The use, what is the bloody use?
That was the only kind of love,
This hacking each other's parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. (129)

Although Kamala Das becomes an active agent in searching for the desire, the sexuality that Kamala Das explores outside marriage is defined in a patriarchal society to the advantage of men. Her stories about her extramarital affairs are also tales about male abuse. Thus, in the narrative of her most intense affair, she questions the sadomasochistic nature of her relationship: "Years after all of it had ended, I asked myself why I took him on as my lover, fully aware of his incapacity to love. . . I needed security. . . Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change"(184). Here is yet another recognition of the mental and spiritual damage women suffer on account of their sex; the masochistic rationalization of drives, while more conventionally expressed as religious growth, is itself a chilling example of psychic damage in the female protagonist (Lim 360).

Kamala Das's search for independence in sex and other subjects is exceptional in the tradition of Indian writing in English whether written by women or men. Lim explains female desire in the Indian context:

In the Indian context, female desire, because it breaks social conventions of marital and sexual property and propriety, is inherently illegitimate and therefore doubly exceptional. Marilyn French explains this as "Indian women's primary duty, a duty so emphatic as to override their children's well being and certainly their own, is to "make the marriage work." This means that a woman must adjust to her husband. Whatever he is or does – if he is cold or cruel, if he is never home, or does not

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give her money, if he drinks or gambles or has other women, if he beats her – is her lot. She is expected to submit, serve, and produce a son. (360)

On the other hand, Kamala Das is able to stand outside the traditions in the woman centered matriarchy of Nalapat House and also she can question the abusive patriarchal world in which she or her sexuality functions only as an economic object. When her husband complains that she has not read “the prestigious report of the Rural Credit Survey Committee” – that is, not given him due respect- she answers, “But I let you make love to me every night . . . isn't that good enough?” (128). The relationship between male and female is often an economic exchange. Woman lets her husband make love with her, then man provides a shelter and material security (Das 114).

Das goes beyond the economic/social bond to examine the place of class in her society. She observes the lives of the working class and poor who surround her. She finds their lives fascinating. In chapter 49, while Kamala Das is in her “drawing room” with “cultured voices” and they are discussing poetry, she hears the song of the poor who live in the builders' colony behind the “large new structures” (214). “Finally,” she writes, “unable to control myself any longer, I dragged my husband to the colony one evening”(214):

I was pining for yet another settee for the drawing-room while these grand men and women were working from morning till dusk carrying cement and climbing the scaffoldings. And yet they had more vitality than I had of optimism . . . My gloom lay in its littlest corner like a black dog. I had had the idiocy to think of myself as Kamala, a being separate from all the rest and with a destiny entirely different from those of others. (214)

After inheriting her ancestral home, Kamala Das starts living in matriarchal rural South India. While at home, the rich families try to kill her with magic because they fear that her writing will reveal their immorality. Das here tries to seize control of the society's own cultural codes, particularly those formed by dominant religious ideologies. She uses, for example, the terrifying religious image of Kali, the goddess of war and destruction:

I hung a picture of Kali on the wall of my balcony and adorned it daily with long strings of red flowers, resembling the intestines of a disembowelled human being. Anyone walking along the edge of my paddyfield a furlong away, could see the Goddess and the macabre splash of red. This gave the villagers a fright. (201)

Significantly, the narrative in *My Story* provides the reader with a series of empowered female subjects. Chapter 4 is a rewriting of Das's matriarchal

past. In the autobiography, Nalapat House becomes a symbol. It is a place where the contradictions in traditional Indian women's roles are solved. Das traces her roots to her ancestress, Kunji, a wealthy aristocrat who, at age fifteen, fleeing from the war between the English and Dutch, "was made to change her route by an amorous chieftain who brought her over to his village and married her" (12). However, while telling the story of this marriage, Das does not present the possibilities of abduction, rape, and forced marriage. Rather it suggests instead a romantically blurred portrayal of a male figure motivated by "amour," a male figure moreover who "was well-versed in Astrology and Architecture" (13) and who set his bride up in the magnificent Nalapat House. The maternal home was dominated by the "old ladies"- "[her] grandmother, [her] aunt Ammini, [her] great grand-mother, her two sisters" (12). In this female- universe, only two men take place. The idealized political saint, Mahatmaji Gandhi, whom Kamala Das sees as a "brigand whose diabolic aim was to strip the ladies of all their finery so that they became plain and dull"(13) ; and her grand uncle, the famous poet-philosopher Narayana Menon, who is seen as lonely and poor. The woman who deeply influenced Kamala Das is her aunt Ammini, "an attractive woman who kept turning down all the marriage proposals that came her way"(14). While listening to her, Das "sensed for the first time that love was a beautiful anguish and thapasya"(14). Thapasya, here, means total dedication. The following chapter is devoted to an even earlier ancestress, "[her] great grand-mother's younger sister," Ammalu, "a poetess." Like Ammini, Ammalu "was a spinster who chose to remain unmarried although pretty and eligible" (14- 15). Both women are ascetics. Ammini "chose to lead the life of an ascetic" (14), while Ammalu "was deeply devout and spent the grey hours of dusk in prayer"(16). Both love poetry. The former recites it and the latter "read profusely and scribbled in the afternoon while the others had their siesta."(17). In these maternal figures, Kamala Das finds an indigenous tradition that her English-educated childhood denied her. Only in Nalapat House, in a matriarchal society, do the identities of Indian, woman and writer come together.

The early chapters narrate an engagement with Indian cultural elements. The strongest symbol of female empowerment in Das's early ancestral memories is Kali. Kali is the most feared deity in the Indian pantheon, the goddess to whom powers of death and destruction are attributed. In spite of her fearful appearance, she has a caring and intimate relation with her devotees. Significantly, the narrator devotes her longest description to her worship. Describing the annual ceremonies, she writes, "When Kali danced, we felt in the region of the heart an unease and a leap of recognition. Deep inside, we held the knowledge that Kali was older than the world and that having killed for others, she was now lonelier than all. All our primal instinct rose to sing in our blood the magical incantations"(29).

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Das's focus is less on the male than it is on the female. The female types that fascinate the young girl range from those in the women-centered community in Nalapat House to the the fearfully empowered Kali figure. As Sheila Rowbotham suggests, women as a group can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience (27). If the idea of collective solidarity with other women happens, women can move beyond alienation. In *My Story*, women together form an original patterning of proud and powerful womanhood against which the narrative of patriarchal marriage and abuse develops.

As a poet, Kamala Das sees herself and other poets as different from other people. She says:

They cannot 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. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. I was emotional and over-sensitive (157).

Kamala Das was hated and loved by many people inside and outside her country. She expresses her feelings about her readers as:

I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin, the hair, and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers. I have no secrets at all. Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time walked to my lovers' houses dressed like a bride, my readers have walked with me. I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of an all-seeing God they follow me through the years. (206)

Kamala Das shares everything with her readers, good and bad. She chooses to confess everything by writing rather than going to a priest. She shares everything about her life with all the secrets that should not be openly expressed in her society. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, there are four ways to write a woman's life:

the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process . . . Woman of

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accomplishment, in unconsciously writing their future lived lives, or, more recently, in trying honestly to deal in written form with lived past lives, have had to confront power and control. Because this has been declared unwomanly, and because many women would prefer (or think they would prefer) a world without evident power or control, women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over- take control of – their own lives. (16 -17)

Das chooses the fourth way in Heilbrun's description. She writes her autobiography to take control of her life and get power in a patriarchal society. Despite the fact that she is criticized by many people for doing an exceptional thing for an Indian woman, she becomes very successful. Kamala Das becomes a mirror for the other silenced women. She manages to speak the unspeakable instead of them. As Shirley Geok lin Lim puts it:

Marginalized by their gender, their colonial English education and language, their rejection of patriarchy and its given social and familial norms, and their bourgeois interests in a chiefly peasant society, women writers such as Das negotiate their identity needs among contradictory dominant discourses, each of which offers more grounds for tension than for resolution. As a work by a major English-language Indian woman writer, Das's story is less a seamless product of hybridity than it first appears, although the cultural differences between Indian and Western values and ideas are obviously present and affect her work. Her autobiography, in fact, shuttles between the gaps, articulating the space between cultures, displaying rather than resolving these differences in the narrative. The conclusion of the autobiography moves out of the discourse of feminism that occupies the foreground of the first two-thirds of the text to the more conventional discourse of the confessional autobiography. (363)

In *My Story*, Das attacks patriarchal constructions that show the male as superior and the female as passive. While doing this, she also attracts the western readers who only know the stereotypical representations of Indian women. Nevertheless, the greatest contribution of Das to her own society is to encourage women to write for empowerment. Finally, it must be kept in mind that by writing, women will be able to express themselves freely and they will find a chance to speak the unspeakable.

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