



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

Volume 10, Issue 5, May 2023



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.580



+91 99405 72462



+9163819 07438



ijmrsetm@gmail.com



www.ijmrsetm.com

Comparative Analysis of the Theme of Confession in Select Works of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath

Amarnath

M.A. English, Amity School of Languages, Lucknow Campus, U.P. India

Abstract: In today's world of literary exploration and experimentation, many genres have come to the forefront. However, in earlier times, these avant-garde aspects were dealt with crucially by many important writers, who brought into the literary field genres of their own bent of mind. One such genre is Confessional poetry, and two prominent poets who have brought it to its zenith were Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath.

The paper shall first look into the origins, meaning and essence of Confessional poetry, thereafter taking into consideration its prominent poets and pioneers and their specific approaches to their work. The paper will introduce both the poets — Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath — and their individual perspectives towards Confessional poetry, whereon in the end a synthesis of their ideologies shall be formed; a comparative analysis shall be done for this purpose. This paper thus aims to trace the congruency within the works of both the concerned poets, more specifically focusing on the female perspectives present and operating therein. This shall be approached via reading, analyzing and interpreting some select works of both the poets.

Confessional poetry formed its foundations technically in America, but poetic flow of the similar kind was visible all over the world and therefore also in India, for poets flourished in and around a similar worldview and scenario — of enhancing the individual. In and around the twentieth century, the poetic explorations and contributions of Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, etc., helped in a great manner set the foundation of Confessional poems.

From this approach in continuation will flow the tracing of female perspectives in the poems, and feminist theory and literary analysis too shall be the tools used for this purpose at times. Prominent themes within their works too shall be traced for effective and efficient analysis. The aim of the paper thus is to find whether the poets meet on certain levels of female agency and female representation; if yes, on what grounds. The work then seeks to establish the answer for this prominent research question. Towards the end, an effective conclusion shall be formed based on the research findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Confessional poetry formed its foundations technically in America, but poetic flow of the similar kind was visible all over the world and therefore also in India, for poets flourished in and around a similar worldview and scenario — of enhancing the individual. In and around the twentieth century, the poetic explorations and contributions of Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, etc., helped in a great manner set the foundation of Confessional poems.

This form of a new kind of poetry was believed to be therapeutic in nature by M. L. Rosenthal, a popular critic. It formed the centre and essence of a unique and personal poetic identity, whereby the “psychological vulnerability and shame” the confessional poet feels is expressed through his confessions of “repressed feelings”. (Gupta, Tanu & Sharma, Anju Bala. (2014).) Moreover, the poet at the same time presumes the voice of his/her civilization, and the first person narratorial agency is primordial in shaping the Confessional genre.

Sylvia Plath, a poet of this genre, was born and brought up in America (Boston, 1932); apart from being a novelist, she also wrote short stories and was an active activist during her lifetime. Plath lived a tumultuous life, the expressions of which are formed and seen in her works — which deal with suicide, depression, drug abuse, failed relationships, broken familial ties, female sexuality, death, self-harm, etc.

Similarly, we have Kamala Das, who operates in and around the Indian context around the same time period such as Plath (1934 – 2009). Das wrote poetic and prose pieces in Malayalam (her mother tongue) as well as in English. The works of Das are significant for their unfiltered and unapologetic treatment of female sexuality — “free from any sense of guilt”; this “infused her writing with power, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation.” (Atlas, Nava.) Therefore, the two poets, even though are operating in different contexts, they shall meet on one congruent plane of action — the exploration of female agency, the representation of female psyche, and the voicing of female perspectives. This meeting is then further influenced by many factors, such as:

- Cultural differences
- Temporal differences
- Differences in psyche, and nature and nurture environments
- Discourse of race and identity

Along these lines the present comparison will be made and conclusion will be reached through a proper analysis of the above-stated factors.

The confessional theme within the works of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath relate to overall many familiar aspects, few of them are listed below:

- Family and personal relationships
- Use and representation of the female body
- Man-woman dynamic
- Love
- Female sexuality

Apart from these, certain motifs or recurring elements again unite the two poets along the lines of female perspectives —

- The presence of an overarching figure of male domination and their resistance to it
- Violent imageries related to the body

These aspects shall be explored one by one.

When we talk of the first semantic congruity between the two writers, it comes forth in the form of their dominant thematic concerns of dealing with familial strife, broken relationships, and unsatisfactory bonds via the medium of poetry. Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are poets who talk about and represent their personal relationships, sometimes along with the trauma faced due to them, quite categorically onto paper.

Das has done this confessional representation in her work ‘My Grandmother’s House’; here the poet connects the theme of nostalgia for the past to the universal themes of losing love, loneliness, death, and surrender to the constant flux of time. Das’ personal relationship with her husband was not up to the mark of contentment, which is again often seen in her works.

Sylvia then again comes to the forefront here, where she too explores her personal life — along with the people who are in it — and its struggles within her poems, in order to find some relief from the tumults of her mind and heart. Plath explores this relationship in terms of her father and husband primarily, again, like Kamala, connecting it to the larger dynamics of men, submissiveness, feminine repression, etc. Therefore, both Plath and Das actively connect one thematic concern to larger semantic and linguistic structures, i.e., to larger and universal themes. This is how the two women really speak to the experience of women all over the world, and the female perspectives portrayed in their works remain an experience not so personal as they become universal, for they are widely felt by women from various legions around the world.

Continuing further, we also see the two poets uniting along the lines of using and representing the female body in a significant manner — the female body becomes an image of recurrent use, and its assertion becomes a form of tool which takes back control over the narrative of female representation. The lines by Kamala Das — “What is/It to the corpse if the maggots nip?” (Kamala Das: ‘The Maggots’) — talk of the act of making love, however, the imagery is rather violent and not in line with the conventional imagery associated with love and sex, especially when it comes to the expectations of modesty and sugariness levied upon female writers. Das’ works use the female body often, and majority of her works are also centralized around the theme of sexual frankness and expression.

Plath also comes round to the same aspect — in ‘Lady Lazarus’, as seen in the above sections, the imagery used by Plath disintegrates and disjoins the body, reducing it to the level of inanimate objects. This not only allows Sylvia to take control of her own narrative but also set into motion the unconventional but much needed idea that the female body is not just meant for syrupy rendition and flowery representation. Plath’s female body is subject to Voyeurism,

abuse, deconstruction, and thus reflects a very strong feminist discourse that the female body and its definition is not static, rather mobile and based on individual expression.

One more concept which again resonates a structural similarity is the use of imageries of violent fashion — for Plath the skin is “jew linen” and “paperweight” (Sylvia Plath, ‘Lady Lazarus’), for Das the mouth assumes the shape of a dark cave, where “stalactites of/Uneven teeth gleam” and the heart is like an “empty cistern” (Kamala Das, ‘The Freaks’). These two elements also unite the two poets tenaciously. Their detail-oriented approach towards these imageries enriches their work with a profound visual essence and vigour, but it also reflects the manner in which both these poets felt their emotions deeply and passionately. Passion is one such element found in both their works.

Das never defined herself as a feminist, and thus it was never that she was writing only for and about feminist concern. About her it is said that she transcended the role of a poet and just authentically attended to her lifelong role of just being a very honest woman. Das explores those aspects of society that are not generally given to women for them to explore. She, as a poet, deals with the needs and desires of women around her, and Plath on the other hand gives expression to the mental traumas and subjugations which surround women all over the world — because in some way or the other their lives are being controlled and influenced by men around them.

Sylvia was a radical feminist by definition as well as work, while Kamala, even though her works are sometimes radical in nature, was never one by definition or identification. This is where the two poets do not have a congruency. Nonetheless, the subject matter of their works remains feminist by all terms. It is also crucial and interesting to note how both the poets belong to two different cultures and how their works remain true to that particular culture by representing it in its most authentic form.

The remaining aspects left to be talked about when comparing the two poets are:

- The man-woman dynamic
- Love
- Female sexuality
- The presence of an overarching figure of male domination and the poets’ resistance towards it

Another aspect common to the confessional similarities of both the poets, and to the way through which they deal with the expression and representation of female perspectives, is the thematic concern and treatment thereof of the concept of love. For Kamala Das, for example, the search for love is the primordial aspect with which she is concerned in her poems. Love, in her poems, has many forms — violent, magnanimous, erotic, sensual, detached, decapitated, etc., and either via a direct manner or an indirect one, she has talked about love — and how it relates to the other, larger aspects of human life — in a very categorically poetic yet authentic way. Critics and readers have long been shocked and astounded by the sheer vulnerability with which Das exhibits her personal thoughts and perspectives onto paper. Especially coming from an Indian woman, in an Indian context, and from a culture deeply rooted within certain restrictions levied upon women, it became all the more awe-inspiring. Das wants not only emotional but also physical fulfilment, rejecting the popular idea that a woman only needs the emotional one.

After that love became a swivel-door,

When one went out, another came in (Das, ‘Summer in Calcutta’: 11)

Kamala reveals how she started seeking sexual experiences and love right from the times of her adolescent years. Kamala, even though is direct and starkly clear about the concept she is expressing, makes the theme much more complex, as she echoes the needs and pangs and fervours of a mythological kind of love (Radha-Krishn), as she records in her autobiography.

When it comes to Plath, it is interesting to note that even though when she is confessional towards her relationships and personal experiences, we see her taking an iconoclast route when it comes to the expression of amorous adventures. We see both Plath and Das engaging with the same concept, however, the way they treat it remains different, which again testifies to the varied female perspectives both the poets attest and attend to, for they represent and give voice to two different sets of women who may or may not feel the same towards the ideas of love, sex, or marriage.

When it comes to Plath, all her works, and if not all then most of them (including her posthumous one — *Ariel*) can be grouped under the classification of love poems. However, Sylvia presents a rather discontinuous or deranged face of love, a love she needed but perhaps was absent from her life — the resultant consequence being her subsequent detachment from this idea altogether. The kind of healthy love which she could have experienced in her young age she could not receive; the idea of love did not make a healthy impression on her right from the very start. Moreover, even

when she did get settle down and married Ted Hughes, the relationship seemed to be more on the rocks than it seemed to sail swiftly.

This does not certify, however, that Sylvia was completely obstinate in her desire to stay away from the idea. She is a poet who portrays love in its brutal, disillusioned, non-rosy and hellish versions — the versions that speak of the brute reality more than anything else. But she also speaks of the love which she feels when she expresses how she is in love with nature altogether — with the seaside, with her demised father, or somewhere in love with the idea of death itself. Sylvia's intellect and her encounters in early childhood with unhealthy and seldom present models of love formed in her mind a disembodied image of what love should feel and look like, and when the love she received could not save her from the immediate disillusionment, she faced a tragic breakdown.

While Sylvia does not represent a dire need for love in her works, Das expresses the need of it as well as her desire for it. Sylvia's works are related more with her mental and psychological fluctuations and tumults. Das however looks for polyamorous adventures; her works thus become complex, and hence her treatment of the idea also differs from Plath. Nonetheless, both the poets unite on the level of thematic congruency, and thus in their portrayal of the same theme but in different manners, they resonate a clear feminist idea — of giving voices to different sections of women and portraying varied perspectives of femininity: therefore, rejecting preimposed labels and presumptuous stereotypes.

Another congruent aspect between the poets concerned is the often-explored arena of female sexuality in their works. Sexual frankness, images of sexual encounters, sensual innuendos, and expression of feminine sexual approach — all find a place in their works, thus giving voice to their individual female perspectives as well as the collective female perspective in relation to such concerns.

For example, a leading characteristic of Das' works is the constant consideration and focus on the female sexual life. Kamala's coming of age, the frank expression of her sexuality, extramarital affairs, her sexual needs, etc., all find a place in her expression of unadulterated sexual representation. As a child, as an adolescent, as an old woman and also as a young wife, the poet explores a woman's journey which she undertakes in order to connect with her own sexuality. Kamala's sexual desires generate from her desire to seek emotional fulfilment in sex; however, a point comes when the lack thereof of this need degenerates into ultimate lustfulness and voicing of her bodily needs. This aspect then becomes feminist in nature. Her poems and concerns with female sexuality thus are talking of facets such as: —

- Love
- Sexual frustration
- Unfulfilled sexual desires

These aspects then meet on the common or collective level of the sexual desires of Indian women, and Das becomes a pioneer, or one of the very few poets, women poets at that, who freely and frankly talked about in their works about the female sexual experience and female sexual desires and needs.

Within this context when we talk of Sylvia Plath, she on the other hand represents an approach that firmly takes control of her sexuality and how it is represented. Through the previous discussions it is evidently visible that Sylvia does this via three focal mediums: —

- Bodily disintegration
- Rejection of the female body being a voyeuristic object for the male (even female) gaze
- Taking control of the individual definition of what sexuality means and not assenting to the social definition of it

What the immediately preceding point means is that in Plath's poems, the speaker repeatedly tries to take back control of their individuality via the means of their sexual freedom. Female sexuality as a discourse as well as a practical and day-to-day life consideration is shaped by the socio-cultural, political, economic, discursive, patriarchal and sexist forces operating within the society. Plath's poems then are radically charged and speak to the common consciousness of women all over the world, giving voice to their concerns and frustrations. "To question these discourses is to question their power and to go against the oppression they impose, and different poems by Plath portray female speakers' attempts to deny stereotypes of female of sexuality." (Balbi, 2011)

Plath's works are a strong argument against the fantasies that are laid upon the female body. Her works therefore reflect and deal with the narratives and social perspectives revolving around the female body, along with its treatment and representation in popular culture. "The objectification of the female body parts ("rubber breasts" and "a rubber crotch") can be read as a reference to the artificiality of the ideals that are constructed when it comes to what is desirable or

not.” (Balbi, 2011) Therefore, by taking control of the way and manner in which women are seen, Plath takes a firm step in the direction of an independent and realistic female representation.

In this manner, the concept of female sexuality is explored by both the poets. Das represents it in her individual manner — talking about her own desires and needs, but situating them within the universal context of the desires and needs of several Indian women. Plath, on the other hand, becomes a step further radical — her works then take the responsibility of reversing the already existing narratives. Thus, in their distinct manners, both the poets talk of the same concept and therefore represent the ardent standpoint that women and their sexuality are topics of prime importance and deserve to be discussed and talked about in an open, unapologetic manner.

REFERENCES

1. Atlas, Nava. “10 Poems by Kamala Das, Confessional Poet of India.” *Literary Ladies Guide*, 30 Aug. 2022,
2. www.literaryladiesguide.com/classic-women-authors-poetry/10-poems-by-kamala-das-confessional-poet-of-india.
3. Bite, Vishwanath. *The Themes of Love and Sex in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das* — *the Criterion: An International Journal in English*. 27 Sept. 2021,
4. www.the-criterion.com/the-themes-of-love-and-sex-in-the-poetry-of-sylvia-plath-and-kamala-das.
5. ---. “Confessional Poetry | Poetry Foundation.” *Poetry Foundation*,
6. www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry
7. Gupta, Tanu & Sharma, Anju Bala. (2014). Confessional Poetry In The Light Of Psychoanalytic Theory with Special Reference to Sylvia Plath. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*. 2. 112-116.
8. Herman, Herman, et al. “AN ANALYSIS OF FEELING LOVE AND HATE IN SYLVIA PLATH’S POEM ‘DADDY.’” *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 4, LPPM IKIP Mataram, Oct. 2020, p. 442. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v8i4.2835>.
9. “Love and Sexuality in the Writings of Kamala Das.” *theweek.in*, 7 Feb. 2018, www.theweek.in/webworld/features/society/feral-beauty-kamala-surayya-writings-ente-katha-my-story-kamala-das-literature-poems-sexuality.html.
10. Mukeshbhai, Brahmabhatt Kishan. “Contribution of Kamala Das to Indian English Poetry: A Study.” *ideas.repec.org*, Mar. 2019, ideas.repec.org/p/vor/issues/2019-29-05.html.
11. *My Story* — Kamala Das (ISBN: [81-207-0854-7](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107085477))
12. Ray, Kumkum, And Srashti Srivastava. "Faith of The People in The Justice of The Village Council And Resolution of Disputes As Opposed to Modern Courts (Munshi Premchand's 'Panch Parmeshwar')." "
13. Ray, Kumkum. "Interrogating History in Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion."
14. Singh, Suman. “Woman Perspective in Kamala Das’s Poetry.” *IJERT*, Apr. 2018,
15. <https://doi.org/10.17577/IJERTCONV3IS10004>.



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT



+91 99405 72462



+91 63819 07438



ijmrsetm@gmail.com

www.ijmrsetm.com