



# Before She Could Speak: The Silent Conditioning of the Protagonists in the Autobiographies of Emmiline Pankhurst and Kamala Das

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**Abstract:** It can be arguably said that in autobiography, like other literary genres, gender issues can be taken up with equal vehemence and effect, as it can offer insights into women's real selves, thereby attempting to make their private lives public. These autobiographies/ life narratives/ life writings offer numerous opportunities for the writers to identify common feminine aspirations across cultures. Apart from lending voice to woman's suppressed feelings/ desire, these narratives also foreground their resentment against/ rejection of social injustices, search for identity, and need to liberate themselves from the patriarchal clutches. The autobiographers, Emmiline Pankhurst in *My Own Story* and Kamala Das in *My Story* have used their life narratives as a means to question gender discrimination. One often wonders about the reason behind an author's writing about herself as s/he reads an autobiography. Every story begins with the birth of a female/ male child, which signifies the beginning of a new life. Nevertheless, there is a huge variation in people's perception vis-à-vis the birth of a female/ male child. That is exactly where the argument/perception/ discrimination starts.

**Key Words:** *female autobiographies, gender discrimination, birth, childhood.*

## Introduction :

One often wonders about the reason behind an author's writing about herself as s/he reads an autobiography. Reading an autobiography, in fact, is an act of "voyeurism" as well as "self-discovery" (Brownley XI). By knowing/ reading about the life narrative of an autobiographer, we get insights about our own life. Since every living thing has a beginning, in the like manner, every autobiographer has a beginning—the starting point of her story of life called birth. According to Rochelle L. Millen, birth stands at the centre of the "mystery of human existence." Both intensely physical and thoroughly spiritual, "it reminds us that though mired in flesh and blood, which ultimately decay and die, we carry the capacity to create, bring forth and nurture new life" (13).

Thus, every story begins with the birth of a female/ male child, which signifies the beginning of a new life. Nevertheless, there is a huge variation in people's perception vis-à-vis the birth of a female/ male child. As a matter of fact, the birth of a girl child does not bring as much happiness to the parents and the family as the birth of a male child does. Right from the beginning, the female/ girl child feels unwanted and notices special preference given to the male child. She also witnesses the joy and celebration on the birth of a son and the gloom occasioned by the birth of a daughter. It is at this juncture that saga of discrimination begins. The girl child is a liability that must be brought up with immense care. She is trained beforehand for her future role as a housewife and is confined to the four walls of the house and denied every freedom to move out and opt for some job in the outside world. In a way, a female child's genuine interests have always been neglected and kept at the fringe in male-dominated society. The social and cultural upbringing of a female child is the root cause of her oppressed and degraded position in and outside the family. It has been rightly observed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine... (273)



Beauvoir here observes that biological differences are natural and that these have no relation with the roles attributed to male/ female by the family and society. Now, let us see where this discrimination between male/ female starts. In fact, it starts right from the birth, where a girl child is taught to be polite, calm, serving, and denied of education and participation in various activities as compared to the male child. Thus, family is the first responsible factor for encouraging discrimination. When a child is born, s/he enters in an established setup of family and society. S/he is nurtured by her/ his parents and family and adopts almost everything s/he is taught by the family alongside adapting according to other things that s/he observes around her/ him. However, this adaptation varies in case of a female child. Right from her birth, a girl is taught feminine norms and these childhood impressions get rooted in her psyche as she eventually starts considering herself different from her male counterpart. One can arguably say that girls are made to accept these patriarchal norms of male-dominated society and thus, grow up considering themselves to be inferior to boys.

Childhood is a fascinating experience particularly for the female autobiographers as their experiences as a child are responsible for the later stages of their physical or psycho-spiritual growth: "Experiences at this stage are raw, emotional, and inarticulate..." (qtd. in Surendra 1). Autobiographical writings thus act to share one's childhood experience/ incidents alongside personal history. As Meta Y. Harris states:

The production of autobiography opens avenues for individuals to examine how the things their parents taught them, their formal education, and cultural and life experiences all impact who they are... (36)

This means that the elementary knowledge given to the child by the parents, family members, teachers and society adds to the creative faculty of the autobiographers being examined here. It acts as an important source which forms the basis of their writings. The childhood incidents leave a permanent impression on the personality of females which helps them to give a detailed description of their sufferings right from their birth. Carolyn G. Heilburn has put forth several issues while discussing the essentials of a woman's autobiography:

Where should it begin? With her birth and the disappointment or reason for no disappointment that she was not a boy? ... What in short, is the subject's relation inevitably complex with her mother? ... (27)

Though Carolyn G. Heilburn's questions have been raised with reference to western woman, they can be applied to Indian context as well. The basic difference between western women and their eastern counterparts is that of diversity of their socio-economic and cultural background. Whenever we start reading an autobiography, we gradually start getting into the character and being of the autobiographer and end up having a flashback of our own lives as well. It does not mean that every woman's life is similar but the circumstances may be identical with which one may identify. Not all but only few women can muster the courage to write about themselves, their life narratives. Likewise, all women cannot face hardships of life and move ahead proving their will and ability. Most of them become slaves at the hands of society, family, or patriarchy which curb their freedom and power.

The female autobiographers taken up for critical analysis namely Emmeline Pankhurst and Kamala Das had notable beginnings. Being sensitive and courageous, their childhood stories have been fascinating as most of them had their fair share of struggle to overcome innumerable hurdles to stride forward in life with fortitude and conviction. Emmeline Pankhurst was born to Robert Goulden and Sophia Crane who were liberal as other Victorian parents of their time. Her father hailed from a family with radical political beliefs and her mother was a passionate feminist who took part in the women's suffrage meetings. She was the eldest of five girls and even the brightest among the ten children. Her parents were well-settled, economically sound, and politically active and she was bestowed with a loving family, comfortable home and good education.

When Pankhurst was born, England was divided along gender lines. Women were submissive, docile, and serving. This sense of gender discrimination was inculcated in Pankhurst right from her childhood. Pankhurst explains thus: "Yet, while still a very young child, I began instinctively to feel that there was something lacking, even in my own home..." (7). Her father always focused on her brother's education. She was sent to a small girls' boarding school where the teacher would inculcate feminine skills in the girls. She had to look after her younger siblings. Pankhurst as a child was entirely different from other children. She noticed that her parents' friends circle also opposed slavery. Her father was the most enthusiastic abolitionist. At the age of five, she knew the meaning of 'slavery' and 'emancipation.' The bedtime stories told by her mother were thrilling that left a permanent impression on her consciousness.



Kamala Das was born in 1934 in Kerala into an aristocratic, Nair Hindu family. Das belonged to the Nalapat family, well known in Kerala for their contribution to Malayalam literature. She was brought up in the pre-independence era. Her father was the Managing Director of the Mathrubhumi Group whereas her mother was a poetess. Kamala Das spent her childhood in Calcutta. She was dark, belonged to a colonized country and grew up with the consciousness of the racial categorization of humanity. She along with her brother felt alienated both at home and school. Her father was always busy with his work. Her mother spent time composing poems.

She was discriminated in school. Her loneliness and feeling of alienation would haunt her at times. She became sentimental and started writing poems at six. She wondered why she was not born to white parents. In Calcutta, Das realized the fate of being a brown child who was doubly colonized. She went to her ancestral maternal home when her father was threatened by the Second World War. In the Nalapat house, Das was fascinated by the idea of women having their own group. Her aunt, Ammini, was most influential. Das was later disillusioned as even these women were under patriarchal pressure. She received love in Nalapat house from her grandmother.

Kamala Das was disillusioned by the institution of marriage as she doubted her parents' relationship. She writes her parents were mismatched. She regularly shifted from Calcutta to her ancestral home and then to a convent school. Her father immediately sent her back to Calcutta. In the convent, she witnessed groups made on the basis of their class in the society. Her instincts of love were visible very early. In Calcutta, she was attracted to her tutor. When her father noticed this, he discontinued her classes. She then developed a relationship with a girl. Kamala Das always looked for love in people around her. Her idea of love comprised care, affection and concern. She experienced hollowness in love, leisure and music. Her father pretended to be modern; to Das, he was orthodox. She was married at the age of fifteen. Her childhood echoes voice of a child who has throughout been devoid of parental love and care.

In view of the beginnings of the four female autobiographers discussed in the foregoing units, we become familiar with the domestic and socio-cultural environment they grew in. All of them were aware of the societal taboos and keenly observed the patriarchal mindset within and outside their families. The autobiographies namely *My Own Story* and *My Story* remarkably portray the challenges that both the writers must undergo as girls. One may say that all the female writers were born and brought up in oppressive environment governed by patriarchal norms.

Comparatively, both the autobiographers had diverse socio-cultural upbringing but at one stage or the other, they experience the same fate. Emmeline Pankhurst faced gender discrimination both inside and outside her home. Kamala Das too was a victim of both gender and race.

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