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KAMALA DAS'S *MY STORY*: A BIOMYTHOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

'Telling women's lives often involves new or mixed genres', asserts Judi Long, because of the 'messy accounts' they (women autobiographers) have incorporated into their books (55). The present study aims at examining Kamala Das's (1934-2009) *My Story* as an autobiography that does not strictly adhere to the conventional principles of the genre of autobiography. And here I would humbly make an attempt to consider Kamala Das's *My Story* to be in the line of those autobiographies that 'have pursued autobiographical projects in the form of fiction' (Long 55). Said differently, the present study proposes to look into Das's autobiography as a form of 'biomythography', a term coined by Audre Lorde. At the same time, I propose to show how Das has violated the rules of generic autobiography to straightforwardly portray the evolution of her self that relentlessly cries for liberation from the oppressive measures of patriarchal codes in Indian society. When Das has serialized the different episodes of her own life in the form of an autobiography, she also has incorporated into it a number such events which give birth to the bewilderment in the readers who ask time and again whether those events had been experienced by Das at all in her personal life or not. Yet, the addition of fictitious accounts renders the text to become more than the mere record of one's life. Moreover, the notion of self-mythification does not only transcend the autobiography from the orbit of non-fictional genre, but adds completeness to a woman's accounts as well.

Keywords: Autobiography, biomythography, fact, fiction, self-mythification, patriarchy, self, liberation/emancipation, etc.

Telling women's lives often involves new or mixed genres. Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lord [sic], and Gwendolyn Brooks have pursued autobiographical projects in the form of fiction. Kate Millett's *Flying* is autobiographical but violates many conventions of generic autobiography. "Messiness" is the shorthand for this content; it is also an element of style. "Messy" accounts make no attempt to streamline the narrative, to corset the subject, to shear the web of connections. The fullness of women's accounts reproaches the leanness of generic autobiography, and contradicts its claims of universality. (Long 55)

This is how Judi Long, the author of *Telling Women's Lives: Subject/ Narrator/ Reader/ Text*, opines when she refers to Audre Lorde's (1934-1992) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, A Biomythography* (1982). Long's comment speaks volumes on the notion of a woman's autobiography that denies traditional generic

approach. Long aptly observes that the women autobiographers such as Toni Morrison (1931-), Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) and Kate Millett(1934-2017) have denied 'the leanness of generic autobiography' and written their autobiographies in 'the form of fiction'. Hence, 'Telling women's lives often involves new or mixed genres', asserts Long, because of the 'messy accounts' they have incorporated into their books. And here I would humbly make an attempt to name Kamala Das's (1934-2009) *My Story* to be in the line of those autobiographies that 'have pursued autobiographical projects in the form of fiction'. Said differently, the present study proposes to look into Das's autobiography as a form of 'biomythography', a term coined by Audre Lorde.

Prof. Edward (Ted) Warburton, Assistant Professor, Theater Arts Department, University of California, Santa Cruz in his paper "Movement Research in the New Arts Praxis" defines biomythography. He writes, "Biomythography is the weaving together of myth, history and biography in epic narrative form, a style of composition that represents all the ways in which we perceive the world" (1). Warburton's definition corresponds to what Long terms "Messiness" in her book. No doubt, this "Messiness" is largely occasioned by "weaving together of myth, history and biography" in a narrative that rejects traditional definition of an autobiography. Secondly, another important point which we find here is that Prof. Warburton considers biomythography as "*a style of composition*" (emphasis added), a point noted already by Long when she considers "Messiness" as "an element of style" (55).

Kamala Das's *My Story* has been found to be composed with such "Messiness" that leaves enough space for the scholars to question whether her autobiography conforms to the traditional form of the genre or defies the principles of generic autobiography. This confusion is due to Das's own statement which she makes towards the end of her autobiography: "It was obvious that I had painted myself a wrong image" (192). Indeed, there is a debate among critics and scholars whether all the incidents and happenings depicted in Das's autobiography are real or imaginary. Some critics are anxious to find out the fictional accounts as detailed in the autobiography. Rosemary Marangoly George states:

My Story has often been discussed as sensationalist and melodramatic fiction, yet these very features of Das's writing allow her to interrupt the narration of everyday events with speculations that transgress the conventions of the autobiography genre (George 744).

In an interview with Sreedevi K. Nair, Das replied when asked whether the incidents of the autobiography are "real"; or "imaginary": "You see, 'My Story' need not to be one's own story. It could mean 'the story one has written'" (Das 54). She added to Nair's queries: "I have always said that those stories were true. But my dear father told many people that I wrote them under the effect of tranquilizers. I never said so. I have been in love several times...." (54). As is seen here, Das herself thrives in contradictions. She does not make it clear whether the incidents are real or imaginary. But she makes it clear that her stories are "true" as she told Iqbal Kaur—"I am speaking the truth" (Das 164). She tries to make us understand that as a creative writer she writes with her feelings, and her feelings are authentic. As a creative writer, Das dwells both in the real world and in the shadow of the real world, and makes a criss-cross of the two. She herself said in an interview with P. P. Raveendran:

Frankly, a writer deals with a world that is supposed to be real and then a world that is only a shadow of this real world. This second world could even be called an unreal world. But unless we live in these two worlds at the same time, simultaneously enjoying the fruits of each world, I do not think a writer can progress much. The strength that you get from this imaginary world, this dream world, can be utilized when working in the other world.... I feel that my life is inadequate in some areas, I try to fill that—I try to perfect my life by adding things which may not really have happened. But for me they are real—they have happened (Das 149-150).

Moreover, Das added to Raveendran, "I would like a writer to be as honest as he or she can be" (Das 153).

So, it is very clear that what Das has narrated in her autobiography may be mixed with some fictional elements by which she has tried to "perfect" her "inadequate" life. But at the same time, we are assured that as a creative writer she is "honest". She is evidently "authentic" in her description. In conversation with Eunice De Souza, she once said, "When you write about your own feelings, it is authentic. I like authenticity" (Das 33). Hence, whether Das's autobiography is a fiction or not is only a matter of scholarly investigation. But it can

vigorously be said that what she has described in her writing is out and out “honest” and “authentic”. Because of her honesty and authenticity in approach, Das is always sincere to her writing which she chose as a vehicle to liberate her oppressed self from the patriarchal norms.

No doubt, Kamala Das's autobiography reveals numerous aspects of her “self”. It gives out the fact that she was really a distraught woman, hankering after true love. Through her autobiography Kamala Das has let her readers peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche. She defends the self of a writer in her writing and at the same time gorgeously celebrates her creative self. Jean Starobinski suggests, “No matter how doubtful the facts related, the text will at least present an authentic image of the man who ‘held the pen’” (75). In *My Story*, Das has evidently incorporated a host of fictitious elements, probably with a view to render it more marketable. But it should not be forgotten that Das has presented an “authentic image” of herself.

Das's *My Story* is more than a record of the life of an individual. It is but a potent portrayal of the life of the Indian women who having faced oppressive patriarchal subjugation are always in quest for a flight of emancipation. It has helped women realize their worth and dignity; it has encouraged them to stand against victimization and exploitation. Das herself stated in an interview with Iqbal Kaur:

I don't even have to speak about the exploitation that all of us suffer at the hands of men. They know when they see me. Probably, I symbolize something for women. I symbolize courage. I don't think women in Kerala are any longer victims. It wasn't so about twenty years ago. Almost every woman was a victim and had to submit to tortures mental and physical. But the position has changed now and perhaps in some small way my writings and speeches also have made some difference (Das 163).

The most important statement in the quote is obviously that she symbolizes “something for women” and that “courage”. Das here proudly claims that through her writings and speeches she brought a change in the life of women in Kerala as they are no longer victims of patriarchal repression.

My story is, indeed, a straightforward account of female sexuality and call for sexual freedom. Evidently, this straightforwardness of Das's personal life, her female sexuality and her quest for emancipation is made possible owing to the amalgamation of fact and fiction. In a “Messiness” of style, Das has mesmerizingly projected and presented the gradual evolution of herself through giving accounts of her extramarital relationships, sexual flings, and desire for solace. This process of the evolution of herself in her autobiography renders her adamant to no longer remain a passive object of her husband's wills and whims, and victim of the lust of various strangers. Rather, she becomes courageous enough to take pleasure and desire out of her own wills and whims. In her autobiography, the desire of a woman to write and discover herself anew becomes the governing principle. Of course, *My Story* is “my autobiography”, as Das herself firmly claims it to be (Preface). Nevertheless, the “fullness of women's accounts” (Long 55) in Kamala Das's *My Story* is achieved by her inimitable “style of composition” (Warburton 1) that involves intertwining of appearance and reality. Hence, the notion of self-mythification, that tempts us to call it biomythography, does not only transcend the autobiography from the orbit of non-fictional genre, but adds completeness to Das's accounts as well.

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