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Confessional poetry of sylvia plath and kamala das: An exploration of two repressed feminist psyches

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Abstract

The confessional poetry of Kamala Das, like that of Sylvia Plath and other American poets, has a therapeutic and cathartic effect on the readers as well as the poet herself. Her poetry is replete with a powerful force of catharsis and protest. She raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal, and the confessional appeal as traced in the poetry of Sylvia Plath is universally appreciated. Sylvia Plath raises herself to a level recognized as both a confessional and feminist poet. Kamala Das is also ranked as an important confessional feminist poet in the Indian poetry in English. Confessional poetry is an attempt to reveal the facts or realities related to a poet. A confessional poet allows no barriers between his or her self and the direct, free and frank expression of his or her concealed facts and thoughts. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a confessional poet and at the same time a bold voice of feminine sensibility. They rebel against the conventions and restraints of society. This is meant to exploit womankind in the male-dominated society.

Keywords: Confessional poetry, replete, feminist, therapeutic, realities, society, feminine sensibility

Introduction

Confessional poetry is predominantly autobiographical in theme, mode and expression. It is a new type of autobiographical literature in verse. Confessional poetry is an attempt to reveal the facts or realities related to a poet, which normally remain unrevealed. It requires the poet's courage and boldness to bare the secrets of life because the revelation of the secrets might land her in trouble in her personal and social life. A confessional poet takes the reader into confidence about his or her personal and private life, and reveals those facts of her life which an ordinary person, even if that person be a poet, would keep them concealed in his or her mind because of the delicate nature of those facts. A confessional poet sheds all his or her inhibitions and restrictions and writes frankly and candidly, and in an outspoken manner, thus defying restraints and restrictions which the social code and conventions of society impose upon him or her. A confessional poet allows no barriers between his or her self and the direct, free and frank expression of his or her concealed facts and thoughts. Confessional poetry not only reveals parts of his or her life, which normally withheld but dramatizes the poet's disturbed state of mind as well. The confessional poet is heroically prepared to face death and destruction in order to realize a higher love of perception. In confessional poetry the poet feels almost alienated from his or her environment.

Origin and Growth of Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry is a branch of confessional literature. It is a new species of poetry of the 20th century poetry. It is a style of poetry that emerged in the United State of America during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is sometimes categorized as a form of Postmodernism. Confessional poetry is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and also a few others. Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" is one of the best-known confession poems. The term "Confessional" was first coined and used by M. L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert Lowell's work "Life Studies". In the ancient world, there are two great autobiographies, one by Saint Augustain entitled "Confession" and the other by Sante Terrassa entitled "Life of Herself". Both these works have been written not for personal display or justification but to tell the vital religious experiences which might serve as an example for others.

In the 19th century, Rousseau created a land-mark in the long history by writing “Confessions” which is the story of his feelings. Latter confessional writers follow the example of Rousseau in describing their inner experiences with a fair degree of outspokenness. Modern American poets have adopted the mode of confession of the vehicle of the concealed heart through their poetry. American poets like Berryman, Jarrell or Sylvia Plath of Lowell’s time and Kamala Das in India have written poems in confessional mode.

Purpose of the Study of Poetry by Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das

Sylvia Plath became inspired by American confessional poets. She wrote poems to give expression to her worried mind and repressed heart. She was worried on account of the lack of child, and therefore she became tormented with depression and dark terrors. Her poetry of that time is the reflection of her hopelessness in the poem “Little Figure”:

I survive the while
 Arrange my morning
 These are my fingers, this baby
 The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.

Her marriage with Ted Hughes was fully dissatisfying and disturbing. It very adversely affected her. She became disillusioned with the pleasant desire of conjugal life her husband because her dream of the model figure in Ted Hughes as husband failed and she felt completely crushed by her husband’s disloyalty to her. The poems written at that time show her broken heart. It seems that she was heart-broken. She began to realize her husband’s infidelity. Her anger was more prevalent because she could not help loving him still though she began to call him a traitor. The faithless act of Ted Hughes shocked Sylvia. At last Ted left her. This experience was psychologically and emotionally very disturbing to her. She began to feel that all her ideals of good marriage had been shattered but her poetic personality underwent a change for the better. Her separation from him created depression in her. She tried her best to cope with the depressed state of mind through her full devotion to writing poems in order to express herself to remove depression from her mind. The expression of the unexpected depression through poems helped Sylvia Plath, to a great extent, to attain her poetic perfection. Her marriage which caused a disaster in her life hardened her mind to plunged herself into writing. All the poems such as “Lady Lazarus” or “Daddy” came from pain in the last year of her life.

Plath became an outstanding poet sharing all the characteristics of the Confessional School. Her last poems are purely confessional writings. Her poem “Daddy” reminds the reader of her love-hate relationship with her father. She became so hopeless that she expressed her complete dislike for her father in the following stanza:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now.

She became so frustrated that she decided to commit suicide that seemed to her a great deliverer. She wrote some lines to convey that death would be the best way to be relieved of her despair and disappointment:

The woman is perfected
 Her dead
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment.

Throughout her poems, Sylvia Plath is obsessed with the theme of death. She had the first experience of death when her father died in 1940. She brooded over his death all her life. The love-hate drama on death is especially staged in the poems “Daddy”, “Lazarus” and other poems as well. But death is not the halt. It is a door to another life, a new heaven, a new earth. Plath’s life is her work and her work is her life. Her poems are uninhibited, free from moral, literary, and social constraints. Her poems contain mere hatred because she felt that people hated her more. She was not afraid to stop paying back people in their own coin. The confessional mode of writing finds its boldest champion in Sylvia Plath. The aim of the study is to trace and examine how she has expressed her own repressed ideas, feelings and tortured emotions through her poems.

Feminist Element in Plath’s Poetry

Though Sylvia Plath never considered herself a feminist, in her poems she has criticized the predicament of women in 1950s. She has taken up the problem of male tyranny over enslaved women in many of her famous poems like “Ariel”, “Purdah”, “Fever103”. Thus she is said to be a forerunner of the Feminist women. She is one of those writers, who have preferred womanhood in every field of life even in her poetry, and this is called Sylvia Plath’s feminism. She considers women equal to men. She has raised voice against male domination. She always thinks that society is depriving women of their legal and ethical rights. Her “Daddy” is considered as a feminist poem. Her father, by his death along with the way he treated her was one of the major inspirations behind this famous poem. Her Lady Lazarus is considered as a woman’s effort to voice herself in modern society. The narrator in this poem voices herself through a sort of self-confession. The poem advocates feminism. Her feminism evolves from her protagonists’ deep hatred for their male counterparts. In the last poems the women are meek or submissive, but they are of aggressive nature which encourages them to challenge men and over-power them. While revealing the suppressed voice or feelings of the poet Plath has voiced against male denial of the distinct independent existence of women in the society.

Kamala Das’s Aims of Confessional Writing

Kamala Das wrote poetry to bare her heart as a woman failing to have that happiness which all women seek in their conjugal life. Her chief concern was to express her sexual frustration and the failure of marriage as a means of happiness in the life of a woman. The theme, namely the failure of a woman to achieve happiness through her sexual relationship with her husband and even through a similar relationship with other men, recurs in many of her poems. Thus her poetry is largely autobiographical and confessional. The frustration resulting from the total failure of her marriage and her search for happiness through indiscriminate sexual relationships with other men constitutes a very large component of her poetry. The poem “The Old Playhouse” is confessional in theme and quality. It describes, in unusually frank terms, the kind of life which she has been leading with her husband. The poem describes metaphorically the poet’s feeling of suffocation in her

husband's home as a consequence of her husband's selfishness, self-centeredness, egoism, and exaggerated sense of his own importance. She feels to be imprisoned in her husband's home. She expresses her resolve to liberate herself from this kind of slavery to her husband. Kamala Das as a confessional poet may be compared with Sylvia Plath.

As a confessional poet Kamala Das takes the reader into her confidence about her personal and private life and reveals the facts of life which any one will not dare or will at least hesitate to express. The poet shows her courage to reveal the most private matters or facts frankly and candidly in her poetry. Her poetry is all about her revelation of her personal life and unpleasant experiences of life in the family with her husband. As a true confessional poet she shows frankly the wrongs, the injustice, and humiliation that she endured in the male-dominated world. Sexual humiliation and exploitation constitutes one of the main themes in her poetry. Her poetry records her experiences and struggles she had to undergo in order to maintain her identity. It frankly and truthfully discusses her relationships with her family, friends and lovers. She examines her private life because that is her authentic life.

Kamala Das is concerned with herself as a victim. Sexual humiliation becomes a central experience in her autobiography entitled "My Life" in which she admits, "In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence." The poem "The Freaks" presents Kamala Das as a married woman, who has to feign love to protect her image as an active participant in the sexual act:

It's only

To save my face I flaunt at

Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

"The Suicide" deals with Kamala Das's problem of the retention of her identity. "The Stone Age" discusses her yearning for freedom from her husband who has turned her into a "bird of stone, granite love". She is totally disenchanted with her life of alienation, humiliation and suffocation in the company of her self-centered husband. She gives free and frank expression to her dissatisfaction with marital love in the poem "The Composition". The poetry of Kamala Das is full of anguish and sufferings. It calls to her mind the onset of the old age, disease and decay in her life. In "Too Early Autumn" she experiences the premature loss of emotions and fascination in life. "An Introduction" is a remarkable confessional poem. Thus Kamala Das wrote poetry to ventilate her pent-up disenchantment with life, mental agony and deep frustration. She is obsessed with the feelings of decay, destruction, sense of futility of marital life and death. "The Sunshine" shows her plight of half-death in the company with her husband. Confessional poetry is intensely personal and Kamala Das's poetry is expressive of feelings and situations of such women in general. She transforms her intense personal experience into a general truth, her own predicament into human suffering and her voice into the agonized voice of neglected and distressed women in the world.

Feminine Sensibility of Kamala Das

Kamala Das is pre-eminently a confessional poet and at the same time a bold voice of feminine sensibility. She rebels against the conventions and restraints of society, which is

meant to exploit womankind in the male-dominated society. In her poetry she reveals feminine sensibility. Her vision is vitally particularized from woman's point of view. Her feminine sensibility yearns for fulfillment in love. She is deeply hurt when love is denied to her. More sexual union, devoid of love, tires and sickens her. Her feminine sensibility is badly bruised and tortured by masculine callousness, heartlessness and sexuality. In the poems dealing with love her feminine sensibility is found to have been hurt because of absence of love. Her sensibility is fully expressed in her "The Music Party". She challenges male-domination of women in the male-dominated society. She is pro-female and is strongly opposed to the repression and exploitation of women. She is a leading champion of woman's causes and feminism in the field of Indian poetry in English. She deals with different aspects of feminine sensibility in her iconoclastic poetry. She is a feminist as her poetry represents female voice and the voice denouncing male attempt to repress, subjugate and exploit women in the society. Her feminism is clearly seen in her bold portrayal of sex in her poems. She frankly and fearlessly depicts her marital and extra-marital relationships in her autobiographical poems. She denounces indirectly the male-dominated society and patriarchal tradition that denies women's equality, individuality, freedom, rights and dignity as humans.

Plath's Feminism through Confession in her Poetry

Plath is acknowledged as the most fascinating and tragic woman writers of the 20th century. In appreciation and recognition of her confessional poetry she is hailed as an important feminist writer not only in America but also in the world. She never considered herself as a feminist. In her poems she has criticized the predicament of women in 1950s. The study aims at exploring and examining the extent of her poetry corresponding to the principles of the second stage of feminism in 1960s. The study of her some prominent confessional poems reveals that the predicament of women in the 1950s which she has portrayed gives me much insight into the status of women in post-war America. Plath is more a confessional poet than feminist like Kamala Das. She shows confessional bent of mind in her latter poetry. She has surpassed confessional mode which restricts the expression of personal sad experiences which she had the perfect ability to transform into universal truths.

Conclusion

The confessional poetry of Kamala Das, like that of Sylvia Plath and other American poets, has a therapeutic and cathartic effect on the readers as well as the poet herself. Her poetry is replete with a powerful force of catharsis and protest. She raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal, and the confessional appeal as traced in the poetry of Sylvia Plath is universally appreciated. Sylvia Plath raises herself to a level recognized as both a confessional and feminist poet. Kamala Das is also ranked as an important confessional feminist poet in the Indian poetry in English.

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