

“Love in Lethal Doses”: Cultural Violence in Kamala Das’ *My Story*

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This paper examines Kamala Das’s *My Story* through the lens of gender-based violence, foregrounding how intersecting structures of patriarchal hegemony, gender performativity, and psycho-social conditioning perpetuate the violence on women’s bodies and identities. Kamala Das, an indispensable figure in the arena of Indian English poetry, was known for her controversial, taboo-breaking confessional verses. Her autobiography, which is equally charged with an unguardedness, whimsicality and spontaneity typical of the iconoclast herself, chronicles the trials of her marriage and her subsequent awakening as a writer. The paper deconstructs the ways in which heteronormative norms act as instruments of cultural violence that restrict women to the role of passive objects, with close reference to Das’ poems in tandem with several instances from *My Story*, ranging from her early years divided between the Nalapat House and Calcutta, to her vicious relationship with her husband, her developing literary career, extramarital affairs, and the birth of her children. It explores Das’ ultimate reconciliation of the various identities violently imposed upon her by the myriad manifestations of systemic violence and coercive control, enacted through familial, marital, and social institutions, which seek to regulate female sexuality and agency. The paper delineates how hegemonic masculinity manifests in an ecosystem of structural violence which renders the brutal reality of gender based violence opaque and legitimises sexual violence, denying women sexual agency within heteronormative structures. Kamala Das’ trailblazing testament of resistance to gender-based violence makes her an icon for the marginalised, a challenger of the oppressive status quo in Indian literature.

Keywords: cultural violence, systemic violence, gender performativity, psycho-social conditioning