

Letting Out the Demons and Writing the Self: Exploring Kamala Das', My Story and Sara Suleri's Meatless Days

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The subject.... Female autobiographies, memoirs, letters, and diaries represent one of those cases of maddening neglect that have motivated feminist scholarship since 1970. This body of writing about the self has remained invisible, systematically ignored in the studies on autobiography that have proliferated in the past fifteen years.

-Domna C Stanton, *The Female Autograph*(vii)

In her book *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), the late Carolyn Heilbrun expressed the need for original scripts for women to live by; stories that press beyond the convention and closure of the marriage plot. In the "Introduction," Heilbrun points out, "There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process."¹ Heilbrun proclaims in this book that she will concentrate on three of these ways, except fiction. She claims that whereas men have always indulged in penning narrative stories, for example, the quest and the warrior motif, relating their life stories, such stories of achievement have not been accorded to women. For this, they have been labeled "unwomanly". As she remarks pertinently, "above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives)."² Further, Heilbrun comments: "Only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. Women poets of one generation—those born between 1923 and 1932—can now be seen to have transformed the autobiographies of women's lives, to have expressed, and suffered for expressing, what women had not earlier been allowed to say."³

The American poet and activist Muriel Rukeyser poignantly remarked "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open". Rukeyser's remark throws light on the unspeakable and unquestioning womankind, standing in absolute contrast to the patriarchal world which dominated not only the world they coinhabited with them but also the world of literature. One of the most remarkable literary evolvments of post-independent India was the upsurge of women writers who yearned to express themselves, their desires, and their strivings both in fiction and in verse form. They worked tremendously to chisel their writing as their tool for emancipation. The paper intends to explore the autobiographies of two such powerful authors, Kamala Das, and Sara Suleri.

With Kamala Das, we are introduced to a new kind of women's writing that is brave, honest, fearless, candid, and self-assertive. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, Das, has to her credit many autobiographical creations both in verse and fiction. She has also made a significant contribution in the domain of short stories and essays. The common thread that binds together her entire corpus of work was the invincible determination to break down all the boundaries for women. Choosing to speak and to write on taboo topics Kamala Das very candidly unbares her oscillations, defeats, nescience, chagrin, and feelings of remorse which very clearly reveal her character and mental makeup. She never strives to extol her personality but wants to lay bare the innermost crevices of her mind and soul. Her poetry bears great likeness to those of American confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Das employs the confessional mode beautifully exploring every aspect of womanhood. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have included her name as the only writer from Asia in their Norton Anthology of Literature for Women. It is very interesting to note that, though the American poet, Sylvia Plath and the great Indian poet, Kamala Das are not influenced by each other's works, however, they exhibit the same tone and theme for their poetry. The progressive 20th century America and the conservative Indian society were poles apart. Tasnem Anjum rightly maintains, "Women's education was developed, and they could work outside. But India was a very conservative country at that time. Despite these differences, their poetry responds in a similar way."⁴ Sylvia Plath and Kamala stand out as very gifted confessional poets, whose works project comprehensively, the agonies of womankind through their first-hand experience in a male-oriented society.

Kamala Das wrote her autobiography, *My Story*, in 1976. In the Preface, Das explains the reasons for writing her autobiography and the first reactions to it as: "My Story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of.... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience... The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband... This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it."⁵

When Kamala Das' book, *My Story* was published, the conservative Indian society was outraged at the forthright woman who could so frankly discuss her extramarital affairs and her homosexual encounters. Kamala Das published her first book of poems titled, *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965, followed by *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, *Collected Poems Vol I* in 1984, *The Best of Kamala Das*, and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Collected Poems* (1985). The first collection of her poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* has been considered a central voice of her generation who made an example of breaking away from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernist.⁶

With the publication of *My Story* in 1976, Kamala Das has carved a niche in the annals of Indian women's life writings. Redefining the man-woman relationship, Das' life story delineates not only her life but also her body and its desires. However, it is interesting to note that while searching her body she is also searching for her inner self. Married to a man twice her age, Kamala Das could not attain marital bliss. Due to the restrictive society, she did not go for a divorce and continued with her loveless marriage with

her uncaring husband. She bore three children but there was no intimacy that she shared with him. Out of their arid relationship, she gets intimate with her Italian lover, Carlo. She comes to terms with herself through this autobiography, *My Story* gets a cathartic release. As she confesses, “I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say.”⁷

In *My Story*, Kamala Das very revealingly shares her personal experiences narrating her journey to womanhood, and her unfortunate unsatiated yearning for love, both inside and without her marriage. When the members of society try to kill her with magic so that her immorality is not revealed to society, she defies the dominant socio-religious dogmas, and uses the frightening image of Kali, the goddess of war: “I hung a picture of Kali on the wall of my balcony and adorned it daily with long strings of red flowers, resembling the intestines of a disemboweled human being. Anyone walking along the edge of my paddy field a furlong away could see the Goddess and the macabre splash of red. This gave the villagers a fright.”⁸ Her story is indeed a tragic one. Her nonchalant, lascivious husband got involved with boys and maidservants traumatized her immensely. Her husband's homosexuality hurts her no end, “At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday” I felt then a revulsion from my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through”.⁹ Kamala Das describes her first sexual intercourse with her husband as “an unsuccessful rape”.¹⁰

Das manages to utter the unutterable. As Shirley Geok lin Lim remarks: “Marginalized by their gender, their colonial English education and language, their rejection of patriarchy and its given social and familial norms, and their bourgeois interests in a chiefly peasant society, women writers such as Das negotiate their identity needs among contradictory dominant discourses, each of which offers more grounds for tension than for resolution. As a work by a major English-language Indian woman writer, Das's story is less a seamless product of hybridity than it first appears, although the cultural differences between Indian and Western values and ideas are obviously present and affect her work. Her autobiography, in fact, shuttles between the gaps, articulating the space between cultures, displaying rather than resolving these differences in the narrative. The conclusion of the autobiography moves out of the discourse of feminism that occupies the foreground of the first two-thirds of the text to the more conventional discourse of the confessional autobiography.”¹¹

Thus, we see that in *My Story*, Das fiercely interrogates the patriarchal constructions that establish the male as superior and the female as their subjugates. The most laudable achievement of Das to her society is to motivate women to write for self-assertion. I would conclude my analysis of Kamala Das' autobiography, *My Story* with K. Satchidananda's glorious tribute to her poetic prowess, “As a poet, Kamala was a pioneer: She took Indian poetry in English far ahead of her women predecessors, like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, giving it a new feminine charm, a confessional quality and, yes, a political slant. She always identified with the downtrodden, the maidservants the so-called lower caste helpless women exploited by landlords. Her poems on the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and on the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka are powerful indictments of the ethnic hatred and genocide of our times.”¹² He further remarks, “Her autobiography *My Story*, which she kept revising all through her later years and kept the readers guessing as to whether all those love affairs were real or imagined, is one of the most lyrical and heart-rending memoirs ever written in India. Kamala will be remembered for long for having championed a breakthrough in the way we perceive human reality.”¹³

As far as Sara Suleri's, *Meatless Days* is concerned, it is easily the most celebrated memoir in South Asian literature. In *Meatless Days*, Suleri beautifully fuses the story of her family and her country's political history. Representing Pakistani culture, *Meatless Days* chronicles the memories of Sara Suleri and her defiance against female oppression which was being enacted through misinterpreting the Islamic laws in Pakistani society. "my reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant."¹⁴ She sees her home as a microcosm of Pakistani society with the main plot of the story revolving around the family of ISI chief, Mr. Suleri, an acclaimed writer. Suleri fuses her family saga into the political arena of literature. We get to know of her father who was a Pakistani, her mother, a Welsh woman, her five brothers and sisters, and her mercurial grandmother. She also talks about the journalist career that her father had chosen and how she undertook a shifting journey from Pakistan to America. After observing the religious extremism in her country and the way its people were being manipulated through religiopolitical discussions she decided to go to the USA, where she spent her remaining life in a kind of self-imposed exile. Suleri could perceive that Pakistan could never be an unexacting and unchallenging place for women. She could see that in Pakistan, women will always be confined to a subjugated position.

Her autobiography reveals Suleri's complete dissatisfaction with the suppression of women in her country. Their social and biological roles were prefixed by society and all of them were denied any kind of freedom. Male supremacy was evident everywhere. As Suleri remarks succinctly, "...we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory physiological way that we happened on perchance. Or else it was at maximum a practical joke, we thought, hidden somewhere among her clothes. But formulating that definition is about as impossible as attempting to locate the illustrious qualities of an Islamic landscape."¹⁵

Sara Suleri talks about how all members of her family were subject to frustration in the prevalent political and social scenario at that time. She talks of her grandmother's pietism and piousness, "In the winter I see her alone, painstakingly dragging her straw mat out to the courtyard at the back of the house and following the rich path of the afternoon sun. With her would go her Quran, a metal basin in which she could wash her hands, and her ponderously heavy spouted water pot, that was made of brass. None of us, according to Dadi, were quite pure enough to carry these items."¹⁶

She could see her father's character change. Earlier he was not so much into prayers which he later started to do. Sara notices that her grandmother who was always particular about praying, stops to do that suddenly. As Suleri writes, "That was a change when Dadi put herself together again and forgot to put prayer back into its proper pocket, for God could now leave the home and soon would try to join the government. Papa prayed and fasted and went on pilgrimage and read the Quran aloud with most unusual locations."¹⁷

Even Sara's mother, Mair Jones, who came from a broadminded and unrestrictive society is subjected to the status of a marginalized woman. She never talks about her 'othered' state and though she does reminisce about her country she does not crib. Unfortunately, however much she tried to embrace the Pakistani lifestyle and made all kinds of sacrifices for her better half, she never received recognition of any kind. She could never win the trust of the people of that country and was always seen as a colonizer. Suleri aptly comments, "The touching good faith of her Pakistani passport could not change the fact that even as my mother thought she was arriving, she actually had returned. There was century's worth of mistrust of English women in their gazes when they looked at her who chose to come after the English

should have been gone: what did she mean by saying. ‘I wish to be part of you?’ Perhaps, they feared, she mocked in certain way.”¹⁸

We see thus, that Suleri’s mother was reduced to a life of subservience and silence. On the contrary, her sister was quite vocal about her disagreement with the dogmas of the male-dominated society. Unfortunately, she had to suffer intensely for this rebellious attitude of hers. She had taken the bold step of running and marrying without anybody’s approval. When she later informed her father about this, he disconnected the phone after congratulating her. However, in the end, she too had to submit before her husband’s dominating nature. Suleri talks about her sister, “What energies my sister gave to Pakistan! First she learned how to speak Punjabi and then learned the Jehlum dialect, spoken in the region from which Javed’s family belongs. She taught herself the names and stations of hundred-odd new relatives, guessing how each of them would wish to be addressed. She learned more than I will ever know about the history of the subcontinent and then she turned to polo’s ins and outs.”¹⁹

Her father was a dominating and arrogant person who always saw women as inferior to men. Her father would disparagingly call his children “mama’s pigeons.” Sara remembers how her mother had to do the entire shifting work all alone. It was quite burdensome, but her father never offered to help with the task in any way. He did not allow any animal in his house without seeking his consent. Suleri felt very hurt when he disallowed the rabbits she wanted to stay in her house. Very justifiably, she could only visualize her father as a family patriarch whose will ultimately prevailed above everything else. He was not satisfied with her marriage to a non-Muslim. Sara Suleri comments as if her father will listen to her words, "Pip, you must put these things from your mind. You see me married, domesticated. But one thing I know still agitates you. Sometimes in the middle of the night, I can hear you whisper, ‘make him a Muslim: make Austin a Muslim!’"²⁰

Thus, we see that Suleri beautifully depicts her agonized childhood as well as gives us true glimpses of an eruptive and unstable postcolonial Pakistan. The detailed narration of Suleri's life creates a feeling in her readers that they have gone through an unblemished and undistorted story of her life. Through her writing prowess, Suleri has added symbolic and metaphorical dimensions to her autobiography. Suleri, the memoirist's individualized version is ignited with her personal ethos. Each persona etched in *Meatless Days* seems to be narrating his own story. Thus, there is no denying the fact that through the 1980s and 1990s, Sara Suleri Goodyear was an “academic postcolonial star.”²¹

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