
Pain and Pleasure in Kamala Das' *My Story*

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Abstract

Pain and Pleasure are the two psychological terms, used in English language and literature to show or describe the state of human mind with the perception of occurring incidents in their lives. In the relation of meaning, both of the terms are adversative adjectives to each other but both have the most important elements in the existence of human beings in the absence of each other. Pain describes the dark side of life or mental the state of human sufferings while pleasure is expressed during the mental state of joy and entertainment or light side of the life. Both of the terms have been well expressed in the autobiographical work of Kamala Das, *My Story* published in February 1973. This paper is going to explore the human state of mind in the most autobiographical work of Kamala Das, the female Keats and Lawrence of Indian English literature.

Keyword: Psychology, Human Sufferings, Emotion, Passion, Observation and Perception.

Kamala Das was one of the most eminent poets, novelists, critics and short story writers in Indian English literature. Kamala Das or Kamala Surayya or Madhavikutty was born on 31 March 1934 to V. M. Nair who was a managing editor of the widely circulated Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* at Punnayurkulam, Malabar District in British India (presently known as Thrissur District of Kerala in India). Her mother Nalapat Balamani Amma was a renowned Malayali poet and it can be said that Kamala, the real combination of both these personalities,

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has found her tone of expression with the open and honest treatment of female love, relationship and sexuality, freely from any sense of guilt in the ignorant tradition of lady love, care and marriage. She is also called the ‘Mother of modern Indian English poetry’ by presenting the sensibilities of pain and pleasure, love and hate, believe and deceive, light and serious, and humor and pathos in her practical, social, political or emotional life as well as her writings under the influences of Keralite culture and tradition. The most autobiographical fictional work of Kamala Das is, *My Story*, originally written in Malayalam entitled as *Ente Katha* 1976 during the author’s treatment for suspected leukaemia while later on it was translated first in English as *My Story* in 1976 that made it too much popularized among its readers “of the serialized autobiography were drawn into charming and intriguing life of love and longing of desired and disloyalty” (MS, vii).

The book has also been very controversial for its violent reactions towards relationship of admiration and criticism for its readers as well as critics in the contextual or conceptual background of Indianness “the more orthodox readers of Kerala found it shocking fortnight and were quick to brand it immoral, denying to their sisters or daughters access to its agonized excitement” (MS, vii). In this book, Kamala Das seems to recount her trials of childhood, marriage and her painful self-awakening towards her infant consciousness, innocent girlhood, adolescent womanhood and a mature philosophical writer, crossing the boundary of her confessed expression for the growth of feminine sensibilities. The book has been best selling autobiography by any Indian English writer the history of Indian English literature for its year of publications. The book is also reminded for its controversial arguments on its publication where other members of the family of Das did not want it to be published, she was fully determined to publish it at any rate which can be understood in the remarks of V. B. C. Nair, the editor of Malayalanadu “Despite pressure from her influential relatives to stop the publication of the work, Kamala remained bold and it proved a roaring hit boosting the circulation of the weekly by fifty thousand copies within a fortnight.” (TOI, June 1, 2009).

The entire self-awakening and confessed stories of the book are described in the form of fiction where one can find it divided into fifty chapters having the different experiences of life for Kamala Das as a common girl, wife and mature woman which can be read in the different sensibilities of every lady in India. Through all these fifty chapters, one can know

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Kamala Das as Aami who has delineated her life in the racial discrimination, brutal and indulgent relationship with her husband, sexual harassment and awakening, her literary career, her extra-marital affairs, the birth of her children, slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing about sexual openness and many more from the very beginning of four in then the British colonial India and missionary schools in Calcutta. Here, Das upholds her personal self-identity and dignity in this autobiographical work and writes about her personal experiences without having the round about the bush rather than the political and social upheavals predominated during the pre or post independence war in India.

As early as in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir like feminine critics in were of the view that the women do not set themselves up as the subject for anything special and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects can be reflected and also they have no religion or poetry of their own that's why they still dream through the dreams of men. The consideration of Simone de Beauvoir like feminists, is looking still very relevant even today especially in the study of Indian feminism where the readers have not yet witnessed a proliferation of autobiographies by women writers so that their expression of real life can be read through their eyes. In this relation of feminine concerns, one can have *My Story* of Kamala Das and compensate the genre of self expression among its readers. In the context of Indian cultures, though the metaphorical term 'angel' is not in vogue and the words like 'Nari' or its corollary term 'Devi' are very near and dear to the expression of respects and regards but only in the tongue not practically with all their socio-cultural connotations which imply ideas of sweet exploitation. Both, the words have very close readings to those of Woolf who exposes in connection with the concept of the 'angel in the house'. The strong bond of family relationship for the females across every culture and country, especially in India, it is not a Herculean task for the feminine self to 'Kill the Angel' and 'Tell the Truth' simultaneously.

With the access of highly and modern education, one can have such resultant changes that can bring the betterment for females in their individual as well as social lives of both, the intellectuals as well as common women who have attempted to narrate their selves in their autobiographical writings, may have achieved the first of the two tasks. Virginia Woolf like feminine critics have accepted the facts that they have been succeeded at their first mission of killing their angels in the houses but admitted that they have failed at the second mission of

The Creative Launcher

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Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

telling the truth of their bodies: “The first-killing the Angel in the House - I think: I solved.... But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved” (Woolf, 538). Not only this, but Woolf also is doubted whether “any woman has solved it yet” (Woolf, 538). Through her own deliberation of self, Kamala Das has to dismantle the entire structure that has rendered her services voiceless and priceless by always assigning her a marginalised position: “there was minority, mostly women sentenced to patriarchal oppression and unable to find a way out of its asphyxiating labyrinths, who could identify themselves with the sad, lonely and ever experimenting protagonist in her desperate search for true and lasting love” (MS, viii). *My Story* is the only attempt of its kind among Indian women autobiographers in English (or for that matter in any other regional languages) to tread the untrodden path of exploring and sharing the experience of the body rather than soul. Kamala Das confronts her body with unparalleled candidness and honesty of expression, quite unlike her fellow autobiographers, Pandita Rama Bai, Shirin Madam, Kanan Devi, Hamsa Wadekar, Durga Khote, Amrita Pritam, Ajeet Cour, Rosy Thomas and many more who have tactfully shunned any explicit reference to their bodies. In this connection of women concerns, one may have Linda Anderson who theorizes such aspect of women’s autobiographical discourse through her discussion: “It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself, is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden” (Linda, 59). Before her, there were many females who tried to write their autobiographies but most of them have described their attributes being passive citizen of India. In such trend of Indianness, one can read Bahinabai’s *Autobiography 1700*, Rassundari Devi’s *Amar Jiban 1876* (in Bengali), Ramabai Ranade’s *Memories of Our Life Together*, Binodine Das’s *Amar Katha* in Marathi, Urmila Haksar, Brinda, and Sharan-Jeet-Shan. Lakshmibai Tilak and Ramabai Ranade express their views on marginality in parental households where they were not allowed to sing, play, read and write their thought on a paper. These writers also try to express themselves in their works but the boundary of passivity checked them to cross over their marginality. It was Kamala Das who not only crossed the boundary but also made attributing remarks in Indian English literature. Her disclosure of sexuality, amorous extramarital affairs vis-a-vis the conservative set-up of

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Indian society, all of these appear as an act of strip-teasing herself before her readers in public which has earned her notoriety more than celebration and accolades from the conservative circle. The critics have also not failed to express their reservations, time and again, denouncing her autobiographical experiences in vilifying terms. From the very beginning of the first chapter to the twenty six, in *My Story*, one can read all about her personal experiences in the straightforward style of prose while the chapter starting from twenty-seven to the second last chapter of forty-nine, one can have knowledge about her personal experiences with a poem in the beginning of the chapters while they are well narrated in prose for their close readings which signals the thematic concern of her personality and identity seeking ability interwoven with pain and pleasure.

The first chapter of *My Story*, 'Britannia Rule' tells us her experience of racial discrimination during the British/colonial rule in India where she was called "Blackie, your blood is read" (MS, 2) in a convent school which was governed by a British, Mr. Ross who called her father "My good friend Nair" (MS, 1). The statement made her rage but it was overpowered by the Anglo-Indians. Here, one can see her with her cook who used to bring her to the missionary school and "there developed between us the relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate" (MS, 2) the first chapter of the autobiography tells us that Kamala was very genuine scholar with her ability of singing and writing poetry. Her poetry was appreciated by the Whites in her schools. In her appraisals, her principal Madam addresses her as Shirley and also claimed her as the "combination of beauty and brain" (MS, 3) and then "there was Governor's wife a special kiss" (MS, 3) for her. The behaviour of her parents was not looking good as they roared at her and the children were afraid of their parents, which may dominate their intrinsic nature and capabilities. The children in this family pierce for "if someone tugged at the string, we pulled it up in a hurry and hid in the bedroom fearing deliciously that he may come up to grab us" (MS, 5) The confession is enough to tell us the alienation of the children from the commonality of commodity which may destroy their accompanying concerns. Here, she had only friend, Menon who "worked as the stores manager of the motor car company" (MS, 6).

The chapter, 'The Bougainvillea' describes the isolated mentality of the writer and at the same one can have knowledge that she started writing poems at the very early age of six. She wrote "sad poems about dolls, which lost their heads" (MS, 8). She found her female

The Creative Launcher

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Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

tutor, Mabel, to be partial for her womanhood by her cook, serving her tea on a tray with tiny sandwiches” (MS, 8) while her male tutor, Nambiar was given “a glass tumbler of tea and a few sardonic remarks” (MS, 9) by the same cook which astonished her. She felt here isolated where “no one seemed to want my company” (MS, 9) that’s why she wondered “why I did not join the girls who crowded around her.” (MS, 9) Her wonder was also “why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses.” (MS, 9) Her loneliness was “except for monkeys I was the only living creature there, but the red bougainvillea, gaudy as spilt blood, that had climbed the minarets swung in the breeze” (MS, 10) in this part of *My Story*. When Kamala Das came to The Nalapat House, she was introduced with it which “had seven occupants not counting the servants” (MS, 13), her grandmother who was “plump, fair skinned and good looking” (MS, 13), her aunt Ammini who was “an attractive woman who kept turning down all the marriage proposals that came her way” (MS, 13) and her grand-uncle, Narayan Menon, “famous poet-philosopher” (MS, 14). Here, one can also know that the Nalapat House “had the finest library of palm leaf manuscript, most of which were written in the Vattezhuthu that probably came to Malabar from the Phoenicians” (MS, 14). The most concerning matter in this chapter, one can find the description of Das’ Grand uncle who has been great source for her writings and very dominant personality in her house.

The chapter ‘The Village School’, describes the innocent observation of her childhood in which she finds Velu, the child of a beggar for her friendship and wishes for Govinda Kurup, to get married with as she announced to her grandmother. Govinda Kurup was slapped by his class teacher for he “wrote some obscenity at recess on the blackboard” (MS, 19). Being infatuated with his charm, she “wanted to follow him and tell him that if he was wicked, I (she) was fond of wickedness too....” (MS, 19) while, she was written a love letter by her plum friend Devaki which made her upset. Here, she also describes about her favourite aunt, the second wife of her grand uncle. She was “never seen even at night without her heavy jewellery” (MS, 20). She was also called “the most empty headed woman” (MS, 21) by her grand uncle while at night “she enslaved him with her voluptuous body” (MS, 21). Her grand and favourite aunt “walked up the steep staircase of the gate house to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom...” (MS, 21). The present chapter of the autobiography indicates the sexual craze of the writer as she mentioned here the book of her grand uncle on

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Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

sex, Rati Samrajya, based on the writings of Havelock Ellis and the other Indian sexologists. In the next chapter, 'Matriarchy', one can read about the exploitation of the lower castes like of Lazar, the oil seller "who drove his white cow and the three women of his house round and round his old mill,...abusing them in pornographic language which only amused his victims" (MS, 26). He was a heavy drinker but the oil from his mill was unadulterated to make an unguent that was supposed to keep their skin golden and wrinkle free. Behind the Lazars, one may find "the thatched huts of Pariahs who were by profession basket weavers and sorcerers. Their women wore around their necks strands of red breads and left their breasts uncovered." (MS, 26). These Pariahs were regarded as outcastes and kept at a distance but also the readers can read it ironically in the hollowness and shallowness of conservative Indian society, especially, in the month of Makaram between January and February, when "they attained a sudden importance for the worship of Kali to whom, being aboriginals the Pariahs were dearly beloved" (MS, 27) for "Rupam Dehi, Sriyam Dehi, Yaso Dehi..." (MS, 27).

'A children's Theatre' of this book can be read with the performance of the children at Vannery Children's Dramatic Society, where one can find the first and the best role of Kamala Das for the Moghul queen Noor Jehan, yet her grandmother was worried "about the duskiness of my skin and rubbed raw turmeric on Tuesdays and Fridays, all over my body before the oil bathed" (MS, 35). The chapter also describes the humbug life of writer's childhood at the years of nine when she was taken to be admitted "into a boarding school run by the Roman Catholics nuns" (MS, 36). At the same time the writer has to be humiliated for her "meager belongings: four white frocks made of mill Khaddar, four old fashioned knickers and two towels" (MS, 36). The she was introduced with Mother Superior and Sister Philomene who embraced her and made her assure that she was there to look after her. Entering the gate, she was introduced with Raji, a twelve-year-old girl who "looked as if she had cried a lot. Her eyes were red and held only misery and mistrust" (MS, 36-37).

The most innocent ideas of womanhood and the most confessional sensibility of privacy of Kamala Das can be seen in the chapter of 'Mahabharata' where she got first menstruation with much more surprise: "My frock had large spots of blood on it. I felt the hot blood flowing on to my thighs and dripping down to the floor" (MS, 59). At this, she started to weep over saying "I am ill. I am dying. Something has broken inside me and I am bleeding" (MS, 59). At her remarks, her mother tried to examine the situation and finally

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Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

announced with a laugh “It’s nothing to be worried about, it is what all girls get at twelve or thirteen... she told me that the blood only showed that I was ready to be a mother.” (MS, 59) After three days, she got relaxed from her menstruation and then she started to think to get a son as fast as she could like that of Kunthi, the mother of the Pandavas. This chapter of the autobiography, which made Kamala Das very different from other feminine autobiographers, describes not only her privacy but exposes her adulthood very frankly: “After the bath, alone in my room, I bared my body to the sun and told the sun that he ought to give me a son.” (MS, 59). The great openness of Das can be seen when she started to expose herself before her readers in praying God Sun: “Take all of me, take my swelling limbs, take my wavy tresses, take my round breasts with their diminutive nipples, take all of me and give me a son” (MS, 59). Very devotedly, she exposed herself before the Gods but “No God came forward to claim me as his wife. But gradually, I grew. One or two places sprouted hair. The smell of my perspiration changed” (MS, 59). Her father sent away the dancing master saying that she was too old to dance. After that she got prominence words of dentist “Now you are a pretty little girl” (MS, 60) which blushed her purple in happiness. At thirteen when she went to Malabar for her summer vacation, she “fell in love with a student leader who has been jailed for his revolutionary activities” (MS, 60). He did not reciprocate because his only interest was in politics that’s why she thought it “ruined my first love and made it unrequited” (MS, 61) while her grandmother got a local tailor, Kumaran to make for her “two long skirts of green and two pale pink blouses” (MS, 60).

‘An Arrange Marriage’ tells all about her marriage at an early age while her friends advised her to “complete your education before thinking of marriage” (MS, 79). Returning to Calcutta, she became moody and her mind clouded over with doubts. Her father invited the fiancé to Calcutta. When he came, her father left her alone so that they can enjoy. Consequently, wherever “he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not he turned brutal and crude” (MS, 79). He also told her the sexual exploits which he had with his maidservants in his house in Malabar. When he went back to Bombay, “our eyes were watering and the dust had swollen our lips.” (MS, 80) There was another chance for love and affection for a young, man “But he has no job.” (MS, 81) Her marriage at that time was very costly. ‘The Brutality of Sex’ is described here in her words for her friend: “for him such a body was an embarrassment, veteran hat he was in the rowdy

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

ways of sex which he had practiced with his maids who worked for his family” (MS, 85) while she “remained virgin for nearly a fortnight after her marriage” (MS, 85) because her husband came from a joint family and she was “just another of his admirers” (MS, 85) as he had several young cousins. The dissatisfaction in the relationship can be seen here, after getting pregnant, “I fainted in the bathroom and lay there on the damp floor for a while, becoming conscious much later feeling the water flowing beneath my head” (MS, 86). If one wants to read the feminine sensibility of mothers feeding her child, one must read the complexity of a mother’s shyness in Jaisurya: “My breasts overflowed with milk and yet I was shy to untie my blouse and let my son suck at them. In pain and misery I waited for the first chance to be alone so that I might lock the door” (MS, 160) for feed her child. This chapter has also the differentiation of lust and love: “Love is not important that makes the blood/ Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his/ Lust but is shed as slough at end of each embrace” (MS, 159). But for a few changes and the way in which the words are placed on the page there is no significant difference between the two versions. The above examples show how the distinctions between prose and poetry are deliberately blurred so as to show the fluidity of forms but some critics tend to interpret it as the paucity of the poet’s thematic concerns. While foregrounding the consciousness of the writing about self, there is an attempt to evoke the illusion of face-to-face intimacy between the author and the reader which in turn influences the style of narration. Devendra Kohli is of the view that “My Story held together more by a narration of incidents rather than by a reflection on them. In a sense, her autobiography is curiously static, and a few incidents seem to (or are shown to) contribute to the organic development of her literary personality” (Kohli, 16).

The conclusive remark of having no regrets and derivation of pleasure from writing and reading her autobiography, clearly, shows her defiance, self-assertion and, celebrative mood against all the odds of her life. Yet, paradoxically enough the defiant stance, however genuine in tone, does not underscore her in the preceding the act of self justification, rather through her self-justification, she reveals the inner tension and plight of the woman writer when she attempts to write about her own life which has never been the concerns of any male writer to confront such a predicament in his life. The interesting point is that Kamala Das has never declared herself a feminist writer, but judged everything in her writings from the subversive way of expression in which she highlights woman-centred issues, most pertinent

The Creative Launcher

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Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

to the Indian context and her autobiography is also undeniably a feminist confessional text. Confession in Kamala Das symbolizes a private assertion of freedom that challenges rather than simply conforms to the existing social norms in the context of Indianness. There is affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity. Very aptly she remarks on her writing about: “This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say” (MS, v).

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