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## The Confessional Mode In The Poetry of Kamala Das

**Major Prof. Sultana Khan**

Dean of Arts, Department of English,  
Anwarul-uloom College, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

### Abstract

Confessional literature emerges from a tradition associated with Christianity. It is often identified with autobiography and is highly subjective. It is a poetic technique adopted to reveal and even dramatise the poet's life. It creates an environment where the writer leads a life of struggle, improvisation and resistance. Such poetry translates autobiographical facts into epic narratives.

Quest for identity, the dominant mood in confessional poetry, finds an important place in the poetry of Kamala Das. The man woman relationship which paves way to the identification of the searcher's individuality is of great interest to her. In almost all her poems she explores the role of a woman in relationship to men, this is where her poetic concepts contrast with those of the poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Gauri Deshpande.

Confessional mode of writing has its virtual origin in the mid 50s in America, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath being its chief exponents. Confessional poetry is a hybrid mode of poetry that came into existence as a consequence of the popularization of the psychological studies, the spread of the Freudian and Jungian Theories and the emergence of the feminist movement. Confessional poetry means objective, analytical or even clinical observation of incidents from one's own life whether tinged with comedy as irony, self loathing or compassion. One thing that these writers have in common is the conception of the self as passive: the confessional poets alternately flagellate and flaunt, punish and cosset themselves. They see themselves as victims and heroes – sufferers through their sensitivity, heroic in their suffering which renders a peculiar tone or rather range of tones – nervous and hard sullen and self-pitying, the nervous breakdown often ending up in suicide. Suicide as the guarantor of integrity and the procurer of authenticity is the true identifying preoccupation of the school. The chaos of the psychic situation becomes the ground of a reoriented art in which the beset self is the testing ground and the embodiments of all human possibilities – the terrors, pains, early miseries, regrets vexations, (and lassitudes) remain as the proofs of one's existence, the degree of the intensity confirming one's reality." The artistic problem is to make a genuine poetry out of the language of untrammelled self awareness.

**Key words: Dominant, Impulse, Sublime, Cruelty, Hypocrisy, Identity, Quest, Vision, Ignorance, Womanhood, Formal Crisis, Ambivalence Creativity, Observation, Gender Anxiety, Alienated Emancipation.**

## Introduction:

In the following pages an attempt will be made to outline what makes the poetry of Kamala Das a unique phenomenon and at the same time gives it the flavour of the composite poetic tradition.

Kamala Das's first collection of poems *Summer in Calcutta* appeared when Indo-Anglian poets had shifted from the themes belonging to the colonial past to personal themes. The Confessional mode was already established in the English speaking countries, especially America. The Indian women poets with their love for the intensely personal. Confessional mode and with certain amount of attraction for the feminist views were all actively writing poetry. While their attempt was to explore the self in depth, most of them could only scratch the surface. However the poetry of Kamala Das has been hailed as excellent because of the apparent imaginative, daring stylistic innovation, richness of energy, and music. All these qualities spring from her poetic genius, she is a natural poet, not a semi-skilled craftsman trying to construct poetic artefacts. Kamala Das is an investigator of the impulses, one who is obsessed with the flow of inner experience. Being a natural poet her poems may show different levels of poeticality, depending upon the nature of the spatio-temporal effect on her senses and intellect. The natural poet, promoted by the spatio-temporal effect, goes on writing till the inspiration fades away. The following words of Kamal Das contain this idea:

*"I write only at night when I am left alone and every one else is asleep. Then the world suddenly comes to focus, becomes more my own". (20) The sudden excitement of the poets creative faculty by some impulse generated by stimulus in a spatio-temporal context results in poetry.*

Kamala Das's poetry is spontaneous, straightforward and simple. She opens up for the reader new fields of feelings and emotions in an earnest manner. What she presents before the reader is a synthesis of rare and contrasting thoughts of lonely minds. She perceives the world as one perceives it in a dream. Though she believes that she has not achieved the emotional maturity to write sublime poetry, her heart flows in words abounding in sensual rhythms and soulful laments. The experience she concretises is her's as well as anybody else's.

On another plane we find in her poetry an alert and inquisitive approach to life. She draws inspiration from the simple, the said and the gorgeous events in every day life. The evenings in the old Nalpet house, the silence around the hanging corpse of a maid servant, the frenzied dance of the eunuchs in the burning Calcutta afternoon, the smell of death in the hospital wards, the Anamalai hills, a brown Concrete in a Sri-Lankan Street, a vigorous but loveless lover, all inspire her to write. And she writes, dipping the sharp end of her imagination in her simple but a sensitive, sensual but sad heart, about the mundane and ethered and the reader witnesses the coalescence of various emotions in all her four published books of verse.

With her personal experience at the core Kamala Das has succeeded in writing delightful poetry and has gained and applause of the people who once showed on her the version of negative criticism. It is with extreme sincerity that she pictures her quest for identity. It appears in the song of a heart that longs for sexual satisfaction, in the recollection of the purity and playfulness of the childhood, in the broken womanhood, in the love of the grandmother, in the cruelty and hypocrisy of men, in the painful realisation of failing youth and approaching old age and in the despair of old age itself.

The majority of her poems present her personal ecstasies, sorrows and convictions in a way that could shatter the ideas. That an average India had on his surroundings at the time of this composition Devendra Kohili who finds a “*passionate sincerity*” in her poetry says that “She can hypnotise one with the weight of her personal passion which colours her attitude to the external world... This is apparent in a good number of her poems. Anisur Rahman claims that the images in Kamala Das’s poems undergo metamorphosis and became symbols giving strength and vigour to her poetry” His discussion on the use of words in her poetry shows that she is well at home with the English language – her repertoire of English vocabulary is sufficient to formally represent her vision as a poet.

Calling Kamala Das a purely confessional poet means not doing justice to her vision as a poet. As we have seen in the preceding observation, Kamala Das has the capacity to transcend the purely personal and embrace the non-personal and finally merge with it. While her quest for identity makes her a confessional poet, many of her poems express deep sympathy for the suffers - be it about an old woman’s longing lingering look’ from behind the window bars, or be it about a

bleeding brown comrade in Sri Lanka, her poems initiate the fusion of herself with the surrounding.

Kamala Das is often grouped under the confessional poets. She has succeeded in going into the sub-conscious needs, desires and aspirations of the feminine mind. Anisur Rahman comments in this connection “As a poet, she explores her psychic geography with an exceptional female energy and achieves the capability to express her inimitable vision through the technique of sincerity” (42).

While there is so much in her poetry which seems to draw from earlier Indian traditions there are also various shades of physical love described in the confessional mode. This mode of expression suits her as she ventilates her personal experiences and humiliations and also the intensity of her expresses. Kamala Das’s ‘outcries’ are on the central ground of the painful experience of being a woman. What has stirred her sensitive psyche is the dehumanisation of woman as a being. The spiraling self, as an insect pinned to a wall, rages within against this lack of social recognition for her lot. The articulation of this anger becomes impossible in any socially accepted language formulas. Kamala Das is a self conscious poet and does not pretend ignorance about her unique position of a feminist mouthpiece.

The root of every problem for her is the distinct phases of alteration and change from childhood to adolescence and then to womanhood. The relative manner in which she presents the various facets of growth in life ultimately contributes to one simple summation, that is life in its overall presentation of growth and development offers no relative comfort or ease. In all probability life has to be lived and for the poet it has to be lived with all contingent regrets and distinct agonies from time to time. The manner in which she presents the agony of living ultimately matches with that of the Greek poets and philosophers who untiringly depicted life as a grim ironic presentation having no ease or respite from the pains of living. But she very often attempts a poetic retreat into the good old days as in ‘*My Grandmother’s House*’ wherein she says:

*‘There is a house now far away, where once.*

*I received love,*

*You cannot believe, darling, loved...*

*(My Grandmother's House', Summer in Calcutta)*

This kind of need for a regress into the childhood is a formal stylistic device in the Romantics and their followers, the 'Confessionalists'. It is rather than their potential manner of expressing the painful undecided nature of being-in-the here-and-now which is a matter of inordinate crisis and indecisiveness. The imaginative stress on the need for escape from the arduous nature of existing in the present into a childhood that might have been comparatively free from constraints. This escape, as cherished by Kamla Das, is just her own manner of poetically suggesting that the present is insufferable.

Confessional poets court death and disintegration as well as psychic wholeness and insights. This tension between two opposites is reflected in the constantly shifting moods of Confessional Poetry. "Composition" embraces such diverse moods as passionate, attachment, agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust and inhuman bitterness

Kamala Das, who writes in the tradition of Confessional writers indulges in a great deal of heart baring. "The poetry never reaches a stage of sickness and breakdown but in her morbid moods Kamala Das comes close to the more pathological states of Confessional poetry when she steers clear of self pity on one hand, and the exhibitionism on the other, she is profoundly moving, and the loneliness and despair come through."

Das seems to be profound when she makes loneliness and despair come through. Self pity and exhibitionism are somewhat unpoetic, but loneliness and despair are poetic.

Most of the poems by Kamala Das are explorations of the gender roles an Indian woman plays – the embarrassment they involve, the resistance they provoke, and the pain they cause. The Confessional in Kamala Das is a dramatisation of the self, to place itself in focus with itself. This device is to formalise the process of analysis and adjustment of the problems that crop up from arranged marriage at an early age, she confesses in her autobiography, *My Story* all her frustrations, doubts, and anxieties stem from an early age.

The poem "Of Calcutta", besides making a general reference to the gender role, specifies the essence of a wounded self in an angry mode wherein she refers to her residence as "my husband's home". The image of a "trained circus dog" makes obvious the sort of home in which

stays. But she does not forget to ask, “*where is my soul, my spirit, where the muted tongues of my desire*”? Her creative concern seems to find her soul, her spirit, to articulate her muted desire and thus to make herself in the process of which she learns the poetic of confessional mode. Although Kamala Das seems to be intensely aware of the self, the critical consideration is whether she has succeeded in discerning appropriate language and structure to communicate it.

“*An Introduction*” is one of the poem which seems to clarify doubts as to the poet’s capacity to discover an adequate linguistic medium. A mild sort of irritation and an anxiety to assert one’s hold over the medium of articulation are combined to create a strongly felt need to confess and to communicate. The success of the Confessional poems seems to depend on the honesty of the self and the inquiring mind’s integrity in thought, feeling and creation and Kamala Das impresses by being very much herself in her poems. What the speaker tells us is that she has a mind that sees, hears and is aware. The task of a poet is to find a linguistic structure and a frame of reference to communicate what he or she sees, hears and is aware of. This creative urge leads to a confession of the speaker’s experience urge leads to a confession of her speaker’s experience as a married woman, not exactly knowing what marriage is, and what it demands of her as a woman.

The concluding section of the poem brings to the surface the problematic of a woman’s identity, the male identity is everywhere taken for granted as suggested by the image “*the sword in its sheath*”. The poem ends with the enumeration of unconventional role a woman is not expected to play by categorizers. But notwithstanding moral-socio-political categorization, every Woman has self and the subjective need to call herself “I”. In Kamala Das’s poems, the quest for identity of a woman as a woman goes a long way in making the self out of various disjunctive psychosomatic pressures which makes her sometimes a victim and sometimes a crazy woman in whom we find an evaluating reason. Writing on the motif of isolation in contemporary American women’s poetry, Deborah Pope says,

In modern confessional poetry, as an extension of the Academic tradition, the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of his time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience he is simultaneously relaying the social fabric of his world. Yet, for the female confessional poet, there is not, the same extension. She is not Everyman, and is hardly

Everywoman. Her experience only serves to reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. Although solidarity or community with other woman very real sense male confessional poets do be speak trauma of their times, poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton remain individual “Crazy woman”.

But in case of Kamala Das’s poems, her experience of isolation instead of being internalised surfaces and becomes part of a woman’s experience in its macro-cosmic implication in the concluding lines of the poem.

This could be seen clearly in the poem “*The Looking Glass*” in which Kamala Das exhorts women to be cautious in matters of love, it is a poem which suggests that woman’s weakness lies in her body, which has its needs. The possibility of living without satisfying its endless hungers is depicted in a sad state. The poem underscores male exploitation. It also shows that the female body seems to make her a victim of male domination, which she wholeheartedly resents. The anatomical images found in the poem seem to have their source in her intrinsic dislike of body, which seems to limit the horizon of the self. The anatomical images, free and frank erotic lyricism are part of the creative repertory of Kamala Das as is the case with other women poets.

### **Conclusion:**

Kamala Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian Women’s ambivalence. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional women in her make up, so that not only can she speak of the common woman and her basic need of love and security with inside knowledge, but cannot help, in addition expressing an ambivalence proceeding from her own duality the combination in herself of a need for domestic security and the desire for independence, an independence not consistent with a domestic mode of living.

Kamala Das writes with a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context Most Indian poets in English do not have the candour of Kamala Das in creativity analyzing and evaluating their experience. Just as the American Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton she exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood.

Hence, Kamala Das may or may not be serious about women's emancipation from male domination, but as a poet she is seriously and creatively concerned with her own identity as a woman. While exploring the theme of making the self she also explores the possibility of adapting of the language of men poets to voice her own feelings as a woman, wife, mother and a citizen.

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