

## Revisiting the Themes of Death and Identity in the Poetry of Kamla Das and Sylvia Plath- A Comparative Study

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### *Abstract*

*Kamla Das and Sylvia Plath are two poets who have much in common and yet are distinct. Das is an Indian confessional feminine poet and Plath an American. Both explore their identities as women in their poetry and deal with the theme of death in their own different ways. Kamla Das has earned a secure place as a pioneer in the expression of feminine sensibility against the conservative background of Indian cultural ethos. The poetry of Kamla Das reflects the gender inequality persisting in the socio-cultural Indian milieu to the very core; Committed to the language of the common woman, Kamla Das attempts to explore the deepest and permanent aspirations and doubts of a woman. In most of her poems Sylvia Plath rebels against the social conventions and feudal relationship nurtured by the society. In her poems she emphasizes the conflict between the social boundaries and woman's creative aspirations. Kamla Das also portrays the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male dominated world and her poetry is an acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. The research paper attempts to revisit the themes of death and identity in their poetry in a comparative assessment.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Death, Feminine sensibility, Gender inequality, Love

The poetry of Kamla Das (1934-2009) and Sylvia Plath (1932-63) has much in common cutting across the geographical and cultural boundaries. Kamla Das has earned a secure place as a pioneer in the expression of feminine sensibility against the conservative background of Indian cultural ethos and the poetry of Sylvia Plath, a prominent American poet of the confessional school reflects the white American women's rebellion against the patriarchal values of the suburban middle class. Plath's first volume of poetry *The Colossus* appeared in 1960 and in 1963 her only novel "The Bell Jar" and less than a month after its publication, she committed suicide in London. Her poetry expresses self, which is for her, either a rigid, false persona or an amorphous,

uncongealed and fluid category and is best reflected in her collection *Ariel* (1965). She was influenced by Margaret Atwood's and Anne Sexton's investigation of feminist and psychic reflections in their poems. However, Plath differs from Atwood and Sexton though she shares their dominant confessional strain. The work of Sylvia Plath represents romanticism in extreme, repeatedly sees relationships as predatory and intense private agonies are made public.

The poetry of Kamla Das reflects the gender inequality persisting in the socio-cultural Indian milieu to the very core. Committed to the language of the common woman Kamla Das attempts to explore the deepest and permanent aspirations and doubts of a woman. In most of her poems

she rebels against the social conventions and feudal relationship nurtured by the society. In her poems she emphasizes the conflict between the social boundaries and woman's creative aspirations. Kamla Das also portrays the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male dominated world and her poetry is an acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman. The ultimate resilience in the face of any relationship that threatens to devastate the vital and potential self of Indian women marks the majority of her poems bringing out the gender inequality. Her poems in fact reflect the sensitivity of the modern Indian woman with a strong ambivalence of awareness of self identity and socio-cultural roots and background. She attempts to explore her personality in terms of the male dominated Indian social milieu and finally succeeds in saying- "I am sinner, I am saint, I am beloved and the betrayed."

Both the poets whether it is Kamla Das or Sylvia Plath have this strong sensitivity about their roots, their identity and the need to belong to themselves. A deep disillusionment stemming from their relationships brings out the deep pain and agony in their poetry. Both of them have elements of confessionalism in their works. The similarities and differences between the two are elementary and intricate. Reminiscence and nostalgia in the poetry of Das is more intense whereas in Plath is a distinct obsession with death. Plath reflects her 'intense private agonies' in her poetry whereas Kamla Das reflects her all are 'intense private passions'.

Kamla Das mirrors her deepest emotions. She introduces herself simply -"I

am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two and dream in one."

But moves on to- I am sinner, I am saint; I am the beloved and the betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours (An Introduction). Plath on the other hand mentions death in her introduction- 'and I a smiling woman. I am only thirty, and like a cat I have nine times to die.' (Lady Lazarus). The introduction of Kamla Das has the subtle mood of somber *tete-e-tete* and blends of fantasy and realism. She speaks of herself with uncompromising honesty- "We kissed and we loved, all in a fury, for another short hour or two. We went all warm and wild and lovely. After that love became a swivel door, when one went out another came in".

The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamla Das has a distinct taste of Electra-complex. Plath herself wrote of her 'Daddy' as "spoken by a rich girl with an Electra-complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Later, in another poem 'Colossus' she addressed her dead father- "I shall never get you put together entirely". In Daddy she talks to her father innocently like a child, her yearning to get back and the underlying meaning of her immense love for him becomes very obvious. She regrets intensely his passing away but presents the emotion in a totally different tone-"you stand at the blackboard, daddy/in a picture I have of you/a cleft in your chin instead of your foot/But no less a devil for that, no not/ any less the black man who/bit my pretty red heart in two".

Sylvia Plath holds death as something very dear. Death occurs eventually after the personality's

disintegration, because for her death and horror images existed since her childhood. Her poetry has been rightly called 'the longest suicide note ever written'. Her poems reveal the painful intensity and desperation of a mind seeking to express, in hideous clarity visions of one trapped in 'The Bell Jar' for whom 'the world itself is a bad dream'.

Das has all the several undercurrents of nostalgia for the past and her need for love manifests itself in the form of death poetry. She accepts death as inevitable and as the reality and so seems prepared for it all the time. In her poem 'Request' she writes- When I die/Do not throw the meat and bones away/But pile them up/And/Let them tell/By their smell/What life was worth/On this Earth/What love was worth/In the end."

Plath manifests the same emotions- "I was ten when they buried you. At twenty- I tried to die and get back, to you." (Daddy)

Similar yearning for the lost father is to be found in the poetry of Kamla Das. She beautifully concludes a poem nostalgically by remembering her father very fondly. She writes- 'I do not bother to tell that I have misplaced/ a father somewhere/ and I look for him now everywhere.' For two poets the relationship with men is based on a deep longing to be loved and accepted, as a child is accepted by its father. Their psyche holds intense love and nostalgia for their lost fathers and it is this security that the fathers provided that they look for in their relationships. The intense attachment to their fathers and the need to be accepted gives their poetry this subtle shade of Electra-complex. It heightens their sensitivity and transforms poems of physical love into

celebrations of emotions. Plath in her poem 'Daddy' complains while deeply missing her dad- You died before I had time. In the waters of beautiful Nauset/ I used to pray to recover you/ Ache due. I could not talk to you". The deep underlying lust and bruised sentiments of a daughter fondly remembering her father and complaining about the pain his absence causes, for was a father whom she likened to God makes this poem a masterpiece of contemporary literature. Later in another poem 'Çolossus' she addresses her dead father- "I shall never get you put together entirely". In 'Daddy' she writes-"I was ten when they buried you/ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back to you."

Kamla Das's Descendents (1967) has illness and suffering as the major theme. Death occurs in various images from the substitute for love to the final achievement of rest and peace. The concept of death for Das is it specifically to be accepted as inevitable- it is/ not for us to scrape the walls of womb's for/ Memories, not for us even to/ Question death/ we give ourselves to the fire or to/ the hungry earth to be slowly eaten/ Devoured".

While Plath sees a certain charm in death and relates it cohesively to personality disintegration, Das sees death as a substitute to life where there is no love; it is just a reality that is inescapable. She speaks of her death -rites in 'The Joss- Sticks at Cadells Road'- "They burn as Joss Sticks/ The poor man's bodies/Those dark, thin corpses/ All bound with strungs of tuberoses/ And the brilliant marigold When they feed the body/ to the fire, the fire/ leapt high, snarling beast like" Das has all the severe undercurrents of nostalgia for the past and her need for love

manifests itself in her death poetry. She accepts it as a reality and says 'In Request'- "When I die/ Do not throw the meat and bones away/ Put plie them up/And/ Let them tell/ By their smell/ What life was worth/ On this earth/ What love was worth/ In the end". Kamla Das sees death as the end of her physical being but not for her soul which is immortal. In her autobiography she writes- "I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence tears shall dry on my son's cheeks. Their wives shall bring forth brilliant children. It is enough for me. It's more than enough."

Plath's identity takes its roots from political. She has seen the generic nature of these private catastrophes of the self, their public origin founded on mass manipulation. Esther Greenwood in 'The Bell Jar' links her electric shock treatment with the electrocution which is the Rosenberg's punishment for rebellion against the American way of life. She fears most of all to be consigned to the charity wards 'with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in a basement.' In 'Tulips' even the smiles of husband and children in a photograph- 'Catch onto my skin/ Little smiling hooks'. The deep essence of Plath's poetry is American and the distinct self- oriented tone whereby she seems to pour out her soul onto paper results from the impact of the American feminist movement.

The poetry of Kamla Das comes from her socio- cultural milieu of the Nayar community of Southern India. Her quest for identity finds its roots in her childhood and its absence since she was married at the age

of fifteen to a man she had never met before. In 'My story' she writes- 'Not knowing what else to ask, I asked for love. He drew a youth of sixteen into the bedroom and closed the doors. He did not beat me but my sad woman body felt so beaten. Later in her poem- 'The Old Playhouse' she says- 'You plan to tame a swallow, to hold her/In the long summers 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'. For Kamla Das the concept of self-identity is of belonging to herself emotionally and being accepted as an individual. Her poem 'I Shall Some Day' presents this need to belong to herself- 'I shall some day leave. Leave the cocoon/ You built around me with morning tea/ Love- words flung from doorways and of course/ Your tired lust. I shall some-day take/ Wings, fly around, as often petals do/ when free.'

Thus, she reflects her quest for self-identity and her need to be loved. Das undoubtedly finds her identity in the patriarchal Indian society, bogged down with deep cultural norms and social influences. She tries to discover her identity as a woman in Indian background but cuts across the geographical barriers with her deep sensitivity and voices the entire womankind.

For Plath writing about exploring her identity was much more spontaneous than for Kamla Das. When Das started writing women's liberation did not carry much weight in India and since she expressed her femineity so candidly, she was considered as a controversial writer. Despite the differences the poetry of Plath and Das

represent their respective socio- cultural milieus and their traditional backgrounds.

Thus, to conclude, the themes of death and identity in the poetry of Kamla Das and Sylvia Plath are reflected in their search for identity as women while their socio- cultural milieus distinguish their poems distinctively from each- another.

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