

once are used by Karan's mother. She says, "Tell your mother that the bastard does not carry your family's name. Tell your mother the bastard's name is Mallika Rao. Rao, Rao, Rao" (425). At the proposal of becoming father to her and husband to her mother, she strongly raises issues on subjugation. It is expressed in the following lines:

Then, after you marry her, you'll want to take her away from our house and our friends and from her job- to your house and there you'll make her look after your old mother and look after your sisters and their husbands when they come, and spend all her time in the kitchen. That's what you'll make her do. (427)

Mallika's comments are very critical. She says "men never think" (434). Mallika assimilates and with conviction questions Karan's 'paternal function'. Karan wants to perform his paternal functions now and asks her "Mallika, Do you think I can sever all relations with you and your mother? Especially you? But her reply to him is very strong. "If you did it for thirteen years why can't you do it again?" (431). The shock of missing father in her life has been worse than on anyone else. Mallika has written an essay on the father titled: *My most unforgettable Character-my father Kunal*. Mallika's dreams and fantasy about the father as a savior have been expressed throughout the novel. At last, Mallika resolves to continue to live as they have been living for all these years without her biological father, Karan. Her mother Padma agrees to do so. Each father of second generation is contrasted with the 'father present' in the novel. five women, who revisit the story of Padma, compare the function of father with Mallika's absent father unintentionally. At the end of the novel it is revealed that different versions of absent father try to show the importance of father.

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## Confessions of Kamala Das: An Iconoclast of Her Generation

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**Abstract:** Confessional poetry as a genre emerged in the US in 1950s to aid the American youth drifting towards the drugs. Kamala Das did not attempt this but purely confessed her womanhood. Her truth was misinterpreted as lust and was crudely categorized as an adulterous feminine poet. Many elements of her poetry like the equations of Consciousness and Pain, use of language as salvation, constructing a selfhood and undoing it and the somnambulistic strain qualifies her to be compared with Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton but her assertion as a female poet in the male dominant generation and her unhesitant confessions undoubtedly make her an Iconoclast.

**Keywords:** Confessional poetry, Voyeurism, Somnambulistic Strain, Consciousness and Pain, Salvation.

*With words I had destroyed my life. I had used them like swords in what was meant to be a purification dance, but blood was unwittingly shed.* Kamala Das (My Story, 198)

An epitome of womanhood, a soul laid bare, a guilty and a pure writer, an unequipped housewife, a loving mother, an affectionate granddaughter, a teenager who migrated to womanhood, an innocent soul who was left alone in the sea of lust to experience and safeguard her identity, Kamala Das started writing at an early age only to discover it to be her greatest love and biggest fear. She emerged as an iconoclast not merely because she was a woman writer but because she had a voice and could speak about women as a woman. She wrote about her personal life, all that was a taboo and confessed it in the boldest language that a conventional nation could not accept: I am a freak. It's only | To save my face I flaunt, at | Times, a grand, flamboyant lust ('The Freaks')

Confession stems out of a need to lessen the burden of a heavy soul, the emergence of confiding oneself in a confidante, may it be a priest, a friend or a reader. Confessional poetry as a genre emerged to aid the same purpose, in the United States of America in 1950s. This genre gathered its concerns from 'the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologising of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor' (Charles Molesworth, 163-178). The variedly developing American middle class of the fifties, fascinated towards drugs was hardly interested in the post-Eliot poetry. The 'post-industrial' society, the 'lonely crowd' was intrigued and titillated by poets like Snodgrass and Sexton, who, focussing on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and the personal trauma included subject matters which were then considered taboo, such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide. "These are the tranquilized fifties, / And I am forty. Ought I regret my seedtime?" queried Lowell in his *Life Studies* (1959).

This sectioning of the personal and public growth suggested that the 'historical impotence' was at hand. Kamala Das did not attempt to satiate the hunger of a drifted youth or to provide a voyeuristic relief for her readers. She merely wrote her experiences ignoring the conventions and unafraid of the consequences. She never emerged as an example for the revolutionary youth; she was an obeying teenager and limited her experiences to the kaleidoscope of her family and society, but once the family forced her to womanhood and her husband assumed the responsibility of maturing her body, Das never stopped to turn back and so did her pen. Like in 'An Introduction' she remembers,

I was child, and later they|Told me I grew, for I become tall, my limbs| Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair (24-26)

She explored every sphere of womanhood and never hesitated to write about it. She does not regret any action of hers and never does shy away from her readers. She clarifies in her autobiography *My Story* that even

If my parents had talked to me and pointed out the wrong path and the right, I would still have led the life I led. I sincerely believe that knowledge is exposure to life. I could never bring myself to hang my life on the pegs of quotations for safety. I never did play safe. I compromised myself with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all boats that would have reached me to security. (204)

Kamala Das was not merely a confessional poet but had embodied it. She never teased her readers with mysterious themes or hidden motives. E.M.W.Tillyard divides poetry into two types; Direct and Oblique Poetry. Direct poetry refers to the type where the surface meaning is the same as deep meaning and Oblique poetry encompasses the poems where one thing is stated in terms of another. Although Das' career has a few oblique poems but she excelled in the field of direct poetry. She wrote explicitly about sexuality of women, relationships of man and woman, her memoirs, her illness and health, her sorrows and joy, her disconnection with God and re-establishment of faith, her husband and other men without hesitating and fearing her conventional reader's reaction. In *My Story* Das confesses,

I've stretched my two-dimensional|Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,|Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. (146)

The "long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe, / while breezing on their trust funds through the world" quoting Lowell from *Life Studies*, confessional poetry could be understood as envious of the way faith manages the universe. A confessional poet did not aim at becoming a Victorian sage but ended up merely as a "failed sage". In his voice, the poet wanted to speak of a community but the bold language and experimental subject matters blurred the eyes of the readers, belittling the poets to a lust stuck race, the feminine poets who would go to any limits of nudity merely to gain a readership, the mentally ill section who would postulate on taboo subjects merely to sensationalize. Though Kamala Das was often accused in such light, yet her autobiography laments that when she refused the sexual initiations of her excited readers they turned

into her bitterest critics. Das felt and wrote about the marginalised; her use of 'I' in her poems encompass the entire womanhood, she does not remain merely Kamala Das but metamorphose to a perfect blend of Amy, Kamala Das, Madhavikutty, Kamala Surayya, the shy Delhi school girls, the ideal housewives of slums, the elite adulterous Calcutta women, the grandmother who died waiting for her beloved granddaughter and the wife who always craved for her husband's love but only received ample lust. In 'An Introduction' she says,

I am sinner, | I am a saint. I am the beloved and the | Betrayed. I have no  
joys that are not yours, no | Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.  
(58-61)

K. Satchidanandan in his Memoriam on Kamala Das *Redefining the Genre* observes that 'Kamala's whole oeuvre thus becomes a declaration of the greatness of love that even while being expressed through the body also transcends the body' (251). Nearly always, the readers get stuck to the "For love is Narcissus at the water's edge" (*An Introduction*) imagery of Das' poetry and forms opinion of her lustful expressions only to categorize her as an adulterous feminine poet but fixating on the body images we often ignore the plight of a wife who screams, On sedatives | I grow more lovable | Says my husband... (*My Story*, 187). The three dots which we often ignore trace us to her transcendence. Her assertion in her autobiography 'I had shed carnal desire as a snake might shed its skin... I was no longer bed-worthy, no longer a charmer of lecherous men' (186) introduces us to the woman in her who played with lust but was not trapped in that vicious cycle, she trifled away and came back a writer, a mother, 'an owner of Nalapat house'. R. Raphael criticises Das of indulging in "pathetic exhibitionism" and "subtle eroticism" in his work *Kamala Das: The Pity of It*. He accuses Das of being a 'prisoner to her own passions and prejudices suppressing right reason, good sense and delicacy' (134). But Kamala Das not merely confessed her sexual experiences, she also unveiled her childhood, grandmother, Nalapat house, marriage, husband, cities, children, illness, hospitals, neighbours, friends, critics, sorcerer and decomposition. Charles Molesworth in *With Your Own Face On* diagnoses a "Somnambulistic Strain" drifting through the tones of confessional poets. The tone could be identified with the tone of sleepwalkers arising from the slow wave sleep stage in a state of low consciousness and performing activities usually performed during state of full consciousness. This expression could be justly witnessed in the poems of Sylvia Plath, like 'Tulips', where the "voice of narcotic numbness mixes with a sort of slow-motion hallucination". But Das writes fully conscious of her subjects and her tones always mimic the rhythm of her thoughts. In *The Dance Of Eunuchs* she seems admirably aware of the activities of the sterile vacuum of society and imagery shifts from "hot" to "wide skirts" to "cymbals" to "long braids" and "dark eyes" to "green tattoos" to "beating of drums and sorry breasts" to "half-burnt logs from funeral pyres" to "urine of lizards and mice". The recurrence of the

equation of Consciousness and Pain in the poetry of Sylvia Plath highlights another characteristic of confessional poets. The oft quoted lines from 'Lady Lazarus',

Dying | Is an art, like everything else | I do it exceptionally well | I do it so  
it feels like hell | I do it so it feels real. (43-47)

This brings out the consciousness of the biggest reality, the bitterest pain, Death. A major goal of the confessional poetry was to depict the reality, portray the sentiments even if it rendered the poets with 'hellish pain'. In *Tulips* the helplessness of Plath to see everything and the need to write every bit of it renders her blaming 'her pupil',

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff | Like  
an eye between two eye lids that will not shut | Stupid pupil, it has to take  
everything in. (8-10)

This consciousness seems didactic to her, it appears to drown her but at the same time offers her salvation and she emerges as pure as a nun:

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books | Sink out of sight,  
and the water went over my head | I am a nun now, I have never been so  
pure. (26-28)

Kamala Das's confessions also do not remain aloof from this queer equation of consciousness and pain. In her poem *Punishment In Kindergarten* she recalls,

My mind has found | An adult peace. No need to remember | That  
picnic day when I lay hidden | By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun  
| Standing lonely in the sky. (20-23)

Her *watching*, her consciousness, does not spare her adult peace and the pain of her kindergarten's punishment stays with her. Although she claims that she does not want to remember that day but the innocent mind's impression could not fade away. The biggest pain of death is also gracefully realised and accepted by her. In *My Story* she exclaims "We are trapped in immortality and our only freedom is the freedom to discompose..." (210), the pain is no less harsh on her but her confession is true. Another important critical aspect of confessional poetry is the language that would in itself provide the 'salvation' as Charles Molesworth puts in *With Your Face On* 'the language itself provided their salvation, that the redeeming word could see right what the intractable world of egos, projects, deceits, and self-destructions had insidiously twisted' (166). This accepted space of voluntarily moulding the language gave the poets ample room for developing their personal styles. Kamala Das's use of bold and unconventional language carved a niche and established her as an iconoclast in the Indian-English idiom. Words like 'warm shock of menstrual blood', the musky sweat between the breasts', 'the jerky way he urinates', 'my pubis', 'lesbian', 'frigid', 'queer', 'sandal', 'scent', 'lipstick', 'breast', 'flesh', 'lips', 'kiss', 'embrace', 'womb', 'honeymoon', 'eunuch', 'bloodstain', 'schizophrenia', 'urine', 'cabaret', 'cistern' not only shocked the readers but invited undue attention. These words only provided her the much deserved salvation and did not attempt to create any sensual voyeuristic pleasure. They intended to express not excite.

Although broadly confessional poetry was categorised as a post modern genre, but confessional poets did not attempt to break any established norms. The poetries and lives of Sexton, Plath and Das all came to the inevitable, irreducible choice of either becoming God or resigning consciousness altogether. The suicides of Sexton and Plath confirmed their associations with Nihilism, the starkest relief to the audiences who anticipated a successful life of a modern artist but rather quenched the conventional prejudice of doom of the poetic egos. Plath suffered 'the head in the oven doom' and Sexton died of suffocating herself with carbon monoxide, turning on the engines of her car in a closed garage. Kamala Das was tempted towards infidelity because of her 'bad marriage' but she never gave up on life. Every time she would be hospitalized, she would find an excuse to cheat death. She never proved to be a nihilist in her life; she did not negate but accepted whatever life offered. After giving birth to her third son, she confessed in *My Story* "I walked proud as the Virgin Mary holding my baby by his chubby hands" (167). Here she appears to have assumed the role of God, the role of a Creator. Towards the end, we witness her losing the consciousness of materialism altogether,

If we were to forget the words past, present and future and were to see life as a collage, a vast assembly of things and people and emotions we shall stop grieving for the dead stop pining for the living and stop accumulating visible wealth (209).

Das died in a hospital in Pune but never lost the essence or love for her writing, she confesses towards the end that her only love that was left was for her readers now

I had realized by then that the writer has none to love but the readers. She would have proved herself to be mere embarrassment to the members of her family, for she is like a goldfish in a well-lit bowl whose movements never kept concealed (201)

Confessional poetry did not merely limit itself at constructing a selfhood but 'undoing' it. The poetic genius aims at turning the most intimate moments into a ritual of psychoanalysis and sometimes a sarcastic discourse. Sylvia Plath's artistic attention was focussed at 'concealment and mystery'. Her confessions of her darkest secrets and her revealing the boldest subjects only directed the readers towards solving the mystery of her written word; every discourse analysed and every field of study exploited. In 'Daddy' she leaves the reader in a mysterious maze rather than simplifying it, "You do not do, you do not do |Anymore' (1-2) The opening lines leave the reader shocked of what would she accuse her father of? Lamenting what he did or lamenting what he does not do 'anymore'. "Daddy, I have had to kill you." (6) A shocking confession made, as if the reader were priest and could gift her redemption from her 'sin'. The recurrence of words like "wars, wars, wars" or "ich, ich, ich, ich" suggest the hesitation of a daughter, the memories that feel too ashamed to articulate in continuity, the confession of a woman who killed her molester,

If I've killed one man, I've killed two— | The vampire who said he was  
you | And drank my blood for a year, | Seven years, if you want to know.  
(76-78)

The daughter who is so sure of her father's murder and his doings uses “if”, “if I've killed you”. She does not doubt his activities but gives an impression of a fading memory. She creates a mystery and to epitomise this impact she writes, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through” (84).

Calling her father a 'bastard' was the boldest confession Plath could have made. A word that would at once summon Freud to psychoanalyse the daughter, create a mystery and dissolve it altogether. In an interview with Atma Ram, Kamala Das regards 'The Old Playhouse' as her best poem. Das has compressed her entire married self pity in the poem, but her use of words leave the readers disgusted of the arrangement,

You dribble spittle into my mouth, you poured | Yourself into every nook  
and cranny, you embalmed | My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.  
(10-12)

Her play of words made the lust 'poor' and the sweet juices, 'bitter'. After picturing the male dominant household, she describes herself as the 'playhouse',

No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old | Playhouse with all  
its lights put out. The strong man's technique is | Always the same, he  
serves his love in the lethal doses (24-26)

These three lines summarise her entire married life. A Freudian analysis could solve the mysteries that would otherwise only be revealed by reading her autobiography and discounting a sympathetic reading of it. Freud, when talking about unconscious, subconscious and conscious, offered few commonly associated 'stock symbols commonly associated with genitals'; anything that has a closed entity could be used as a symbol of the female sex organs. Thus, in the poem the use of expressions like 'shallow convulsions', 'spittle into my mouth', 'cut flowers in the vases have begun to smell of human sweat' and predominantly the title 'The Old Playhouse' itself refers to 'abnormal sex', the lustful relationship always smelled of male orgasms and the unsatisfied wife who was 'taught to break saccharine into your tea and to offer at the right moment the vitamins'. In her course to confess, Das does not leave any stones unturned. From the lesbian admirers to the lustful relationships, she unveils it all. In *My Story* she innocently relates “I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons” (195). She never pleads to the reader to understand her or show her a path of salvation but does request her husband to pick up her 'broken face' from 'the debris of house-wrecks' (199). In her poem 'Relationship', she snatches away the dominance that her husband enjoyed and took all the credit to herself, It was my desire that made him male | And beautiful (5-6). Das emerges as a woman whose only love was to write, who could only be betrayed by words:

Betray me? | Yes, he can, but never physically | Only with words that curl  
their limbs at | Touch of air and die with metallic sighs. (9-12)