

**Breaking Gender Stereotypes and Challenges in Society: Represented in ‘My Story’ by Kamala Das**

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**Abstract:**

Gender based discrimination and gender stereotypes are omnipresent. It is a most pervasive barrier and also societal expectation on of women’s role. My paper dwells upon the conditions of women, we know country as diverse and complex as India, the journey toward women empowerment has been a mix of challenges and triumphs. Historically Indian Society has been rooted in patriarchal traditions, but the winds of change have been blowing steadily, we seen a little bit changes woman led to be strong as a resilient woman.

Patriarchal society towards women-based society. Women breaks many stereotypes as a powerful, progressive women. There are many domestic turmoils also which is resolving day by day. Sometimes, In India girls are considered as a ‘burden’ in the societal perception, frequently “*Paraya Dhan*” is characterize girls which ‘*Paraya*’ translates to “*not one’s own*”, while “*Dhan*” conveys the “*idea of property and wealth*”. It symbolizing the cultural belief that girls are meant to transition from being under the ownership of their father to that of their husband upon marriage. This research papers also explores the portrayal of gender issues in the works of Kamala Das’s autobiography ‘*My Story*’. She always encourages women to break free from the shackles of social norms and assert their independence.

The highlight of this paper is to focus on her autobiography ‘*My Story*’, here she reveals from the first time in Indian English Literature the truthful and honesty by women writers of her sexual needs. She also talks about the experience of self, love-despair, gender issues etc.

My paper also throws a light into the entire conditions of women who breaks the traditional and stereotypes traunical life.

**Keywords:** Kamala Das, ‘My Story’, Societal Expectations, Stereotype, Challenges, Societal Perception.

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**Introduction:**

Feminist critics have long identified a significant gap in the traditional canon of autobiographical writing, particularly in its marginalization of women's life narratives. In her introduction to *An autobiographical novel*, in this context, may be understood as a narrative form that blends factual life experience with fictional techniques.

Kamala Das speaks of women in India of their actual value and symbolic value which has been marginalized by man. Women were supposed to be acquiescent for their spouses who were always masters. And the same holds good for Kamala Das too. Her autobiography is also a bold expression of the torture and trauma faced not only by her, but it inwardly speaks of the predicament, and heart breaking condition of an Indian woman. Kamala Das was determined to revolt and transcend against the traditional society's definition of womanhood and dared to question the conservative sex-roles.

Kamala Das's *My Story*, first published in Malayalam as *Ente Katha* and later translated into English by the author in 1976, exemplifies this hybrid mode. The text follows a chronological and linear structure, employing a realistic narrative style to trace Das's life from early childhood, including her education in a missionary school favored by the colonial Indian elite. Upon publication, *My Story* generated both admiration and controversy, largely due to Das's candid exploration of female sexuality, her longing for emotional fulfillment, and her portrayal of Nair society. The autobiography articulates a distinctly feminist consciousness by challenging the cultural conditioning that instructs women to suppress desire and conform to ideals of modesty and chastity shaped by religious and mythological traditions. Dominant narratives within Indian society have historically constructed the image of the ideal woman as self-sacrificing and sexually restrained, as exemplified by figures such as Sita. In contrast, mythological tales of Renuka, Surpanakha, and Ahalya reveal how female desire is punished, silenced, or morally regulated. Against this backdrop, Kamala Das openly resists patriarchal norms and bourgeois morality. When she is compelled to marry a man chosen by her father, she recognizes marriage as an emotionally unfulfilling and restrictive institution, thereby exposing the ways in which patriarchal authority governs women's lives, bodies, and choices.

I was to be a victim of a young man's carnal hunger and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children. I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy.

I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride. (Das 69)

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Kamala Das becomes acutely aware that sexuality is treated as a profound taboo within conservative Malayali society, and more broadly within Indian society, where even married women refrain from speaking about it openly. This silence is explicitly articulated in the seventh chapter of *My Story*, where she observes that “women of good Nair families never mentioned sex.” Throughout the narrative, Das’s persistent sense of loneliness and her lifelong search for genuine love become vividly apparent. The love she seeks is not merely physical or sexual; rather, it is emotional, nurturing, and affirming—something she confesses she was denied even within her own family. In the opening chapters, she describes herself and her siblings as “neglected children in society” as well as within their own home, highlighting the emotional deprivation that shaped her inner life. Her writing thus reveals a deep longing for affection, understanding, and emotional connection, underscoring the psychological dimensions of her autobiographical narrative. She says:

My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Do not you feel any passion for me, he asked me. I do not know, I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands, and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother;..... I wanted conversations, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. (Das 68-69)

In *My Story*, Kamala Das exposes the emotional barrenness and psychological suffering embedded in her married life, particularly through her experience of infertility in the emotional sense of marriage. She waits in vain for love, conversation, companionship, and warmth from her husband, expectations that remain unfulfilled throughout their relationship. Instead, she is compelled to surrender herself to a man she finds emotionally distant, physically repulsive, and morally crude, with whom she shares no emotional intimacy. This absence of emotional connection leads to profound desolation, leaving her feeling lost, unhappy, and reduced to a mere object meant to satisfy her husband’s lewd and carnal desires. Das repeatedly emphasizes that what she longed for in marriage was not merely sexual contact, but tenderness, understanding, and the kind of affection she had once received from her father—a model of care and companionship that her husband fails to provide. Though children are born from the union, the marriage yields nothing but cruelty, aggression, and emotional insolence. Through this candid portrayal, Kamala Das unequivocally condemns the institution of Indian marriage as a site of patriarchal victimization.

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Kamala Das strongly resists all forms of domination, whether of the mind or the body, and articulates her aversion to any system that legitimizes the mastery of one individual over another. She perceives her female body not as a source of empowerment but as a social liability within a patriarchal framework that renders women inferior, denies them autonomy, and deprives them of basic rights, including the right to speech, self-expression, and self-determination. Traditional Indian households, governed by entrenched patriarchal norms, elevate male authority while normalizing the sexual, emotional, and psychological exploitation of women. Although Das yearns for separation from her oppressive marital life, she remains trapped by social conventions and familial obligations, aware that divorce would sever long-standing ties between families spanning generations and leave her socially ostracized, unable to return to her ancestral Nalapat House. The cumulative burden of an unendurable marriage, her son's illness, and her husband's emotional rejection in favor of a homosexual relationship drives her to the brink of suicide. Yet, in a decisive moment of self-realization, she chooses not death but writing, envisioning a renewed life and an unstained future. Through her innovative and confessional writing, Das seeks originality, healing, and liberation from suffering, transforming personal trauma into creative fulfillment and self-awareness.

In the contemporary literary context, women writers increasingly challenge the restrictive "Love Laws" of patriarchal culture, particularly by exploring themes such as extra-marital relationships and female sexual autonomy. For centuries, sexual fidelity to a single man—the husband—has defined the Indian ideal of womanhood, reinforced through cultural and mythological models such as Sita. However, writers like Kamala Das, armed with a growing awareness of their own sexuality, question this ideal and assert a stronger demand for emotional reciprocity and physical fulfillment within marriage. Her work thus marks a significant shift in Indian women's writing, foregrounding female desire, emotional truth, and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Thus, Kamala Das vividly articulates the life-affirming forces of renaissance, resistance, and dissent against the entrenched patriarchal order. Her writing foregrounds confrontation—between female desire and imposed feminine modesty, between inner anguish and sustained masculine dominance—areas that had rarely been explored by earlier writers. Kamala Das's works remain remarkably consistent in their thematic intensity, marked by a compelling frankness and emotional allure through which she boldly evokes female desire. She provocatively engages readers by unveiling the erotic consciousness of a woman in ways previously unheard of in Indian literature. Her candid revelations unsettled Indian society, earning her the reputation of being one of the most fearless and controversial writers of her time. Yet this controversy itself signifies a progressive transcendence, as her

assertive voice brings to the forefront the complexities of women's lived experiences, articulated in a language uniquely her own.

As a representative of the "New Woman," Kamala Das was among the first Indian women writers to emphasize the urgent need to release suppressed emotions and guarded secrets without inhibition. Throughout her life and writing, she persistently searched for an unadulterated form of love—one grounded in emotional truth rather than social expectation. Her autobiography demonstrates extraordinary courage in unveiling the psychosexual realities of female experience, thereby transcending conventional gender stereotypes and limiting labels. Rich with accounts of physical intimacy and emotional encounters, *My Story* probes deeply into the human soul's longing for authenticity, meaning, and self-realization. In this sense, the text emerges as a comprehensive and introspective narrative that reveals Kamala Das's inner strength and her relentless pursuit of self-identity. By rejecting deeply entrenched patriarchal values and the restrictive traditions that undermine her essential self, she metaphorically breaks free from inherited constraints to gain a clearer vision of the world around her. Through this act of self-assertion, Kamala Das opens a new horizon in autobiographical writing. The present paper has examined how *My Story* responds dynamically to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing social order, while also raising critical questions about whether contemporary Indian women writers in English have moved beyond the foundational feminist concerns of identity and self-assertion that preoccupied earlier generations.

Life rarely unfolds according to human anticipation; it is marked by unpredictability and unexpected challenges. Confronting such situations demands courage, resilience, and emotional balance. Traditionally, women have been socialized to seek protection and validation from their male counterparts during the early stages of life. However, as life progresses, experience compels them to cultivate self-reliance and inner strength. This gradual evolution from dependence to autonomy is often interpreted as a feminist assertion. Yet, rather than viewing it solely through the lens of feminism, it may more accurately be understood as a fundamental instinct for survival, wherein women learn to adapt, endure, and assert their agency in response to life's adversities.

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