CONFESSION AS A STRATEGY IN
THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

SYNOPSIS

Thesis submitted to The University of Burdwan in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Arts (English)

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August 2013
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Synopsis

The general trend of Kamala Das criticism, by and large, has been to regard her either as a ‘confessional poet’ or as a feminist writer. Studies relating to ‘Kamala Das as a confessional poet’ are not many and they are mainly of referential type. And a survey of Kamala Das criticism confirms that so far no critical study on Kamala Das has dealt with the issue of confession as a strategy in her poems. My endeavour here is to show how Das has strategically used the mode of confession in her poems to unburden the psychological weight of her perceived victimization. They read like an exorcism and the persona in the poems finds a kind of radical freedom in their composition. At the same time these poems are of universal interest as they impart the truth about gender inequality and oppression, about the need to unify aspects of the self and because they show the inscriptions of collective pain. Kamala Das through her confessions touches irresistible pain that unites us or tears us apart. The poems recognize the gravity of woman’s situation in society which is a succession of atrocities. Hence, reading of these poems does produce a therapeutic effect on the reader, too.

The first chapter “Introductory” is divided into three subsections. In the first section I’ve tried to trace briefly the history of American Confessional School. The troubled psyche of the Post-Second World War period in Europe resulted in a certain sense of identity-crisis among people and consequently this prompted a body of contemporary American poets to adopt a very personal mode of poetry writing that went against the tradition laid down by poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The intimate details of life were reflected in the poems of poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrianne Rich. These poets detached themselves from the New Critics who considered text as autonomous and gave no importance to the author’s intention.
Issues like psychological turmoil, suicidal tendencies, domestic violence became the themes in their poems. My discussion starts with Rosenthal’s review of Robert Lowell’s collection of poems entitled *Life Studies*. Rosenthal termed Lowell’s particular type of poems as confessional. In these poems although the poet is clearly a part of the drama, the emotions and feelings revealed are not simply expressions of the poet. On the contrary, they expose us to a reality that is universal and a psychology we are familiar with on a wide spectrum. In the second part of this chapter I’ve mentioned Kamala Das as the pioneer of confessional poetry in India. In Indian writing in English her poems appeared shocking as well as disturbing to the contemporary society. She told in her autobiography *My Story* that she wanted to disturb the society. In this part of the chapter I’ve tried to find out briefly the reason behind her intention to talk deliberately about her personal experiences in her poems. Her disturbed marital relationship and its consequent psychological turmoil almost confined her to the traditional role of Indian women. But ultimately her rebellious attitude helped her to even the score and protest against the conventional social system. Her poems acted as a powerful tool through which she voiced her strong disapproval of the biased and prejudiced attitude of society towards women. In the third part I have tried to show briefly the attempts made by women poets in ancient India writing in the same vein. Their poetry also focused on feminine issues and the female body. I have tried to discuss some poems written by them. But such poems were small in number and they were unable to influence others. Kamala Das’s poems proved seminal in this respect. She is successful in influencing other poets like Mamta Kalia, Eunece de Souza and Meena Kandasamy.

In the second chapter “Survey of Kamala Das Criticism” I have done a detailed survey of the important studies on Kamala Das. Most of these critical works have tried to show her either as a love poet or as a feminist writer. Some of them have even labelled her as a poet merely dealing
with carnal pleasures. Again some critics prefer to concentrate on the spiritual aspect of Das’s poetry and interpret the poems dealing with Radha-Krishna myth with spiritual connotations. However, some of these critical studies deal with the confessional aspect of Kamala Das. But most of them do not go for an in-depth analysis of Das as a confessional poet. They represent her as a confessional poet writing in the same tradition of her American counterparts, Plath and Sexton. My attempt in the subsequent chapters is to show how Das has strategically used the mode of confession in her poems to explore various socio-psychological issues.

The third chapter entitled “Confession as a Therapeutic Strategy”, deals with how confession has been used by Kamala Das as a therapeutic strategy. The chapter has got a four-part structure. In the first part I have tried to show how over a period of time poetry therapy has been proving useful in treating patients suffering from psychiatric problems. Poetry always possesses a therapeutic value. From ancient time poetry has been considered as having a curative function. Patients suffering from psychological imbalances were treated with poetry reading as a therapy. Significantly enough, Greek God Apollo is the God of both poetry and medicine. I have tried to trace the significant relationship between the ancient use of poetry as healer and its present day version of Bibliotherapy (which is afterwards called ‘Poetry Therapy’). Taking cue from the analysis of noted therapists like Nicholas Mazza and J. Leedy, I have tried to show that poetry in general and confessional poetry in particular has the power to purge out psychological crisis in a patient. In the second, third and fourth parts I have focused on Kamala Das’s poems where she confesses her very personal experiences; they help her ventilate her pent-up feelings. The second and third parts deal in detail with her poems like “Composition”, “The Invitation”, “Suicide”, “Substitute”. The dominant image in all these poems is the sea with which the speaker persona is engaged in an intimate communication. The sea is not a mute presence here; rather it takes part in
the dialogue with the speaker persona who is no other than the poet herself. The poet finds in it the ultimate abode of human life. After life’s fretful fever the sea appears to be a soothing self ultimately appeasing the tormented and tortured soul. It acts like a safe refuge. Das considers ‘suicide’ by drowning herself in the sea as the final act of finding solace from the life she undergoes. The desperation arising out of failed love in married life leads her to construct the image of sea which can solve her problems by consuming her. The fourth part deals with a series of Kamala Das’s poems known as Anamalai poems. The poems have a political background and they deal with the poet’s psychological upheaval following her defeat in parliamentary election of 1984. In these poems the soothing and alienated environment of the Anamalai hills helped her to convalesce soon. Here she found the deep association of nature undisturbed by the clamour of crowded city. The hills, the mountains and the beautiful landscape offered her a chance to escape from the mundane reality and its hardships. The poems speak of a withdrawal from the outside world and there prevails an all enveloping silence which soothes her troubled spirit. The ‘deaf-mute’ Anamalai gives her solace and comfort. By a strategic use of her very intimate details of life in these poems she successfully uses the confessional mode of writing to heal her troubled self. She has been able to universalize the first person in her poems even as it dwells upon the poet speaker’s solitary grief. The detailed analysis of these poems shows the therapeutic value of her poems. She becomes both the counsellor and the counsellee in this process of poetry therapy.

The fourth chapter “Writing the Body: A Strategy of Protest” has a bipartite structure. In the first part I have tried to show how confessional poetry can be used as another manipulative ploy to undo the age-old prejudice and chauvinism about the ‘female body’. Female body always remains a vulnerable space which can be unswervingly occupied and maltreated by patriarchal social system. A woman is always a victim as her body is often the prized possession of the male
winner. From time immemorial a female body has been used just for the sake of carnal pleasures and reproductions. I have cited the female characters from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and tried to point out that the same male-dominated perspective was prevalent at that time, too. Thus it is rooted in our tradition that male power can easily subjugate a female body. I have briefly referred to Foucault’s concept of power and ‘docile body’ and Helen Cixous’s concept of ‘écriture feminine’ to contextualize Kamala Das’s use of female body in her poems. The second part of the chapter analyzes a number of Das’s poems to show that the frequent use of the ‘female body’ appears as a motif in her works. Her husband was a representative of patriarchal social structure and the atrocities forced upon her made her feel a person of no consequence. She suffered from a crisis of identity. Her poems act like a protest in this respect. Body becomes the war-front as well as the tool of protest for Kamala Das. She often talks about failed love. And this ‘failing’ is due to the unsympathetic and uncooperative attitude of her husband. Disclosure of frank sexuality is a direct attack on this ‘lustful’ male ego. It is a ‘body protest’, a way of representation of the female body which gives a shock to our traditional chauvinistic outlook. The female body which once remained the most delicate thing turned out to be the heaviest ammunition in the hands of a woman. In poems like “Nani”, “Gino”, “Cat in the Gutter”, “The Freaks”, “The Sunshine Cat”, “The Old Playhouse” etc the poet deliberately writes the female body to protest against the patriarchal power and ascertain the female identity. In Kamala Das’s poems the reader encounters the body as an expressed experience, as a figure made up of speech. In traditional love poetry the body is always implicitly present. Kamala Das’s uniqueness lies in the fact that through her free and frank confessions about the body she has made it a fiction of presence from a fiction of absence. In Indian English Literature Kamala Das can certainly claim a pioneer position in breaking the made-up mirror image of woman.
In the concluding chapter, I have attempted to bring out an almost unknown facet of Das’s genius. Alongside being a writer, Das was also a good painter and her paintings meant a lot to her. Her paintings, though few in number, are equally significant in the understanding of Das as a poet, especially a confessional poet. These paintings also deal with very personal issues often discussed in her poems. Subjects like ‘love for her grandmother’, ‘dilapidated condition of poor woman’, ‘marginalized condition of maids or women’, ‘nostalgia for past memories’ and obviously ‘bold representation of female body’ help to have a better understanding of her poems. The discussion on the strategic use of confessional elements in her poems acquires an additional dimension if we consider the paintings of Das simultaneously. They can well be considered as the extension of her poems. Where her poems end, these paintings begin to take shape. Abstract emotions presented in words in the poems are given concrete shape in these paintings.

The intimate details that the poet reveals in her poems are neither spilling the beans for titillating her readers, nor telling something to take a revenge on her husband. Kamala Das’s confessions in her poems might not have acted as a cure-all for her, but certainly they rescued her from the edge. For Das it is no “falling upon the thorns of life” and bleeding self-pity, rather through her strategic disclosure of truths about herself she is able to achieve the dual purpose of purgation and protest. The speaker in these poems disrobes her psyche but at the same time the “I” in these poems is the languaged self, not necessarily the poet herself. This “I” strategically allows her reader to enter an inaccessible space, a hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty where voice for the first time has replaced silence.
Chapter Division:

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