

# Status of Woman in Kamala Das and Banu Mushtaq: A Critical Study of “My Story” and “Be a Woman Once, O Lord”

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## **Abstract**

Kamala Das and Banu Mushtaq are the two prominent female writers in modern Indian literature. Both of them have tried to present the position of women in the family and society- their dreams and frustrations, their desires and sufferings, and their hopes and despairs. Kamala Das mainly explores the troubles of women in the male dominated Hindu family and society while Banu Mushtaq explains the severe constraints prevailing in the Muslim family and society faced by the women. Women are treated merely as sub-human entities in the male dominated society; they are bereft of basic human amenities. Both of them have been relentlessly trying to describe the unbearable tortures borne by the women in the world. As social activists and creative writers they intend to unearth the status of women in the family and society and explain their vehement protest against the inhuman injustice to women.

**Keywords:** Status, Tortures, Protest, Male dominated, Unbearable.

## **Introduction**

Kamala Das, an Indian English writer talks of her own life which she has expressed very frankly in her autobiographical work ‘My Story’. The book which is published in 1976 (translated into English) covers her life story upto forties of her age. The story talks about her childhood, adulthood, young age and married life of a matured lady. It is pertinent to expose her true identity – rather a feminist or a feminine one. Because till today she is mainly considered to be a firebrand feminist in the literary world for her approach to position of women in the male dominated society specially caste based Hindu society. But it is also very much relevant to consider Kamala Das as a woman of flesh and blood- her longings and sufferings, her dreams and failures and her constant urge to lead a free human life. From this perspective it has Kamala Das alias Madhavi Kutty is a famous name in the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian English Literature. Mainly she is famous for her poetic works which are deeply connected with different aspects of her life. She can be generally accepted for her artistic work; here the study is to focus on and to consider her own understanding of her life which is presented in the most controversial book among her writings, ‘My story’. Side by side Banu Mushtaq is basically a social activist and a lawyer; she turns into a writer who is very much committed to expose the hindrances to a full fledged human life for women. Banu Mushtaq wins International Booker Prize in 2025 for her book- Heart Lamp, a collection of short stories. Here she shines a light on the lives of Muslim women in rural India- on wretched condition of their livelihood.

Kamala Das, alias Madhavikutty also known as Kamala Surayya, is one of the most distinctive as a poet, short story writer, and autobiographer, writing in both English and Malayalam. Kamala Das's literary career is most notable for her bold and confessional style. Her poetry, especially in English, breaks traditional norms by expressing feminine desire, pain, loneliness, and rebellion with brutal honesty. She is often compared to confessional poets like Sylvia Plath for her raw emotional intensity. In her highly controversial autobiography *Ente Katha (My Story)*, (1973) she openly discusses her personal life, marriage, emotional struggles, and quest for identity. Though she later admitted that parts of it were fictionalized, *My Story* was groundbreaking for its time and remains a landmark in Indian autobiographical writing. What made Kamala Das truly unique was her fearless expression of subjects that were considered taboo in Indian society. She openly wrote about love, female sexuality, emotional alienation, and identity crisis—subjects often ignored or suppressed, especially by women. Through her writings, she gave a voice to countless women who experienced similar struggles in silence. Her work continues to inspire generations of writers, especially women, to explore themes of identity, autonomy, and emotional truth. It may be said that, Kamala Das was a path breaking writer who challenged social conventions and literary traditions with her fearless voice. Her legacy lies not only in her literary achievements but also in her role as a pioneer of feminist expression in Indian literature. She remains an enduring symbol of courage, authenticity, and the power of the written word.

"My Story" is the autobiographical work of Kamala Das, one of the most bold and influential literary figures in modern Indian literature. First written in Malayalam as "*Ente Katha*" in 1973 and later translated into English by the author herself, *My Story* is a deeply personal, confessional, and emotionally powerful narrative that explores the inner life of a woman struggling to find her identity in a conservative society. At the heart of *My Story* lies the theme of self-discovery. Kamala Das writes about her childhood, early marriage, emotional conflicts, love affairs, and her literary journey. Married at the age of 15, she describes her early experiences with love and sexuality with startling honesty, something that shocked the traditional Indian readership at the time. Unlike conventional autobiographies that often glorify the author's life, Kamala's narrative is raw, vulnerable, and unapologetic.

One of the most powerful aspects of *My Story* is its exploration of female identity and desire. Kamala Das does not shy away from expressing her dissatisfaction with the traditional roles imposed on her as a wife and mother. She writes openly about her emotional loneliness, the failure of her marriage, and her quest for love beyond social expectations. Through her experiences, she voices the suppressed feelings of many women who remain unheard in patriarchal societies. *My Story* was highly controversial upon its release. Many criticized Kamala for being too bold, too open, or even immoral. However, others praised her for her courage, honesty, and literary brilliance. Over time, the book came to be regarded as a feminist classic—a voice of resistance against gender norms and repression. "My Story" is not just an autobiography; it is an act of defiance, a journey of self-liberation, and a literary landmark in Indian English writing. Through her fearless self-expression, Kamala Das opened the doors for women writers to speak their truths. Her work continues to inspire generations to write without fear and to live authentically. "My Story" covers Kamala Das's life from early childhood to her early middle age, focusing on her personal experiences, emotional struggles, and literary development. It is not a complete autobiography but a partial, confessional account of her most formative years.

"I took off my sari which was of heavy gold tissue and sat on the bed. Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack" (p-72)

The institution of marriage is portrayed as oppressive—a social bondage that crushes individuality. Her inner turmoil and rejection of marital subservience echo throughout this segment. Freedoms of thought and desire surface in her extramarital explorations. Kamala openly discovers and articulates her sexuality, longings, and dissatisfaction within the confines of marriage. Societal taboos shatter as she claims agency over her body and emotions. Around the birth of her second child, Kamala faces a psychological crisis. A notable chapter (midway in the book) marks an epiphany where she reckons with the oppression rooted in her physicality—“the weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me,” revealing the soul-wound of being defined through gendered vulnerability. This moment underscores the conflict between anatomy and destiny, as she confronts the limitations imposed on women by body and society. Kamala invokes powerful female figures as reflections of her inner strength. The goddess Kali emerges as a force of both protection and fear—symbolizing her repressed feminine energies capable of defiance and transformation. Other female figures—from relatives to mythic archetypes—serve as mirrors of empowered womanhood, countering the prevailing narratives of patriarchy. Amid her personal struggles, Kamala's authorial voice strengthens. She charts her literary awakening, writing in Malayalam (as Madhavikutty) and later translating her work into English. Writing becomes both therapy and liberation, forging her path as a woman asserting her voice in both language and society.

The narrative progressively shifts from emotional despair toward creative assertion. Though it ends before her conversion to Islam (1999) and later life, *My Story* closes with Kamala beginning to embrace her literary identity and sexual self—an emerging autonomy that defines her legacy. *My Story* unfolds as a powerful confessional narrative—a journey from silenced childhood to emergent self-expression; its soul lies in this unfolding arc of alienation, struggle, revelation, and literary emancipation.

Kamala Das, one of India's most controversial and outspoken literary figures, has often been labeled a feminist because of her bold writings on female sexuality, identity, and emotional honesty. However, in her autobiography *My Story*, she challenges this label, asserting instead that she is not a feminist, but a free woman. This statement is critical in understanding both her personal ideology and the essence of her work. While her writings resonate with many feminist ideals, her self-perception as a "free woman" stems from her deeply personal quest for identity, love, and truth, beyond any collective movement or ideology. Kamala Das's rejection of the feminist label in *My Story* stems from her belief in personal rather than political liberation. Feminism, as a socio-political movement, often seeks to challenge and restructure the systems of patriarchy through collective action and ideological consistency. Kamala Das, however, does not align herself with any such structured movement. Instead, she writes from a deeply individualistic perspective, seeking freedom in her own terms. Her desire is not to overthrow patriarchy but to carve out a space where she can live authentically as a woman, with her own desires, choices, and contradictions.

In *My Story*, Das openly discusses her emotional dissatisfaction in marriage, her yearning for love, and her extramarital affairs—not as a call to action for women, but as a reflection of her personal journey. This raw honesty is often interpreted as feminist because it breaks social taboos and gives voice to suppressed female experiences. However, Das herself distances from any such label. She writes not to represent “women,” but to represent *her own self*. One of the most radical aspects of *My Story* is its open discussion of female sexuality. Das refuses to hide behind the veil of social respectability. She writes about her desires, her body, and her experiences in a way that was, and remains, groundbreaking in Indian literature. Yet, she does so not with the intention of making a feminist statement, but because she believes in living and writing her truth. She says, “I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within

your home, you stray a little.” This candidness is not ideological but emotional—an act of personal liberation rather than political rebellion. In *My Story*, she writes as a woman searching for meaning, not as a spokesperson for a cause. Her refusal to be labeled is itself a declaration of freedom. In an interview, Kamala Das once remarked, “I am every woman who seeks love. Feminism is not what I live by. I live by instinct.” This instinct—raw, emotional, and personal—is what sets her apart. While feminists often celebrated her work for giving voice to women’s inner lives, Das remained detached from the movement, seeking instead to simply express her own.

Banu Mushtaq in her famous story “Be a Woman Once, O Lord” (Last story in “Heart Lamp” translated by Deepa Bhashti) delineates in detail how a woman is brutally tortured mentally and physically in a muslim family. It is told to every woman to be always loyal to her husband and to follow her husband as God. But it is observed that in her husband’s house she is humiliated and tortured always by her husband. She is treated as a mere serve, not at all a human being. She does not have any sort of freedom.

“Even my name got lost. Do you know what my new name was? His wife.”

Marriage is not the culmination of love rather it is a system of torture. The lady narrator explains — “My body, my mind were not my own. To my surprise, he desired my body, whose power to bounce back even I was unaware of. He devoured me.”

She is also a victim of dowry and always threatened that her husband would marry again. In fact Banu Mushtaq has vividly described the miserable condition of the muslim women bereft of all types of human values. At the end of the story the writer appeals to God to come to the earth and observe their critical inhuman situation.

“My mouth can speak no more. No more letters to write. I do not know the meaning of patience. If you were to build the world again, to create males and females again, do not be like an inexperienced potter. Come to the earth as a woman, Prabhu!”

Thus Banu Mushtaq has turned into a great fighter against all kinds of injustice to women in the present world.

## Conclusion

It is very clear that both the woman writers- Kamala Das and Banu Mushtaq are very much concerned of the issues of woman in the male dominated society and are committed to fight against the hurdles which compelled to lead an inhuman life. In *My Story*, Kamala Das emerges not as a feminist icon in the traditional sense, but as a free woman—someone who insists on living and writing on her own terms. Her freedom is not granted by any movement, nor does it seek validation from society. It is self-made, self-owned, and deeply personal. Though her writings have contributed immensely to feminist discourse, she herself resists that label, choosing instead to be known as a woman who dared to be honest. In doing so, Kamala Das expands the very definition of freedom, offering a powerful example of what it means to live authentically. It has become very clear to us that Kamala Das is a woman who always intends to lead her life freely crossing all types of limitations. For this she does not hesitate to fall in love again and again though she is a mother of three children and wife of a recognized personality. Even she does not hesitate to express her free feelings and thoughts denying any type of restriction. She does not feel ashamed of her persuasion of social freedom. In her later life being a hindu widow she had a relationship with a young muslim boy and she changed her religion. In fact, all the events in her life clearly indicate that kamala Das was a type of lady who always tries to live a free life and responding to her own wishes. Almost similarly Banu Mushtaq brings into light the indescribable tortures faced by women in muslim

society. Women in muslim family are not in a position to enjoy any sort of liberty as a human being .Mushtaq strongly protests against this – the attitude of the males towards the females in the society specially of the husbands towards wives. While Kamala Das advocates for a free life crossing all kinds of boundaries, Banu Mushtaq pleads for a normal life without torture and inequality in woman’s life. Both Kamala and Banu have understood the issues from the core of the hearts and have strongly raised their voices in their writings. They plead for a congenial situation where women would be able to lead a free life as a human being in the world.

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