



CONFESSIONAL MODE IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS & SYLVIA PLATH

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ABSTRACT

Confessional poetry is a branch of modern poetry. There is no place either for religion or morals in this poetry. The poet does not expect any redemption or retribution as there is no remorse. It is just, that they bare their soul to get a psychic relief. It is of some therapeutic value. These confessional poems are intensely personal, highly subjective. There is no 'persona' in the poems. 'I' in the poem is the poet & nobody else. The themes are nakedly embarrassing and focus too exclusively upon the pain, anguish and ugliness of life at the expense of its pleasure and beauty.

1 INTRODUCTION

The confessional poets were dubbed as neurotics by the society, as they did not follow any tradition nor respected any conventions. They wanted to be unique and not a part of the conventional social set up. This conflict with the society leads them to introspection. In the course, comes a breaking point when they could not compromise with themselves. They loose themselves helplessly in the battle and start searching for the lost self. This conflict has given birth to a number of beautiful poems. The sensitive poet cannot take failure for granted. At this juncture, life becomes unbearable and the call of death becomes irresistible. They are more than convinced that death can offer them more solace than life.

Nostalgia for childhood is one of the characteristic qualities of confessional poetry. As confessional poets, both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das have drawn vivid pictures of their



childhood in their poems. Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath, both the poets, can be termed as child prodigies. They started writing poetry at a very young age.

Plath was just eight years old when her first publication appeared in “Booston Newspapers”. She is aware of and responsive to natural surroundings and described the early childhood poems as –

Nature, I think; birds, bees, spring, fall all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who does not have any interior experience to write about. I think the coming of spring, the stars overhead, the first snow fall and so on are gifts for a child, a young poet.

[Peter Orr, *The Poet Speaks*]

Kamala Das was barely six, when she started writing poetry. There is a vivid description of her childhood days in her autobiographical novel ‘*My Story*’. She wrote tragic poems about her dolls that lost their heads and limbs and confesses that “each poem of mine made me cry”.

Failure in love as a theme is more powerful in the poems of confessional poets, than its consummation. Kamala Das’ shocking confession about the theme of love has startled equally the critics and the laymen. It was more shocking because it comes from a traditional, Indian woman. The search for ideal love is continued throughout her poetry. She was sick of love which was just skin-deep:

*..... what is
The use, what is the bloody use?
That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other’s part
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon*

[Convicts]

Sometimes, she fails to draw a line between love & lust and gets vexed

*O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
It love is to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead*



[Suicide]

Sylvia Plath too has handled the theme in a brilliant way. She has very few poems on this theme of love, compared to Kamala Das. Plath belongs to the permissive society of the West where no brows are raised either at extra or pre-marital relationships. The normal love which she ought to have experienced as a young girl, does not make an impression on her as poetic themes.

“Death” is the common theme where both the poets meet, though, in their own different way. Of course, Plath valiantly met her goal and Das was saved. Sylvia Plath, in her poems has sketched ‘Death’ in many colours without sounding morbid. For her, dying is not a painful end, but an art.

*Dying is an art, like everything else
I do it exceptionally well.
[Lady Lazarus]*

Kamala Das considers death a reward for all her pains in surviving upon the earth. Her autobiography gives ample evidence to her idea of death by water, drowning oneself in the sea. The relevant passage reads thus;

*Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness
which is not unique in any way, but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest
in the sea and an escape from involvements.
[My Story]*

The strong individuality of Plath was an asset to her as a poet but a handicap in real life. The basic ingredients of high intelligence and extreme sensibility made her different from everyone else. Plath could not be happy as a wife. She didn’t like the idea of being an ordinary housewife. Her contempt towards this idea is beautifully expressed in the poem “The Applicant”. She ridicules the institution of marriage where the woman is treated as ‘an object’

*It can sew, it can cook
It can talk, talk, talk.
It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a whole, it’s a poultice
My boy, its your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
[The Applicant]*

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Her inability to identify herself with the society and refusal to accept the tragedies as part of life, led to a struggle of self and society.

Kamala Das' early marriage with a man much older to her creates an aversion. His demanding nature made her frigid. Kamala Das was a rebel and does not make any attempts to hide it. She looks every where for love but she gets it only in her dreams.

*Why do I so often dream
Of a house, where each silent
Corridor leads me to warm
Yellow rooms-
.....
They love ... and once awake, I
See the bed from which my love
Has fled, the empty room, the
Naked walls, count on fingers
My very few friends ...
[The Corridors]*

Kamala Das writes, in her usual frank open-mindedness, about married life or man-woman relationship in many of her poems. She frequently complains about man's callousness and wantonness and woman's suffering on that count. In the poem titled 'Of Calcutta', she says that her people had sent her away to another city as;

*A relative's wife, a housfrau for his home, and
Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to
Warm his bed at night....
... he folded
Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
Pleasure that had come his way, rich harvest of
Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine the embers died.
Within me then.*

She has thus, a strong grievance against her husband's infidelity and lust.

Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das have distinguished themselves by becoming vital, familiar landmarks in the development of poetry in their respective native cultures. Both of them employ a highly self-conscious idiom, depicting their own peculiar sensibilities. They have



also tended to assume a larger-than life 'Persona' in their poems, to comment on a wide variety of concerns, especially as women belonging to particular traditions. The roles they have played as creative writers have rendered them almost as cult figures, who will also, undoubtedly, continue to exercise a considerable influence on women in general and future poets in particular.

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