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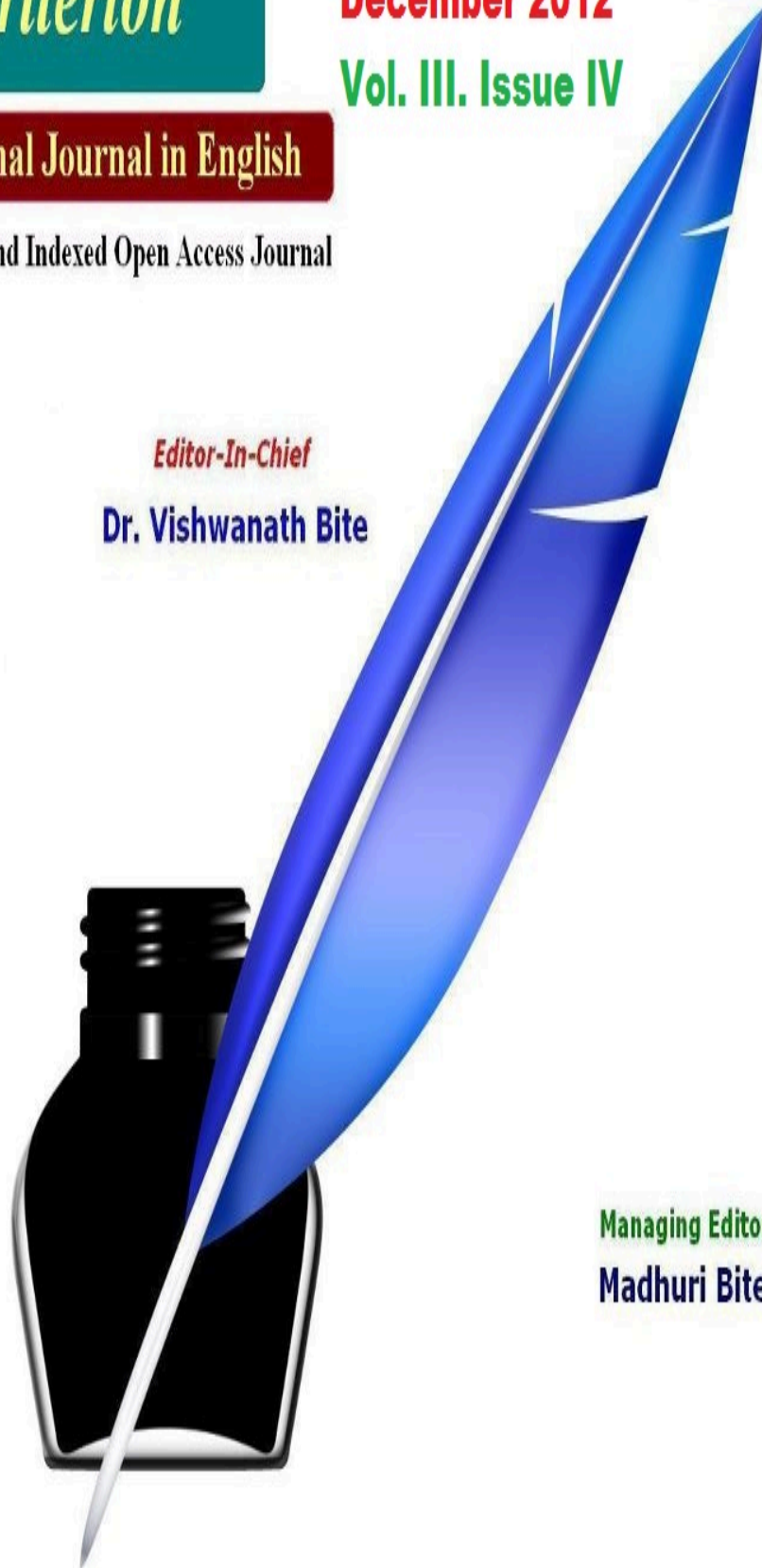
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## **Confessional Theme and the Crisis of Woman's Identity in the Poetry of Kamala Das**

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Indo-Anglian has been a favourite genre with women literateurs before and after independence. A very interesting phenomenon of modern indo-Anglian poetry is a large number of women poets indefatigable writing verse also. It has compelled attention from critical circles also. P.LaL points out the phenomenon of high percentage of women writers in English producing technically competent and sensitive work. Their poetry possesses not more quantity but quality also. Indian women literateurs have been fortunate to get an atmosphere which is not hostile to women-writing.

The main purpose of this article is to study the confessional theme in Indo-Anglian poetry in the post-independence period, with special reference to the poetry of Kamala Das.

Kamala Das, the daughter of a Malayalam poet Balamani Amma, is the most popular among modern women poets. The credit of making modern Indo-Anglian poetry a world famous phenomenon goes to her. She holds the distinction to be the only modern woman poet who has evoked the maximum response of foreign critics. Her poetic creativity includes for volumes viz. *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The old playhouse and other poem* (1973), *The Descendants* (1967), *Tonight, this savage rites* (1979), *Besides a great number of articles*, many book length studies have also been made on her, for example, *Kamala Das and Her Poetry* (1983) by Dr. A.N.Dwivedi, *Kamala Das* (1975) by Deviender Kohli and *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das* (1980) by Anisur Rehman. Her first volume "Summer in Calcutta" contains poems on a variety of subject like man-women relationship, childhood experiences, identity crisis and social consciousness. Later volumes have become exclusively concerned with man-women relationship and its complexities. Her distinction is her daring portrayal of sex attempted for the first time by any women poet in India, which has earned her the title of 'queen of Eraotica'. Her autobiography "My Story" (1970) and "Novel Alphabets of Lust" (1976) captured the interest of readers. Her strong point is her modernization of India poetic psyche.

In order to understand the main stream i.e. confessional theme, first we have to go through some important aspects related to Kamala Das's poetry i.e. Man-Woman relationship, the quest of love and crisis of women's identity. The proper understanding of these three topics leads to the depth of the confessional theme. It is a renowned fact that she has been a controversial poet. So, to solve all types of controversies related to her poetry, it becomes important for any researcher that he or she should study all these three concepts, which, undoubtedly from essential features of the confessional theme.

*Keywords: Confessional theme, Indo – Anglian poetry, Man- woman relationship, Quest of love, Women’s identity, Controversial poet, Childhood experiences, Daring portrayal, Poetic psyche, Women poet.*

### **Introduction**

In the present study, the confessional theme is proposed to be analyze under the following titles :

- {A} : Man-Woman Relationship
- {B} : The Quest of Love in Kamala Das’s Poetry.
- {C} : Crisis of identity
- {D} : Confessional theme in Kamala Das’s poetry.
- {E} : Conclusion.

Discussion in the first section, portrays a fifteen year old girl, who was forced to marry a bank employee with her consent. Man-woman relationship is essentially based on mutual understanding, love, respect and trust which are in essence the bed-rock of whole code of ethics governing these relations. Kamala Das felt the lack of love at quite an early age.

Her parents’ behavior was indifferent towards her.

They were not so caring ones as it is reflected in her autobiography. This is about her father:

He was not of an affectionate nature so  
We grew up more or less neglected,  
And because we were of ourselves  
As neglected children in a social-  
Circle that pampered the young  
There developed between us a strong  
Relationship of love, the kind a  
Leaper may feel for his mate who  
Pushed him on a hand cart when  
They meant on their bagging rounds<sup>1</sup>.

As she grew, she longed for a peaceful relationship which could make ample amends for all the loss she had sustained in her childhood, in her parental house: Conversation, companionship and warmth. But unfortunately enough she could get nothing from her marriage except pain and sufferings. She felt jilted in love. Her husband was busy in worldly affairs. He was callous,

selfish and lustful.. She tried to reconcile with the situation as it developed but failed. Her husband's cruelty towards her is summed up in the lines that follow:

Winter came and one day while looking her in, he  
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a  
Line, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when  
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and  
Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men<sup>2</sup>.

The second section is exclusively focused on 'Love'. Love is complex, many-splendored feeling. Kamala Das who failed to elicit norms and entered into other men's world. Her husband sought to subjugate her with his superior muscle power which get she abhorred. To him, she was just an object of carnal desire not a partner. In a pleasing, self-fulfilling human enterprise, she holds her husband responsible for her dismal-position. She writes:

When I got married  
Many husband said'  
You may have freedom,  
As much as you want.  
My soul balked at this diet of ash.  
Freedom became my dancing shoe,  
How well I danced,  
And dance without rest,  
Until the shoe turned grimy on my feet  
And I began to have doubts,  
I asked my husband,  
Am I hetero  
Am I lesbian  
Or am I just plain frigid?<sup>3</sup>

Her quest for genuine love is expressed in the following lines:

... And, I thought, if I could only want  
Really, really want his love, we shall ride  
Happiness.  
Great white steed, tramples of unsacred laws.<sup>4</sup>

Her husband was so uncaring that even in case of her ill-health would force her for sex. His lusts won't any barriers:

There was,	Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger,
The blood had,	Weakened too much to lust, and the skin,
Without health's,	Anointments was numb and un yearning
What lusted then,	For him, was it perhaps the deeply hidden soul? <sup>5</sup>

Kamala Das considered her husband directly responsible for shoving her into other men's arms. The tragedy with her is that even outside her marriage, she could not find love. Her happiness is expressed in the following lines:

... Who can, Help us who have lived so long  
And have failed in love?<sup>6</sup>

The next section deals with the concept of crisis of women's identity. When Kamala Das felt jilted in love, she was depressed and frustrated. She tried to reconcile with the reality of the situation. At the same time, she realized how her very identity is at stake. She expresses how she endeavored to reconcile and the betrayal in married life with an acceptance of responsibilities of married life:

... Oh, never mind I've  
Spent long years trying to locate my mind  
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath the bond<sup>7</sup>.

Satya Dev Tyagi affirms that "she is intensely conscious of herself as a women."<sup>8</sup>

Kamala Das has shaken off feminine inhibitions in a blunt manner. In her autobiography she says "I was physically destroyed beyond resurrection."<sup>9</sup> Her ego hurts when everybody used her for the sake of bodily charms only. She does not want to become an object of sex. She tries to search out her position like this:

To pick herself an average  
Identity, to age  
Through years of earthy din  
Gently, like a cut flower until  
It's time to be removed<sup>10</sup>...

With a great pain, she explains the real and basic nature of man; specially of her husband:

...betray me?  
Yes, he can, never physically:  
Only with words that curl their limbs at  
Touch of air and die with metallic sighs  
What care I for their quick, sterile sting, while  
My body's wisdom tells and tells again  
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace  
And even death nowhere else but here in  
My betrayer's arms...<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of men's temperament she shows in the following lines:

There were the men who were either  
Connected with my husband's occupation  
Or were at one time my father's friends,  
The one I used to call "uncle " from

Infancy, who had changed to such  
Extent that they gave me lecherous  
Hugs from behind doors and leered at me  
While their wives were away.  
I hated them.<sup>12</sup>

In the words of K.R.S Iyenger, “Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive largely man-made world.”<sup>13</sup>

She tries to justify her point of view in this way:

I yearned for a kind word, a glance in  
My direction. It became obvious to me  
That my husband had wished to marry me  
Only because of my status and the  
Possibility of financial gain. A coldness  
Took hold of my heart then. I knew then  
That if love was that I had  
Looked for in marriage I would have to  
Look for in marriage I would have to  
I wanted to be given an identity that  
Was lovable.<sup>14</sup>

This section concludes with an apt comment of Devender Kohli who maintains, “the woman’s impatience and frustration with the man as well as the moment: with the man because of his sexual passivity and slackness and with the moment because it mocks her feminine integrity.”<sup>15</sup>

The next section is an attempt to analyze the change in her attitude towards love. No doubt, the preceding sections were confessional in the sense that they shed light on her past experiences. The next section communicates the important idea of change in her attitude towards life which ultimately converted her to Krishna-consciousness as she grew to be the devotee of Lord Krishna-her eternal lover.

Undoubtedly, Kamala Das is the most prominent of the confessional group of Indian poets in English. She herself has confessed that she likes to confess:

I also know by confessing  
By peeling off my layers  
I reach closer to the soul  
And  
To the bone’s  
Supreme indifference<sup>16</sup>

According to Adil Jussawalla, the significance of the poetry dealing, “exclusively of love, sex and loneliness in tone of an insistent confession is that by exposing those dark areas which are normally concealed, it might touch some of the deepest points in the reader’s own subconscious and so uncover what is worth uncovering.”<sup>17</sup>

Kamala Das makes confession to release herself from tension, agony and anxiety. At the same time, she goes beyond confession by using myth of Lord Krishna in her work. Casually she writes; "I began to write poetry with the ignoble aim of wooing a man. I feel forced to be honest in my poetry."<sup>18</sup>

The following stanza is the best example to recognize Kamala Das as a confessional poet. What not does it contain? Love, hate, identity, freedom and confession, everything it consists Kamala Das wants to compile her whole poetry in five lines:

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love  
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying  
With a rattle in my throat, I am sinner,  
I am saint, I am the beloved and the betrayed.<sup>19</sup>

The present study concludes with Devinder Kohli observation. He observes "Kamala Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman's ambivalence, giving expression to it more nakedly and as a thing-in-itself than any other Indian woman poet."<sup>20</sup> In the concluding section , an attempt is made to resolve the tension between a man a woman regarding sex. Kamala Das's psychology is discussed further to find out the compulsions which make her to confess everything. Emphasis is all through an evaluation of the relevance and validity of her observation as a confessional poet.

### **Section {a} : Man-Woman Relationship**

A person's behavior is always relation-oriented .It is relations which can make or mar the atmosphere at the workplace as also in the family and the society as a whole.

Man-woman Relationship has its own grace and aroma. Admitted that our parent Adam was the lone monarch of what he surveyed in the universe newly created for his benefit and amusement, when the beauty and boundary of nature were mere adjunct of his condition. But he was soon bored and fed up, to powers that he and his position was more than accepted when Eve was created from one of his ribs. In religio-mythical terms , Eve was flesh of Adam's flesh and blood of his blood, she was created for companionship and in a way, it established his primacy in human relations

Kamala Das excels in delineating human relationships. The most recurrent themes in her poetry are the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism.

An Empty Cistern, Waiting  
Through long hours, fills itself,  
With coiling snakes of silence.<sup>21</sup>

Kamala Das could not get affection in her childhood. She says about her parents that "They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us, they did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently."<sup>22</sup>

The sense of loneliness in childhood finds transference in her adult life as well. In marriage, she had dreamt, she would get love. With the key of love she tries to unlock the complexities of human psyche and its insistent demands.

““ Their voices  
Were harsh, their song melancholy; they sang of  
Lovers dying and of children left unborn...  
Some beat their drum,  
And wailed and arithed in vacant ecstasy.”<sup>23</sup>

There is passivity as well as rebellion against a man-dominated world. But there is no escape from conflict, from a sense of sterility. She wants real love but despairs when this itself denied to her. In “the suicide” it is suggested:

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 ...  
While he enter deeper  
With joys discovers  
The sea’s hostile cold  
In after all skin –deep  
The sea’s inner chambers  
Are all very warms  
There must be a sum slumbering  
At vortex of the sea.”<sup>24</sup>

This empty material relationship came under fire in the poem ‘captive’:

My love is a empty gift, a gilded empty container,  
good for , Nothing else...”<sup>25</sup>

The complex mental state is reflected in the very moment and jerk of thought , She frankly lays bare her women’s heart, when she says:

When I am able to give  
Is only what your wife is qualified  
To give , We are all alike,  
We women, In our wrapping of hairless skin”<sup>26</sup>

An all-embracing discussion is needed to pin-point the right place for a woman in society. The importance of woman has been recognized in literature on various levels. For centuries, the human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience. Right from the beginning of their life, women are forced to feel dwarfed and acquire a highly circumscribed world-view. The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to



the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. But it becomes a hard fact that in the institution of marriage she loses her place. She feels herself only as a machine.

### Section {B} : The Quest for Love

Love's an itch

That's never reached<sup>27</sup>

The modern Indo-Anglian women poets try to seek meaning through forging various relationships of love where they explore the entire gamut of this overpowering emotions. The genre of poetry with its more emotional and sentimental nature is ideally suited for the expression of a sentiment like love.

Kamala Das occupies a prominent position among the poets who constitute the modern tradition of Indian poetry in English. It is only Kamala Das among all her contemporaries who draws our attention immediately. Most of her poems delineate the theme of unfulfilled love and the yearning for love. A cursory reading of her poems at once reveals the facts that the person and the poet are not different. Her desperate attempts to search for genuine love is shown in all her poems. Women are more emotional and sentimental by temperament than men. Love holds a paramount place in their life. Kamala Das's seems to be a representative cry:

I want to be loved  
And  
If love is not be had  
I want to be dead.<sup>28</sup>

At first, Kamala Das searches love in her parental home and she seeks an emotional identity in parental love. Their disinterestedness infuses the feeling of alienation and depression in the poet's heart. At the age of fifteen, she gets married and leaves her parental home with her husband. The love-seeking girl tries to unlock her mind and soul to her husband but he does not care for her sentiments. Her poems paint a disgustful picture of her husband. She clearly brings out her misery and sorrow in the following lines:

Too early the autumn sights  
Have come, too soon my lips  
Have lost their hunger, too soon  
The singing birds have  
Left...<sup>29</sup>

Again, her subjective, feelings are predominant when, in "the suicide", she tells of her melancholy regarding her role as a wife:

But  
I must pose  
I must pretend  
I must act the role  
Of happy woman  
Happy wife....<sup>30</sup>

To gratify her quest of love, she shatters all the shackles and enters other men's world without any sense of guilt. But she finds no difference. Man outside home also wants sexual satisfaction, which has forced her to rebel at home. She feels tried and bored as she does not want herself to be taken as a mere body:

I enter other's  
Lives and  
Make of every trap of lust  
A temporary home<sup>31</sup>

She cries out bitterly:

There was a time when our lusts were  
Like multicolored flags of no  
Particular country.  
And we asked each other, what is  
The use, what is the bloody use?<sup>32</sup>

Actually, for Kamala Das, love is an enriching and blissful experience and has an immense transforming power. It is all fulfilling experience which seems to end quests of the poet:

Now that I love you,  
Curled like an old mongrel  
My life lies, content  
In you.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, she detests excessive indulgence in sex, Yet she shows a deep urge for the partner. Ultimately, she spontaneously says:

Yes  
It was my desire that made him male  
And beautiful, so that when at last we  
Met, to believe that once I knew not his  
From, his quiet touch, or the blind kindness'  
Of his lips was hard indeed....<sup>34</sup>

She believes:

When other eyes haunt my thought,  
I kiss your eyes and shut them, so that  
I need no longer  
See them brood on their naked, naked fear  
Another voice haunts my ear, another face  
My dreams, but in your arms I must today  
Lie, and find an oasis where memories  
Sad winds do not so much blow, and  
I must  
Here you say,

I love, I love, I love...<sup>35</sup>

That is why, she transforms herself and directs her heart to the direction of Lord Krishna. It is only to be noted that spiritual love everything for her. She says somewhere in her work: "love is beautiful whatever four lettered name the puritans call it by. It is the foretaste of paradise. The crisis of woman's identity in Kamala Das's poetry will be the topic for the section that follows.

### **Section {C} : Crisis of Woman's Identity**

Woman's identity continuous to be nameless and faceless. The problem of identity crisis when she is relegated to the background as an inferior and subordinate partner in human affairs, when her moral, mental and spiritual endowments are deliberately belittled as of no great consequence and easily – dispensable..

Sushila Singh says, "Human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete."<sup>36</sup>

Identity crisis and a quest for identity are basic to the human world. Identity has many aspects and dimensions. When self is hampered in its fulfillment in various possible roles, it generates an identity crisis which is a state of emotional and intellectual chaos and confusion crisis brings alienation. But her identity is expected to merge with and grow from her various roles as a wife, beloved, mother, daughter and so on. The possibility of being SHE is denied is invariably thwarted in case of woman by the do's and don'ts of society. Restrictions were imposed on Kamala Das as she started growing up and she was forced to fill different slots propagated for to fit in:

Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said-be embroidered, be cook  
Be a quareller with servants, fit in, oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers.<sup>37</sup>

Before Kamala Das, Virginia Woolf had discovered that "woman is not indication of a particular sex, but includes in its definition of all those who are powerless, vulnerable-men, trees, animals anyone that is a viction. Fellow travelling for men ought to be allowed, not as a concession but as a necessity for organizing the weak against the strong. She says that it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex."<sup>38</sup>

The culture that created a Sita and a Gandhari has denied existence to woman in any other role except the subordinate one as a daughter, sister, a wife and a mother. The Hindu society has denied woman the possibility of being a SHE. The sharing of Draupdi as a wife is a prominent example of man's tyranny over woman. She was shocked when Kunti unshockingly instructed her five sons to share among themselves whatever alms they had brought. The honor and respect of a woman was jeopardized. Ramayan and Mahabhart project two opposite view points of womanhood as of other values. According to Indian culture, a woman could be shared only as a mother or sister not as wife. And then again Draupdi was humiliated in the court which

was presided over by a bunch of hypocrite, who were her own relatives and wanted to enjoy watching the nubile beauty of Draupdi. The same moral crisis is faced by Kamala Das. She has recorded the cramping effects of marriage on her life.

She says:

Lost my will and reason, to all your  
Questions mumbled incoherent replies.<sup>39</sup>

In order to show depth of Kamala Das's agony, Joyce Carol Oates writes "a woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream waiting. I mean, she lives in a dream, waiting for a man. There is no way out of this, insulting as it is, no woman can escape it. Her life is a waiting for a man. That's all."<sup>39</sup> There is a certain door in this dream, and she has to walk through it she has no choice. The wife at the same time, is no more than a slave who has to suffer the aggravated assaults committed by the husband." Kamala Das feels as if nothing belonged to her and she belonged nowhere. Real self or natural self is entirely denied to a married woman and none knows it better than her:

No more singing, no more a dance  
My mind is an old playhouse wish  
All its lights put out.<sup>40</sup>

She is fed up with the hollowness of marriage. Her encounter with her husband presented with a subtle psychological insight:

My life is an empty gift, a gilded empty  
Container, good for show, nothing else.<sup>41</sup>

A woman's legal existence is suspended or at least is incorporated and consolidated into the hands of the husband. Her husband can be an adulterer, or sodomite, or stained with every crime, yet he is still her husband and she cannot leave him or remarry. Kamala Das strikes out as a helpless creature caught in a vice:

I must pose  
I must pretend  
I must act the role  
Of a happy woman  
Happy wife<sup>42</sup>

### Section {D} : Confessional Content

Rosenthal was the first to use the term "confessional poetry" for the particular work produced by the poets for sixties. He defined confessional poetry as the one in which "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme."<sup>43</sup>

Charles Molesworth is of the view that the confessional poets gathered their concerns from two cultural moments: the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language and the insistent psychological of a society, strange into itself and adrift from purpose and meaningful labor. Some of the confessional poets are Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. In his or her own individual manner, each tries to express the innermost feelings of the heart, for example, those of failure, guilt, disappointment, incestuous desire .

Kamala Das shot into prominence when he wrote her autobiography “my story” and has remained an important focus of attention in the literary arena. Her life history is as fascinating as her poetry. As there is a lot of autobiographical element in her work. It is very tempting to read her poems as purely “confessional”. This is what Edward Butscher does in method and madness. It is also tempting to read her poems from the psycho-analytical point of view and interpret them as expression of a schizoid personality.

Writers like St. Augustine, Rousseau, and De Quincey, instead of confessing before a priest, chose to make their confessions in writing. The purpose of confession, then, is to come face to face with god, or the self. That is, it repairs the loss which the person feels he has suffered. It is in this sense, part therapeutic of the process of self-redemption. This is the therapeutic nature of confession which is common to these works. What holds the reader is the personal, subjective experience of man. Robert Phillip rightly says, “we are living in a great age of autobiography.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Before reaching at any particular conclusion , there must be a long discussion on all of the controversies related to kamala das ‘s writing. First of all, it should be noticed that kamala Das locates man – woman relationship only from a woman’s point of view. what a man thinks, what he expects from a woman? why is he? and why he is? it does not matter to her. if we think deeply , biological difference between a man and a woman is the cause of this tension. secondly, there is no barometer to measure a man’s love. all men are not callous and selfish. there are so many male personalities who respect women with a strong and healthy feelings.

A strong and healthy relationship can be possible between a man and a woman , if they carry on their relations according to the ethics of relationship and if they have mutual understanding.

Kamala Das loved everybody extremely as she had kind and tender nature. The same she required from others. she expected more from those who were not capable to do . They could not love her according to her demand and psychology. This is the main reason of her disappointment and that appointment comes out in the shape of confession. She was in need of care, tenderness and affection . specially she was searching fatherly love. Just because of this she could not reconcile with anyone else. ultimately, Kamala Das got the shock of her life when she faced the reality and she became a victim of her problems . Kamala Das interacted with different men but failed to find the genuine love. Her pain and suffering inspired her to confess her past experiences. whatever be her writing , whether autobiography {my story}, poetic work or prose work , she seems to confess and this confession draws the reader immediately. we admire her confessions as she pours them forth uninhibitedly in soft and compelling tones.

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