

Subjective identity: A study of Kamala Das's *my story*

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Abstract

Identity is the projection of the 'self'. Self-image molds and transforms self-identity. The urge to identify with the present stimulates one in the quest for identity, which operates at public and private levels. The nature and knowledge of self-identity is reflected in all sincere memory statements which are also the autobiographical statements. Self-identity is self-knowledge. Identity in general is taken to be a relation between a thing which is known to exist at one time, and a thing which is known to have existed in another time. Identity is something intrinsic and can be known only by one's being conscious of it, or by sensing one's identity with a past self. Memory gives the sense of identity which can be written in the autobiographical form. The present paper aims at the exploration of subjective identity of Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story*.

Keywords: Self, Subjectivity, Identity, Consciousness, Feminism, Patriarchy, Autobiography.

If they ask me about my identity
What can I say but
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe in your
Dead language
The lost noun, the verb surviving
Only in the infinitive
The letters of my name are written under the lids
Of the newborn child (Rich "The Stranger" 13-21).

Within dominant distant they are always 'off-stage, off-side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood (qtd. in Irigaray 22). The dilemma of women writers with language order which is essentially phallogocentric in nature marks a woman's negative entry into the realm of literary world. French feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixous and Julia Kristeva have laid special emphasis on women writers' experimentation and evolution of *écriture féminine* i.e. female writing and aesthetics, a feminine order of meaning with which to construct a positive sexual identity for women. Feminist theory in France in the early 80s is not interested in women writers or women theorists, but in positing "woman" as a binary opposition to "man," and examining/deconstructing the other binaries that reinforce and uphold that opposition: man/woman, masculine/feminine, presence/absence, rational/irrational, moral/immoral, light/dark, life/death, good/evil, etc. Irigaray asserts that the mannish society always denies the female sexuality. She focuses on positioning the gender as sex based. She appeals women writers to construct their own language to describe their own sexuality just as men and thus affirm their own subjectivity. According to Lacan, subjective identity has no authenticating point of origin in a 'real', unitary self; it begins in a fantasy or mirage (qtd. in Morris 117). Self is simply a continuous deferral of identity enacted by the displacement of desire from one social ideal to another. The present paper is written with the objective of figuring out the traits of subjective identity in Das's *My Story* as proposed by Luce Irigaray and other French feminists.

Kamala Das is one of the well-known writers in Indian English literature who is not ignorant of her role as a woman writer. Her confessional mode clearly reflects her boldness as a writer. The way she expresses herself uninhibitedly marks out her subjective identity in patriarchal set up. It is believed by the feminists that women writers are likely to be concerned less with action, experience and achievement and more with thoughts and sensations. Therefore most of the male writers criticize women writings for being teemed with emotions only. The reason behind this is that our social structure is perceived as irreversibly enacting the structural subordination of women. As women enter the world of language, they are put in their place within the social order of meaning, which is phallogocentric in a patriarchal society. Gender behavior is actually a learned cultural behavior. There is no such thing as original gender identity; but rather normalized notions of gender which are purely cultural products, present from the earliest stages of subjectivity. Judith Butler asserts that it is culture, not sex which marks out discrete gender based behavior internally (behaviorally) and externally (on the body). She says that the way in which the dominant culture teaches and enforces these cultural beliefs occurs gradually through internalization. Many of the French feminists have revolted against the biased ideas regarding feminine identity of Freud and Lacan, who cut the essentialist knot joining gender identity to biological sex. Their theorization of femininity constructs a model of women sexuality which functions only to affirm the primacy of masculinity. Their concept of femininity actually acts like an empty mirror which reflects back only masculinity. Irigaray refers to female subjectivity and sexuality as "a sexuality denied", considering that in the patriarchal social order penis is the only sexual organ of recognized value. According to Irigaray, this situation causes female pleasure to be foreign until it remains within the dominant phallic economy/control. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray details how that cultural theorists such as Freud have only been able to measure female sexuality as an adjunct rather than as a force in its own right. Lacan is another theorist that she ridicules, as his notion of the

'imaginary' is again a phallic-based notion. The specter of a female imaginary or symbolic is not conceived of in his theories. What infuriate French feminists with the well-known psychoanalyst is that he says that the first stage of infancy is bisexual and describes the pre-oedipal girl as a 'little man'. He does not think of describing the pre-oedipal boy as a 'little woman'. The girls' active sexuality at that stage is termed 'masculine'. In other words, sexuality is a primarily masculine for Freud. Woman's 'discovery of lack' functions within psychoanalytic discourse to confirm and valorize masculinity as the fullness of phallic possession and power. Within this logic of the same, a woman is denied any representation as presence; she is only a non-man (Irigaray 27). Irigaray acknowledges that Freud is disarmingly open in the way he elaborates this and that his explicitness allows us to recognize a logic which structures not just psychoanalytic discourse but a great deal of western thought.

Luce Irigaray's radical challenge to psychoanalysis has two-fold purposes: to expose the masculine ideology inscribed throughout our meaning system (the symbolic order) and to resist the patriarchal ideology that construct a feminine order of meaning with which to produce a sexual identity for women. To follow the first of these aims, Irigaray draws attention to what she calls the 'logic of sameness' operating with in all dominant forms of language. By 'logic of sameness' she means that a social reality containing two gender specificities (man and woman) is persistently collapsed into one and the same. In her major work *The Speculum of Other Woman* (1974), she demonstrates with detailed, often wickedly ironic commentary on Freud's writing, how his theory of sexuality is constructed just on sex:

The feminine is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy (the clitoris is seen by Freud as an atrophied penis), as the other side of sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well known 'penis envy'. How can we accept the idea that woman's entire sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus by her longing for....The male organ? Does this mean that women's sexual evolution can never be characterized with reference to the female sex itself? (qtd. in Morris 114)

In this context Irigaray says that all Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own specificity. She also points out that Freud never questions the effects of breasts atrophy in the male. His thinking on sex is entirely framed by masculine perceptions. She states that women need not just passively accept a subject, marginalized position once they have acknowledged its existence, but rather actively resist the system itself through removing themselves from it and thus rediscovering their own nonlinear sexuality, language and discourses on their own terms. She says that direct action is required if women are to rise above simply being an exchange value among men and that women need to forge for themselves a female imaginary that compels recognition.

In the views of Freud and Lacan, woman has no separate identity as de Beauvoir also claims with resent in *The Second Sex* that man is always the positive term (the norm) and 'woman' the 'other' to that positive male as absolute subject. Luce Irigaray wants to project the negative deconstruction of patriarchal logic and her positive quest for a way of theorizing and representing the specificity of femininity as well. In other words, Irigaray focuses on the subjective identity of women.

Kamala Das, a distinguished figure in Indian English Literature, is widely acknowledged as a confessional writer. A confessional writer invariably reveals his/her inner self and never inhibits the flow of the emotions. (S) He never vacillates in reciting the secrets of his/her life. Whatever thought comes in their mind takes the shape of words. Thus the way of confession gives the writers enough space to flourish their thoughts and views. In this way confessional writing proves as the best way to reflect the true self of a writer. Kamala Das's confessional writing gives the reader an opportunity to probe into her inner self. Her multiple selves come in to light to the readers in her autobiography *My Story*. Through her autobiography she tries to seek out her identity as a woman and as a writer. Her outspoken autobiography springs a lot of arguments. It projects her multiple affairs, her strained relationship with her husband and so many hidden facts of her life. The book faced different controversies as it contains some frank discussion of author about her quest of love inside and outside the marriage. She writes about the society as well as the traditional conservativeness in which she lives. She possesses a clear vision about relationship. Deriving inspiration from her matrilineal background, she celebrates woman's body and pleads for its integrity. She writes only as a woman can write. She takes pride in the fact of being a woman. This is certainly the starting point of all kinds of feminism.

Das tries to unify herself to locate her true existence and identity. She caricatures the male to underline the plight of female in the world of man and manners. She exposes her own realization of the uselessness of her anger and protest against social patriarchy. The childhood that she describes seems to be darkened more by socio-political and national climate than by personal or individual self-image. Her ethnic consciousness and her sensibility were shaped from her early childhood by the social experiences. She was not an outspoken child. The only companion close to her was her brother. In her observations, she created a sense of suppressed implications, which propagated the unhappiness of mob-psyche.

Kamala Das in *My Story* is in search of her selfhood. Patricia Souza opines that peer pressure is a powerful force in shaping attitudes and behavior. Our self develops with the communication with other individuals. But in Das's case, she has not been given choice in any field of her life and thus left deprived from everything. Consequently she turns to writing where she is searching for her selfhood. Writing is a means of self-discovery for Kamala Das. She says: "When I write I get closer and closer to my true self.... It is an activity that cannot be shared so akin to dying" (qtd. in Kumar 86). She looks upon writing as a full-time vocation and complains that she as a "part-time house-wife" (ibid) finds it difficult to set aside the timetable for writing (ibid). She uses, according to Bruce King, a personal voice, and "self-revelation" (ibid) an effort to evolve her personality in a self-assertive mood. Anisur Rahman observes that her personae are her own "mutilated self," tormented by temporal consciousness (87).

There is an abiding sense of crisis which pervades herself narrative as she relentlessly tries to build an identity in a patriarchal society. The existential framework of her writing underlines the dynamics of self- evolution. Her writing is marked by a feminist consciousness as well as a feminist sense of resistance to male oppression. She evolves a female identity as a person in her works. Devindra Kohli observes that "Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging

from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity” (29). K.R Srinivasa Iyengar also expresses the same idea: “Kamala Das has a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in largely insensitive man-made world” (qtd. in Prasad 180). The central burden of her autobiography springs from the conflict between a woman’s loss of freedom and identity in a patriarchal society and her ruthless fight to attain the same values. Das’s vision is vitally particularized by woman’s point of view. She startles the conformist society by her attempts to redefine herself in personal relationships even by breaking the traditional concept of womanhood. Kamala Das’s personae are contemporary women affected by an identity crisis which works at two levels. In the first, she tries to mend an identity for herself by her nostalgic yearning for her ancestral past represented by her grandmother and ancestral home, a place of childhood innocence where she feels at home with her self. The familial memories are the vital “symbols of undefiled purity which she left once and lost forever” (qtd. in Kumar 88).

In the second level the crisis assumes the form of a psychic conflict in which the fascinating past is at war with the depressing present. The writer’s self-frements the past and present in a commendable effort to redefine her identity. Her rebellious attitude against the patriarchal world detaches herself from the crisis of identity. On the one hand, she rebelled and broke away from traditions. On the other, she regretted the loss of what she had lost in anger and protest. Her conflict is rooted in her East-West conflict of ideas right from her childhood.

Das’s autobiography is a contemporary Indian woman’s persistent quest to develop a personal identity distinct from her identity as a sexual object that traditional society has fabricated for her. Kamala Das uses her vision of personal relationships to evolve an identity for herself. This is an existential problem which involves a personal demand for self- definition against a personal impulse to have none. Her expressions betray an aggressive personality. Like a wild beast she wants to grab and swallow everyone and everything that comes her way. Her appetite for life is a consuming passion. The yearning for satisfying human relationships is at the bottom of her heart, for the relationships form an endless series of substitutes. The frustrated female psyche continues to deal with the substitutes in a tireless attempt to build a new identity. The distinction of the identity unmistakably conveys the idea of the woman she wants herself to be. Das hints that she wants to be different from the traditional woman who has no substitute to trust on. Kamala Das undergoes an identity crisis due to her helplessness to establish meaningful and abiding relationships with the world. She attempts to resolve this crisis either through love or by her writing, wherein the craving to return to the past becomes, in essence, an occasion for the celebration of the body. Her first experiences about her body begin with the attraction of a female friend. She describes the intimacy in an inhibited manner, which in turn justifies the growth of the female self:

Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling, it was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that, no one, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all

through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot (Das 75).

My Story is essentially an account of a woman’s search for love and happiness in the face of loss, loneliness and societal restrictions. She longed for some form of connectedness with the universe and her writing was one way of achieving this. This autobiography was marketed as “the compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian writer” (Piciucco 3). When the female body is exposed at length, there is the risk of other factors of female identity becoming distracted or overlooked completely. *My Story* has been subjected to such phallogocentric criticism and marketed as a saleable product. But despite this criticism, this autobiography has proved as a perfect medium for Kamala Das to assert her subjective identity.

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