

Forked Tongues: Multiple Voice in Kamaladas's "My Story"

N. PRASANTHA KUMAR

Department of English, S.N. College, Nattika.

The most inappropriate aspect of the publication of *My Story* is that Kamala Das has sensationalised the issue. Sensationalising the publication of a book is nothing new. The art of advertisement has played a vital role in the success of books like Norman Mailer's "*The Naked and the Dead*". What she has written appears to be startlingly out-spoken to the traditional sensibility of the conservative society to which she belongs. The commotion and the conflicting responses that follow are not an outcome of the matter she has written, but the manner in which it is written. The controversies arising from the publication of *My Story* can be attributed to the caustic response of traditional Indian readers to a conventionally un-Indian content content of the book.

The title of the book *My Story* is misleading. It leads to more complex and abstruse questions like whether the book is a fictionalised autobiography or an autobiographical fiction. Despite its claim to be an autobiography the title is deceptive. This should be understood in the light of the fact that many incidents and anecdotes of the book have already been

appeared in the form of surreal short stories in Malayalam. She is a bilingual writer who likes to write in Malayam and in English under two different names. Her popular name in Malayalam, Madhavikutty, may be deliberate choice. But it does not affect our appreciation of either the book or her poems. Many modern women writers like Doris Lessing, Toni Morison or Judith Anderson have been trying to transform what is biological and even pathological in their lives into something universal in literature. They are concerned with the question of how much of facts can be assimilated into fiction. Kamala Das is also concerned with the same problem in the case of her short stories. She has been exploring to absorb into fiction as much materials from her life as possible. She has succeeded in creating a fiction which is twin to life. But, while writing *My Story* she has been confronted by a problem which is diametrically opposite to the one described above. She has to constantly encounter the question of how much of fiction can be factualised.

A first reading of *My Story* leaves the reader dissatisfied. While Das speaks with a forked tongue, the readers keep wondering whether *My Story* is a story or the story of her life. the dissatisfaction which follows the first-time readers of *My Story* is the dissatisfaction of Das as a writer. Recent writings of women display a sense of imperfection. Women writers seem to have a feeling of unfinished human beings. Their awareness of being different and their pain resulting from the sense of being incomplete make their existence rather symbolic. Writing constitutes a form of self-woman and her life consists of adventures in two worlds and two cultures.¹ The tendency to write in two different

languages shows the split-self motive of the writer. The foreign tongue and the alien culture offer an opportunity to escape from the surveillance of the centralised society. The writer also tends to experiment in different genres. The tendency to distribute the creative energy in two different languages or two different genres also reflect the decolonising aspect of the self.

Kamala Das has stated in the preface to *My Story* that she began writing the book during the time of her first heart attack. Her doctor advised her that writing would be a distraction to her mind which was under the firm grip of the fear an imminent death. At first, she doubted whether she could complete the task. She recovered from the heart ailment with the completion of the book. Her story-telling has lengthened her life.² This incident is a parallel to the adventures in story-telling of Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Story-telling is an alternative to reality. Time of living is the time of reality. Day stands for reality and night stands for the terror of approaching death. Story-telling is a gambling against death: Your life for your story. Many story-tellers have brushed with death or suffered mutilations. But they have survived their ordeals. The stories are oddly like the tellers; they are incomplete, they have to be cut short by the morning³. Kamala Das evades evades death by her story-telling and her story is incomplete like her femininity. There is a wilderness, a void emptiness as the story is finished.

As an autobiographical writing, *My Story* belong to confessional literature, which has always been there like the autobiographical writings of Roussau, St. Augustine and De-Quincy. There is nothing innovative about declaring one's emotional

reactions to experiences as appropriate materials for literature of any kind. In a confessional writer there is the split between public and private worlds which is intimately connected with the split between intellectual and emotional lives, between spiritual and material realities. Usually the subjective and objective realities are mutually exclusive as in Donne's poems or the subjectivity is carried to a logical conclusion as in Wordsworth's "The Prelude." Confessional literature, in the modern connotation, is less a revelation of intimate personal details than it is an attempt to redefine human identity. The breakdown of a confessional writer is considered a defence mechanism for human his/her survival, a cover for the sense of inadequacies. As the renowned Polish psychiatrist Casimierz Dabrowski argues in his book Positive Disintegration, some neuroses and psychoses are begun. They help to develop personality through a series of disintegration and reintegration of psychic structure. Mental disorientation is not only artistically productive but but is actually a movement to health.⁴ The confessional spirit has its public origin. The private world of the writer fascinates us due to its relation to objective reality. The outer world is a possible consequence of the deep-rooted urges of the writer who is his own victim. A sense of guilt pervades confessional writing and it is often put under the thin veil of self-pity. There is the strongly felt presence of an ego or a consciousness under the threat of disintegration. Confessional literature originates from the conflict between the lap toward psychic wholeness and the yearning for disintegration.

Kamala Das's *My Story* is confessional in tone and revelatory in nature. She shares a diary-writers' compulsive

need to record to record every single stage that she has gone through. The book has the inner logic of a psycho-analytic cure. It progress from obsessive innerness to a confident identity. She proceeds in a painstaking way towards more integrated selfhood and better self-knowledge. The writer becomes the written. The material comes psychic and cultural and the method becomes associational. Kamala Das might have been suffering from a neurosis at the time of her first bout. The benign neurosis has proved to be artistically productive and hence writing has become a psychic cure, an integration of self.

No book, however confessional, is fully reflective. The Oedipus myth is a telling predicament of every man. Man's heart is partitioned between Oedipus seeks enlightenment on his terrible fate, continues his indefatigable enquiry despite the appalling horror that awaits him and finds that the revelation is fatal. But Jocasta pleads with him at every stage of his fatal curiosity not to inquire further and plays down its relevance to their life. In most people Jocasta triumphs. *My Story*, therefore, cannot be considered a complete revelation of Das's life. In a conservative society which is hostile to her fidelity to experiences and sensibility even confession is a compelling task.

The distinction between an autobiography and a story is only institutional and minimal. There is no linguistic difference between them. Each is a literary text and is an independent entity in itself. They are alike in function or device. Each is functional structure. The factors of the message each one offers are the same. They are the addresser, the addressee, the context, the code, the means of contact and finally the message itself. The functions of the six factors remain the same. From

the point of view of literariness also they appear to be the same. The difference surfaces when story and autobiography are taken as two independent genres. But the difference in genre does not stand in the way of the appreciation of the book.

The book should be evaluated in the Indian context. Indian attitude to woman has been ambivalent. The Hindu male worships goddesses while he degrades women. He adores his mother while he slights his wife. Wife to him, is an object he can manipulate. Indian woman is instructed to seek advice from her elders, to adjust her life and to abide by the popular tradition. She is enlightened on the need for stability of marriage and family life. Marriage and family life are pictured as sources of emotional strength and security for her. Meticulous indoctrination forbids her to change her position from one of the objects of the house-hold to a human being with a free will. This becomes the major veil for marital happiness. Even in sexual matters Indian woman has little choice. She is considered a sex object. An Indian woman longs to become a mother, especially the mother of a son, in her eagerness to gain recognition and prominence. For, a son is looked upon as her social redeemer. The son becomes the symbol of her power. An Indian woman turns to motherhood with zest. She turns to her children for companionship and emotional fulfilment. As a mother she gets deference which she fails to evoke as a wife. So she looks upon the role of the mother as more important than that of a wife. Education has neither removed the inequality of sexes nor improved the status of women. An Indian girl is indoctrinated on the virtues of patience and suffering. Education is designed to foster the makings of

good housewife in women like reticence in speech, subservience in manners and conscientiousness. She is never instructed to revolt and rebel but to accept and to surrender.⁶ Indian woman is a multi-faceted person who is strong in spite of her vulnerability. She has long been dichotomised as a paragon of all virtues and the demon of all vices.

The narrative voice in *My Story* is not Kamal Das as many readers believe. It is a constructed person. As the book progresses, the narrative voice takes different guises. In a psycho-analytic writing the narrative voice is at once the patient, mirror and analyst. Likewise in women's writing the narrative voice is at once the protagonist, the writer and the oppressed woman. The situation compels the reader to identify the protagonist with the writer. The process of self-discovery is a continuous creative act. It constructs verbal symbols and enables the writer to reach self-knowledge and self-love.

Multiple voices are the result of psychic fission of the protagonist or the writer. In the case of an autobiographical writing, it is a manifestation of the mental disintegration of the writer. The double or 'doppelgänger' is a common literary motif of modern authors and a recurrent phenomenon in psychopathology. It can enhance the dramatic effect of a work. The conventional double is an antithetical self which predominates as a character representing unconscious, instinctual drives. In Whitman, Fitzgerald and Dostoevsky we find not two, but many selves. The plurality of narrator's voice is called "multiple voices." Multiplicity of the narrator's voice is hailed as a grand feature of an autobiographical writing. The writer's potential selves including the diabolic ones are poten-

tial personae.⁷ These potential personae are the external representatives of an internal conflict within the writer. The psychic fragmentation of the writer is implicit, and it is multiple. So the multiple voices form a "composite character" or rather a group of independent, interrelated characters. This phenomenon is the result of intrapsychic conflict. It involves "the splitting up of a recognizable and unified psychological entity into separate, complementary and distinguishable parts represented by seemingly drives and attitudes or objective like inner conflict in terms of antithetical attitudes. The multiple voices that contribute to a single text are considered multiple personae.⁹ They represent the different selves of the writer or the protagonist.

The most alarming problem encountered by the modern woman writer of autobiographical writing is the crisis of her identity. So all her endeavours are directed to establish a firm identity. In 'dopple ganger' birth and death are looked upon as doubles and the child is seen as a duplicate of the father. Similar analogues of psychological decomposition can be found in philosophical dualism like *Jivatma and Paramatma in Advaita*, *yin and yang* in Chinese cosmology, body and soul in Plato, body and mind in Descartes and mind and object in Locke. There are many defects which split up the personality structure under stress. Psychic constellations or condensations of the multiple voices give the integrated personality or the unified psyche of the writer or the protagonist.¹⁰ This is similar to the fusion of id, ego and superego yielding the integral psyche.

The Double and the Other exist in fiction, fictionalised autobiography and autobiographical fiction. This involves an

identification and transformation of sympathies. In love, the Other is one's double. In selecting a lover one tends to choose persons whose features are one's own. The attraction is that of an otherness that secretes within itself the image of one's own selfhood. In writing the Double is an author's representative. The Double and the Other assume independence as a result of deliberately induced dissociation of the spirit. The manifestation of the Double is a pathological attempt to replace the Other with one's self.¹¹ This process of projection is evidently reflected in the writings of authors with a colonial legacy like Kamala Das. The persistence of the Double is a sign of the indomitable vitality of the Other. A character is mutable and is not fixed. Time can change one character into another. So, the Double enhances the ideology of individualism.

Preoccupation with the Double is a common feature of bilingual writers. The alien culture provides them space to live a secret, second life. It becomes an alluring refuge where one can hide to keep oneself away from one's society. The use of foreign language is especially convenient to the woman writer. It offers her a private world she requires in order to be herself. The foreign tongue is an acquired identity for her. Language is both the medium and camouflage of thought. A fear of the Double is interpreted as a fear of self-knowledge. The self becomes more dependent on the Other in a mediated world. Any attempt to expel or conceal the foreign element will boomerang; for the tie that binds the self and Other is already deep. Hence the foreign appears in the form of the self.¹² A psychoanalytical study of the Double helps to reveal the crisis in the

sexuality of woman: a woman's double appears in masculine form and hence a woman's self-image is contaminated by that of man.

The first guise of the narrator's voice in *My Story* is that of an adolescent girl with a nostalgic longing for her feudal, matrilinear ancestral home. The girl is unusually sensitive and even sentimental. Her thoughts are rebellious and sometimes mischievous. She appears to be a loney soul and cultches to every form of love that comes her way whether it is lady teacher or a fellow student with a lesbian bias, or a drop-out or a tutor or a family friend. She feels that her family is like a sandcastle or a card-place and there is always a sense of incompleteness about it.¹³ She has the purity and innocence of a child who likes to ask questions embarrassing to the elders who brush aside her questions as mischievous. She has the tickling urge for an affair with the sun-god or a tutor. Briefly she has all the makings of a typical aristocrat *Malabar girl*.

The narator's marriage to a man whose sense of love is guided by the conventions of the Indian male-dominated society is admittedly a flop. She becomes the prematurely old wife and meekly surrenders to the wishes of elders. She calls her wedding night "unhappy" as it was a torturing experience to her. She wants to protest and rebel. She realizes that the fame that accompanies a name is a misunderstanding. It is a woman's destiny to change her name, to get married. She wants to mock at her marriage as she seems to be married only in name. She desires to keep an identity which cannot be usurped by her marriage or ravished by the indifferent love of her husband.¹⁴

The strong bond of love that exists between the narrator and her grandmother and the intimacy and frankness between herself and her children reinforce her desire for a permanent childhood. Her childhood is abruptly cut off by her marriage and she is painfully conscious of the loss of her childhood for a reluctant entry to the world of adulthood. Her grandmother is the only person she can cofide to. Her strong attraction for her grandmother is antithetical to her strong revulsion for her husband. In all autobiographical writings there is a descent to hell strong mount. Eden is a state of innocence which is art where every fruit tastes the freshness of childhood memories. Only Adam and Eve are couple without childhood as they were born adults and therefore imperfect. The protagonist's urge to return to the phase before marriage is a recurrent feature of Das's fiction. She strategically brings in a grand-dame or an old lover to underline the childhood of the heroine which is usually her Double.

The next form of narrator's voice is that of a premature wife destined to bear the misery inflicted by a male-dominated aristocrat society. As a girl she dreamt that she could command her husband to bring the flowers of aesthetic delight which would eventually prove to be a token of his adoring love:

.....In day dreams I too become a Draupadi who commanded her adoring mate to brave the demons to get flowers for her wavy tresses.¹⁵

Lonely as she had been, she sought companionship and love in marriage. Before her marriage she entertained a school girl's fanciful idea about love and marriage. But soon she got mentally prepared to resign to her fate:

.....I would be a middle-class housewife and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they ask 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.¹⁶

She was forced to reconcile to her destiny. But she was painfully conscious of the hideous changes her marriage brought to her life:

.....At the end of the month experiencing rejection jealousy and bitterness I grew old suddenly, my face changed from a child's to a woman's and my limbs were sore and fatigued.¹⁷

The initial phase of her married life, according to her, was a saga of misery:

I did not get enough sleep at night, for my husband took me several times with a vengeance and in the day there was no food for twelve hours after that chilli-laden meal of rice and curry.¹⁸

Her husband was not only inconsiderate but also inhospitable. He lost his temper whenever their first-born woke up at night to abate his hunger. He was annoyed at his sleep being disrupted.¹⁹ The sexual incompatibility between the narrator and her husband forced her to seek fulfilment and love outside the marital orbit. His ways of sex crude and brutal whereas her concept of sex was all flowers and moonlight.

At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal, simply and without exhibition. All the *Parijata* that I wore in my curly hair was wasted.²⁰

She longed for a kind word or an earnest glance which he could hardly give. This made her cold and frigid. She wanted to create an identity that was amiable. Her husband ceased to be a real figure and became a thin cloud floating across the horizon of her heart while her child smiled moonbeams to brighten her face. His ill-treatment of the little children made her miserable. She subsequently lost the residual affection she had for him. She kept this stalemate in her marriage life as a closely guarded secret.²¹ She gradually realized that she became frigid as an outcome of his lack of affection and brute sex. He was alleged to have a homo-sexual inclination to a friend which made her position rather more pitiable.

I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part only a wound, the soul's wound showing through.²²

The third form of narrator's voice is that of a love with flamboyant lusts. The first of her lovers is perhaps the grey-eyed young man who has written to her that she loved her as much as the stars in the sky much to the embarrassment of her husband.²³ Then Carlo, her Italian friend, comes to her life with a late flowering of love "like a short-statured God."²⁴ But she has already become frigid and cold:

When Carlo came into my life all the flowers of the University garden had fallen.

I was not a misty-eyed girl in love with love.²⁵

Carlo has asked her to forget her great-eyed friend, leave her husband, marry him and accompany him to Italy. However she does not succumb to his entreaties.²⁶ But she likes to her from him that she is still a pretty girl.

The last of her lovers is the Krishna she has been searching throughout her life. Though notorious and old, he conquered her with the force of a typhoon. He is the king of all kings to her. Though dark, he was handsome with a tattoo between his eyes.²⁷ After her recovery from her major illness, she becomes attractive. Soon she is drawn to the man to become his slave:

You are my Krishna, I whispered kissing his eyes shut. He laughed. I felt that I was a virgin in his arms....I carried him with me inside my eyelids, the dark God of girlhood dreams. At night from the lush foxholes of the city his concubines wailed for him. Oh Krishna, Oh Kanhaiya, do not leave me for another.²⁸

She has practised adultery for a short while perhaps in defiance of her patriarchal husband:

His body became my prison. I could not see beyond it. His darkness blinded me and his love words shut out the wise world's din.²⁹

She has been obsessed with his love. She has played a game in which she loses heavily:

.....I wanted to grow in him like cancer,

I wanted him to suffer from incurable love.³⁰

Her physical responses are quick and lively: She has guided by the wisdom of her body.

His touch is rather electrifying to her:

.....It was if his dark body was the only body left alive. All the other deaths were silent; no requences were sung for those love affairs.³¹

Das's love poems recall to our mind similar experiences of gratifying love. The lover portrayed in these poems is exactly identifiable with the last end and she seeks peace in the same Lord for whom she yearned with wild hunger.

.....The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning more, understanding all end then the part of Him.³²

After her recovery she wants to enjoy abiding peace in the company of her Lord, Krishna and she seems to have it.³³ Her fleshly sentiments have mellowed into a bliss as pure and as sweet as summer twilight.

Another element which demands analysis is the colonial heritage of Kamala Das. The sense of rootlessness is the aftermath of colonialism. In Das heritage is at odds with aspiration. This forces the narrator to lead a double life—one of ideology and the other of imagination. The process of mental translation to a new environment paves the way for difference of culture and identity. The structure of ideology involves inevitable alienation whereas the structure of imagination involves frustration which evolves aggression as response. Ideology, the characteristic of the modern era, splits the written language from the spoken language. Both ideology and imagination enforce self-division. Kamala Das displays what P.P. Raveendran calls "an ideology of intimacy" which is the result of her urge to escape from the colonial legacy.³⁴ On the imaginative level she creates false lores to combat the self-splitting

vice of colonialism. Thus, by her intimate, subjective and personal narrative and by creation of myths both real and feigned, Kamala Das has constantly fought against the divisive trends of her colonialist settings.

The presence of multiple voices, the pre-occupation with the Double and the Other and the resistance to the split-self motive of colonial heritage show that *My Story* is an excellent fiction. The notion that it is an autobiography is absurd

References

1. Niocolle Ward Jouve, *White Woman speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 11.
2. Kamala Das, "Preface" *My Story* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1988)
3. Jouve, pp. 186-7.
4. Casimierz Dabrowski, *Positive Disintegration* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964)
5. Ralph J. Mills, Jr, *Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Random House (1965) pp. 25-35.
6. Alladi Uma, *Woman and Her Family* (New Delhi: Sterling, C 1989) pp.4-10.
7. Robert Rogers, *A Pshychoanalytic Study The Double in Literature* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1970) p.3.
8. Rogers, p.5.
9. Jouve, p.96.
10. Rogers, p.17.
11. Paul Coates, *The Double and the Other* (London: Macmillan, 1988) pp.1-2.
12. Coatges, p.4.
13. Das, pp.59-80.

14. Das, pp. 81-90.
15. Das, p.31
16. Das, p.85.
17. Das, p.90.
18. Das, p.91.
19. Das, p.94.
20. Das, p.94.
21. Das, pp.102-3.
22. Das, p.104.
23. Das, p.117.
24. Das, p.119.
25. Das, p.119.
26. Das, pp.121-23.
27. Das, pp.177-8.
28. Das, p.180.
29. Das, p.183.
30. Das, p.184.
31. Das, p.184.
32. Das, pp.186-87.
33. Das, p.218.
34. P.P. Raveendran, "Introduction: Ideology of Intimacy." *The Best of Kamala Das*, (ed.) P.P. Raveendran (Calicut: Bodhi Publishing House, 1991)