

Beyond Domestic Silence: Female Desire, Emotional Fragmentation, and the Politics of Self-Expression in Kamala Das's My Story

¹Lavika, ²Dr. Arti puri

¹Research scholar; Department of Arts and Humanities, Apex university Jaipur

²Research supervisor, Assistant Professor, Department of Arts and Humanities, Apex university VT Road mansarover. Jaipur

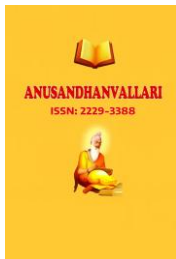
Abstract

This paper explores Kamala Das's autobiographical writing, *My Story*, as a radical text that disrupts the silence imposed on Indian domesticity as a text that articulates female desire, emotional fragmentation, and the possibility of self-expression as three intertwined spaces of political resistance. Set in the patriarchal framework of mid-twentieth-century Kerala, the study suggests that Das' confessional mode is not only a form of self-disclosure of the private pain of the female body but also a conscious aesthetic and political move, which aims to assert a female voice and body in the context of institutional erasure. It is desire—the sexual, emotional, and creative desire—that becomes the organizing principle of Das's self-narration, even as it gives birth to an alienating, at times guilt-ridden, and yet autonomous, fractured self in a constant negotiation of transgression and guilt, autonomy and belonging. Rather than a sign of weakness, this emotional disassociation is taken as a realistic portrait of a woman who is working against the codes of "wifely duty," "maternal sacrifice," and "sexual purity." Self-expression in *My Story* is examined as a double-edged performance, one which is a catalyst to the violence of domestic containment and another which is a creation of a public self that refuses to be contained in the victim position. The paper argues that Das' use of the lenses of desire, fragmentation, and self-expression brings the autobiography into a dialogic relationship with itself and that this process is an insurrectionist literary act that questions the foundations of silence which patriarchal domesticity is built upon.

Keywords: Kamala Das, *My Story*, female desire, emotional fragmentation, confessional autobiography, domestic silence

Introduction

My Story is a unique and disturbing book in the field of Indian women's writing. This autobiography, published in 1976, upended the 19th-century taboo of women's reserved expression of the intimate truths of their bodies, their disappointments in marriage, and their inner conflicts. The text is placed on the hard texture of the social tissue in mid-twentieth-century Kerala, which has a tendency to silence women within the confines of the home. It is not downright humbling but asserting, accusing, and demanding. Beyond the ways in which it has revealed itself to be a work of enduring critical importance, the significance of the work is that it has turned personal suffering into a politically oriented act of writing, a place where the private self becomes a site of ideological struggle. This paper focuses on the conceptual frameworks of female desire, emotional fragmentation, and politics of self-expression in relation to *My Story*. Instead of considering these as individual themes, the study looks at them together as forces that engage and work to unravel the architecture of domesticity's silence. In Das's story, the desire of the female is not one given but a desire for love, recognition, and creative satisfaction, a desire denied by the system of patriarchy. However, its articulation is at a price. The author's own split personality is revealed by guilt, alienation, and a constant dualism of rebellion and conformity. This emotional breakup isn't perceived here as a sign of a lack of strength but rather a result of a woman's construction of a social being in opposition to



the codes that construct her. Thus, there are politics of self-expression at stake, and it is the central act of resistance. Das disturbs unspoken histories of female interiority, narrating the unspeakable, in a way that also challenges the moral and literary traditions of the past. My story is located in the confessional mode but transcends it. My story is in the confessional mode, but it is also beyond the confessional mode. Das's desire and her fragmentation are co-tangled; more than telling her story, they rewrite it, and it is this that is argued for in this paper.

Objectives

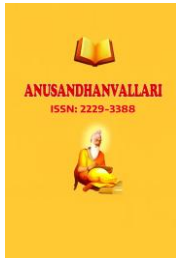
1. To explore how female desire is constructed in My Story as a site of rebellion against domestic silence.
2. To interpret emotional fragmentation as a deliberate narrative strategy reflecting the psychological cost of self-assertion.
3. To examine self-expression as a political act that reframes autobiography into feminist resistance.

Methodology

This study is of the qualitative, interpretive type based on close reading of the text My Story of Kamala Das. The principal text is considered a literary artifact and a socio-cultural document and examined as such; therefore, reading is an integrated approach involving aesthetic strategies as well as ideological interventions. Rather than being a literal narrative of lived experience, the research does not treat the autobiography as such but takes it as a constructed narrative in which language, memory, and self-representation are under the constraints of gender, caste, and domestic ideology. The analytical framework is interdisciplinary, based on feminist literary criticism, the theory of the autobiographical, and the psychoanalytical idea of fragmentation and desire. The study is informed by feminist theory, in particular theories of self-writing as a site of contestation, not of simple confession, as theorized by Shari Benstock and Leigh Gilmore. In Das's text, the concepts of the "fissures" of female autobiographical narrative by Benstock and Gilmore's 'autobiographics' as technologies of self-representation are useful tools for reading the fractured self. Selectively used psychoanalytical approaches, especially those of Julia Kristeva about desire and the semiotic disruption of symbolic order, are used to highlight Das's use of language to challenge the patriarchy and domestic ideology. Moreover, the study places My Story in the cultural and historical setting of mid-twentieth-century Kerala and recognizes the particular caste, class, and gender configurations that impact Das's experience and its representation. Other secondary sources are critical essays on Kamala Das, Indian feminist work on women's autobiography, and theoretical work on confession and performativity. The methodology emphasizes a hermeneutic interpretation of the text, and the three concepts that inform it—female desire, emotional fragmentation, and the politics of self-expression—are not dealt with in a linear series but rather are considered mutually constitutive forces that collectively subvert the architecture of domestic silence.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a significant amount of scholarly work done on Kamala Das's My Story, especially in the context of feminist literary criticism, autobiography studies, and postcolonial studies. By placing the current study in the context of three overlapping fields of scholarship—theory of women's autobiography, critical approaches to desire and fragmentation in Das's oeuvre, and scholarship on the political aspects of confessional self-expression—this review aims to help readers connect the dots and understand how the emphasis of this study

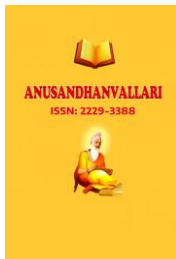


differs from the work of its predecessors. This review situates the present study within three intersecting bodies of scholarship: theoretical approaches to women's autobiography, critical approaches to desire and fragmentation in Das's work, and scholarship on the political dimensions of confessional self-expression, in order to help readers connect the dots and understand how the emphasis of the present study differs from the work of its predecessors. One of the most significant theoretical works that has influenced women's life-writing is an essay entitled "The Female Self Engendered: Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood" (Benstock, 1999), which argues that women's life-writing is characterized by fissures and discontinuities as opposed to the linear tradition of men. Benstock's work has played a crucial role in changing the way fragmentation is understood not as a failure of aesthetics but as part of a representation of females' structurally limited experience of self. On the basis of this, Gilmore (1994) put forward the idea of "autobiographics" as a feminist theory of women's self-representation, suggesting that women's self-writing is a technology of identity that situates itself between personal and political. Gilmore's analysis of the ways in which women's autobiographies "transgress institutional 'truth-policing' and gendered constraints" provides a critical perspective that can be applied to Das's transgressions as deliberate acts of feminist intervention and less of a confessional gesture.

In the focused study on Kamala Das's scholarship, Sujitha and Daves (2023) explored *My Story* as a narrative of self-discovery and empowerment, highlighting its themes of love, sexuality, and personal growth while challenging the dominant patriarchal narratives. In their study, they place it in a wider Indian feminist context, highlighting Das's reworking of female personae in Indian English literature. In a later examination of the work by K (2025), a feminist approach to autobiography and the idea of "voices from the margins" places Das's work in the socio-cultural context of 1970s Kerala and examines her depiction of desire and disillusionment in marriage as a calculated literary strategy that challenges entrenched patriarchal belief systems. This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the redefinition of the boundaries of Das's autobiographical act and self-representation in the literary context of India. Das's works have been approached by parallel scholarship in their confessional aspects. Das's confessional poetry was read gender, in a gendered way, by Yadav and Yadav (2025), who emphasized how Das participated in the articulation of female sexuality and emotional vulnerability as sites of resistance and self-realization. They also show how the confessional mode serves to "disrupt patriarchal constructions of womanhood," which can also be transferred to the autobiographical register of *My Story*. In the same way, Meenakshi (2024) explored the continuum of desire and despair in Das's poetry, uncovering the ways in which the female body is domesticated by the norms of society and culture, which helps to focus on the domestic confinement Das describes in her autobiography.

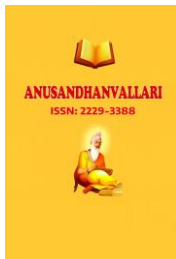
Desire as Defiance, Fragmentation as Form, Confession as Politics.

My Story (1976) is an unusual and disturbing book by Kamala Das that stands out in the field of Indian women's writing. This autobiography was a radical departure from the long-established norms of feminine modesty, revealing the private details of her sexual urges, failed marriage, and hidden psychological anguish. The text is set in the strictures of social order in mid-twentieth-century Kerala, where women are not allowed to speak in the household. It does not just admit to; it demands, accuses, and insists upon. In the end, the significance of the work lies in its making of the personal into the politically motivated act of writing, a personal self into a site of ideological contestation. This paper examines three conceptual axes that are mutually entangled: female desire, emotional fission, and the politics of self-expression and claims they are not isolated forces but rather are mutually reinforcing, whereas they combine to challenge the architecture of domestic silence. Das constructs her autobiographical self on the axis of articulation of female desire in *My Story*. In the text, desire is a three-dimensional process: it is not only a desire for sexuality but also a desire for emotional exchange, for recognition



in intellectual relationships and for autonomy in the physical realm. Das continually frames herself as a subject of her own speaking, challenging the marital and domestic code of silence. Her unabashed representations of longing outside the marriage, physical discontent, and seeking love outside the marital span are acts of rupture to the narrative of the ideal Hindu wife. Sexual desire gets translated into a more general sense of need, an unwillingness to be demeaned as a household chore. *My Story* defies the patriarchy by emphasizing topics of love, sexuality, and personal development while changing the image of the feminine in Indian English literature, as Sujitha and Daves (2023) argue. Encounters are repeated throughout the text, where the body talks back to the authorized muteness of the marital house, and desire emerges as the main language of selfhood. Das' story is one of desire, and it is to desire that one be, to speak about such desire in public is a political act of defiance. The study reveals how her language of desire works as an affront to the prescribed duty language of the patriarchal home, thus deriving the personal from the political.

But this expression of desire carries a psychological price tag in the form of emotional split throughout the book. There is always a split between the subject positions that emerge in *My Story*: faithful wife and good-for-nothing woman, provider mother and free-sex person, and rule-following daughter and rule-rejecting writer. It is a tale of defiant and guilty behavior, exhibition and withdrawal, self-love and self-loathing. This disintegration is most evident in the sections where Das explores her roles as wife, mother, and lover: identities that clash but fail to fuse. This disintegration is not considered the sign of an autobiographical breakdown or psychological disorder, but rather a structural and thematic result of a woman's writing in opposition to the social codes that require her coherence and submission. This study follows in the footsteps of Benstock (1999), who introduced the concept of fissures and discontinuities in the women's autobiographical narrative, which separates it from the linear male tradition. A fractured self that arises is not a self disheveled but a self made honest, a self that testifies to the psychological cost of living in resistance to imposed unity. Das' negotiation between personal testimony and political critique is further clarified by Gilmore's (1994) notion of autobiographics as a feminist technology of self-representation. The emotional disintegration of *My Story* is therefore the written legacy of someone who lived against domestic ideology, and coherence would be a form of surrender. This complex weave of desire and disunity is what the politics of self-expression in *My Story* is born of. Das's confessional mode isn't just cathartic; it's performative and strategic. She does not ask her readers to feel sorry for her or to be made to feel guilty; she makes the reader the witness and the jury of the structural violence of the patriarchal institutions. Das disrupts a distinction between the literary act and social intervention by narrating what has previously been culturally taboo. Her rather unapologetic style of narration denies victimization and asserts agency by telling. This is in keeping with K's (2025) conceptualization of *My Story* as a feminist autobiographical gesture that disrupts dominant, patriarchal discourses by "speaking of desire and marital disillusionment as a sort of literary protest." In Das's hands the autobiography is a technology of resistance—a text space in which the personal is collective and the private is political. In their gendered critique of Das's confessional poems, Yadav and Yadav (2025) also show in what way the expression of female sexuality and emotional vulnerability becomes a mode of resistance and self-realization in Das's poetry, which is similarly relevant to the autobiographical register. Das cannot be apologized for; it must be recognized. The politics of her narrative are just here, in her refusal to fall into the reader's expectation of a repentant or victimized female subject. The results of this study speak as a whole to the idea that desire, fragmentation, and self-expression are not thematized as separate but reinforcing parts of an insurgent autobiographical practice. Desire is fragmenting because it is not possible to articulate it in the domestic ideology without having to suffer psychologically. Fragmentation requires politicized self-expression, an expression that is only possible within narrative. Self-expression, in turn, changes the meaning of the life of a woman when narrated truthfully. Das's own life story is not just a life story—it is a re-scripting of the circumstances in which a woman's life can be written. Das' move from the domestic silence does not result in one voice. She finds herself at a broken and rebellious and very human expression of "writing oneself free."



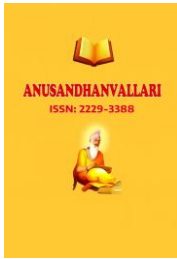
Results and Discussion

When analyzed within the conjuring of female desire, emotional fragmentation, and the politics of self-expression, remarkable insights emerge to enrich the grasp of the autobiography as a feminist literary intervention. The findings are presented in the context of the three main goals of the study. Firstly, the analysis of female desire in the text shows that it is multi-dimensional and not just a sexual desire. Das describes a desire as a complex need for bodily agency, emotional engagement, and self-expression. Her bold portrayals of outside-the-marriage fantasies and bodily discontent are not just unsettling revelations but also strategic disruptions to the story of the perfect Hindu woman. Desire turns to a metaphor of an existential desire, a rejection of a domestic role. The repetition of these encounters registers the body's critique of the prescribed silence of the marital space: desire is the main language of selfhood. Second, emotional fragmentation is not a fault or a mental disorder but is a structural aspect of the narrative, a direct effect of self-affirmation in the context of the patriarchy. The words of the text alternate between resistance and guilt, exhibitionism and retraction, self-love and self-hatred. The most significant expressions of these divisions occur in the passages in which Das talks about wife, mother, and lover; these roles do not merge and indeed contradict each other. The study concludes that this split self is a psychological price paid by the writer for writing against the grain of domestic ideology; fragmentation is the formal counterpart of a life lived in opposition to imposed unity.

Third, the politics of self-expression in *My Story* are in its refusal to apologize. Das is not asking for sympathy or moral absolution. Her approach to confessional is performative and strategic, elevating the private to the public sphere and making it a public indictment of the institutions of patriarchy. The private political is recreated as the reader, the witness, and the jury: the literary act and the social intervention are destabilized. Together, these results confirm that desire, fragmentation, and self-expression are not 'stand-alone' topics but rather complementary components of an insurrectionist writing practice. Das's story is not just about her life; it is a rewriting of the conditions for a woman's life to be told. Although there is already a considerable amount of scholarship on these topics, a systematic examination of female desire, emotional fragmentation, and politics of self-expression as interwoven, rather than separable, concepts in *My Story* has yet to receive attention. This study fills that void by treating these three forces as a set of forces that are constitutive to one another and that together break open domestic silence.

Findings

The study brings out three major findings based on the textual analysis of *My Story* by Kamala Das. The first discovery is the basis of Das's autobiographical self, which is female desire. The text speaks of desire, but not just about sex; desire is a hunger for emotional connection, for intellectual communion, for physical freedom. Das always uses her body as a talking object and subverts the silence of married and domestic rules. Her story of desire is one that challenges the language of the patriarchy, because it is a language of duty that is meant for women in the household. The second finding is that emotional fragmentation is an intentional narrative construction and not an indication of autobiographical fragmentation. The self that appears in *My Story* is constantly divided between conflicting subject-seesaws of being a "devoted wife" and a "dutiful daughter" on one hand and a "desiring woman" and a "rebellious writer" on the other. This division is not a sign of mental illness but the text mark of a woman who writes against the social codes that require her coherence and submission. The disjointed style of story-telling is, in a strange way, the best expression of a subject that has been created in opposition.



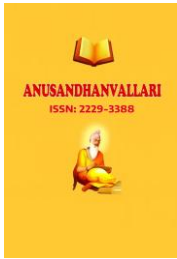
The third finding shows that the politics of self-expression in *My Story* are in the transformative confession. Das makes autobiographical testimony 'public criticism,' placing the reader as a witness to the structural violence of domestic ideology. Her forthright storytelling voice rejects her victimization and asserts a capacity to be an agent of her own story, and her story has been culturally unreachable. In conclusion, the study finds that desire, fragmentation, and self-expression are not isolated concepts but are interrelated elements that work in tandem to break the architecture of domestic silence, making *My Story* a long-lasting feminist literary intervention.

Limitations and Research Gap

The analysis of female desire, emotional fragmentation, and the politics of self-expression in *My Story* in this study has some limitations, but it is justified to consider some of these. This research does not make a comparative study of the Malayalam original *Ente Katha* with the English version of Das's autobiography. There are important differences between the two versions, the English text being significantly and directly more apology-free and more direct in its description of the events, while the Malayalam text is more intersubjective and culturally embedded. This linguistically bounded study can not consider the changes in Das's self-representation in language or audience. Moreover, the analysis is confined to *My Story*, and is not systematically compared with Das's poetry or her Malayalam writings, where other aspects of her divided selfhood are expressed. The gap between Das's English and Malayalam memoirs is a self that is linguistically fractured, as Raveendran points out, which this study acknowledges but does not engage with. Limited to the textual analysis without including biographical interviews or archival documents that could further shed light on the constructed nature of Das' autobiographical persona. One major area of the literature where this study makes a contribution is the preponderance of research that has considered female desire, emotional fragmentation, and self-expression as separate thematic areas. Much of the important work on Das concentrates on one of these aspects individually, as sexual transgression, as psychological turmoil, as a form of confession, and without developing them as a theory of their inter-constitution. Moreover, despite the fact that there is significant scholarship devoted to Das's confessional poetry, there are no in-depth analysis of *My Story* using an integrated approach. Less attention has been paid to the text's particular historical and cultural location as an autobiographical gesture in the 1970s in comparison to thematic readings of her poetic body of work. The relationship between the English and vernacular self-writing is under-explored in Das, and the role of the fragmented structures of narrative in *My Story* as formal strategies of resistance has not been addressed. This study helps to bridge these gaps by showing the production of fragmentation through desire, the need to politicize expression through fragmentation, and the transformation of possibilities for autobiographical truth through expression.

Conclusion

My Story, by Kamala Das, is a revolutionary work in the sense that it does not perform the silence that is expected of women as part of patriarchy's domestic sphere. This study aimed to explore the female desire, emotional fragmentation, and the politics of self-expression not as separate thematic interests but as interconnected forces that are working to undermine the walls of the domestic sphere. The results validate Das' confessional account as more than a process of personal catharsis; it is a conscious and politically motivated literary intervention that reconfigures the possibilities of women's self-representation. The analysis identified female desire as the energy that is the basis of Das's autobiographical project. In *My Story*, desire is a multidimensional phenomenon, including sexual desire, emotional need, and creative drive. Das disrupts the main tenet of domestic ideology by focusing on the desiring female body as a speaking subject that is contained within domestic and marital structures.

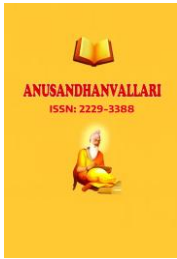


Her story turns desire into an open confession of self. The study also showed that this expression of desire does not create a coherent and victorious self. Rather, it creates a split-personality narrative voice, caught between rebellion and repressive at-oneness, between confessing and hiding. The fragmentation was not aesthetic or psychological but the honest textual signature of a woman who challenged the codes of wifely duty, maternal sacrifice, and sexual purity. The fractured self which emerges in *My Story* does not mark a self destroyed but a self rendered honest, a self which testifies to the psychological price of living in resistance against imposed coherence.

Das's politics of self-expression in the autobiography are in the way it has been transformed by the confessional mode. Das re-imagines the reader as a witness to the structural violence that is the domestic ideology by telling the story of what has been culturally forbidden. Her loud voice does not accept the role of victim but takes on that of the agent by telling. In her hands, the experience of autobiography becomes a technology of resistance: a textual space in which the private is made political and the personal is made collective. The study thus serves as an important piece of theoretical knowledge of women's life writing in so far as it shows that fragmentation is not a failure of the narrative but a necessary feature of its production in a male-dominated patriarchy and that self-expression is the foremost place in which feminist intervention could occur. The autobiographical gesture is radical, for the particular socio-cultural setting of mid-twentieth-century Kerala further highlights the radicality of Das's autobiographical gesture. Her story challenges not only the gender norms but also the caste and class norms that regulated women's speech and sexuality in her context. What remains of the text is a measure of the courage it takes to write oneself into existence when all institutions—family, religion, marriage, and the literary tradition—call for silence. Finally, *My Story* is not just a woman's life story. It changes the parameters for the possibility of telling the truth about a woman's life. In the complex interplay of desire, fragmentation, and politicized self-expression, Kamala Das has made autobiography an insurgent literary genre that remains provocative and precariously inspiring. Comparative analysis of the English and Malayalam versions of the autobiography and the use of other women's confessional writing in other books that are part of literary traditions of post-colonialism could expand the scope of the present study. In the interim, this study confirms that there is not just one voice in the home but many fractured voices, voices that are defiant, profoundly human voices speaking of what it means to be set free to write.

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