

# Autobiographical Discourse in South Asian Feminist Literature: A Paratextual Analysis of Narrative Strategies of Memory and Resistance

Aulia Muflah Nasution<sup>1</sup>, Sakina Selfira<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bhupal Nobles' University, Udaipur, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bhupal Nobles' University, Udaipur, India

**Abstract:** *This study explores the autobiographical tradition in Indian women's literature, focusing on Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam. It examines how their narratives challenge patriarchal norms and redefine female identity through self-expression. The paper highlights how autobiography serves as a vehicle for personal and social transformation, providing an in-depth analysis of select works. By contextualizing these writings within feminist literary discourse, the study underscores their significance in reshaping perspectives on gender, identity, and literary self-representation.*

**Keywords:** Autobiographical writing, Indian women writers, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, feminist literature

## 1. Introduction

Expression seems to be the most fascinating word in the dictionary of human lives. People always have a desire to express their lives inside out, and this longing to reveal their inner and outer world gets manifested in all sorts of arts, be it music, dance, theatre, drawing, painting, ceramics, sculpture, architecture or literature. Literature, like any other art forms, always welcomes and encourages expressions of each and every kind to such an extent that it is often called the mirror of society reflecting human life. Literature becomes a medium for narrating, celebrating and deliberating a number of profound and novel ideas and views about life, both in general and in particular. One such genre of literature that tends to focus and foreground human life in all its hues and forms along with its ups and downs is the genre of autobiography. Generally, autobiography is a piece of writing written by the person himself or herself in which an individual gives a fairly detailed account of one's own life and expresses one's own self, but it can also be an account of the social life of one's time as it can be argued that while narrating the journey of the self, that doesn't take place in a vacuum but rather exists as a result of interaction of self and society, the writer may present a social picture of the time as well.

The discussion on autobiography tends to begin with the term itself. Linda Anderson informs that the term autobiography is supposed to have been coined in the nineteenth - century; it is commonly believed that while describing the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieira, the Romantic poet Robert Southey used it in 1809. However, she states that a slightly earlier usage of the term can be attributed to William Taylor, who insisted on describing the work of Issac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* as autobiography rather than the hybrid term self - biography that D'Israeli himself used. She further says, "Felicity Nussbaum argues that by the 1830s the word had become a matter of established usage, though the definitions of what it might

mean were by no means stable", a fact that is supremely relevant today.

### Kamala Das's My Story

Kamala Das has written her autobiography "My Story" which added fuel to the already raging fire of feminism in India. It had created a great storm in the Indian Literary World and proved to be the compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian writer. "My Story" was first serialized in "The Current Weekly" of Bombay between January to December 1974, then it was published in a book form in 1976. It presents a beautiful picture of the actual condition of women in Indian society. The secrets of Kamala Das's life have been narrated in a very charming and compelling style which is not far from the most Indian women's condition in the society. Here she tells the story of her sexual life, her relationship with men and her views about the world. Although her autobiography imparted her the image of being an abnormal woman yet it proved to be a great success. It has been published in more than 15 languages and is now a textbook prescribed in the school of Japan and Canada. Kamala Das became a writer of substance and emotions as well as love and eternal sorrow, even though she was ridiculed for her first literary creation. It is a common belief that some of her writings became controversial because they were erotic and sexy. She has been a rebel in her writings. Her writings were meant to explode the hypocritical social life of Kerala (Harish, 2002).

Apart of the above - mentioned works, Kamala Das has written various articles for several periodicals and weeklies. The articles penned by her in 'Femina', 'Eves Weekly', 'Imprint', 'Intimate' and her columns in 'Blitz' and 'The Current Weekly' reveal her feminine sensibility and her missionary zeal to work as a feminist writer (Das, 2011).

Kamala Das champions the cause of woman which can be well - illustrated, especially by her articles like: "Why Not More Than One Husband?" published in 'Eve's Weekly' on May 6, 1972; "Enough of Pativrata" published in 'Blitz',

April 30, 1977 and “Only Those Above 55, Obsessed with Sex”, published in *The Current Weekly* on January 26, 1974. Kamala Das has explored the problem of her position as a woman and a writer in post - colonial India, in the essays like “Only Those Above 55, Obsessed with Sex”, “Why Not More Than One Husband?” and “I Studied All Men”. Such type of articles written by Kamala Das created enough hostility and bitterness in the minds of the so - called custodian of Indian culture. She has also published the novels - “Alphabet of Lust” and “Daughter of Immortality” along with “Collected Poems” and “Tonight, This Savage Rite” published in collaboration with Pritish Nandy (Das, 2004).

Writing is an important mode of giving an expression or outlet to one’s thoughts, feelings and emotions. Hence, it plays a vital role in forming our perceptions of our lives as women, in working out our feminist views and in communicating them to others. Kamala Das believed women writer could succeed in breaking down existing social power structures and create a place for herself in the world of masculine hierarchies only by writing an expression. Thereby the women writer could alter her existing marginalized position and accept her rightful role as a significant part of society. She could challenge accepted notions of the female by writing the self and redraft general opinion on the feminine mystique. Every author writes in the political and social structures in which he lives (Harish, 2002).

More and more women writing began to appear in public as the emphasis on demystifying the myth of the female and generating a new role for the woman in society became popular. The woman writer got courage and confidence by the feeling of social responsibility in reconstructing her social role. The autobiographical mode was made popular by the Freudian psychoanalysis where the verbalization of individual experience was considered therapeutic. For the woman writer, the idea of autobiography as expression became an accepted means to explore her personal identity, as well as create a newer and better perception on gender issues (Pavel, 2019).

Yet the woman writer was constructed to be breaking social modes due to the valorization of silence as a desirable “feminine” attribute, by the very act of writing. The woman writer was attempting a breaking up of the power structures of a hitherto acceptable patriarchal discourse by verbalizing. Regarding this aspect of women’s autobiographical discourse, we see that it is essential for the woman who attempts to write herself that she is engaged in rewriting the stories that already exist about her. By seeking to publicize herself she violates an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. The woman is resisting or changing what is known about her and produces differences. A woman writer’s autobiography, her hesitant expressions and confessions are dubbed subversive and by extension become controversial, creating a mental block in the hitherto fore accepting readership (Browarczyk, 2015).

Her “otherness” seems to be an exception rather than a mouthpiece of the female community. In the context of a postcolonial writer like Kamala Das, feminism is a theory of

engagement, creating agency for the marginalized, the oppressed and the underprivileged, the Other.

Kamala Das’s writings in general particularly her poetry can be seen as a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive patriarchal structures of power, antecedent to a profound sense of alienation in the personae of her work. This can be well illustrated with examples from her autobiography “My Stoiiy” which has been a subject of prolonged controversy ever since its publication. The controversy has of course mellowed considerably with the growing recognition of the notion that autobiography is first and foremost a literary from and is as much about the persona as any historical individual. It is a fictional representation of certain chosen facts of the writer’s life. As per Das’s creative works, there is no difference between the “I” of the poems and the “I” of the autobiography. Katherine R. Goodman remarks that:

*“To read an autobiography one must know the fiction it engages. No more or less than men, women have fashioned the stories of their lives from the ready - made images at their disposal. Indeed, all of us tend to read our real and daily lives guided by these ready - made images. But successful autobiographers have also broken with those fictions, manipulated and altered them, thus revealing important and genuine experiences from their lives. ”*

“My Story” possesses its own kind of fiction that is certainly not easy to identify because it is seamlessly blended with facts approaching magic realism, taking the book very close to a novel. If it is considered to be a factual account, the critical response becomes difficult. This type of reading makes Vincent O’ Sullivan voice her own difficulty in responding to this book:

*“It is little hard to know how to respond to this book which, while adopting an openly confessional tone, conceals quite as much or more as it reveals. But if considered as a literary rather than a factual recreation of the writer’s life, it often serves as an illuminating comment on her poetry and fiction. ”*

An autobiography like this has its roots in the writer’s life that often gathers fictional layers as the book progresses, however strong may be the fictional element. This happens in Das’s autobiography that initially “breaks with fiction” and reveals the genuine experience of a sensitive child - poet battered by alienation and discrimination. The fiction involved in the book comes gradually with the transformation of the narrative from an account of a neglected child into a story of a liberated woman (Rathore, 2018).

#### **The Revenue Stamp by Amrita Pritam**

Her works have been appreciated, translated and honored across the geographical frontiers. Prestigious awards and honours, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956, Padam Shri in 1969, Jnanpith award in 1982, Rajya Sabha M. P. in 1986, The French Honor, Order des Arts of Letters, in 1987, and Poet of the Millennium in 2000, a distinction showered by the Delhi State, speak volumes for her genius.

Her association with Afro - Asian writers associations has given her an international exposure. With love as the sole guiding force of her life and the pen as her only might, Amrita Pritam has made a name for herself in the world of letters.

Amrita Pritam is a professedly autobiographical/confessional writer. She does not compartmentalize between her personality and her muse. The total package of her emotions and thoughts, inner states of minds and hallucinatory experiences find portrayal in her work. In the prologue to her autobiography, Amrita declares:

*"whatever happened in my life happened between the layers of thought that found their way into novels and poems."* (The Revenue Stamp: Prologue).

This confession recalls Kamala's Das observation of a writer's muse: "A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality." (My Story: 157) It was precisely the lack of equation between Amrita's dreams and the external barriers, which inspired her creativity. She found a solution to her troubles in her pen. She writes:

"The crude realities of my world fell in love with my dreams and out of such an illicit union was born all that I wrote. . ." (The Revenue Stamp: Prologue)

Amrita Pritam voiced her protest against the fake social values which hindered the realization of her dreams. In her writing she, thus, emerges as an icon of human liberation. Like Pandita Ramabai, a pioneer figure in Indian feminism, Amrita takes a protestant stand against women's abuse. She rejects all the institutions - religion, state/law, middle class morality, etc. - as a blot on human freedom. Being a pragmatist, she finds religion and other such barriers a handicap to human prosperity. Religion renders man irrational and powerless.

She finds herself hailing from another time. Her personality, thus, contradicts the prevailing social set up. From that contradiction sprouts her - literary output. She made a bid for liberty in a highly conventional and male dominated society. As a woman writer, she had a hard time with her male contemporary writers but she never ever changed her attitude and life style.

The heroines of these novels are resolute, assertive, truthful and liberated. They undo the barriers of the hierarchical society to be true to their "# inner selves. They put their whole being in love and enter into physical relationships with their lovers before marriage. Even if they meet failure in love, they do not blame their lovers. Rather they lead life to the fullest. To this effect, the remark of Punjabi novelist and critic.

Amrita Pritam's forte is autobiography. She has never been a private person. It is most appropriate to say that she has very delicately depicted the innocent desires and aspirations of childhood, the burning passions of youth and the depths of her love, agony, satisfaction and ultimately the achievement of her goal. It goes to her credit that she tried her hand at various literary genres. Still, she is best known as a poetess.

Her poetry has fetched her the highest awards. Darshan Singh Maini observes: The best moments of poetic experience in her verse are related to private and personal themes.

#### **Nayantara Sehgal: The Prison and the Chocolate Cake**

Sahgal made her debut in the literary world with Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954), which she wrote at her mother's house—30, Aurangzeb Road—during the autumn and winter of 1952 - 53 in New Delhi as "there could have been no pleasanter city or season for a spell of introspection" (Prison and Chocolate Cake XIII). Since its publication, Prison and Chocolate Cake has enjoyed superlative popularity to such an extent that people who might not be aware of her outstanding work in the realm of fiction certainly know a great deal about this classic piece of life - writing. Just as Malcolm Bradbury considered James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) the "seedbed" (196) of everything he wrote after that greatest novel of the twentieth century, likewise Sahgal's Prison and Chocolate Cake can be called the "seedbed" of her writings. Khushwant Singh rightly observes: "Despite the years that have gone by this book has not dated. It is written in a gentle, easy flowing language without a trace of malice or ill will against anyone" (Foreword XI). Times Literary Supplement considered it a book presenting an "unforgettable picture of the hopes, the unfaltering determination, the spiritual convictions, which carried the independence movement to its triumphant conclusion". Besides, there are critics for whom her autobiographies seem to be an attempt to hide her earlier self. Meena Sodhi remarks:

"Sahgal's fictional writings venture to break free of her "self" through a search for others" characters; in a few of them she tries to see some experiences of her life through her fictional creations and tries to understand herself. On the other hand, her autobiographies reveal her efforts in attempting to confront her earlier "selves" which she had been trying to conceal."

But Sodhi too observes that her autobiographies are significant for their depiction of the political life of the time, with a special emphasis on the Nehru family. Rumina Sethi also observes that Sahgal's writings present "a story that is kaleidoscopic with a polyphony of voices presenting a multiple point of view" (web). Talking about Prison and Chocolate Cake, Sethi remarks that it represents voices from history, a history she and her family have experienced first - hand reflecting India's freedom struggle.

Indeed, one can say that the book is not just a record of her growing up years but can also be considered a memoir of her family in which Taru, an insider, provides a first - hand account of her family. Besides, the book can also be regarded as a significant document of the national history of India presenting a record of two decades of pre - independence era because, as it can be seen that the text of the book impressively mingles the elements of personal history with that of national history. Sahgal herself states that what we have in Prison and Chocolate Cake is "more of a national than personal history" (PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE 1). This fusion of personal and

national is manifested throughout the book. In the preface of the first edition of this book, she writes:

"I grew up during India's non - violent fight for freedom from British rule. I knew history would record the struggle but I do not want the special magic of that time and its special quality to disappear without a trace, especially I had had the privilege of growing up in a family where men and women had committed their lives to it." (PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE 6)

These lines clearly indicate the intention of the author which was to preserve the glorious little things of those turbulent times of pre - independent India. As a result, Prison and Chocolate Cake encompasses "the fabric of a whole past—my personal past along with India's" (PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE XV) as observed and recorded by a sensitive child Taru. Moreover, Sahgal wrote this book for herself, her family and for the circle of friends who were part and parcel of the atmosphere it described. The atmosphere that she is referring to is of the time "when India was the stage for a great political drama" (Preface VII). It was a time when India was a colony under the British Raj, and was combating against the imperial rule of the British under the leadership of Gandhiji because of whom millions of people had joined the non - violent fight against the British rulers including Sahgal's three parents—her Mamu, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, her Papu, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, and her mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Further, she states that in the colonial rule "independence was a figment of radical and courageous imaginations. Transforming it into a reality was a lifelong commitment, and the way those nearest to me went about it impressed even the child I was as being evenly balanced between an iron determination and a rollicking sense of adventure. It was that tread and aura I wanted to convey in this portrait of my family" (PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE XVII). Since, the book presents a dramatic portrait of the spirit of sacrifice that carried India through the years of struggle for independence, therefore, it becomes a "reminder of high ideals lightly and gracefully worn, which served a family and a country as the code to live by" (PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE 7).

No wonder that the book, while presenting the growth - narrative of Taru, also delineates the saga of one of the historic times of Indian - freedom struggle. Commenting on Sahgal's fusion of the national and the personal history in the autobiography, Shyam M. Asnani writes that she nationalizes the personal and vice versa to enable us "to watch the evolution of her parents" personalities in the context of the drama of the national struggle, great actors playing their pre - ordained role and long suffering India in the throes of a revolution that came to an end with the attainment of country's freedom as well as its ghastly tragedy of partition" (103). Indeed, it can be said that Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954) is like a mirror in which the reflection of Indian freedom struggle is the nexus, and the writer's self is peripheral.

Sahgal's autobiography does not narrate the events chronologically; she does not follow any traditional logic or system in the narration. A. V. Krishna Rao comments, "Sahgal's autobiographical narrative at times reads like a

delectable piece of historical fiction rather than a chronologically correct personal calendar of events" (100). Her way of writing in this manner "which constitutes a sort of revolt against the fashion of writing in the chronological sequence" (Asnani 104) has been viewed as a significant and a highly original contribution to the field of autobiography - writing. Moreover, she had her own reasons to employ this technique of narration as she explains in the preface of the first edition of the book.

## 2. Conclusion

The writings of Indian English women writers have resisted the dominant sexual mores, and have explored female sexuality through their writings. Singh observes three phases of female writings based on the authors attitude to female sexuality: the earlier texts depicting the devoted, self - sacrificing, chaste wives; the second phase depicting women tormented with deep guilt at extramarital situations; and contemporary texts where female sexuality is addressed as a necessary urge despite the mental and moral conflicts.

These autobiographies however great they are, cannot change or obliterate oppressive communal structures; but by pretence questions, by signifying re - examination and redefinition, they help in formulating a consciousness which can perhaps ultimately bring about a productive transformation. There was a healing, transformative and empowering dynamics in their process of writing. Furthermore, writing their autobiography, provided the occasion for these writers to reconsider their existence in the milieu of the lived transcendent and inspiring experience restoring it from their present - day perspective. This knowledge and progression resulted in feelings of resolution, and the capability to contentedly progress forward into the next segment of life and/or onto other projects. A sense of inner peace was identified, which in and of itself was transformative and empowering. Autobiography can be claimed as the explosion of vivacious new - fangled talents in the twentieth century. These three writers have surveyed, in their personal approach, have created such consciousness and they replicate the deconstructed womanly susceptibility next to the culturally warped rudiments of sovereignty, the depiction of the personality of these auto biographers reached to the lead of the globe of catering and offspring, indicative of the psychological exasperation and subversion, finally to represent the far - reaching implications of gender edifying self's in the social order on individual and substantial extent.

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