

Redefining “I” (Analysing the themes of death, disease, decay and despair in the poems of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das)

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Abstract: Pain oozed out of their words. It was not ink with which they wrote but blood, their own blood. They were deprived of hopes and dreams in a man’s world. Forced to stay apart, they decided not to spend their time for tears but words. Powerful words rolled down their cheeks giving birth to lines which carried meanings boundless. Such were the poems written by Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. They were frank enough to reveal their self as it is, unwilling to cover up their emotions and feelings which were a taboo in a male controlled-male dominated society. Confessional poetry always redefined the poet’s identity and self. The trend that began with Robert Lowell has travelled afar and has found innumerable ideas through many poets. The expression of the poets were never hesitant or different, but were shockingly frank and unique. They revealed through their poems the dark and dusty nooks and corners of their self. They died and were reborn at the same time. They cursed and blessed the world around. They burst into tears and laughed hysterically at the same time. The paper is trying to focus on the portrayal of themes like death, disease, decay and despair in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das.

Keywords: Confessional poetry, Death, Disease, Decay, Despair

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I. INTRODUCTION

A very intense breakthrough into a serious personal emotional experience which is generally a taboo is the hallmark of confessional poetry. The term ‘confessional’ was first used to describe the poems written by the American poet Robert Lowell in his *Life Studies* published in the year 1959. A confessional poet usually gives the psychological equivalents for his or her mental state through poetry. A controversial or very serious issue is discussed sincerely and subjectively through these poems. There is an element of openness between the poet and the reader. In his *The New Poets* (1967), M. L. Rosenthal rightly points out, “the best confessional poetry is that which rises above the subject matter to achieve a kind of victory over pain and defeat, poems which are glosses on the triumph of life” (Rosenthal 68). In confessional poetry there is an attempt to redefine one’s identity in a man-made world. Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das’ poems recall the nostalgic memories of childhood, rebel against the male dominated society and show their frustration in married life. A shadow of death, disease, decay and despair linger in their poems. So, the paper is thus trying to focus on the use and presentation of the themes of death, disease, decay and despair in the poems of Sylvia Plath (1932- 1963) and Kamala Das (1934- 2009).

An all pervading feeling of loneliness and incompleteness is present in the poetry of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. The poetry of both the poets shows concern for disease, sickness, death and decay. The burden of convention-ridden life and domesticity, dull routine, loveless sexual bouts, non-fulfilment of love and subsequent frustrations and disillusionments cast a melancholy shadow over their poetry and make them think about death and decay. To Plath, death is not a compulsive ending but a beginning of a new life, resurrection. Through her poems, with the help of striking imagery, she presents the cycle of life and death. The transformation of death into life is constituted of three degree- entry of darkness, ritual death and rebirth. Majority of her poems use this three- part structure to dramatic rebirth through death. Quite often, Sylvia Plath draws a parallel between darkness and mother’s womb, trying to show that darkness is the condition which existed before the light of consciousness awakened in the child.

The journey of the poet’s self into darkness and the origin of life can be interpreted in two ways: the darkness through which the poet journeys may be symbolic of her own death and the darkness will help the poet to live through a life, imbued with greater vividness and intensity. These two alternatives constitute the dynamic basis for Plath’s poetry just as a man has to continually struggle against death in his actual life, similarly the poetry of Sylvia Plath presents this struggle for existence in a more dramatic manner. Sylvia Plath’s poem dramatizes the eternal struggle between life and death with the help of striking imagery using people, trees,

houses, colours, and animals as their representatives. These representatives of life and death exert a powerful control over the actions and desires, present and future of the self. She used her own personal experiences as a basis for the conflict between these agents of life and death but the aim is to focus the attention of the readers on the conflict between the universal forces of creation and destruction, life and death.

Kamala Das also shared some of the qualities of Sylvia Plath, like her suicidal tendencies. In Kamala Das' "The Suicide" she writes, "O sea, I am fed up/ I want to be simple/ I want to be loved/ and/ If love is to be had/ I want to be dead, just dead" (50- 54). While Sylvia Plath writes in "Lady Lazarus", "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else,/I do it exceptionally well"(43-45). "Lady Lazarus" is an exemplary confessional poem where personal experience is related to the larger historical unease of Nazi concentration camps and death. The Biblical Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus and that image provides the underlying metaphor of the poem and allows the play on ideas of life, death and resurrection. Kamala Das' poem "The Sorcerers and Exorcists of Kattumadam" tells us that at the age of nineteen, she suffered a nervous breakdown as a 'neglected wife'. A stay with her loved grandmother in Malabar could cure her. For a different reason Sylvia Plath also had suffered a similar nervous breakdown almost at the same age due to her intense love for her adored father. But whereas Kamala Das could be cured, Sylvia Plath could not be. Sylvia Plath committed suicide at the young age of thirty. Sylvia Plath lost her father when she was eight year old. In her poem "Daddy" she says: "I was ten when they buried you/ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back to you" (57- 59). She tried to commit suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills when she was twenty.

There are similar traits in the poetry of Kamala Das too. In her poem, "The Sunshine Cat" the poetess shows how she pined away in secret grief, became lean and thin, merely a shadow of her former self. Her youth and beauty declined, she was no longer of any use to men. Kamala Das' "The Invitation" contains death wish. Melancholy, nostalgia and death-wish pervade the entire poem. It is a dialogue between the poetess and the sea. The sea seems to be inviting her into its cool and soothing water. The sea is an image of death, cool and peaceful death as compared to the death feeling of "lying on a funeral pyre/ with a burning head," given by the ruthless lover.

Kamala Das' last volume, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, is mainly concerned with disease, sickness and death. "After the Illness" written after her recovery from a serious illness is concerned with the theme of ageing and decay.

There was

Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger, the blood had
Wakened too much to lust, and the skin, without health's
Anointment, was numb and unyearning.

The following lines from "The Testing of Sirens" reveal Das' intense feeling of loneliness and disillusionment.

Shut my eyes, but inside eye-lids, there was
No more night, no more love or peace, only
The white sun burning, burning, burning
Ah, Why does love come to me like pain
Again and again and again"

In "Gino" Kamala Das envisions sepulchral journey on the hospital trolley.

I dream of obscene hands.

Striding up my limbs and of morgues where the nightlights
Glow on faces shattered by the soul's exit. And
Of wardboys sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors
To the X-ray room's dark interior.

In Kamala Das' "The Looking Glass" she shows how a woman's body whose emotional fulfilment is denied prematurely grows old.

The edge referred to in Sylvia Plath's "Edge" perhaps is the brink of nervous breakdown or suicide. This poem manages to be both morbid and serene at the same time. It gives a new energy to the familiar nineteenth century cliché of the beauty of a dead woman's body. The last image in the poem seems to be presenting the moon as an old woman a rustling skirt of darkness. Plath's "Tulips" is the monologue of a female patient, the persona of the poet, convalescing after a surgery. In it the patient speaks of her face to face meeting with death. Her poetic persona finds that her desire for death is overcome by her desire for life. The metaphorical transformation is placed by her in a watery space. The dive of the persona into the world of death is the key characteristic of all the main poems of Sylvia Plath. The change of the conscious self of the patient is presented thus, "I have given my name and my day- clothes up to the nurses,/ And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons" (8 – 9).

In the first five stanzas the poet emphasizes the patient's desire for death and lead to the vision of death, and the tulips with their mouths shut like a communion tablet, in great freedom and peace symbolize the force and fascination for death. But when the patient continues to see the tulips they disturb and agitate her. She

realises how full of vitality they are. In "Tulips", the patient conceives of death as a return to womb. In the little poem of her second book, one could see how the exhilaration of swift movement on horseback suggests every other kind of ecstatic movement and life awareness. The mood suddenly becomes a desolate realisation of the plunge into death that is going on:

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas,
The child's cry
Melts in the wall
And I
Am the arrow
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Plath)

In "Edge" suicide is explicit. Death is seen as satisfying. The finality of her situation is comparable to that of a Greek Tragedy. The scrolls of her death robe and the scrolls of her poetry are artistically united. In her final poem Plath's art becomes equated with her life as well as her death. Sylvia Plath had an insatiable thirst for being reborn, and the only trouble is, she must die first. She imagines herself to be a female counterpart of the Biblical Lazarus in "Lady Lazarus". She opens her innermost heart when she says, "I am only thirty/ And I like the cat I have nine times to die" (20-22). By the term "strip tease" which is seen very often used by Kamala Das, the personal impulse to death is interpreted as an obscure desire to be sensational. Sylvia Plath feels that even dying is an art. Towards the end of the poem, 'a Herr Doktor', her enemy is introduced to the reader. He is defined as the doctor attending the concentration camp. Symbolically, doctor in the poem is death.

Sylvia Plath's "Man in Black", which contains the death motif, central to all her poetry, is essentially a landscape. The death surrounds him, the lifeless body makes the landscape around him too lifeless. And everywhere there is the stillness of death. In Plath's "Totem", she confronts the greatest of fears, the fear of death. She accepts death and the fear of death which is elevated to a level of tragic dignity. Death in the poem is nature's "gross eating game". It is a cosmic phenomenon into whose ambit the whole world comes. Plath's "Fever 103" strikes the reader as an incoherent and unrelated talk under fever and delirium. The speaker in the poem has been in bed with her lover. She rejects the flame of passions and like Christ in the underworld before his ascension to heaven, she lives on water alone for three days for the purgation of her sin. She transcends death by assuming an airy insubstantial form and ascends to Paradise. In "Edge" too the woman welcomes death. The poem is impassive in tone and purged of all fury of fearful existence.

Kamala Das' poem, "The Blood" is full of nostalgia. She remembers her old house and her grandmother who is now dead. She is also preoccupied with the thoughts of death and decay.

A night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death
The noise of rafters creating
And the window's whine
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness.

Kamala Das' poetry is a record of her own experiences and observations, her own unfulfilled love and her own sexual exploitation, frustration and disillusionment that she had to suffer in a male dominated society. She creates a world which is emotionally sterile and unproductive, a world where outward ecstasy conceal inner vacuity. It is a world of dancing eunuchs who symbolise the suppressed desires within. In them the poetess finds an objective correlative for her own unfulfilled love longings. The dance of the eunuchs symbolises the dance of the sterile and therefore, the unfulfilled and insatiable love of the woman in the poet. The poetess reveals her own frustration and disillusionment in love through the dancing eunuchs. She always focuses her eye on the pathos of her own predicament.

.....Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy, they sing of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn....
Some beat their dreams: others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy (9 – 13)

She has deftly created a sterile, arid, dehumanized and exploitative world which is conspicuous by the sheer absence of love and the predominance of sexual exploitation of woman by man. She uses apt and suggestive images to visualise this world of "vacant ecstasy".

In poem after poem Kamala Das is preoccupied with love, sex and frustration. Married at an early age of sixteen, Das could not find the fulfilment of love in married life.

Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near-neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love, the lazy animal hungers for the flesh, hurt and humiliation are the warp and woof of her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures this personal world. (Daruwalla 113)

In the "Sea Shore" she bewails the loss of love in the male dominated world, "I see you go away from me/ And feel the loss of love I never once received". Another facet of love that Kamala Das expresses in her love poetry is dual relationship, that is, a strong sense of belonging to one and uniting with another. According to her, in her pursuit of realising love, a woman even though married runs from one man to another, something that she has brought out through her "The Testing of the Sirens", "I am happy just being with you. But you.. / You love another". In her pursuit for love, no male companion of her' gives her love. She thus feels disillusioned and frustrated.

In "Conflagration" lust is pictured with a brutal realism. A man who indulges in sheer loveless sex lets his wife goes astray. In her longing for love she goes from one man to the other but to her utter dismay and disappointment she finds all of them to be loveless sexual beasts. All men are cast in the image of her husband. In writing about marriage, Kamala Das does not justify adultery and infidelity but she justifies the search for an ideal relationship which gives love, satisfaction and security. She identifies extra-marital love with the mythical love of Radha and Krishna. She articulates a women's lifelong yearning for fulfilment through love.

Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath revealed their self in their poetry. They are highly subjective. The "I" in their poems is the real self of the poetess whose inner character emotions and feelings are explored and exposed by the poetess in a frank, direct manner. Both of them used their poetic umbra to shelter themselves from the agony they had to face in a male controlled- male dominated society. They through their poems revealed each and every dark nooks and corners of their self, therefore finding solace in them. For them poems were either confessions or an absolution, or both. Therefore the expressions of their use are never different or hesitant, but shockingly frank most of the times. Kamala Das unlike any other poets, dived deep into her desires and revealed those realities which were a taboo in an orthodox, custom-ridden, conservative society. Plath too through her poems was taking a different turn as a poet by binging in the personalities of a difficult daughter, a tortured woman, a violated wife and a misfit mother. Thus these frustrations came out through the four themes, death, disease, decay and despair in their poems.

II. WORKS CITED

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