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A Voice for Emancipation in the Poetry of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract:

Kamala Das is a memorable name in the field of confessional poetry by Indian women. She was one of the most eminent feminist voices in the post-colonial era. In her poetry, she raises her protest against the confined situation of woman and the patriarchal dominance over female. Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, the most controversial poetess in modern American literature, is one of the most exceptional confessional poets of her time. Her poetry as the reflections of her personal and life experiences evokes the innermost recesses of her soul, the secrets of her heart, and the frustrations of her psyche. Both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath show in their poetry a strong sense of consciousness of their self as the woman. Their poetry raises a voice for emancipation, an inner urge for self-identity. This paper is a study of the selected poems by Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath to evoke their quest for freedom.

Keywords: Emancipation, identity, dominance, isolation, confession.

Kamala Das was Malayalam by birth. But she wrote in her mother tongue as well as in English. As a confessional poet she has been likened to the great poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Denise Levertov. She was a feminist to the core. In her writings, she confesses very honestly the whole canvas of her life which she experienced. Her poetry is the true record of her agony and frustration. Her quest for true love and self-identity is clear in her most of the poems. As the harbinger of post-colonial feminism in Indian context, she portrays a graphic picture of the downtrodden and oppressed situation of the female class, dominated crudely by the patriarchal society. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish, and Indian readers responded sympathetically to her guileless, guiltless frankness with regard to sexual matters. She abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love.

An Introduction, first appeared in Das' maiden volume of poems, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), is her best expression for emancipation from the clutches of male-centric society. Kamala Das does not like to be dominated and forced by the 'critics, friends, visiting cousins' in the choosing of language to express her thought and mind comfortably and properly. She introduces herself – "I am Indian, very brown, born in /Malabar, I speak three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one." (An Introduction 5-6) We are made aware of the cultural differences in the word, 'brown', as the brown complexion for an Indian woman disqualifies her prospects of good marriage, fairness being equated with beauty in this country. Kamala Das feels satisfied in English, though "Don't write in English, they said,/ English is not your

mother-tongue.”(An Introduction 7-8) But she denies the view of the society and chooses English as her voice. Though it is ‘half English, half Indian’, it is honest. She confirms very categorically –

“It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind...” (An Introduction 17-20)

Kamala Das is the symbol of feminine freedom. She does not hesitate little to claim her autonomy of self and her individual urges and needs. Being dissatisfied with her husband’s act of sexual relationship which was just a matter of routine, she does not suppress her desire, rather tries to find out real love in her extra-marital affairs. Though the society and the authority said her to ‘dress in sarees, be girl, be wife, be embroiderer, be cook, be a quarreler with servants,’ she ignored her ‘womanliness’, by wearing a shirt and her brother’s trousers and cutting hair short: “Then ... I wore a shirt and my/ Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored/ My womanliness.” (An Introduction 32-34) The classifiers who define class into two different categories – male and female, howled against her free will:

“Fit in Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.”(An Introduction 38-40)

Kamala Das’ voice against the power politics of the patriarchal society and the dominance of male-ego as ‘I’ is clear when she proclaims that a male justifies lying drunk at twelve in the night in a hotel, is free to laugh at his own will, succumbs to a woman only out of lust and later feels ashamed of his own weakness that lets himself to lose to a woman. Towards the end of the poem, the poetess describes herself also as ‘I’ who has her own individuality. Like other human beings, she also belongs to humanity with her virtues and vices, with her fulfillment and betrayal:

“I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours. I too call
Myself I.”(An Introduction 60-62)

Kamala Das’s another poem *The Old Playhouses* how is the contemplations of a woman trapped in a love-less marriage to a man who enforces patriarchy within the home. Furthermore, this poem is a bold feminist poem because it speaks about the demand of a woman for her release from the cruelty of her husband and asks for “a pure and total freedom.”(The Old Playhouse 29) Kamala Das is here indirectly advocating the right of women in general to get the opportunity to develop their personalities and their prospective.

Kamala Das uses the phrase, ‘old playhouse’ as a metaphor for her own mind. Her mind is no longer in use because it is no longer serviceable and because it has lost its power to think as a result of the continued authoritarianism and callousness of her husband. Das describes a woman as ‘a swallow’ who is compelled to forget her identity, her root through marriage as to Das marriage is nothing but a trap for the woman:

“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
 In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
 Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
 Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
 Pathways of the sky.” (The Old Playhouse 1-5)

The husband is absolutely a representative of the patriarchal society who always wants to play the predetermined gender role through domination. After being trapped in the cage, a woman is taught to obey and follow only the commands and desires of her husband as the speaker affirms “every lesson you gave was about yourself.” (The Old Playhouse 7-8) Das here also portrays a woman as only a source of sexual pleasure for a male. The speaker very vehemently represents herself as a mere object of her husband’s lust:

“... You were pleased
 With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow
 Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
 Yourself into every nook and cranny...” (The Old Playhouse 8-11)

Kamala Das addresses the limitations and restrictions that are imposed through the day to day realities faced by many Indian women. In *The Old Playhouse* she addresses the oppressive male ego seeking to choke her voice-

“You called me wife,
 I was taught to break Saccharine into your tea and
 To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic leaf and
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
 Quantities I mumbled incoherent replies.”(The Old Playhouse 12-17)

Das represents the woman-speaker’s husband as an oppressor in the home. Because of his inhuman attitude and cruelty, the speaker has lost finally her own taste and also her own existence. She has become almost non-functional and inert due to the disastrous physical as well as mental stresses. She has gradually lost her own value as a woman in her life of confinement and suffocation, and her mind has finally been transformed into “an old play

house with all its lights put out” as the disastrous consequence of her mismatched marital relationship. (The Old Playhouse 24-25) Kamala Das’ own marital life was full of disturbance and dissatisfaction due to the overpowering and egotistical nature of her husband. Das emphatically establishes the true fact of the bitter experience of a woman’s life as in the patriarchal society there is no place for a woman to lead her according to her own will. A woman has to be reduced into a dwarf in the hands of male. Finally Das opines, “Love is Narcissus at the water’s edge...”(The Old Playhouse 28-29) suggesting woman’s woes.

Sylvia Plath was one of the most dynamic and admired poets of the twentieth century. Her poetry is basically confessional in tone. Sylvia Plath in her poetry talks of her physical and mental disabilities and frustrations. Her quest for love and self-identity dominates her most of the Ariel poems. Her poems *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* focus on her mind and her psychological state as a result of her bitter self-experience all throughout her life , her fears of abandonment and insecurity after the loss of her father at an early stage, her dissatisfied relationship with her husband and her repeated attempts for suicide.

Sylvia Plath’s *Daddy* is a remarkable poem with an evocation of the poet’s inner anxiety and suppressed outburst of a living daughter for her dead father’s nature and behaviour. From early childhood, Plath was very fond of her father Otto Plath and almost adored him. But her father was a thorough Nazi by his conduct and conviction. He was a tough disciplinarian and complete autocrat. Plath screams “You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot.” (Daddy 1-3) She wants to come out of the evil restrictions. She even wants to kill her father to make herself free from her confinement as she feels herself trapped because of her father’s hard personality: “Daddy, I have had to kill you.” (Daddy 6) She portrays her father as “Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,/ Ghastly statue with one gray toe/ Big as a Frisco seal...” (Daddy 8-10) She considers her father a Nazi German – “I thought every German was you,” and herself as a Jew – “I began to talk like a Jew/ I think I may well be a Jew.” (Daddy 29-35)

Plath represents herself as a victim of the Holocaust, a genocide in which Hitler’s Nazi Germany and its collaborators killed about six millions Jews. She addresses her father, “I have always been scared of you/ With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook.” (Daddy 41-42) She describes her father as ‘panzer-man’, ‘not God but a swastika so black no sky could squeak through.’ (Daddy 45-47) Plath uses ‘swastika’ which is ‘black’ as the symbol of Nazi Germany to suggest the brutality of Nazism and Fascism. She connects her father with the Fascist and represents her brutal attitude – “...the brute, brute heart of a brute like you.” (Daddy 49-50)

The influence of almost all the great writers like Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Lowell, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Ted Hughes was much on Sylvia Plath. But the most prominent influence in the shaping her personality was that of her father. She wanted from her childhood to be intimate with her father to draw his affection and love. But she was absolutely disillusioned instead of getting tender attitude and affectionate conduct. Her father’s death created a void in her life and she never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. His shadow looms large in her poetry as an ominous figure, a “Man in Black” as a colossus or as a creature of the nether world inviting her to join him. When her father was in bed, she used ‘to pray to recover’ him. (Daddy 14) When she was twenty, she attempted

suicide to get back to her father. She thought through death if she could be connected with him: “I was ten when they buried you/ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you.” (Daddy 57-59) She says, she thought that “even the bones would do.” (Daddy 60) She considered when she died she would be buried near her father and his bones would be sufficient for her.

Plath even tried to marry her dead father’s memory and treats her husband as surrogate father - “I made a model of you,/ A man in black with a Meinkampf look,” but she got from him “a love of the rack and the screw,” and gradually the surrogate father turned into ‘the vampire’ who sucked her blood ‘for a year, seven years.’ (Daddy 64-74) She found no difference between her father and her husband. In disgust and anxiety, she asserts, “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two.” (Daddy 71)

In *Lady Lazarus*, Plath confesses her ultimate release from the oppressed and victimized self and the rebirth of a new self “Out of the ash.” (Lady Lazarus 82) In this poem, Plath asserts, “I have done it again,” suggesting her several attempts at suicide. (Lady Lazarus 1) Every ten years, she manages to commit this. She describes herself as ‘a sort of walking miracle’ with bright skin as ‘Nazi lampshade’, her right foot ‘a paperweight’, and her face as fine and featureless as a ‘Jew linen’.(Lady Lazarus 3-9) She asserts “I am only thirty/ And like the cat I have nine times to die.”(Lady Lazarus 20-21) Every decade she attempts suicide. First time it happened when she was ten and she confesses “It was an accident.”(Lady Lazarus 36) She tried again for the second time “to last it out and not come back at all.”(Lady Lazarus 37-38) But all these attempts of her become failure as the people bring her back to life.

To her “Dying/ Is an art, like everything else,” and she affirms, “I do it exceptionally well.” (Lady Lazarus 43-45) She considers the act of suicide too easy without any hesitation: “It’s easy enough to do it in a cell/ It’s easy enough to do it and stay put,” but each time she has to come back theatrically to ‘the same place, the same face’ and has to listen irritating sought – ‘A miracle!’(Lady Lazarus 49-55)She relates her third suicidal attempt to the genocidal killing of the Jews by Nazis. She describes her unsuccessful attempts at committing suicide not as failures, but as successful resurrections, like those described in the tales of the Biblical character Lazarus who was resurrected by the Christ after death and the myth of the phoenix. By the end of the poem, the speaker has transformed into a firebird, effectively marking her rebirth, which some critics liken to a demonic transformation: “Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.”(Lady Lazarus 82-84) She warns “Herr God, Herr Lucifer” to beware of her because she will rise out of the ash and eat men like air. (Lady Lazarus 79) In this way she will be able to emerge into a new woman who is absolutely free from male dominance and the anxiety of life.

Kamala Das’s poems uncompromisingly embody the predicament of the modern Indian women who always want to free themselves sexually, domestically, and economically from the male-endorsed roles on them. Manmohan Bhatnagar rightly says, “Kamala Das’s poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self.” (Bhatnagar 7) Das is a revolutionary writer. Nila Shah and Pramod Kumar Nayar opine in *The Introduction of Modern Indian Poetry in English: Critical Studies*, “Kamala Das, indisputably India’s best woman-poet to date,

shocked and mesmerized audience with her confessional mode ... Writing a poetry that was remarkably sensual ... and constantly interrogating the “persistence” of English in her deeper thoughts, Das helped launch a different woman’s voice.” (12) *An Introduction* vivifies Das’s inner urge to establish herself as ‘I’ – equal to a male ‘I’, and a place where there will be no distinction between a male and a female. *The Old Playhouse* is obviously a protest against male-domination and interference in the life of a woman. This poem echoes Das’s feminine voice for self-establishment and freedom. Iyengar says, “Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate that the hurts she has received in an insensitive largely man-made world.”(Iyengar 680)

Das’s feeling of complete disillusionment in her sexual experiences with her husband as well as with other men, and her husband’s cruelty towards her are well reflected in her another poem *The Sunshine Cat*. Through the speaker’s description of her oppression and bondage in the hands of her cruel husband, Das actually portrays the real situation of a woman in the male-dominated society where a husband without any hesitation used to lock her wife every morning and unlock the room only when he returned home in the evenings: “Her husband shut her/ In, every morning, locked her in a room of books.”(The Sunshine Cat 14-15) This inhuman cruelty makes a woman finally ‘half dead’. Bhatnagar says, “Kamala Das’s poetry presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. Kamala Das inaugurates a new age for woman poets by doing so, an age seeking to forge new idiom, a new medium and newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic expression of the dominant culture... She is not celebrating unbridled sensuality, but projecting the stereotype of a wronged woman and at once asserting the need to establish her voice and identity.” (Bhatnagar 8)

During 50s when feminism was not really that advanced, women were still expected to live for their husband and they had also no courage to sit in front of the type writer and to develop art, Sylvia Plath could not care less about society and flipped off the male literary tradition and kept continuing her writing. Plath was undoubtedly a woman ahead of her time and became an influential inspiration for the feminists after her time. *Daddy* shows very authentically Plath’s protest against the ill-treatment of her father and her husband from whom she always expected to gain true love and affection. The ending of *Lady Lazarus* is most striking as it portrays Plath’s inner rage against the patriarchal society. The concluding lines well suggest her triumph over patriarchy, eating men in demon form. Going to analyze the later poems of Plath, Steiner views that “Sylvia Plath had no personal, immediate contact with the world of the concentration camps...But her last, greatest poems culminate in an act of identification of total communion with those tortured and massacred.”(Gill 61) Another critic Jacqueline Rose remarks, “The concept of an emergent female self-hood...has been so crucial in a reading of these late poems. It is a reading which...is strangely shared by one form of feminist criticism and by Ted Hughes. What the two have in common is an image of transcendence – poetic, psychological, political - in which Plath finally takes off from, burns herself out of, whatever it was (false self for Hughes, Hughes himself for feminism) that had her in its thrall.”(Gill 60) Plath’s another notable feminist poem *Strings* highlights the relationship between her and her husband and her resentment towards men in her married life and also towards women who sacrifice themselves for men. Through the portrayal of a masculine figure, the bee-keeper who exploits the labour and raw materials of the hive and

the fertility of the Queen Bee, Plath represents the exploitation done with her by her husband and also the manipulation done with all the helpless women by the male members of this society. Plath's feminine voice reaches the climactic point when the Queen Bee escapes from her ex-closure in "The mausoleum, the wax house." (Strings 60)

Thus, both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath are no doubt two memorable and influential names in the field of feminist movement. Their words are not mere words to establish their poetic skill and poetic identity. Their words are actually their firm protest against the meaningless and helpless position of women in the male-dominated society. Das, in her poetry, tries to arouse and stimulate women who are confined to their households and considered as mere commodities to be sold through marriage. Her poems are actually a search for true identity of a woman, a journey to establish self-freedom and value of own choice. Plath's *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy* are poems which seem written at the edge of sensibility. Her poetry focuses attention on her inner self and matters relating to the self. Her poems express a tension between the self and the external world, a tension which gets resolved through a metaphoric transformation of the self. The passion for destruction is also a creative passion. She represents herself as both a victim as well as a victor. To conclude, the poetry of Das and Plath, specifically the above discussed poems well suggest the inner struggle and urge for emancipation of every woman of this male-dominated society to live with free breath and free will.

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