

Writing the Shadow: Persona, Repression, and Individuation in Kamala Das's *My Story*

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Abstract

Kamala Das's *My Story* presents autobiographical writing as a sustained confrontation between socially constructed identity and the less acceptable dimensions of the self. This paper examines the narrative through Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of persona, shadow, and individuation, arguing that Das's autobiographical practice transforms writing into a mode of psychological self-recognition. The persona imposed upon the female subject through family, marriage, sexuality, and social convention repeatedly conflicts with desires, anger, vulnerability, and creative impulses that remain difficult to accommodate within conventional femininity. These disowned elements constitute a shadow that emerges through bodily experience, emotional crisis, erotic relationships, and literary expression. The narrative, however, does not present individuation as a completed achievement. Rather, *My Story* records an uneven movement toward greater consciousness in which writing becomes a means of negotiating contradictory psychic positions. The study therefore reads autobiography as a textual space in which the divided self progressively encounters and reconfigures its own unconscious contents.

Keywords: Individuation, persona, repression, self-recognition, shadow

Kamala Das's *My Story* (1988) occupies a distinctive position in Indian autobiographical writing because of its sustained exposure of experiences conventionally excluded from respectable representations of female life. First published in Malayalam in 1973 and subsequently translated into English, the autobiography narrates childhood, family, marriage, motherhood, illness, sexuality, literary activity, and spiritual questioning through an intensely personal voice. Its significance, however, extends beyond the controversial nature of its revelations. The narrative repeatedly returns to a more fundamental problem: how an individual constructs a sense of self when the identities available within the social order are inadequate to accommodate the complexity of inner experience. The autobiographical form is particularly important to this problem because the self represented in *My Story* is simultaneously the subject who experiences and the subject who retrospectively interprets those experiences. A Jungian reading is productive in this context because the autobiography repeatedly dramatizes the conflict between an externally organised identity and the psychic material that such an identity excludes. Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the persona provides a framework for understanding socially functional identity, while his conception of the shadow illuminates aspects of personality that consciousness rejects, represses, or fails to recognise. Individuation subsequently provides a means of understanding the movement through which an individual becomes increasingly conscious of the differentiated elements of the psyche. Jung defines

individuation as the process through which a person becomes a psychological “in-dividual,” a “separate, indivisible unity or ‘whole’” (Jung, *Archetypes* 275). The concept is particularly relevant to *My Story* because Das’s narrator repeatedly confronts the inadequacy of identities imposed upon her and gradually turns inward in search of a more comprehensive understanding of herself. Such an interpretation must nevertheless distinguish between the historical Kamala Das and the narrating subject constructed within the autobiography. The purpose of a Jungian reading is not to diagnose Das or to make claims about her actual unconscious. The object of analysis is the psychological structure produced within the text. Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s study of Das is useful in this regard because she cautions against approaching *My Story* as an unmediated record of experience and instead draws attention to the literary construction of the autobiographical subject (346-69). The narrative self is therefore understood here as a textual formation through which experiences are remembered, selected, interpreted, and reorganised.

The conflict between social identity and individual identity is already visible in Das’s childhood. Her early experiences establish a consciousness of difference that remains important throughout the autobiography. Reflecting upon her school environment, she asks why she was “born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses” (Das 9). The statement is significant because it connects identity with recognition. The young narrator’s creative self does not yet possess independent social validation; she imagines that another cultural and familial environment might have recognised the identity that her immediate surroundings fail to acknowledge. The problem is therefore not simply cultural difference but the discrepancy between the self experienced internally and the self validated externally. The family environment provides several alternative models of femininity. Figures such as Ammalu and Ammini represent women whose lives are not entirely contained by conventional marital structures. Their literary and intellectual interests provide the young narrator with an early awareness that femininity need not be synonymous with marriage and domesticity. Lim observes that the women surrounding Das embody an “ancient female ambition for writing” and thereby provide alternative possibilities for female selfhood (346-69). The importance of these figures becomes clearer when considered through Jung’s concept of the persona. The persona is necessary because the individual must negotiate the expectations of the social world, but psychological difficulty arises when the social role becomes identified with the total personality. Jung describes the persona as a mask of the collective psyche. The problem in *My Story* is that the socially sanctioned feminine mask repeatedly attempts to become the narrator’s entire identity. Marriage intensifies this conflict. The narrator enters marriage within a social framework that presents the institution as an expected stage of female life. She recalls being treated as “a burden and a responsibility” whose marriage had to be arranged (Das 77). The formulation reveals how the female subject is constituted through the expectations of others. Marriage does not merely establish a relationship; it provides a prescribed identity through which the narrator is expected to become wife and sexual partner. Yet the narrative demonstrates that this role cannot contain the totality of her psychological life. She describes herself within the marital relationship as “just another of his admirers” (Das 85), a phrase that conveys the reduction of individuality within the structure of marriage.

The persona consequently becomes a source of psychological tension. The roles of wife and mother remain present, but they are accompanied by desires and frustrations that cannot easily be incorporated into them. Jung’s concept of the shadow becomes significant at precisely this point. The shadow contains aspects of personality that the conscious ego does not accept as belonging to itself. It is not simply an embodiment of evil or moral deficiency. Rather, it includes those qualities and impulses that are excluded because they conflict with the conscious identity. In *My Story*, sexuality, anger, dissatisfaction, emotional dependency,

intellectual ambition, and the desire for autonomy repeatedly challenge the socially acceptable image of femininity. Sexuality is particularly important because the narrator's body becomes the site at which social expectations and subjective experience collide. The marital encounter is described in terms of violence: her husband "fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack" (Das 84). The passage demonstrates the distance between the socially recognised role of wife and the subjective experience of the woman inhabiting that role. The marital persona promises security and legitimacy, yet the embodied experience associated with it can produce alienation and psychological conflict. The emergence of sexuality outside the marital structure complicates the situation further. Das refuses to represent female desire through the passive vocabulary traditionally associated with respectable femininity. At one point, she describes her love as "like alms looking for a begging bowl" (Das 112). The image reverses conventional gender expectations because the woman becomes the subject who actively seeks an object capable of receiving her emotional and sexual desire. Yet this movement should not be interpreted simply as liberation. The relationships recorded in *My Story* repeatedly reveal that sexual expression does not automatically resolve the psychological needs underlying it. This becomes evident when the narrator reflects upon her desire for a lover. She states: "I needed security. I needed permanence; I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear" (Das 178). The passage shifts attention from sexuality to the deeper desire for emotional recognition and security. The narrator's relationships therefore become occasions through which she encounters needs that had not been adequately recognised within her socially prescribed identity. Lim similarly argues that the sexual episodes of *My Story* should not be reduced to a simple narrative of liberated sexuality because they remain entangled with questions of dependence, identity, and patriarchal power (346-69).

The Jungian significance of these episodes lies precisely in their ambiguity. The emergence of the shadow does not constitute individuation by itself. Recognition of a repressed desire is different from integrating that desire into a more comprehensive understanding of the personality. Das's narrative repeatedly demonstrates this distinction. Sexual relationships provide temporary forms of emotional or bodily recognition, but they do not resolve the narrator's deeper dissatisfaction. The recurrence of dissatisfaction indicates that the psychic conflict has merely changed its form. What had previously remained suppressed within the socially acceptable persona begins to emerge through action and relationship, but the narrator still has to understand what these desires signify. The psychological crisis that follows becomes an important turning point. Jungian theory regards psychic crisis as potentially significant because the established conscious structure may become incapable of containing emerging unconscious material. In *My Story*, the pressures generated by marriage, sexuality, motherhood, illness, emotional deprivation, and social expectation eventually produce a rupture in the narrator's existing identity. The crisis exposes the limitations of the persona because the social role can no longer contain the experiences that have accumulated beneath it. Writing becomes crucial at this moment. Das recalls that she "lit the reading lamp ... and began to write about a new life, an unstained future" (Das 99). The significance of this scene extends beyond literary productivity. The narrator turns toward language at the moment when her previous identity has become psychologically unsustainable. Lim identifies this moment as a movement toward "self-inscription" rather than self-destruction (346-69). The act of writing allows experience to become an object of reflection rather than remaining only an undifferentiated emotional or bodily reality. This process can be productively related to Jung's concept of the transcendent function. Jung describes the transcendent function as arising from the confrontation between conscious and unconscious contents and producing a new psychological position capable of holding elements that previously existed in opposition. Writing in

My Story can be understood in analogous terms. The autobiography does not simply choose between conformity and rebellion. Instead, it creates a symbolic space in which the narrator can articulate the conflict itself. Experience becomes language, and language makes reflection possible.

Robert A. Johnson's account in *Inner Work* (1986) further clarifies the relationship between consciousness and unconscious material. Johnson argues that inner growth requires the conscious examination of what motivates the individual (72). He also describes imagination as a means through which unconscious contents can become available to consciousness (4). *My Story* should not therefore be described as an instance of Jungian active imagination in its technical sense. Das does not present herself as deliberately practising the method Jung developed. Nevertheless, the autobiographical process performs a related function by giving symbolic and linguistic form to experiences that had previously been difficult to integrate. Writing becomes a medium through which the narrator can encounter her own psychological contradictions. This movement is particularly evident in the relationship between sexuality and literary creativity. The narrator eventually states that she had "learnt for the first time to be miserly with my energy, spending it only on my writing, which I enjoyed more than anything else in the world" (Das 201). The statement marks a significant redistribution of psychic investment. The energy that had previously been directed toward relationships, recognition, and erotic attachment becomes increasingly invested in literary creation. Lim observes a similar transformation in Das's autobiographical trajectory, noting the increasing importance of writing as a form of self-definition (346-69). This development can be interpreted through Jung's understanding of psychic energy without reducing literary creativity to a symptom. The important point is not that writing replaces sexuality as a socially acceptable activity. Rather, writing allows different aspects of the personality to be represented and related to one another. Desire, anger, memory, vulnerability, and creativity can coexist within the autobiographical form. The narrator is no longer required to choose between the socially acceptable woman and the rebellious woman because both become textual objects of consciousness. The title *My Story* acquires particular significance within this process. The narrative is simultaneously a story of the self and an assertion of the self as narrator. The distinction is crucial because the narrator has repeatedly experienced herself through identities defined by other people. She is daughter, wife, mother, lover, and social subject before she becomes the conscious author of her own narrative. Autobiographical writing reverses this structure by allowing her to determine the terms through which these identities are remembered and interpreted.

The narrator's increasing emphasis on inwardness reinforces this movement. She observes that "One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real" (Das 103). The statement does not simply reject external reality. Instead, it relocates the question of identity from social recognition to psychological consciousness. This inward movement corresponds closely with Jung's understanding of individuation as the development of a more differentiated relationship between the conscious ego and the wider psyche. Individuation does not involve the abandonment of social roles; it involves the recognition that no single role can exhaust the personality. The later spiritual dimension of *My Story* extends this movement toward a symbolic conception of the Self. The appearance of Krishna in the concluding sections provides a figure through which the narrator encounters a mode of identity beyond conventional social roles. Krishna's statement, "I am myself" (Das 179), is particularly significant because it offers a symbolic formulation of selfhood that is not dependent upon externally prescribed identity. The narrator describes her mind as an "old playhouse" in which Krishna's presence emerges (Das 179). The metaphor of the playhouse recalls the earlier problem of persona. A playhouse is a space of roles, performances, masks, and identities. The assertion "I am myself" therefore introduces an identity that

cannot be reduced to a role. Within Jungian psychology, the Self is not synonymous with the ego. The ego represents the centre of conscious awareness, while the Self signifies the wider totality of conscious and unconscious psychic life. Jung's concept of individuation is therefore not a project of constructing an entirely autonomous ego. It is a movement toward a more comprehensive relation between the conscious personality and the unconscious dimensions of the psyche. The symbolic significance of Krishna in *My Story* can be interpreted in this context as representing an identity beyond the restrictive roles through which the narrator has previously understood herself. Nevertheless, the autobiography does not present individuation as a completed achievement. The persistence of contradiction is one of its defining characteristics. The narrator remains simultaneously mother, wife, lover, poet, daughter, and spiritual seeker. These identities are not finally harmonised into a stable synthesis. Such incompleteness is theoretically significant because individuation is itself an ongoing process rather than a final psychological condition. The purpose of the autobiographical narrative is consequently not to announce that the narrator has achieved a perfectly integrated Self. Its significance lies in documenting the repeated encounters through which such integration becomes possible.

The autobiographical form is particularly suited to this process because writing permits retrospective consciousness. The narrator can encounter earlier versions of herself as objects of reflection. Childhood experience can be reconsidered from adulthood; marriage can be narrated after its emotional consequences have become clearer; sexual relationships can be interpreted in light of the needs that motivated them; and literary creation can become part of the process through which these experiences acquire meaning. Autobiography therefore becomes more than recollection. It becomes a form of psychic mediation. This mediation also explains the apparent contradictions within *My Story*. The narrative contains moments of assertion and vulnerability, desire and disappointment, rebellion and dependence, spirituality and embodiment. Rather than treating these contradictions as inconsistencies that weaken the autobiographical subject, a Jungian approach recognises them as evidence of a psyche negotiating incompatible demands. Lim's emphasis on the dialogic quality of Das's autobiographical subject is useful here because the self in *My Story* is never presented as completely unified (346-69). The text repeatedly stages conversations among different versions of the self. The significance of writing therefore lies in its ability to contain these contradictions without immediately resolving them. The narrator does not have to erase the socially constructed persona in order to acknowledge the shadow. Nor does the recognition of the shadow require its complete enactment. Writing creates a third space in which the two can be brought into relation. In this respect, the autobiographical act approximates the psychological movement described by Jung as the integration of opposites. The writer can simultaneously acknowledge the woman she has been expected to become and the woman she experiences herself as becoming.

Conclusion

A Jungian reading of *My Story* shifts the emphasis from the question of whether Das's autobiography is confessional, feminist, erotic, or rebellious toward the psychological process through which confession itself becomes transformative. The exposure of forbidden experience is significant because it makes previously disowned material conscious. The articulation of desire is significant because it challenges the completeness of the conventional feminine persona. The turn toward writing is significant because it allows experience to be symbolically represented and reflected upon, and the later movement toward inwardness and spiritual self-recognition suggests an increasing awareness that identity cannot be exhausted by external roles. The autobiography consequently presents individuation as an uneven process

of self-recognition. The persona remains necessary but is no longer sufficient. The shadow emerges through precisely those experiences that conventional femininity seeks to suppress, including sexuality, anger, dissatisfaction, vulnerability, and creative ambition. Yet these experiences initially produce further fragmentation rather than immediate integration. It is through writing that they increasingly become available to conscious reflection. Autobiographical narration thus becomes the means through which the narrator moves from simply experiencing psychic conflict toward interpreting it. *My Story* can therefore be read as a textual enactment of the movement from persona through shadow toward the possibility of the Self. The process remains unfinished, and this incompleteness is essential to the argument. Das does not provide a final image of psychological wholeness. Instead, she records the continuous negotiation through which a socially constructed woman becomes increasingly capable of recognising the multiplicity of her own psychic life. Writing allows her to confront what the persona excludes, to recognise the inadequacy of repression, and to transform private experience into symbolic knowledge. The autobiography consequently becomes not merely an account of a life but a sustained encounter with the problem of becoming oneself.

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