

Confessional Poetry: Voice of Oppressed Women

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April 2015



BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Confessional Poetry: Voice of Oppressed Women

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English and Humanities

Of

BRAC University

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Bachelors of Arts in English

April 2015

Dedication

To

Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University

And

My Family.

Acknowledgement

My foremost thanks is to the Almighty for keeping me healthy throughout the period of this work and for giving me the ability to complete this work.

I am thankful to my supervisor Rukhsana Rahim Chowdhury. Without her support and encouragement I would not have been able to complete this paper. My sincere gratitude is for all the faculty members of the Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University. They inspired and guided me throughout the years of my Undergraduate program.

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Abstract

Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal. This genre is mainly focused on extreme moments of individuals, their private experience and psyche. Confessional poets' private experiences are revealed in their poetry. Confessional poetry is quite different from traditional poems. This genre breaks down the traditional definition of poetry and explores new poetic style where poets vent out their inner feelings and unspoken words through their writings. Confessional poetry is famous both for male and female poet but female poets theme; writing and style are different from male poets. For the female poets, confessional poetry is a medium where they can expose their psyche. Through this genre woman poets seek self-definition. Female confessional poets struggle to find connection between the name that was set for her by the society and the name that they want to give themselves. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two confessional poets belong to different country. Plath is an American confessional poet and Kamala Das is Indian poet. Though these two poets belong to different country, different society even their themes of poems are quite different but the tone of their poems is same. Their personal trauma, childhood suppression is vented out by their poetry. Both mental and physical sufferings can be seen in Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das's poems. Plath's poetry book *The Ariel* deals with her suffering for being a woman, this book also deals with mental sickness, the urge to find the "Self" of Plath. Then, Kamala Das's book *The Descendants* is more about her experience of love and lust. Many poems of this book are about her search for true love. Just like Sylvia Plath Kamala Das also portrays her sufferings for being a woman and her struggle to find self-

definition. Actually, by showing personal sufferings in their poems, these two poets depict the universal sufferings of womanhood. This two women's struggle is to find their identity and their "Self". Actually these two poets use this genre as a medium for their oppressed voice in a rebellious way. They project their emotion as well as represent the reality of the world through portraying their own experience.

Chapter I

Introduction

Poetry is a very old medium for expressing emotions in a rhythmic way. Different eras of literature have come up with different kinds of definition and patterns of poetry. Confessional poetry is one of the modern fields of poetry. Confessional poetry mainly flourished in the 20th century and the term “Confessional” was first coined by M.L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert Lowell’s work “Life Studies”. Robert Lowell was the first poet who wrote in this genre (Hoffman 687). Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg and John Berryman etc are some major confessional poets.

Though the term “Confessional writing” was first used in the 20th century but it was still being practiced earlier and was considered as autobiographical writing. Confessional writing is a subgenre of autobiographical writing. Autobiography is the subjective, retrospective work written about the life of the self, by the self and aims to connect the past life of the self to the present of that self. But the history of autobiography is a history of changing ideas about what may be meant by 'life' and 'self'. Such an example is the subjective, retrospective autobiography in Western literature of both women and men which defined life as 'Eternal Life' and the self as the 'Soul'. It was spiritual kind of writings. But, during the nineteenth and twentieth century this idea of autobiographical writing has changed (Oldfield 296). This era has come up with different idea.

Though autobiographical writing is based on a writer’s personal experience but it also represents an era, different issues and different ideas of that era. Confessional autobiography is

neither spiritual, nor intellectual, nor social, but emotional. The 'self' in such autobiographies is the heart. However, Confessional poetry can be defined as the poetry "of the personal". According to M.L. Rosenthal "In the confessional poems the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme" (Perloff 471). So, this genre is focused on extreme moments of the poets and their personal experiences. Then, the mode of this poetry arose from the 1960,s society of America. During this time, the sudden development made changes in all sectors of life which led cultural discontinuity in America. New generation avoided the old culture and lived a very carefree life. This type of sudden change created a distance between two generations. So, social lifestyle became collapsed due to this miscommunication and generation gap (Molesworth 163). In this situation, writers, sociologists found themselves alienated and isolated from the society. It created the mode of confessional poetry where the poets wrote about themselves and about their beautiful past.

Another important thing is that though confessional poetry is generally associated with male poets like Lowell, Berryman but many critics considered this genre as women's writing, they explored how this genre brings out issues of women's experience and gender identity (Glaser 26). Female confessional poets writing purpose is totally different from male poet. The purpose of male confessional poets' writings is move beyond their self- deprecation. M.L. Rosenthal states that the personal crisis of the male poet is a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis. So, to seek their self is not their key concern, their confessional poems reflect different kinds of social crisis such as: Slavery, war etc (Gilbert 444). In short they romanticize their own psyche in a conscious way. Robert Lowell intensely describes his mental sufferings in his writings. Though it shows his madness, personal crisis but there is a sense of control over his writings. His intellectual thought reflects even in his madness (Gilbert 445). On the other hand,

female confessional poets seek self-definition, their true identity through their poems. Confessional Poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton write poetry for defining their sufferings. It would be for discovering their 'selves' (Gilbert 445-446). This distinction between male and female poet is obvious because in the 20th century's American patriarchal society women had to maintain certain rules and regulation. Male writers were permitted to vent out their aggression but women writers were supposed to pretend to be calm. Women writers also had become the victim of a sexist society (Martin n.p). Many women writers as well as poets like Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das went against this feminine decorum and vented out their frustrations and sufferings through their writings.

However, there is a strong connection between women's confessional writings and feminism. The autobiography of a woman writer is the act of confession, a liberation, which reveals many political aspects through personal experience and dealing with social gender roles. Autobiographical writings make private knowledge into a public truth for women readers. Texts such as Kate Millett's *Flying* and Ann Oakley's *Taking it Like a Woman* are two examples which share a foregrounding of the relationship between a female author and a female reader (Blaha 44). The relationship between the author and the reader is also significant as well as crucial since it addresses a "we," a union and merging together. Autobiographical confession assumes a guarantee of the truthfulness in its depiction of life and the writer's inner feelings towards that life. It is the representation of experience that brings to light a common female identity. Confessional writing exemplifies the problems of the everyday life of the female, and distinguishes among those experiences which may be of stronger importance in relating to the women it reaches out to. The feminist confession tries to diminish the importance of the organization of experience done in the historical, more traditional narrative. Rita Felski simply

explains that "it self-consciously addresses a community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated general public". Language is such a thing that not only identifies male superiority but also produces it. Just like that feminist language and writing has vital role for altering an already existing male dominance. So it can be said that through the confessional writing the feminist writer actually tries to commune with her women readers (Blaha 47). By emphasizing the deeply personal aspects, experience of one's life, feminism connects these with the social and the nature of female oppression. So, feminist confessional writing is not only "self-awareness therapy", it is the representation of all oppressed voice (Blaha 49). Feminist confessional literature also shows how real a woman's power is when she expresses herself and shares her story.

Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two well-known confessional poets belonging to two different countries. Though their backgrounds were different but both of these poets used this genre for expressing their oppressed voice but in a rebellious way. They openly revealed their love, lust, hatred in their confessional poems. Plath's book of poems "*Ariel*" and Das's poetry book "*The Descendants*" show their thirst for seeking identity and true love. It also reflects their views towards the society. In short, these two books reflect the intense sufferings caused in the way of a search for or an exploration of the "Self" and "Psyche" of these two poets. In their work, they have also introduced themselves in a different way by writing about taboo subjects and openly discussing their private lives. Being women they exposed new kinds of emotional and psychological depths in their poems. So, their books can be seen from a feminist point of view. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das's volumes, "*Ariel*" and "*The Descendants*" portray different images of the universal sufferings of womanhood through exposing their oppressed voices.

Chapter 2

Sylvia Plath's struggle for Self-definition in *The Ariel*

Sylvia Plath is one of the most prominent and leading poets of 20th century's American literature. She is well-known as a confessional poet. Sylvia Plath was one of the first American women writers who refused to disguise her true emotions; her aggression, hostility, and despair in her art. She challenged the traditional literary prioritization of female experience (Martin n.p). Furthermore, Sylvia Plath was the student of another famous poet Robert Lowell and she got the inspiration of writing from him. Her husband Ted Hughes also inspired her. In Plath's lifetime she published one poetry book *The Colossus* and one novel *The Bell Jar*. After her death another well-known poetry book was published *The Ariel*. She also wrote many poems and journals. Through her writings she tried to explore her obsession with death, self and nature. Plath has an ambivalent attitude towards society that is reflected in her writings. According to the critic Annas, Plath's poetry is a response to the oppressive modern society and her dual consciousness of self as both subject and object. This poet exposes her nature of dual consciousness because the world she describes is a place created by men rather than women. Plath sees men as having the ultimate control on this earth which affects both men and women. (Annas n.p). However, Plath's bold writing style and her themes got the attention of literary critics especially feminist critics and scholars who liked to analyze them from different perspectives (Hamdan 16).

At very early age Sylvia Plath started to practice creative writings. Remarkably, she wrote short stories at school. "Heat", one of the early-written stories by Sylvia, was written when she was 16. In this story, protagonists are women, and the atmosphere reflects boredom and

depression. In another early poem, "The Attic View", the protagonist is a nameless woman whose presence in life goes as unnoticed as her death (qtd in Hamdan 24). So, Plath dealt with feminist issues, death, depression, etc. from the very outset of her writing career. This work also reflects Plath's lifeless childhood and her obsession with death. Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographic novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) and highly charged verse in *The Colossus* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965) have won widespread critical admiration and continue to attract scholarly analysis. "*The Collected Poems*", another collection of her poems published in 1981 was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1982. The themes of Plath's works are not something very romantic. Harsh reality, expression of frustration, a sense of despair, and the morbidity of death is found in her works. Though she is considered as a confessional poet but the projection of her personal lamentations, often reflect the universal reality of women. Plath's shocking verse reveals the psychological torment associated with the feelings of alienation, sense of failure and rejection (qtd in Hamdan 25). Sylvia Plath has introduced a new chapter to American Literature. By writing confessional poems she exposes herself and her life to the reader.

Since her confessional poetry directly or indirectly reveals her psyche, her personal life, it is important to analyze her autobiography. She is also well-known for her ambivalent quality. This quality dominated her personal life and is reflected in her works (Sharif 7). Throughout her life Sylvia Plath struggled for an identity that she wanted. Plath's own created identity for herself and the identity given by the family and society did not match. During her life time she craved to find her true-self and perhaps this is the reason of her ambivalent personality. During her childhood Plath got undivided love, affection and care of her parents and grandparents until the birth of her brother Warren. At first she could not accept this lack of attention from her parents. It was the first step towards her mental suffering. It increased more because of the sudden death

of her father. These two reasons made little Plath very insecure. According to Freud, “Sylvia Plath was a paranoid who suffer from a fixation in narcissism”. (qtd in Sharif 8). Narcissist patients always seek for a surrogate if they lose their dear ones. It is exactly what happened with Sylvia Plath. After her father’s death she looked for a person in whom she could find her father’s quality. She compared every man she met, with her father. As every person has a unique quality, Plath could not reach her expectation throughout her life and this made her frustrated. This failure also developed a bitter feeling towards her father (Sharif 8). On the other hand, Plath was a very talented student from her childhood. She used to acquire the top position in every subject. The habit of succeeding in everything made Plath an over-ambitious person. As a result she could not bear the idea of rejection. Sylvia Plath first attempted to commit suicide when she was rejected from a creative writing class from Harvard (Sharif 7). So, Plath’s childhood obsession was somehow responsible for her personality syndrome. From childhood this poet faced isolation.

Sylvia Plath also was the victim of a sexist society (Martin n.p). At the age of twenty five, Plath got married with Ted Hughes. In 1950, the scenario of America was much in favour of family life, marriage and children. For women looking after their child and family was considered to be their prime duty. Being a woman, Plath perfectly fulfilled her role as a mother, as a writer and as a wife. Plath described herself a triple –treat woman (Martin n.p.). But, it was very difficult for her to cope with domestic life and a demanding career. She could feel the dominance of the patriarchal society where only women had to perform different roles within their homes. The conflict between domestic life and her artistic interest made her depressed. (Martin n.p). This led to her facing great personal humiliation and despair when she got to know that her husband Ted had an extra marital affair. Ted was a person in Plath’s life who always

encouraged her writings. This sudden shock made her sick. She suffered from psychological disorder. In one journal she states “Living apart from Ted is wonderful- I am no longer in his shadow, and it is heaven to be liked for myself alone, knowing what I want” (Sharif 11). At the age of thirty Plath finally rejected her painful life and committed suicide.

Plath’s entire life is a story of suffering and pain. Her suffering was acute because she could not take things easily. She could not bear anything that affected her identity or her freedom. She portrays all her pain and frustration in her writings. Sylvia Plath’s poems not only reflect the outer reality of her life but also project her inner reality (Dobbs n.p).

As mentioned above *The Ariel* is Plath’s one of the major poetry books. Her collection *Ariel* was published after her death in 1965. Originally edited and compiled by Hughes, a new version of *The Ariel* was also released in 2004 that restores Plath’s original order and the twelve poems missing from the first version. Her late poetry, collected in *Ariel*, includes some of the best-known contemporary poems in the English language, including “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” “Ariel,” and the opening poem of the collection “Morning Song.” Plath’s work in *The Ariel* is intensely personal. The speaker of this book sees herself trapped between her self- definition and the expectations of others. Society’s nature, rules and regulations do not match with the poet’s thought. *The Ariel* has often centered on Plath’s most shocking images. In the Foreword to the US edition of *Ariel* Robert Lowell says, “Everything in these poems are personal, confessional and felt. It also portrays the acute sense of depersonalization and fragmentation of 1950s America for women.” (Annas n.p). Though this book is focused on many feminist issues but it is considered as Plath’s confessional poetry book because here Plath writes about feminist issues through the lens of her own experience. In *The Ariel* almost in every poem Sylvia Plath confesses her sufferings, her quest for individual identity, etc. Her outlook towards every aspect

of life is ambivalent. She was a married woman with a child. In the beginning of her marriage, she claims that it is an important part to be a complete human being (Sharif n.p). But, despite being a married woman she considered 'marriage' as a curse for any woman. She once said,

“So, I began to think that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.”

(qtd in Sharif n.p)

So, she considers married life and having children as a kind of slavery in the male society. Plath is such a woman who cannot confine herself to a certain duty. In her time women had to consider their prime duty was to be a good housewife and mother, but it was very tough for Plath to cope up because she wanted to lead an independent life, she did not want to become a slave to patriarchal society (Sharif n.p). This was the reason behind her ambivalent thought towards the different aspects of life that made her frustrated. Sylvia Plath vent out her sufferings and frustration in her confessional writings. In the poem “The Applicant”, she satirizes the concept of marriage. Marriage, the holiest institution on earth as considered by many religions, is denounced by Plath. At the very beginning of this poem she shows the image of dehumanization. People's thought are described as crippled. The applicant is physically scanned and judged before being taken in for a wife. She is checked if she has any "rubber breasts" or "crotch". Then, in the second stanza the poet describes the emptiness of the applicant. In the third stanza the man is introduced as alive as the hollow man and the woman as a mechanical doll. Throughout the poem, Sylvia Plath shows how a woman has to face lots of humiliation in the marriage market.

“Will you marry it?

It is guaranteed.”

The woman is referred to as “it”, as if she is an object. People ask the man whether he wants purchases this commodity or not.

I notice you are stark naked.

How about this suit----

In these lines the suit of the man symbolizes the identity of the groom. At first both the man and woman do not have any individuality but the man’s black suit gives him form and a role in a bureaucratic society. On the other hand, only the institution of marriage gives women an identity. Woman is considered as naked like a paper. Plath writes-

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,

In fifty, gold.

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk , talk.

So, only household work can give women’s identity. Men need black suits for looking perfect and women need to do the household works for becoming perfect. Here she considers marriage as an artificial thing (Annas n.p). In this poem Plath shows the stereotypical views of the 60’s towards marriage where women do not have any voice, any identity. It also conveys Plath’s alienation from such a world, her struggles for finding new alternatives for the future and her effort to survive just like the paper doll woman (Annas n.p).

Sylvia Plath's hidden desire for a rebirth and a sense of hatred towards the society is shown in her poem, "The Munich Mannequins". This poem portrays the images of winter. Plath's poems often symbolize the time of winter as a time of rest preceding rebirth. In this poem by showing the flow of months and seasons she tries to show continual dying and rebirth of a woman. In Munich, winter is shown in a more ominous way which suggests death rather than hibernation. Here, the world of city actually symbolizes the male dominated social world.

"Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.

Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb."

In the opening line, cold is associated with perfection and infertility. This poem follows male quest for perfection to its logical end. Here Mannequins are contrasted with the real woman though the real one is not static but complicated. In Munich, the artificial has somehow triumphed. Women have become mannequins (Annas n.p). However, in this poem Plath shows such a society where there is a need for women to be perfected as if they were mannequins. Critic Annas argues that Plath describes a place that is created by men and they have the control of all forces. Men want to see women like puppets. Plath sees the male society as the ultimate culprit responsible for the harsh reality of women and this makes the poet feel alienated from the society. These two poems not only show the reality of women but also represent the suffering of Plath being a woman. By focusing on the feminist issues she shows the real position of women in her time.

The poem "Lady Lazarus" shows Plath's obsession with death and struggle to find her true-self. In this poem the speaker who is actually the poet talks about her attempt to commit suicide.

“I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it——“

These simple lines prove Plath’s fascination with death. Death is a common practice for her. She tried many times to commit suicide. In this poem she states that, “*Dying is an art*”. However, her ambivalence towards life and death and her yearning for seeking an identity is hidden in this bold poem (Sharif n.p). In the fourth stanza Plath says-

“Peel off the napkin

O my enemy.

Do I terrify?——“

Here, she tells someone to peel off the napkin and asks if her identity terrifies him? The “napkin” symbolizes a mask that is covering Plath’s true self. She desperately wants someone to peel off the mask and see her real self. She is actually searching for a self-definition. Attempting suicide reflects Plath’s intense struggle for finding her true self. She wishes to be born in some new present but again discovers the same thing, the same face (Annas n.p). She says,

“Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face, the same brute

Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’ “

Plath's obsession with death is also evident in "Cut". Plath had written this poem around the same time when she wrote "Lady Lazarus" and both the poems indicate her fascination towards death. In this poem the speaker cuts her thumb while chopping the onion. She has become mesmerized with the blood flowing from her thumb.

"What a thrill ----
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge"

The speaker considers this experience as a thrill. She finds it something exciting and interesting. The poet gives a very naturalistic detail of this minor accident. Then, she also admits that she is ill.

"O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill
The thin
Papery feeling."

Here, paper stands for Plath's self image. In her many post *Colossus* poems she uses this symbol. Paper symbolizes something that is less real than the thing itself. The papery feeling juxtapose her emotional dissociation from the wound to the horrific detail of the cut. It shows the sense of separation from self to self. Wound, blood does not affect her emotionally, for her it is a very artificial feeling. In this context it is significant that one would take a pill to kill a feeling of

depersonalization (Annas n.p). So, it can be said that the poet's illness has made her obsessed towards death that is evident in this poem.

The themes of Plath's poems in *Ariel* are concerned with sufferings, sickness, torture, death. Plath's poems are related to her experiences as a poet and who is also a woman. Feminist critic Suzanne Juhasz sees Sylvia Plath as a victim. She says that Plath suffered as a woman artist who needs to reconcile her two roles, woman and poet. This critic feels that Plath struggled in her poetry that shows her conflict between her two selves. Paula Bennett adds that her conflict was between the needs of her own self and the requirements of the genre. This internal conflict destroyed her and forced her to commit suicide (Margret 658). Plath's conflict between her own artistic life and social life made her frustrated and ambivalent. Her ambivalent attitude is evident in her *Ariel* poems like *Tulip*, *Daddy*, *Morning Song*, and *The Night Dances*. Plath's ambivalent mind depicts in "Daddy". This poem shows that the poet suffers from Electra complex even Plath admits that "Daddy is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex" (qtd in Shariff 8). This poem shows an incestuous relation between the father and the daughter. In the beginning Plath addresses her father like God. Her ambivalence is portrayed after some stanza where speaker's loving father turns into devil for her. She compares her father with the Nazis, vampire, devil etc even she directly claims in this poem that she wants to kill her father for relieving herself. Sylvia Plath's complexity as a mother and her ambivalence towards her children is portrayed in "Morning song", "Tulips" and "The Night Dances". In "Morning song" Plath tells her experience being a mother. This poem starts with the excitement and fondness for the newborn baby. "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" this line shows the poet's love for her new born baby. In the second stanza the speaker changes her tone and tells her baby "new statue". Statue is not kept in a home but it is preserved in the museum. Comparing her child with the statue, Plath

creates a distance between their relationships. She also expresses the bitter-sweet experience with her child. In the third stanza Plath tells-

“I’m no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind’s hand.”

Just like a cloud produces rain, a mother gives birth to the baby. Rain takes a shape of a lake but the wind drives the cloud far from the lake. Plath also knows that her baby will resemble her but one day a baby has to go far away from her mother (Shariff 13). A mother who willingly compromises her life style for the sake of her child, one day this child will make own world and will go away far from the mother. Perhaps Plath could not take this fact easily and this realization made her ambivalent towards her children. Again, in “Tulips,” she expresses love-hatred feeling toward her family. This poem is one of the popular poems of Plath. Ted Hughes says she wrote it after being hospitalized for an appendectomy in 1961 (Dobbs n.p). After returning from hospital she shares her feeling in this poem. In the beginning the speaker talks about her experience in the hospital then she expresses her feeling when she returned to her home. She says-

“Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage——
 My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
 My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
 Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks”.

The tone of these lines shows that the poet is not happy for coming back to her home. Home making, taking care of the husband and children seems to be burden rather than an enjoyment for Plath (Shariff 13). Here, tulip symbolizes Plath's children and these tulips are "like an awful baby". She says "they eat my oxygen".

"I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free——"

Here, Plath wants to reject the tulips since she wants to escape from this suffocated life (Dobbs n.p). She wants freedom and wants to reject all the trappings of her life. A woman's urge for freedom is beautifully presented in this poem. It is also shown Plath's conflict between her family life that she had to lead and her own independent life that she wanted to lead.

As mentioned above that in the light of her own experience Sylvia Plath talks about the affliction of women in the male society. Though she is considered as a confessional poet but the feminist issues she writes on cannot be overlooked. In this book almost every poems reflect the difficulties that women had to face in the patriarchal society. Urge for self-definition in *Ariel* represents the urge for freedom of all women in 1950s. Mari Jo Buhle's definition of feminism exposes the close relation between feminist writing and Plath's work. She says-

"Feminism swings between *difference*, it emphasis on the qualities that distinguish
"woman" from" man" and determine the distinctive roles, rights and identities of each; and
equality, meaning a claim to autonomy and justice based on the common humanity of men and
women" (qtd in Blaha 21)

Plath's had feminist ardent within herself. Her intention to be "different" and to be "equal" can be shown in her poems because openly exposing a woman's life to others was not acceptable in

Plath's time. Women supposed to do all household works and permitted to writing for children but Plath went against this view and tried to do something different (Blaha 21). She wanted to free herself from the ill male society through her writing (Blaha 22). Moreover, she set an example of a rebellious and intelligent female voice in a male society; she didn't surrender the same way that the others did being confined within a boundary. By using the medium of writing she raised her voice.

Then, just like Sylvia Plath many feminist writers tried to commit suicide. Critic Deborah Gentry comments on this in his writing "The art of dying: suicide in the works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath". She says-

"All of these women characters are driven forward by their desire for autonomy toward a wall of restraints and oppression designed by society to hold women in. In the end these characters would make any sacrifice to get to the other side" (qtd in Meneses 12)

Feminist writer like Kate Chopin, Sylvia Plath tried to rebel against the society's restrictions through their writings, they struggled for their desired right but when they failed to do it they found death as an alternative for find their true identity. Gentry argues that "through suicide Chopin and Plath find a way to move beyond the body, and they present suicide positively in their works as a form of feminist self-definition" (qtd in Meneses 12). So, Plath's suicidal attempt also symbolizes a feminist urge for finding self-definition. It also symbolizes her rejection to not to embrace the male dominated social life that she had to lead in her entire life. So, Plath's representations of suicide can be interpreted as the ultimate rejection of a woman to accept social conditions (qtd in Meneses 13).

The voice in Plath's poetry shows an enormous range of oppressive and violent experiences (Smith 320). When she failed to find her self-definition she committed suicide for

getting the ultimate freedom. She tried to draw the image of her mental state and misery through her confessional poems.

Chapter 3

Kamala Das's projection of oppressed voice in *The Descendant*

Kamala Das is the name of a sophisticated Post-Independence Indian English Poet Kamala Das. Das is one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers. She writes literature in two languages, English and Malayalam. Kamala Das frames her own self, her own female psyche in her writings (Verma 1). Kamala Das is considered as the first Hindu woman to write honestly about sexual feelings and her bodily needs. She got the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984. Her poetry is often interpreted as confessional and feminist poetry (Das n.p). Das's poetry can be compared with the poems of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath (Verma and Dhar 2).

Kamala Das's poetry always dealt with the private humiliation and suffering that are major themes of confessional poetry (Raphael 127). Through her writings she explores the struggle of womanhood by presenting her own experience. She is considered as a feminist poet because she raised her female voice by writing about taboo subjects, sharing her most personal experiences, establishing her individual choice to speak and to write. Kamala Das wanted to create her own identity in a conservative society (Raphael 127). India in the 20th century was a very constructive society for women but Das wanted to break down all boundaries for women. In her poems, Das openly talks about her hesitations, failures, ignorance, shame and feelings of guilt which clearly expose her personality. There is no attempt to idealize or glorify any part of herself (Raphael 128).

She published her first book of poems titled, *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965. Her successive lists of books are *The Descendants*, published in 1967, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* in 1973, *Collected Poems Vol I* in 1984, *The Best of Kamala Das*, and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Collected Poems Vol 1* in the year of 1985. Because of her Autobiography, *My Story* (1976) she also gained fame (Das n.p). The first collection of her poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* has been considered a central voice of her generation who made an example of breaking away from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernist (Verma and Dhar 2). In *Summer in Culcutta*, Kamala Das talks about the trauma of arranged marriage, devaluation of love, etc. This book is an expression of an Indian married woman who yearns for freedom. Das' second book *The Descendant* also portrays the urge of seeking true love, lust, disappointment, etc. but here the tone is more mature and there is a better command over expression (Rajeseckhar 77). Frustration, inhibited expression of love and sex, emotional conflict in marital relationship are presented in most of her poems (Manoj n.p). *The Descendants* and *The old Playhouse* and Plath's other poems are filled with warmth and passion, with love and lust (Verma and Dhar 4). In her autobiography *My Story* portrays several descriptions of her own marriage as unsatisfying and unfulfilling. This book has an open statement about the poet's efforts to define and expose the prison in which she finds herself trapped. The major theme in most of her poems is the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society and finding love (Pathak n.p).

Kamala Das was born in Kerala in a Hindu family. Kamala Das' mother, Balamani and Uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon, were both leading poets. Born into a literary family Das practiced writings in her early age. Kamala Das got married at the young age of sixteen. She started writing after her early marriage to cope up with the emotional strain that she had gone

through (Pathak n.p). Das was not happy with her married life. In many of her writings she presented an image of marriage as lifeless, empty and dull (Pathak n.p). Kamala belonged to the Nair caste. The Nair males were usually violent in temper and she found this nature very offensive. Das found that her husband treated her like an object. About her husband she says: “my husband was immersed in his office work, and after work was the dinner followed by sex where was there any tie left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes the slopes.” (qtd in Verma and Dhar 3). For this reason, he could not understand her emotional needs and psyche and that is why Das could not find peace in her husband’s arms and tried to seek it somewhere else. Perhaps this was one reason for her unhappy married life. Many of her poems she openly talks about her affair with other men for escaping from her husband but even there she could not find much happiness (T. Anjum 53).

Then, Kamala Das grew up in a family where her mother did not love her father. To her mother, her father was a dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. Her mother belonged to the royal family and her father was neither a Brahmin nor a member of the royal family. For this reason she had lack of charming features. As a child, Das was acutely conscious of her swarthy skin and lack of strikingly charming features. That’s why she made the most unjust generalization regarding her parents. Child Kamala thought that her parents did not care about her (Raphael 132). She seemed to have not loved any one including her parents (131 Raphael). It can be said that just like Sylvia Plath Kamala Das used poetry as a medium to vent out her agony. She was the type of unhappy soul who wanted pure love and freedom. However, strong and true to her passion, she made no compromises with her conventional society’s expectations from women. She tried to do what she wanted.

The Descendent is one of the recognized books of Kamala Das. In this book, the major subject is about love and lust. It reflects also some harsh realities. This book is the representation of a woman's longing for true love and her struggling for finding true-self. Some of her poems in this book, she writes about her desire to escape from the binding of marriage to get freedom (Verma and Dhar 4).

Das's poem 'Composition' reveals a deeply distressed woman. There is love and pessimistic tone. Here, she remembers her glorious childhood and the frustrated bygone days of her married life. In this poem the poet starts to think her diseased inner-self (Verma and Dhar 4). The poet remembers how she could hear the sound of the sea when she lived in the house of her grandmother. But, soon her grandmother passes away. Then she remembers the cold and dull days of her married life and says-

“The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth,
The child growing into an adult”.

For the speaker tragedy for a woman is to growing into an adult. This poem also has a quest of find the “Self”. She asks her husband questions such as “am I a lesbian?” such questions reflects her crisis for finding true identity. Then the speaker stats-

“What I am able to give
Is only what your wife is qualified
To give.
We are all alike.
We women,

In our wrappings of hairless skin.“

Here she universalizes her own feeling. All women are treated no better than a hireling. Kamala Das tries to connect her own feeling with the women reader by converting the subject “I” into “We” (A.Dewivedi 44). This poem tells about how Das’s feminine self and her feminine consciousness has drowned, bit by bit, into the infinitive sea of sorrow. It seems that her feminine self would not come out from this sorrowful sea (Verma and Dhar 4). In “An Introduction,” Das again universalizes her private experiences, suggesting that whole womanhood has some personal feelings of yearning and loss that are part of the collective experience. According to Kamala Das womanhood involves certain collective experiences (Verma and Dhar 6). By telling her acute suffering as a young girl, she exposes the fear of the young girls for getting early marriage. A young girl’s dilemma and fear is revealed in the poem “An Introduction” (Manoj 3). She says-

“(…) he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me

But my said woman body felt so beaten.”

These lines also symbolize her loss of freedom to live her life in her own way. Actually in this poem she portrays her physical and emotional agonies when she was growing up. Here, the conflict begins between the identity that the society wants to give them and the identity that the speaker wants to embrace. Society compels her to behave like a “Girl”, be like a “Wife” and wears women’s traditional dress. But, the poet confirms her feminine self by going against the social barriers. She confirms her individuality where the both good and evil quality merges together (Rajesekhar78). She does not want to live like a saint rather like a human being. So, this two poems show two different stages of the poet’s life and both of are clearly evident Kamala

Das's struggle to find her own "Self". But, It was not easy for a woman to create her feminine identity. Kamala Das's suffering has become acute when her feminine self is threatened by the horror of social confinement (Verma and Dhar7). Her poem 'Substitute' clears the idea. She says:

"It will be all right if I join clubs, and flirt a little over telephone.

It will be all right, it will be all right.

I warn the type that endures. It will be all right, it will be all right.

It will be all right between the world and than me".

By using the expression 'It will be all right' Kamala Das depicts her dilemma to establish her feminine self. Here the speaker knows that as a woman it is not all right for the society to do anything according to her wish. So, the poet has used this expression as a poetic tool to show her restlessness and fear for asserting her feminine identity (Verma and Dhar7).

Kamala Das's craving for true love is another important aspect in the book *The Descendent*. Kamala Das' obsessive search for true love got involved into her search for finding true meaning of life. Different aspects of love can be seen in this book. In her poems she portrays her own experiences in love and lust. She boldly expresses her traumatic experiences of physical love and her urge for finding true love. By true love she means the kind of love that exists between legendary Radha and Krishna in Hindu mythology (Om Dwivedi 949). Kamala Das actually yearns for such a love that does not make an obstacle in her freedom (Arya 71). Das's this type of obsession has made due to her lonely childhood. At an early age Kamala could realize that her father did not care for her. As a result she had grown up with an empty heart. Even later her marital life she had to bear loneliness because of her husband's insensitive behavior. So the sense of negligence had increased her urge to find true love and it is reflected in "A Request" (Nimavat 62). In this poem she tells Krishna-

“O Krishna, I am melting, melting.

Nothing remains but you”.

In Hindu mythology Krishna symbolizes the pure love. Melting refers to the end of human body. Poet's melting body symbolizes her absence of real love in her life. Through searching the beauty of Krishna she exposes her painful quest for love (Nimavat 63).

Then in “Composition” she writes: “now here is a girl with vast/ sexual hungers/ a bitch after my own heart”. This line shows sexual violence of the speaker. For Das marriage is a matter of only lust, there is no love in it. (Arya 73). Though Kamala Das talks about sexuality in many of her poems but it shows her rejection of lust and urges to find true love. Poems like “The Convicts”, “The Maggots”, “Conflagration” Das rejects lust. For her it has no value at all (Dube 3). In “Conflagration” she shows her silent pain in the company of a man (A.Dewivedi 42). She writes-

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man”?

Kamala Das's husband was a kind of conventional egoistic man and for this reason in her married life she did not feel loved to her husband. Her disappointment of love clearly shows in this poem (A.Dwivedi 42). In “The Maggots”, she depicts the feeling of Radha when Krishna wants to make love with Radha. Radha feels herself like a corpse. Perhaps she has no feeling for this because she knows that Krishna will be no more with her and the feeling of lost love is more important for Radha than lust. About this poem Anisur Rahman stats that in this poem the poet relates herself with Radha. She also feels herself like a cold dead body while sleeping with her partner. Since her life has lack of love she feels the sense of boredom with her husband (Dube 3). Then, in “The Looking Glass” Kamala Das portrays the harsh realistic description of women. In this male-dominated society a woman's main job is to satisfy her male. It does not matter if she

has to stand naked with him before a mirror. A woman should admire her man's ego (Dube 2). She says-

“A man to love is easy but living
Without him afterwards may have to be faced.”

This line shows a very tragic condition of womanhood. Das claims that life will become complicated if a woman denies merging her identity with a man. Society will make her life difficult as if without a man woman's life is nothing but a puppet. This poem clearly shows the frustration and agony of the poet. She feels totally hopeless in this poem. Kamala Das always longed for respect and love but this love should be mutual. She did not get the true love and respect in her entire life. She felt herself as a love making object.

As a feminist poet Kamala Das was always against the traditional conformity and conventional lifestyle. Through the journey of her poetry she tried to explore herself. Her writings are only about women's private feelings and desires which are universal (Mishra 56). She was a poet of openness and frankness, later became the voice of women's sexuality. She openly talked about her own sexuality. In the 20th century's Indian society not permitted in that time to talk openly about sex. It was considered as a taboo subject (Verma and Dhar 3). Just like Kamala Das many feminist writers such as Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Emily Bronte, Toru Datt are used frank and bold expression in their writings to reveal their inner motivation (Rahman 3). Being a woman writer, writing about love and lust in the tabooed society itself is a kind of rebellion against the male society. Kamala Das uses her poetry as a weapon to fight against the conservative society. In this book she mostly talks about the different variation of love. Through this theme of love Das tries to expose her emptiness and her intense desire to get the pure flavor of 'freedom' (A.Dwivedi 32).

So, in *The Descendant* Kamala Das not only deals with the different images of love and lust but also behind these images she shows the instability of her feelings being a woman (Verma and Dhar 4). She exposes her feminist urge to seek true identity. Many of her poems show the ill-treatment towards the women in the male society. It brings out the issues that a woman has to suffer in the sick society (Arya 71).

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Confessional poetry works as a mirror of the poets because it reveals the life and the psychology of a poet. This genre works as a medium for the poets to vent out their all personal feeling, experiences and their own thought about life. Confessional poetry always works as a bridge between the poets and the readers. By reading confessional poems readers can connect their life with the poems since confessional poems also represent different aspects of human life. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two examples of confessional poet whom universalizes the sufferings of womanhood through the lens of their own experiences in life. Their works depict the tragedy of life being a woman in the patriarchal society.

Sylvia Plath is an educated American poet and Das is a traditional Indian poet. Though Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are not influenced by each other's writings but the theme and tone of their poetry are almost same. These two poets have long geographical distance and also the position of their countries was not same in the 20th century. In 20th century America had almost become a developed and modernized country. Women's education was developed and they could work outside. But, India was very conservative country in that time. Despite of these differences their poetry responds in a similar way (Tasnem Anjum 1). Both of the poets have chosen poetry as a medium of their oppressed voice. Plath and Das was the victim of the sexist society. They had conflict with the patriarchal society because in such society women had to hide their own 'self' . These two poets did not want to be a part of this kind of society. They wanted to search their own identity but they became failure. Their struggle to find their true "Self" and their

failure in life has given birth to unique poems of them. They found their writings as a voice of their suppressed life (Tasnem Anjum 3). Through analyzing the book *The Ariel* and *The Descendant* it also can be said that Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das were two rebellious voice of the male society. They reveal their feminist ardent in their book but being a feminist in the patriarchal society they did not want the men's position rather they wanted to get their individual liberty and their individual self.

So, both Plath's book *The Ariel* and Das's book *The Descendant* expose the feminist revolt against the male dominated society. They used pen as their weapon to fight for their identity and it is clearly reflected in this two books of them. By analyzing these two books it can be said that women have to pay for being a "Woman" it does not matter in which country and in which generation they belong to. Throughout the life woman has to struggle for their oppressed voice.

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