

## Strip Teasing the Self in Kamala Das Poetry

Dr. Paviter Mohan

Associate Professor, Govt. College, Hisar, Haryana, India

### ABSTRACT

The outpouring of human emotions which was hitherto considered objectionable acquired a new dignity in Confessional poetry. Revolting against an early tendency to put up an impressive intellectual smoke screen, the sixties' poets express their feelings of failure, guilt, disappointment, incestuous desire and experience in mental asylums, denying all taboos. Just as Browning probes into the mind and heart of his characters, so do the poets of the sixties try and fathom the complexity of the psyche. The admission of fear, guilt, neurosis and failure voiced in the poems, pertain to the poet's own life and hence involves a lot of autobiography. The confessional poets of the 1970's achieve universality through personalization – the self and family history. It is an 'extremist art' that has more in common with psychoanalysis. Confessional movement of poetry means objective, analytical or even clinical observation of incident from one's own life, whether tingled with comedy or irony, self-loathing or compassion. One thing that these writers have in common is the conception of the self as passive. Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experiences with the outer world as it is. Such struggle is evident in the poems of Kamala Das from a very early stage. Her chief contribution to modern poetry is not only stunning frankness she betrays in every line she writes but also in making public a vast fund of agonies and information regarding women's psychic experiences that have laid hidden for ages, in the private female sector. She throws the unholy sanctum open and etches out all caustic detail in full public view. Kamala Das has faced frustration, disillusionment and drabness that she has expressed through her poetry which is known as the confessional poetry of Kamala Das. Her poetry is unconventionally bold and shockingly autobiographical where the confessional mode is fused with a feministic slant. One can establish a link between the two confessional poetesses (Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath) with all their problems, psychological traumas, frustration and the resultant quest for identity arising from the revolt against male-dominated world and so on. Both indulge in self-awareness, self-exposure and self-introspection in order to define her-self poetically. These confessional poets write poems that are candid, honest and down to earth. These poets give expression to their hidden thoughts and feelings that would normally not find expression in the social milieu. Kamala Das also develops the confessional mode of poetry. Her dissatisfaction in marriage and life has sharpened her consciousness, and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium, because many unpalatable things can be said in this medium without incurring the wrath of the powerful person. A desperate obsession with love is one prominent feature of Kamala Das' poetry. The wounded self, which has to struggle hard to achieve its own identity, is the principal theme that runs through her poetry. The alienated self of Das engages in a hectic search for genuine love. Loveless poems are elegies on the death of love, against which even a marriage, often drab and banal to the persona, is no insurance. Humiliated at the boarding school by the Britishers and at home by a brutal husband, she becomes a psycho-pathological dwarf. This paper optimizes her bitterness about the sexual politics of female submissiveness and her attempts as a modern Indian woman to free herself sexually and domestically from the role of bondage sanctioned by the society. Pain being the central and all-pervading symbol to her existence, Kamala Das makes use of poetry as redemptive and as a metaphor of relief in order to transcend the aches of her lonely soul. Lyrics, thus, are a psychic striptease of a woman poet who is denied the emotional involvement which she hungers after. The sense of nothingness of man-woman relationship pervades her poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** Confessional poetry, symbolist, psychological crisis, humiliation, autobiography, archetype, sanctum, depersonalization, anxiety, incompatibility

*How to cite this paper:* Dr. Paviter Mohan "Strip Teasing the Self in Kamala Das Poetry" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-7 | Issue-1, February 2023, pp.771-776, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd52775.pdf



Copyright © 2023 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



With the influence of French symbolists, particularly Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Laforgue who “used poetry as a means of illuminating psychic regions in themselves that would otherwise have been kept concealed” (King P. R. 153) the poetry in early century exposed a decadence and breakdown of value in both culture and individuals. At least this could be argued as a central driving force in Eliot in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, in Pound in *Cantos*, and in parts in Yeats. But in these poets there remains the assumption that they were writing not merely out of their sense of a crisis of values but of that shared by a whole society, and they wrote from the position of a strong and authoritative sense of their own purposeful identity.

More recently particularly among the American poets, like John Berryman and Robert Lowell there emerged poetry which appears less concerned to generalize its explorations and expressions of the poet’s own inner state. It is a kind of poetry, which M.L. Rosenthal has called “confessional”. Here the confessional needs to be explicated. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘confession’ would mean “to acknowledge that one has done wrong or make known one’s sins to a priest” (Hornby 177). But M. L. Rosenthal has defined ‘confessional’ in terms of literature when he wrote *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*. In literature it is “the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis that becomes a major theme” (Rosenthal 15). He used the term confessional to describe the intimate and immediately personal works of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton. He saw confessional poetry as the “culmination” of what he considered a continuing Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal self more and more at the center of the poem. The confessional poem brought “private humiliation, sufferings and psychological problem into the poems, usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself” (Rosenthal).

According to Raveendran, a confessional poet is “a writer of spontaneous emotional expression with a capacity to dominate over others in that mode becomes a significant personality influencing the rest. Hence, individual writers have definite places in the super personal development, that is the school” (Raveendran 119).

Confessional mode of writing has its origin in the mid-50s in America. Confessional poetry demands attention to Robert Lowell the strongest figure to emerge in the period. Confessional poetry as an

accepted and established form came into vogue with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959. The outpouring of human emotions which was hitherto considered objectionable acquired a new dignity. Lowell revolted against an early tendency to put up an impressive intellectual smoke screen, in their own individual manner, the sixties’ poets express their feelings of failure, guilt, disappointment, incestuous desire and experience in mental asylums, denying all taboos. Just as Browning probes into the mind and heart of his characters, so do the poets of the sixties try and fathom the complexity of the psyche. The admission of fear, guilt, neurosis and failure voiced in the poems, pertain to the poet’s own life and hence involves a lot of autobiography. Phillips is of the view that “whereas the poets of 1930’s and 1940’s consciously strove for universality through the invocation of mythological and psychological archetypes, the confessional poets of the 1970’s achieve the same through personalization – the self and family history” Philip Robert 16).

Confessional poetry has a hybrid mode of poetry that came into existence as a consequence of popularization of the psychological studies, the spread of the Freudian and the Jungian theories and the emergence of the feminist movement. A. Alvarez refers to such poetry as ‘extremist art’ that has more in common with psychoanalysis. He says that “if surrealists are concerned with the wit and whimsicality of the unconscious, extremist art is committed to a stage below this before the dream work, begins.” To such poets, “Freud becomes their God” and their goal is self-therapy of purgation (Alvarez 214).

Confessional movement of poetry means objective, analytical or even clinical observation of incident from one’s own life, whether tinged with comedy or irony, self-loathing or compassion. One thing that these writers have in common is the conception of the self as passive. Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experiences with the outer world as it is. Such struggle is evidence in the poems of Kamala Das from a very early stage. Her chief contribution to modern poetry is not only stunning frankness she betrays in every line she writes but also in making public a vast fund of agonies and informations regarding women’s psychic experiences that have laid hidden for ages, in the private female sector. She throws the unholy sanctum open and etches out all caustic detail in full public view. On that account, she has become unwittingly though a female Pope of the brave woman who can look to her with deference for inspiration, guidance and commitment. Kamala Das has faced frustration,

disillusionment and drabness that she has expressed through her poetry which is known as the confessional poetry of Kamala Das. This is what Pasupati Jha means when he says, “The poetry of Kamala Das is unconventionally bold and shockingly autobiographical where the confessional mode is fused with a feminist slant.”

Sylvia Plath suffered, like Kamala Das, a nervous breakdown almost at the same age that was due to an intense, nearly unbearable love for her adored father. But whereas Kamala Das could be cured, Sylvia Plath could not. One can establish a link between the two confessional poetesses with all their problems, psychological traumas, frustration and the resultant quest for identity arising from the revolt against male-dominated world and so on. Both indulge in self-awareness, self-exposure and self-introspection in order to define herself poetically. These confessional poets write poems that are candid, honest and down to earth. These poets give expression to their hidden thoughts and feelings that would normally not find expression in the social milieu. The emotions portrayed by them are true to their own feelings and their opinions and are born of sincere personal conviction. For these confessional artists, “the artistic problem is to make genuine poetry out of the language of untrammelled self-awareness” (Rosenthal and Shally 303).

The confessional mode becomes a device to formalize the process of analysis and adjustment of the problem that crops up from poets’ own cultural milieu. Plath who, like Kamala Das, felt herself surrounded by the violence of everyday life, communicated these feelings with a startling clarity. In confessional poetry of Plath there lies very small difference between the author and the persona. In her poetry subject and object, torturer and victim are finally undistinguishable. In her writing, the revealed and the repressed are allowed to speak at the same time. She, like other confessional poets, makes use of a persona to create interests. Thus, through the use of mask, one can tell the complete truth of one’s life. Like the Indian confessional poet named Kamala Das, Plath’s vital information in her verse is about the tragedy of her life. Similar to Kamala Das’ candid records, her (Plath’s) poetry is a sensitive record of life’s negative aspects.

‘The Applicant’, a poem by Plath, is explicitly a portrait of marriage in a fully ironic way. ‘The Applicant’ suggests a close connection between the capitalist economic system, the patriarchal family, and the general depersonalization of human relationship. However with this system got started, both men and women are implicated in its

perpetuation. In this poem, Plath sees herself and her imagined persona not merely as a victim caught in this situation, but in some sense culpable as well. The poem begins with an image of depersonalization:

*“First, are you our sort of person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace as a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch” (Mecbeth George 303).*

We are already so involved in a sterile and machine-dominated culture that we are likely part artifact and sterile ourselves. The definition of the woman shows her be even more alienated and dehumanized. The woman is portrayed as the mechanical doll. Woman does not exist before the marriage and dissolves back into nothingness after it,

*“But in twenty five years she’ll be silver,  
In fifty gold  
A living doll, every where you look,  
It can sew, it can cook.  
It can talk, talk, talk. (Mecbeth George )*

In this poem, Plath describes the emptiness which characterizes the applicants and which is variant on the roboticized activity.

Parallel to Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das also develops the confessional mode of poetry. Her dissatisfaction in marriage and life has sharpened her consciousness, and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium, because many unpalatable things can be said in this medium without incurring the wrath of the powerful person. A desperate obsession with love is one prominent feature of Kamala Das’ poetry. The wounded self, which has to struggle hard to achieve its own identity, is the principal theme that runs through her poetry. The alienated self of Das engages in a hectic search for genuine love. Loveless poems are elegies on the death of love, against which even a marriage, often drab and banal to the persona, is no insurance. Humiliated at the boarding school by the Britishers and at home by a brutal husband, she becomes a psycho-pathological dwarf:

*“Cowering beneath your monstrous ego,  
I ate the magic loaf and  
Become a dwarf” (Mecbeth George).*

*My story* reveals Kamala Das’ inward journey—her search for identity. Her offended feminine self goes on some emotional wanderings attempting to explore identity and freedom. This book optimizes her bitterness about the sexual politics of female submissiveness and her attempts as a modern Indian

woman to free herself sexually and domestically from the role of bondage sanctioned by the society. Pain being the central and all-pervading symbol to her existence, Kamala Das makes use of poetry as redemptive and as a metaphor of relief in order to transcend the aches of her lonely soul. She confesses at the core of her heart that:-

*I also know that by confessing  
by peeling off my layers  
I reach closer to the soul  
And  
to the bone's  
supreme indifferences (Mecbeth George)*

All her compositions are an outpouring of her own loneliness disillusionment and sense of frustration. As she want to striptease the layers of her mind at full length. In 'My Story' she acclaims:

*"I let my mind striptease.  
I must extrude my autobiography" (Mecbeth George)*

The poet is obsessed with soul and seeks to obliterate body. Man's total insensitivity to the female sentiments and emotions manifests itself in his almost necrophilic enjoyment of the female body. Indeed to a man a woman can be lovely even without an iota of feelings or emotions as suggested by the oxymoron "cold loveliness". In the human world, by contrast, particularly in the institution of marriage, lust is often passed off and the woman is invariably made a victim of sexual politics leading to profound anguish when love becomes blackmailing. She accurately confesses in the poem 'The Suicide':

*"Life is quite simple now  
Love, blackmail and sorrow" (Ted Hughes 155)*

It is triggered off by a gnawing sense of loss coupled with the anguished realization that love is nothing but blackmail and sorrow. It could be the loss of speaker's identity disfigured by the mechanical role-playing. When the light of love is put out, an encircling gloom pervades the mind. This happens usually with a sharp, sensitive person like Kamala Das. Lyrics, thus, are a psychic striptease of a woman poet who is denied the emotional involvement which she hungers after. The sense of nothingness of man-woman relationship pervades the poem substitute:

*What is  
The use, what is the bloody use? (Ted Hughes)*

In this regard Das' closest parallel is found in Plath. It is evident that the core of Plath's poetic experience is personal experience, but for her the creation of art

necessitates control and manipulation by the informed and intelligent mind. This is, of course, what she characterizes as 'cries' from the heart. The sense of failure leads to an alienation of the poet from the rest of the world. The rift between the poet and the world seems to be such as cannot be bridged by any human being. In 'The Bell Jar' which is also a part of Plath's tragedy, Esther Greenwood is a girl who comes increasingly to feel herself alienated from the moments of her most personal experiences. She feels disassociated not only from around her but also from herself. In the 'Suicide of Egg Rock', the woman is fed up of life:

*"Everything glittered like blank paper" (Ted Hughes 231)*

It seems too neat to be coincidence that Plath should begin drafting poems that responds so immediately to the breakup of her marriage with Ted Hughes on the reverse of the chapter that marks Esther Greenwood's discovery of Buddy Williard's deception. Plath's truest voice is the most painful, the one closest to the nerve.

'Fever 103<sup>0</sup>', dramatically illustrate the individual's urgent drive towards liberation and the self-definition. The main theme is that the purified self-arises from the imprisonment of the history. The woman of 'Fever 103<sup>0</sup>' tries to duplicate Christ's ascension voice into the experience of the poem, the first half is concerned with establishing an inclusive historical milieu against which the persona will transfigure. This milieu is the reality of man's sinfulness which permeates history. The second half begins with a direct reference to the speaker's condition, one of illness. Like Christ, the speaker is transfigured/purified:

*"I am too pure for you or anyone  
Your body  
Hurts me as the world hurts God" (Ted Hughes 155).*

Describing herself as "pure acetylene" she has transfigured from her physical body into pure spirit. As the speaker abandons her lover, such is the ironic tone towards that Plath used in the fully candid manner searching for the self. Beware of her ranging emotions and violent impulses, she uses creative writing as a means of containment.

If the human mind once tempered with it will askew like the 'idiot bird'. Such is the case with the young American poet Sylvia Plath. Recovering from the disease becomes the themes of most alienated past for the confessional poet like Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. In 'Tulips' written by Sylvia Plath, the protagonist is laid up on a hospital bed. The desire to

be left alone is so intense and the tempered mind is so crucial that object like flowers and photographs become unwelcome. In that white, dead world intruders come in the form of red tulips sent to the patient. Thus the lyric explains the patient's alienation or frustration beautifully:

*"Their redness talks to my wound.  
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and  
their colour  
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck"*  
(Richard Ellmann 1038)

The flowers also watch her and eat her oxygen. In her anxiety, she equates the tulips with the red blooms of heart which insist on beating despite her desire for death.

'Morning Song' the first poem in *Ariel* is a good example of the way autobiography can become art. The deep sense of personal disappointment at having to cut short the vacation sours her imagination and makes her view everything distastefully. The poem implies that having a baby cannot be more than winding a fat gold watch. The new world of motherhood is a frozen one where breath is ephemeral as the life of a moth. The speaker's dawn is not of love but one of dimly felt anxiety. The arrival of the baby is utterly puzzling to mother. The poet's angst transforms the baby into a

*"New statue  
In a drafty museum"* (Sylvia Plath).

The speaker is at a loss to understand her relationship to this new object (baby). If her infant is merely a mechanical thing, it is ultimately because she is one also.

Confessional poetry is further marked by the sexual candour, frankness and about family life, confessional of private humiliation of varying pathological degrees and kinds, proliferating image of failure, in short by a literal exposure. The ferocious intensity of the passion, the boiling cauldron of heated emotions which Das and Sylvia Plath articulate in their poetry stirs deep chords in the reader's mind. Unlike other poet, they give the reader a sense of inclusion and do not keep their privacy. Their poetry therefore, with some justification may be called "Confessional". Both writers tussle with love, sex, lust, deprivation, unfulfilment and separation. In resorting to open self-criticism, in peeling of the layers of pretense, and in adopting a clipped historical edged tone of objectivity while articulating subjective reality, these confessional poets attempt an authentic reconstruction and transcendence of the fragmented self. In their struggle for an enduring insight, these poets constantly assert the validity of the feeling personality

which seems threatened and victimized. The private life of the two poets, especially under stress of psychological crisis, therefore becomes a major theme.

Kamala Das is shocked by the un-fulfillment of her desire for spiritual love. The inner crisis of her reality is brought about by the crucial facts and artifacts of social reality. The survival of personality is caught in the flux of desire, frustration and insecurity on the one hand, social fear, hypocrisy and injustice on the part of male partner on the other. The psychological spiritual dimension of love is a significant aspect of Kamala Das' poetry which is full of the emotions of anxiety, frustration, hollowness and chaos. Under the subjugation of carnal love, she does not want to loose her own identity and realize that spiritual/pure love is an opportunity for the development of personality. Like shadow upon shadow, her vague awakening for spiritual love falls criss-cross and gets crucified in the violence of sex. Bearing the brunt of the volcano of sexual humiliation on the part of the poet is the central theme for confessional poets. The resultant sense of annihilation of soul projects itself through the persistent tendency of the poetic consciousness to associate death and rottenness with the life of sex. She responds to the act of sex:

*what is  
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?* (Das  
Kamala 22)

Plath's "Pursuit" in the similar manner reveals the marauder or savage like nature of the man. The man is compared with the panther chasing the narrator with high speed. The pursuer is infinitely supreme and steadfast in his chase. This poem employs sexual imagery to suggest the consummation that is imminent and in that sense it invites comparison with "The Maggot" written by Kamala Das:

*"Charred and ravened woman lie  
Become his starving body's bait"* (Das  
Kamala 28).

Thus men are characterized as fierce and savage creatures whose very savagery is appealing to women. The marauding nature of man is also presented in the 'Queen's Complaint' in which

*"He made her shoulders bare  
And selected her, but quit her at cock's  
crowing"* (Hughes Ted 247).

The woman of Plath's poetry is imaginative, self-willed and rebellious. The man, physical and rapacious, is sought for his sexual power is evident in the above-cited examples. Because of this temperamental disagreement the ties of love are

uncertain and tenuous. The emotion of love, as celebrated in Romantic literature, finds no place in the poetry of Plath.

The suppressed, endless feminine hungers of a Nair girl find an outlet through Das' poems. She shows her genuine struggle to dig out her roots like Sylvia Plath on expressing the experience of her futility. She lays bare hesitation, failure, ignorance, shame and feeling of guilt. She succeeds in projecting, with brutal honesty, the feeling of her agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust, physical rotting and sickness, inhuman bitterness and ultimate futility. The repeated articulation of frantic and unabashed sexual love and frustration and incompatibility with her male lover may be partly responsible for her feeling of loneliness and isolation. She intends to escape from the prison into a new world of love and declares:

*“As the convict studies  
His prison's geography  
I study the trappings  
of your body, dear love,  
For I must someday find  
An escape from its snare (Das Kamala)*

She aspires for the freedom of a bird. Her language is fully under control. But Sylvia Plath steps further to her tone of male domination and her tone is outrageous:

*“Out of the ash  
I rise with red hair  
And I eat men like air” (Hughes Ted 247).*

Like the Lowellian *Life Studies*, Das' poems, which tend at times to sound like a long bill of complaints in a chancery, too, centre round a study of her life largely confined as it were to the various stages of development in her journey a sublimation of carnal love. And the emotions of love, as celebrated in Romantic literature, find no place in the poetry of Plath and Kamala Das.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alvarez A, *Sylvia Plath, A Memoir “The Savage God”* (London: Weidfeld and Nicalson Press, 1971), 214.
- [2] Das Kamala, *the Descendant* 22.
- [3] Ellmann Richard, *the New Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 1038.
- [4] Hornby A. S., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 177.
- [5] Hughes Ted, ed., *Sylvia Plath's Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 155.
- [6] John Auriely, *the American Moments* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 64.
- [7] King, P. R. 'Dying is An Art', *Nine Contemporary Poets* (Oxford University Press, 1979) 153.
- [8] Phillip Robert, *the Confessional Poets* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1973) 16.
- [9] Meabeth Gorge; *Poetry 1900 to 1975* (Longman with Faber and Faber 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. 1985) 303.
- [10] Raveendran N. V., *The Aesthetics of sensuality: A Study of the poetry of Kamala Das* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publisher, 2000) 119
- [11] Rosenthal M. L; *The New poets: American and British Poetry since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).
- [12] Rosenthal M. L. and Shally M. Gall, *the Modern poetic sequence: The Genesis of Modern Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 303.