

Establishing the Identity and Celebrating the Self in *My Story* by Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

Being unconventional is the only alternative for an individual to establish his or her identity in a conventionally indifferent and oppressing society. The objective of this paper is to study how through unconventional and revolutionary methods, Kamala Das establishes her identity in a traditionally hostile society and also to analyse how she celebrates herself

KEYWORDS

Unconventional; Revolutionary.

Introduction

Identity is very important for an individual for not being counted as a fragment of a crowd. As a result, identity gives a space for self. When some roles are imposed upon a person, the true identity is suppressed and the tension starts between the individual and the imposing force. The chance to have a true identity is very less for a woman in a traditional society. If a woman tries to move away from the suffocating conventions and dogmas of the society, she definitely has to face indifference, resistance and hostility. Most of the women who have tried to advocate for the rights of their feministic community have faced many challenges and troubles. A

daughter is expected to be obedient and respectful, a wife is expected to be submissive and attentive, and a mother is expected to be nurturing and protective, and all these roles are imposed upon a woman without caring what exactly she wants. Kamala Das, as an Indian woman who has tried to move away from the conventions especially from the role of a 'Nair feminine' has been received by the society in a rude manner. *My story*, her autobiography is the most controversial work that has led her to many problems with the society. Consequently, the work can be considered as a monument of her continuous battle with the society.

Fighting Against the Stereotypes

Domination is an unavoidable fact in every society and different levels of domination practised in a community are rooted in the traditions and conventions. When an individual tries to question these injustices ingrained in traditions, the further result would be insult and humiliation. As a part of women's community, Kamala Das also faces the domination of the male counterpart, especially when she tries to question them, and it pushes her to insecurity, alienation and fear. But she has selected such an odd alternative to go against the tradition for not to get her identity defaced because of some conventional reasons.

An individual is conditioned by his or her past, culture and the environment. One cannot do anything about the past or the collective unconscious but can choose a unique path which may not be completely different from the tradition but a slightly variant from the main track. A society which follows the traditions and conventions would be hostile to an individual's "plea for a new kind of morality" (Kamala Das, 195). Iqbal Kaur says, "All the problems are there because of the incommunicability between the being and that surrounds being". The gap between the individual and society leads to disharmony and tension, and it would further lead to anguish and alienation.

My Story starts with the portrayal of domination of white people over the browns. A sensitive childlike Kamala could not bear that, and when her brother becomes a victim of their cruelty, she scratches William, a white boy, in a "mad rage"(2). This spirit to fight against injustices continues throughout her life. Within the confines of the rules imposed upon a woman, it demands unusual courage and inner strength for a woman to proclaim her existence. Kamala Das is a revolutionary woman who chose to take the path that would help her to get her 'self' a space. Even though she is aware of the

further nuances, she dares to be forthright and bold. The more she is dominated, the more she fights, and it leads to more alienation and insecurity in her life. Since she is very sensitive, she cries helplessly. Her cry can be seen as the symbol of 'eternal helplessness' of a woman. It is in the midst of all these confusions and fights, she tries to recognise her 'self'.

From the Role of a Traditional Nair Woman to a Revolutionary Writer

As a typical Nair woman, she is not given freedom even in the choice of her partner. Even though she has not prepared for the marriage both physically and mentally, she is forced to marry at her teen to a relative with whom she does not want to live. As a woman, she is not supposed to express her own likes and dislikes. The tradition and orthodoxy force her to lie with her husband, which is for her "extreme brutality of attack" (84). She has felt as if she is raped and therefore she says, "The rape was unsuccessful..." (84). Because of this, she fears that she is not normal and not fit into the society. So she says "Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a hermaphrodite" (84). The convention that infested the Indian womanhood evokes many tensions in her mind. The spirit to fight does not allow her to be a subservient, whereas the conventions demand her to be so. This contradiction adds many chaos and confusions to her life.

In *My Story*, she herself gives an idea of 'simple and uncomplicated life' which the society wants her to follow:

After tea I went out to inspect my rice and my vegetables. I fed my cows. Breakfast. After that, playing some game with my little son until it was bath time, prayer in the pooja room... (196)

These are the jobs which she is expected to perform. Another time she says "I was useless as a housewife anyway. I could not pick up a teapot without gasping. But

writing was possible and it certainly brought me happiness” (202). Kamala Das establishes her space through writing, which offers her a sense of fulfilment. The tension between tradition and the self is reflected throughout her life. In addition, the social obligations and moral responsibilities make her life more complicated.

Kamala’s father forced her mother to follow his ideologies. He had “stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but khaddar and preferably white or off- white”(4). Kamala also realises that her mother was merely adjusting with her father. She says:

My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother’s timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends (4).

This timidity of her mother is expected in every woman of Nair community to satisfy the relatives and friends who are representatives of the society that perpetuate the conventions.

Since Kamala’s husband considers her as a mere possession, every freedom in her life is curtailed by him. She is merely an object for the satisfaction of his carnal needs, and her emotional needs have remained unsatisfied forever. The domination of her husband has made her helpless, and in one occasion she says:

My husband stopped me from going up to the terrace for the rehearsals in the evening. You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said. My friends passing our window glanced at me with pity in their eyes (93)

The superiority complex of her husband crushes her freedom and expects her to be another Nalappat woman. Since she is not timid, she decides to deconstruct the myth of feminine; as a result, sobs, tears, cries and screams filled throughout her life. But

her writing has certainly brought her happiness. It’s not just she loves writing but she shows the courage to illustrate everything boldly and frankly with a tone of confession. In spite of the fact that the whole family, relatives and society are against her, she dares to uncover everything before the reader. Her advocacy for a new set of morality has gained her many enemies. She says:

They took their grievances to my parents who were embarrassed but totally helpless; for it had become clear to them that I had become a truth addict and I loved my writing more than I loved them or my own sons (195)

The perpetrators of conventions have hated her writings. But in order to attain the goal, she does what she is not supposed to do. She must challenge the existing dogmas. Thus she writes in order to survive with her own emotions. She has selected even the topics which are considered as taboo. This created a gulf between herself and the society. Consequently, she has been excommunicated from the so-called ‘best Nair families’, so she says “no wonder the women at best Nair families never mentioned sex” (23).

In order to attain her goal, she dares to go through everything that is forbidden for a woman. She has realised that she must challenge the existing dogmas. She has started writing and behaving against the conventions in order to cope with her own emotional tensions.

As she says in the text, she has “made up her mind to be unfaithful to him, at least physically” (90). Therefore she follows the myth of Radha who is searching for her Krishna. Like the mythical character, she searches for her ideal lover, with whom her bond will not be purely physical but an emotional and spiritual one. Like many other religious women over the world who depended on God as a final source, Kamala also follows the path of

bridal mysticism to escape from the dogmas of the patriarchal society. With her literary genius, she is able to unfold many unpleasant truths about herself, her family, including her husband and parents and about the Nair community. Critic Thakore therefore points out "one can say that there is marvellous self-analysis, introspection and to some extent self-centeredness in her autobiography". It shows her fearlessness and the complete cut-off from everything around her, and she tries to identify her true self which is opposed to traditional and conventional beliefs, but she loves the positive elements in the same. That is why she loves to be in Nalappat house and she has been fascinated by the landscape. She always tries to establish a bond with nature.

Conclusion

'Self' is what makes a person look at him or herself differently from others. An

individual's perspective on the self helps to create an identity for him or her. Therefore self and identity are inextricably interrelated and these two criteria have important role in providing self-esteem and individuality to a person. Analysis of the whole text proves that her life revolves around a search for self and yearning for acceptance and love. In a conventional and patriarchal society, she is helpless like any other woman in our society. But ultimately through the power of writings, she attains the goals. She discovers her true 'self'. Even though the final result is loneliness, she establishes her identity and celebrates the self, which refuses to accept the conventional role of a woman in the Indian society. Therefore she has decided to be an outspoken and irreverent but at the inner corner enjoying the freedom gained for her 'self' and identity.

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