



## COMPARING AND CONTRASTING TWO GENRES OF CONFESSIONAL POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

*Confessional poetry is an “attempt to present the poet’s own naked self and unrationalised, uncensored actual feelings and behaviour”.<sup>1</sup> It is also an encounter with the miseries of the self, a sense of violence and guilt expressed in relation to the vagaries of the world. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two confessional poets of the modern times, who have struggled for self realisation, in relation to their social role. Their self-exploration leads to their culture and their identity. Since they are sensitive women, their reactions are more intense and frustrations more subtle, causing distortion of psychic energy. Their alienation, anger, miseries and madness-- all demonstrate a break within the self-perpetuating and self-confirming system, created by the tensions between their private and public world.*

### INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das has introduced a strong personal voice in Indian English poetry, which no other woman poet in India had done earlier. Her themes are passionate expressions of the universal experience of love, lust, despair, anguish and failure, and go beyond the traditionally accepted modes of thought and complexity of feelings. Majority of her poems are dominated by of a single theme - the hurt inflicted on her in the man-made world. Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has pointed out that an “endless reiteration of such hurt, such delusion, such cynicism, must sooner or later degenerate into mannerisms”.<sup>2</sup>



Sylvia Plath's poetry also enshrines a constant struggle to assert the encompassing validity of the feeling. She represents a poetic trend, that is central to cultural identity and has given fullest expression to emotions in her poetry. Both these confessional poets yearn for a state of meaningful relationship with the outer world, and to relate such complexities, an act of self expression becomes a significant event in their poems. In Kamala Das's poems, the poet is in the search for an ideal lover, discovering that man succumbs only to the snare of lust. Similarly, Sylvia Plath's love-hate relationship with her father becomes a dark and destructive endeavor, transforming her to an isolated daughter in search of her dead father. What these poets have in common, however, is a drive towards an ideal which is a fusion of conformity and excellence, and an uninhibited urge to reveal their acutely private world disturbed by the impact of conflicting and corrosive experiences.

Plath's poetry is obsessed with the physical self, analysing inter-personal relationships with family and society. She sets an ideal of womanhood unattended by social requirements and her preoccupation with woman in isolation becomes a prominent issue in her poetry. Having lost her father at an early age, her growing mind was surrounded by an exclusively female company which developed an ignorance about man-woman confrontations, giving an added twist to her ideal of femininity. Kamala Das who grew up as a typical victim of the feminine mystique of the India's orthodox culture, is a poet of typical conventional attitude, deprived of the ultimate bliss of marital relationship. In order to discover the meaning of true love, her poetry makes an intense search for an encounter with an ideal lover or a masculine partner. Bruce King calls such a woman poet "*a man-eater or a modern-day vampire*".

Robert Lowell once described Sylvia Plath's poetry as an "*autobiography of a fever*", because of her intensely violent attitude towards herself, her deep obsession with death and her negative encrustation of the society. Being a victim of social and political ideologies and society's commercialism and greed for power and domination, she wanted to acquire all good qualities of a man in order to super-impose herself. Steven Axelrod sums up the themes of Plath's later poems:

*In much of her later poetry, Sylvia Plath sought to give birth to a creative or "deep" self within her --- a Wordsworthian "imaginative power" or Whitmanian "real me". By unpeeling an outer self of "dead Hands, dead stringencies", she sought to unveil and give voice to an inner "queen" or "White Godiva", a spirit of rebellious expressiveness.<sup>3</sup>*

In her poetry, the external realities are internalised so perfectly with the inner reactions, that it brings out her accurate expressions in front of the readers. This is true for Kamala Das's poetry also. Her 'fever' can be traced as a fear about her frigidity, the complex about her conventional upbringing, the suspected unconcern of her husband and her neurotic loneliness.



Kamala Das's poems are related to the persona's husband and the unfulfilling bond between them. She describes the uncaring habits of the man in a candid manner, when as a stranger he walks in his loneliness, 'sulking' and 'joylessly' drinking his tea with downcast eyes. She shows her disgust towards her male counterpart and describes the tense relationship with her husband in "The Sunshine Cat".

The poet seems to be disturbed by the male-oriented world where there is hardly any place for woman. It was an era of women's liberation, an era of women's fight against the society. Most women poet of the early sixties focused their attention to show their calibre and assert their true place in the man-made universe. The target of their violent destructive force was a masculine figure in the form of either husband or father, creating a separate identification for them.

There is a common search for the 'misplaced father' in the poems of both of these poets. The father-figure merges with that of lover in a Freudian manner in order to show the revenge against the male order.

Sylvia Plath reacts with hate for her father and finds liberation through her marriage to a man with many of her father's qualities. She establishes with her father the torturer and tortured relationship. She refers to her relationship with her father as that of a German and a Jew and launches an emotional revolt against her German father.

As a contrast to this highly wrought poem "Daddy" by Plath, Kamala Das's "A Requiem for My Father" is a remarkable poem that combines an inconsolable grief with elegiac soberness. Like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy", this poem is also a climax of the 'father cult' and describes qualities of her father. He was a '*strong man with a never-ending zest for life*'. He withstood all medical tortures and resisted death for nine days.

Sylvia Plath conceives the father-figure in her works as a despot, but for Das, her father was a bold hero, popular and affectionate. Talking about "Daddy" Sylvia Plath said in an interview: "*Here is a poem spoken by a girl with Electra Complex. He died while she thought he was God.*"<sup>4</sup> But there is no trace of the Electra complex in Das's poem. She concludes the poem saying, "*I loved you father, I loved you all my life*". As an obsessed daughter, Sylvia Plath, on the contrary, ritually has tried to destroy the remaining memories of her father.

Sylvia Plath's poems contained in the collection Ariel mostly represent the forces of patriarchy appearing in the disguise of her father. The poem "Daddy" is undoubtedly against her male counterpart. She mentions the daughter's 'Electra complex' to justify the relationship. The characteristic of the persona is conveyed as 'your hound-bitch daughter'.



In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, a peculiar relationship is described, with an element of sexual desire and an urge to destroy.

A review of the poems composed by the Plath and Das reveals many common features. Invariably, both of them dwell upon the theme of guilt which adds to the existential vision they try to project. Plath felt responsible for her father’s death and a life-long search for a father figure led her to a consequent feeling of guilt resulting from the fear of incest. Das’s confessional poems also contain a sense of guilt which was caused by a loose marital relationship. Her search was for a mythic Krishna, to seek satisfaction in her otherwise devastated life. The feeling of personal guilt in these confessional poets merges into the larger forces of social and communal guilt of having been born in a tradition-bound, male-oriented society. They both experienced horrors and terrors in their lives, related to mental illness, feminine indifferences or tragedies of the world.

The women poets writing confessional poetry concern their themes with woman’s physical confinement to the vicinity of a house or kitchen, marriage and motherhood, or a female identification as a curse. Plath’s poem “The Applicant” describes dehumanisation and degradation of a woman involved in marriage.

On the one side she identifies the image of a woman with doll and a mannequin, while on the other side, her images show her attempt to extricate the woman of today from the woman of past, to let her grow into the woman of future. Kamala Das, too, protests vehemently against the senseless restrictions which compel a sensitive woman to lead a vapid existence in the man-made society. The “categorisers” compel women to ‘fit in’.

The bitter irony, misfortune and anguish of women who find themselves tied to a meaningless routine of household activities can also be found in Das’s poem “The Siesta”. The diversity of female experience and the variety of subjective categories it explodes, gives Plath’s and Das’s confessional literature its unique quality.

An obsession with death or a wish to die is persistent in both Plath and Das. As Camus puts it, “There is only one liberty to come with --- death, after which everything is possible”.<sup>5</sup> This is true of both Plath and Das. Both of them relate themselves to death and write about their experiences involved in it. Das writes:

*.. Death is  
Ordinary. To live on earth built upon layers and  
Layers of bone requires an extraordinary  
Courage.*



Sylvia Plath, too, flaunts her expertise in dying by saying:

*Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.*

The source of death is also same for them. Both wished to drown in the sea. Edward Lucie Smith argues that “the sea and more specially the idea of death by water, is the central image of the Colossus”.<sup>6</sup> ‘Sea’ acts as an ‘Invitation’ for Das. It brings about the purification, suggested in The Tempest and The Waste Land. Death becomes the symbol of peace and contentment for these poets. Das writes:

*All I want to now  
is to take a long walk  
into the sea.*

And in “Lorelie”, Sylvia Plath writes:

*.. I see drifting  
Deep in your flux of silver  
Those great goddesses of peace  
Stone, stone, ferry me down there.*

The total collusion with death is reflected in Plath’s last poems like “Edge”, where it acts as an ‘accomplishment’. For Kamala Das death is temporary while the soul is immortal. The sufferings of these poets lead to alienation. In a world of lost relationships an act of self-expression is a significant event and for Plath and Das, isolation and estrangement from reality is the main theme. Unlike Sylvia Plath, however, for whom death was the ultimate source for redemption Das felt contented in surrendering herself to her mythic Krishna. Her poems gain a spiritual wisdom, visualising silence and devotion as modes of achieving the ultimate peace.

There is a feeling of absurdity in some confessional poetry. A threat of disintegration of self and an attempt to demonstrate the perils and pains of life in the confessional poets results in death-wish and suicide. Albert Camus said once: “killing yourself amounts to confessing”. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das were all fascinated by and obsessed to death. Plath and Sexton, finally, did commit suicide, but Kamala Das developed a spiritual consciousness and a deep sensitivity to replace her strong urge of committing suicide.



Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das acted out familiar scenes and wrote about their struggles to bring out their confessions in a poignant manner. Being realists and dealing with their personal experiences, both of them have marked similarities in their poetry. Both of them represented the same age, were married and affected by their respective cultures and dominant societies. Confessional poets like Robert Lowell regain peace through self-revelations. But Sylvia Plath's and Kamala Das's poetry does not evince any perceptible therapeutic changes; they are only pushed further towards the edge.

Confessional poetry is the expression of thoughts and words in which emotion embodies itself. For this, a suitable control over poetic terms and a distinctive language is required. In Plath and Das, the identification of a valuable idea, a warm feeling or a sensation is immediately followed by its poetic expression. Kamala Das also displays a great power of expression in using the language, while giving the allure of hasty composition. She also reveals a mastery of words and phrases, while exercising a control over rhythm where sharp and venomous words and the nervous rhythm, was almost kept feverishly alive.

To confessional poets, language becomes the form of defense against their extreme suffering. In their poetry, rhyme is mostly absent and their verse becomes a kind of blank verse or light verse. T. S. Eliot once remarked that "blank verse is no verse".<sup>7</sup> But this statement cannot hold good for Das and Plath. They adopted blank verse or light verse for revealing their individual experiences but their poetry still contains rhythm and music. There is a fusion of thought and words, which embodies visual, auditory and emotive images. Regarding Sylvia Plath's language, Uroff suggests:

*The speaker's simplistic language, rhyme and rhythm become one means by which she attempts to charm and hold off the evil spirits.*<sup>8</sup>

Symbols and metaphors are emotionally conceived to represent the structure of feelings in her poetry. Some common symbols are generally used by the two poets in order to define a specific meaning. These are: 'roses' is defined for love, 'satan', and 'serpent' for evil, 'green' colour for jealousy and so on. There are also open-ended symbols representing a cluster of ideas. For example, 'sea' represents 'a zest for life', or 'immortality' or a 'destructive agent'; and 'sun' represents 'heat', 'life', 'loneliness' and 'dryness'.

For Kamala Das sea becomes the central symbol in "Composition", "The Suicide", "Convicts", "The Invitation" and "The High Tide". The bright, quiet sea, splashing at the shore symbolises the mysterious interspace between life and immortality.



In “Convicts” the sea acts as “libidinous re-enactment of the aching pleasure of sexual experience”.<sup>9</sup> ‘Sun’ is also a frequently used symbol in both Das and Plath. It acts as a warm and protective symbol and is considered as eternal.

In the poem “Ghanshyam”, the sun later becomes oppressive when the poet compares her loneliness with “bleached bones cracking in the desert sun”. The hot and warm ‘sun’ also symbolises dryness, anger and terror. ‘Fire’, ‘Flame’ and ‘Lamp’ are also used as parallel symbols for sun. They represent death, funeral and share the quality of hope, peace, love and affection. In Das’s poetry, a sense of coherence is achieved through beautifully articulated themes by the artful usage of symbols, images and other figurative devices. She draws her symbols from the earth, air, fire and water, plant and animal-life and from her own society. The moon is symbolic of a middle-aged woman’s dream of her days of youth and love.

A deep sense of alienation overpowers Sylvia Plath’s inner self. “Blackness” and “Silence”, reveal the poet’s failure to establish an eternal bond with nature. Edward Butscher feels that “Her poetry is a brave attempt at merging personal despair with social significance”.<sup>10</sup> The loneliness and the trivial world in which Plath lives is penetrated by the mosaic of guilt, desire and revelations. She talks about her emotional life in confessional manner and explores the psychic trauma resulting in a frightening sense of desolation and fear in the mind of the poet. She is said to have created a climate for a more honest, revelatory confessional poetry. Her abundance of manners, with its repetition of words, phrases, symbols and its curious blend serves as a device for communicating the poet’s sense of suffering. Her style becomes formal and derivative. According to Margaret Uroff:

*She usurps the language of other poets; she shamelessly copies rhythms and styles; she frequently lapses into dullness or borrowed archaic language; she veers between arch literary style and prosaic emptiness.<sup>11</sup>*

In Sylvia Plath’s poetry, as in Kamala Das’s we find a perfect blend a social woman with an intellectual being. As ambitious women both these poets forced themselves to grow out of their patriarchy and to forget their belongings. They lived in a world where men are the possessors as well as the dispensers of reason. Anything outside the norms set by men became unreasonable, and to fight against such norms and to make it seem more reasonable, they had to face heavy odds. This fight made them rebellious and disoriented from their life, which resulted in identity crisis and isolation from the society which gets reflected even through their language because:

*. . . language is the starting point, the tool by which to order the world. To capture reality is to name it, to fix it with the apt description or definition.<sup>12</sup>*



To project their trauma and tribulations these poets took to pen and vented their confessions and revelations honestly, baring their inner personal feelings. The outer world is despairingly bleak, grotesque and disintegrated, and the two poets have laid bare the terrible discrepancy between the actual and the desirable. The honest and frank revelation of their personal life and predicament in their poetry, has earned for them a permanent place in confessional literature.

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