

## The Themes of Love and Sex in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das

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The present paper is an attempt to focus on the theme of Love and Sex in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. They have handled the themes of Love and Sex in their poetry a brilliant way. The contrast, which is glaring between these poets, is 'the restraint' Sylvia Plath has maintained towards these themes. Further, while Kamala Das is preoccupied with these themes, they are only two of the many concerns in Plath. She gains more sympathy from her critics for this quality of restraint than Kamala Das, who cries about her failure in love. The 'self pity' in Kamala Das's poems is completely absent in Sylvia Plath's poetry and she has very few poems on this theme of love, compared to Kamala Das.

Sylvia Plath had an advantage over Kamala Das, if she wanted to emphasize this aspect. She belongs to the permissive society of the west where no brows are raised either at extra or pre-marital relationships. She had more opportunities to mingle with opposite sex.

Sex was not a taboo, at least conversationally. Like other teenagers with a literary background, they relished an image of themselves as mature, adults capable of discussing sex with intellectual detachment.

With this intellectual detachment Plath treats a highly emotional theme in 'Love' which makes her technique superb. Sylvia Plath was born and brought up in an intellectual atmosphere. She could not talk with her own age group who went out on dates and discussed them with excitement. Such type of intelligence was a curse. Her friends felt that she was "Somewhat physically isolated and by nature slightly removed from normal socializing, partially out of shyness and feeling of inadequacy.... perhaps intrigued by the odd combination of social innocence and intellectual precocity."

The emotional void created by her father's untimely death and her mother's involvement in her own career made Plath an introvert, right from her childhood days. For few years, her Intellectual achievements and the scholarships she won were mistaken as a substitute for love. There came a need in her life to assert her as a full-blooded woman. As a teenager at college, she courted and adored a few boys but it was only an infatuation. Her approach towards these dates was quite experimental.

In her confessional novel, *The Bell Jar*, she records her experience with Buddy Willard. Whatever be her intentions, she went steady with him. Buddy tries his best to make her a 'woman'. He pleads with her patiently, showers his affection on her, and takes her out on holidays. His attempts to initiate Sylvia Plath to 'premarital' sex by having her watch him undress. It neither stirs her basic emotions nor evokes any finer sentiments. It is rightly observed:

Her savage, witty ridicule of his male parts in the novel as turkey neck and turkey gizzards results from an almost adolescent disgust with sexuality and highlights the frozen sexual ambiguity at that time.

All the poems written by Sylvia Plath, including the posthumous collection, *Ariel* can be grouped under love poems. She is in love with nature, in love with sea, in love with her dead-father or in love with death itself. The normal erotic love, which she ought to have experienced as a young girl does not make an impression on her as poetic themes. She was utterly disillusioned with the

concept and as a result love in the normal sense of the term is conspicuously absent in her poetry. In the poem 'The Courier' she says:

Acetic acid in a sealed tin?  
 Don't accept it. It is not genuine.  
 A ring of gold with the sun in it?  
 Lies, Lies and a grief.

She had a strong resentment towards marriage. The poem 'The Applicant' ridicules the male ego who treat women as 'it'.

..... here is a hand  
 To fill it and willing  
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches  
 And do whatever you tell it.  
 Will you marry it?  
 It is guaranteed

She continues the same tone till the end.

But in twenty-five years she will be silver,  
 In fifty, gold.  
 A living doll, everywhere you look.  
 It can sew, it can cook,  
 It can talk, talk, talk.

Sylvia Plath's search for the right man to share her love and life comes to an end, when she meets Ted Hughes and gets married to him in the year 1956. Both being creative writers with similar tastes in life and literature, allow us to predict a happy marriage. Sylvia Plath's world enlarges when she becomes a mother and she successfully combines her home and career. Children too find their share of love.

All night your moth-breath  
 flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
 A far sea moves in my ear.  
 One cry, and I stumble from bed, Cow- heavy and floral  
 In my Victorian nightgown.  
 Your mouth opens clean as a cat's.

She did not dream that a day will come that she would confess about her broken marriage to her own son.

Sylvia Plath was a young mother of two beautiful children. Marriage was already on the rocks as the clashes had set in, in many fields. She played her part well, bravely and heroically. Ted Hughes's initial fascination started getting worn off and he developed affairs with other women. Sylvia Plath, as a poet, is deliberately silent here. His affair with another lady made Sylvia Plath heart broken and she separated from him and that was the end of her love.

Ted Hughes takes her for granted and ignores the women in her. He assumes that, as an intellectual, she should overlook such affairs as trivial things of life. She cries:

I am not a mystical: it isn't  
 As if I though it had a spirit.  
 It is simply in its elements.

When her cries were in vain she decides to relinquish the role of a heroine in Hughes' life and she realizes that her spring of love has dried up. Only alternative was to fall in love with death, which seemed to be attractive to her, since a long time.

Love, the world  
Suddenly turns, turns color. The streetlight  
Splits through the rat's-tail  
pods of the laburnum at nine in the morning.

Love has been a major theme in poetry for generations together and a woman plays a major role in the game of love. She is more emotional and sentimental about love than her counterpart. She forgets her identity and completely merges with her lover. She gets a jolt of her life when her tender world, which existed in her imagination, gets shattered. Failure in love as a theme is more powerful in the poems of confessional poets, than its consummation.

Kamala Das, on the other hand, lends a new dimension to her love poetry by revealing her kinship with an interior Indian tradition which has its roots in Indian epics. Search for love is the principal preoccupation of Kamala Das's poetry. She concerns herself with various facets of love. In fact the whole volume of Kamala Das's poetry revolves round this theme, either directly or indirectly. Her shocking confession about this theme has startled equally the critics and the laymen. It was more shocking because it comes from a traditional, Indian woman. She started seeking love and sexual experience, when she was an adolescent.

Devendra Kohli comments in this context: "Almost, all the critics of Kamala Das have been quick to notice that part of the strength of poetry emanates from her powerful personality. But while the vigour of her personality seems to operate rather transparently, and on the surface as it were, it does not detract from the complexity of the women's ambivalence which is the certitude and the precariousness of sexual love."

She makes the theme more complex when she echoes the mythological love. She records her yearnings in her autobiography *My Story* thus:

I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart. Otherwise why did I not get my peace in the arms of my husband? But consciously I had hoped for the death of my ego. The ones who loved me did not understand why I was restive.

Kamala Das searches for love in more than one person and this leads her to more complexities. Her advantage is of being a poet of the modern era, in which, the idea of love and sex are discussed without any inhibitions. She is able to present her themes, raw, naked without clothing it with imagery and metaphors. She lived and loved like a 'Radha', like a queen and could not take the disillusionment of living in one room apartment of Bombay. She writes in her autobiography *My Story*: "From every city I have lived I have remembered the noon in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a home sickness,"

The same sentiment is echoed in her poetry:

..... you cannot believe darling,  
Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
Was proud and loved .... I who have lost  
My way and beg now at stranger's doors to  
Receive love, at least in small change?

This urge for love becomes intense and can be traced in her poetic growth. Many persons entered her life as lovers and she does not make efforts to hide this fact. Her problem was, as she states:

..... Oh yes, getting  
A man to love is easy, but living  
Without him afterwards may have to be  
faced. A living without life when you move  
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that  
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only.

Kamala Das's need to have many men in her life was justified by her at several places. She yearns for such a love, which does not impede her impulse to freedom. Her concept of ideal love is embedded in the poem 'The Old Playhouse'.

... Love is Narcissus at the waters' edge, hunted  
By its own lovely face, and yet it must seek at last  
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors  
to shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

Her experiments with love take many turns and in the course, give birth to more frustrations and more poetry. She wanted a love of her liking and become 'The Prisoner' in that gladly.

As the convict studies  
His prison's geography  
I study the trappings  
Of your body, dear love,  
For I must some day find,  
an escape from its snare.

The search for ideal love is continued throughout her poetry. Her concept of love takes a new turn very often. In 'Love' she confesses:

Until I found you,  
I wrote verse, draw pictures,  
And, went out with friends  
For walks .....  
Now that I love you,  
Curled like an old mongrel  
My life lies, content,  
In you ... ..

She was sick of love, which was just skin-deep. With her strong aversion to lust, she questions her readers:

... .. What is  
The use, what is the bloody use?  
That was the only kind of love,  
This hacking at each other's part,  
Like convicts hacking, breaking clouds  
at noon.

Her ideal love, which she seeks, had her grandmother's love, her parental love and also the soft lesbian love, which she had experienced at school. She failed miserably but quite gracefully and poetically. This helpless feminine anger on her husband, lovers and society made her passion cruel. She says:

I wanted him to surfer from incurable love. This cruelty is typical of women when they are in love.

Sometimes she mistakes these concepts of love and lust one for the other. She fails to draw a line between them. She gets vexed and sighs desperately.

O sea, I am fed up  
I want to be simple  
I want to be loved  
And  
If love is not to be had  
I want to be dead, just dead.

Kamala Das too, like Sylvia Plath had an encounter with death, but luckily she was saved from its fierce grip. Her quest for love continues to be the theme of her poetry, which projects her as an optimist. A series of her love pomes were published in the *Youth Times* and a few more in the magazine *Pamparam*, her own publication. The tone now is more compromising, than repentance.

Kamala Das's bold expression of her frenzied love, expressed without any restraint got her both bouquets and brickbats. But no critic could complain against her technique. Her poetry of love is condemned as a sheer exhibition of permissiveness. Sometimes she ignores sometimes gives a befitting rejoinder to these remarks through her articles. She sometimes lashes out, sometimes speaks convincingly:

If my mode of writing is striptease, let it remain so. There is a great difference between a patient exposing his nudity to her doctor and a cabaret artist baring herself to be provocative. The motive of the one is not vulgar, but a peeping Tom, looking through the keyhole into the doctor's chamber, the nudity may seem exciting.

Kamala Das says that she was never a nymphomaniac and rejects that her poems are pornographic in tone. In her over-anxiety to expose dark areas hidden in her subconscious and also to expose the society of its inhibitions, some of her poems have turned out to be crude and hasty compositions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she is the first Indian woman who could use love as a theme, so sustaining through her poems, in multi-colored dimensions.

In conclusion someone can say that the theme of love and sex had used by Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das in their various poems.

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