CHAPTER 6

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Confessional poetry is an “attempt to present the poet’s own naked self and unrationlised, uncensored actual feelings and behaviour”.\(^1\) It is also an encounter with the miseries of the self, a sense of violence and guilt expressed in relation to the vagaries of the world. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two confessional poets of the modern times, who have struggled for self realisation, in relation to their social role. Their self-exploration leads to their culture and their identity. Since they are sensitive women, their reactions are more intense and frustrations more subtle, causing distortion of psychic energy. Their alienation, anger, miseries and madness - all demonstrate a break within the self-perpetuating and self-confirming system, created by the tensions between their private and public world.

Kamala Das has introduced a strong personal voice in Indian English poetry, which no other woman poet in India had done earlier. Her themes are passionate expressions of the universal experience of love, lust, despair, anguish and failure, and go beyond the traditionally accepted modes of thought and complexity of feelings. Majority of her poems are dominated by of a single theme - the hurt inflicted on her in the man-made world. Iyengar has pointed out that an “endless reiteration of such hurt, such delusion, such cynicism, must sooner or later degenerate into mannerisms”.\(^2\)

Sylvia Plath’s poetry also enshrines a constant struggle to assert the encompassing validity of the feeling. She represents a poetic trend, that is central to cultural identity and has given fullest expression to emotions in her poetry. Both these confessional poets yearn for a state of meaningful
relationship with the outer world, and to relate such complexities, an act of self expression becomes a significant event in their poems. The confessional poets of twentieth century generally reject the original situation for an alternative, and prefer to live lost victims of circumstances. In Kamala Das’s poems, the poet is in the search for an ideal lover, discovering that man succumbs only to the snare of lust. Similarly, Sylvia Plath’s love-hate relationship with her father becomes a destructive passion, making her an isolated daughter in search of her dead father. What these poets have in common, is a drive towards an ideal which is a fusion of conformity and excellence, and an uninhibitive urge to reveal their acutely private universe disturbed by the impact of conflicting and corrosive experiences.

Plath’s poetry is obsessed with the physical self, analysing interpersonal relationships with family and society. She sets an ideal of womanhood unattended by social requirements and her preoccupation with woman in isolation becomes a prominent issue in her poetry. Having lost her father at an early age, her growing mind was surrounded by an exclusively female company which developed an ignorance about man-woman confrontations, giving an added twist to her ideal of femininity. Kamala Das who grew up as a typical victim of the feminine mystique of the India’s orthodox culture, is a poet of typical conventional attitude, deprived of the ultimate bliss of marital relationship. In order to discover the meaning of true love, her poetry makes an intense search for an encounter with an ideal lover or a masculine partner. Bruce King calls such a woman poet “a man-eater or a modern-day vampire”.

Robert Lowell once described Sylvia Plath’s poems as an “autobiography of a fever”, because of her tremendous violent attitude towards herself, her obsession with death and her negative encrustation of society. Being a victim of social and political ideologies and society’s
commercialism and greed for power and domination, she wanted to acquire all good qualities of a man in order to super-impose herself. Steven Axelrod sums up the themes of Plath’s later poems:

In much of her later poetry, Sylvia Plath sought to give birth to a creative or “deep” self within her — a Wordsworthian “imaginative power” or Whitmanian “real me”. By unpeeling an outer self of “dead Hands, dead stringencies”, she sought to unveil and give voice to an inner “queen” or “White Godiva”, a spirit of rebellious expressiveness.³

In her poetry, the external realities are internalised so perfectly with the inner reactions, that it brings out her accurate expressions in front of the readers. This is true for Kamala Das’s poetry also. Her ‘fever’ can be traced as a fear about her frigidity, the complex about her conventional upbringing, the suspected unconcern of her husband and her neurotic loneliness.

Kamala Das’s poems are related to the persona’s husband and the unfulfilling bond between them. She describes the uncaring habits of the man in a candid manner, when as a stranger he walks in his loneliness, ‘sulking’ and ‘joylessly’ drinking his tea with downcast eyes:

... I’ve seen your bitten nails
Yours sickly smile, heard your brittle
Broken talk; I know you now too well
Not to recognise...
The poet seems to be disturbed by the male-oriented world where there is hardly any place for woman. It was an era of women’s liberation, an era of women’s fight against the society. Most women poet of the early sixties focused their attention to show their calibre and assert their true place in the man-made universe. The target of their violent destructive force was a masculine figure in the form of either husband or father, creating a separate identification for them. Sylvia Plath as a ‘Lady Lazarus’ recognises man as

Herr doctor
Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

In the poems of both these poets, there is a common search for the ‘misplaced father’. The father, figure merges with that of lover in a Freudian manner in order to show the revenge against the male order. For Kamala Das, her body feels so beaten that she
... enter others
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home . . . .

Sylvia Plath reacts with hate for her father and finds an escape through marriage to a man with many of her father's qualities:

And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkamph look
And I love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.

She establishes with her father the torturer and tortured relationship. She refers to her relationship with her father as that of a German and a Jew and launches an emotional revolt against her German father. She confesses:

I have always been scared of you
With you Luftwaffe, your gobble dy goo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

As a contrast to this highly wrought poem "Daddy" by Plath, Kamala Das's "A Requiem for My Father" is a remarkable poem that combines an inconsolable grief with elegiac sobriety. Like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" this poem is also an apotheosis of the 'father cult' and describes the
qualities of her father. He was a 'strong man with a never-ending zest for life'. He withstood all medical tortures and resisted death for nine days:

They bled you to test your blood
When you lay insensate and stiff
They did the lumber puncture
Folding you like canvas chair
Yet you did not once protest.

Sylvia Plath conceives the father figure as a despot, but for Das, her father was a bold hero, popular and affectionate. Talking about "Daddy" Sylvia Plath said in an interview: "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with Electra Complex. He died while she thought he was God." But there is no trace of the Electra complex in Das's poem. She concludes the poem saying, "I loved you father, I loved you all my life". As an obsessed daughter, Sylvia Plath, on the contrary, ritually destroys the memory of her father:

Daddy, I have had to kill You.
You died before I had time -
Marble heavy, a bag full of God.

Sylvia Plath's poems contained in the collection Ariel mostly represent the forces of patriarchy appearing in the disguise of her father. The poem "Daddy" is undoubtedly against her male counterpart. She mentions the daughter's 'Electra complex' to justify the relationship. The characteristic of the persona is conveyed as 'your hound-bitch daughter'. In "The Beekeeper's Daughter", a peculiar relationship is described, with an element of sexual desire and an urge to destroy:
Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg
Under the coronal of sugar roses
The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

A review of the poems composed by the Plath and Das reveals many common features. Invariably, both of them dwell upon the theme of guilt which adds to the existential vision they try to project. Plath felt responsible for her father's death and a life-long search for a father figure led her to a consequent feeling of guilt resulting from the fear of incest. Das's confessional poems also contain a sense of guilt which was caused by a loose marital relationship. Her search was for a mythic Krishna, to seek satisfaction in her otherwise devastated life. The feeling of personal guilt in these confessional poets merges into the larger forces of social and communal guilt of having been in a tradition-bound, male-oriented society. They both experienced horrors and terrors in their lives, related to mental illness, feminine indifferences or tragedies of the world.

The women poets writing confessional poetry concern their themes with woman's physical confinement to the vicinity of house or kitchen, marriage and motherhood, or a female identification as a curse. Plath's poem "The Applicant" describes the dehumanisation of woman involved in marriage. A bride is described as

A living doll, where you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

On the one side she identifies the image of a woman with doll and a mannequin, while on the other side, her images show her attempt to
extricate the woman of today from the woman of yesterday, so that she could grow into the woman of future. Kamala Das, too, protests vehemently against the senseless restrictions which compel a sensitive and intelligent woman to lead a vapid existence in the man-made society. The "categorisers" compel women to 'fit in'. In "An Introduction" Das shows the debasing attitude of men towards women:

Be embroider, be cook
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh
Belong, cried the categorisers.

The bitter irony and anguish of women who find themselves tied to a meaningless routine of household activities can also be noticed in Das's poem "The Siesta". The diversity of female experience and the variety of subjective categories it explodes, gives Plath's and Das's confessional literature its unique quality.

An obsession with death or a wish to die is persistent in both Plath and Das. As Camus puts it, "There is only one liberty to come with death, after which everything is possible". This is true of both Plath and Das. Both of them relate themselves to death and write about their experiences involved in it. Das writes:

... Death is
Ordinary. To live on earth built upon layers and
Layers of bone requires an extraordinary
Courage.

She says: "I have no time to waste". Some of her poems, like "Composition", and "Death Brings no Loss", in Summer in Calcutta, and
"Death is so Mediocre" in Collected Poems, are meditations on life and death:

Each night when darkness turns
Me blind, I think of death,
Understanding it to
Be like night-fall, just a
Temporary phase, which
Brings no loss . . .

Sylvia Plath, too, flaunts her expertise in dying by saying:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

The source of death is also same for them. Both wished to drown in the sea. Edward Lucie Smith argues that "the sea and more specially the idea of death by water, is the central image of the Colossus".6 ‘Sea’ acts as an ‘Invitation’ for Das. It brings about the purification, suggested in The Tempest and The Waste Land. Death becomes the symbol of peace and contentment for these poets. Das writes:

All I want to now
is to take a long walk
into the sea.

And in "Lorelie", Sylvia Plath writes:
... I see drifting
Deep in your flux of silver
Those great goddesses of peace
Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

The total collusion with death is reflected in Plath’s last poems like “Edge”, where it acts as an ‘accomplishment’. For Kamala Das, death is temporary while the soul is immortal. The sufferings of these poets lead to alienation. In a world of lost relationships an act of self-expression is a significant event and for Plath and Das, isolation and estrangement from reality is the main theme. Unlike Sylvia Plath, however, for whom death was the ultimate source for redemption Das felt contented in surrendering herself to her mythic Krishna. Her poems gain a spiritual wisdom, visualising silence and devotion as modes of achieving the ultimate peace.

The Bhagvadgita, a religious and holy book of Hindus, echoes the art of gaining eternal peace in the following lines:

He who has faith, who is absorbed in it (i.e. wisdom) and who has subdued his senses gains wisdom and having gained wisdom he attains quickly the supreme peace.

Kamala Das craves for eternal wisdom and love and finds it in the figure of Ghanshyam. Free from all involvements, she desires to reach a tranquil stage of detachment. What sustains her is the thought of immortality of the soul:

The ultimate discovery will be
that we are immortal
the only things mortal being
systems and arrangements.

To Sylvia Plath the ultimate freedom is death, and she becomes a phoenix.

I think I am going up
I think I may rise.

There is a feeling of absurdity in some confessional poetry. A threat of disintegration of self and an attempt to demonstrate the perils and pains of life in the confessional poets results in death-wish and suicide. Albert Camus said once: “killing yourself amounts to confessing”. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das were all fascinated by and obsessed to death. Plath and Sexton, finally, did commit suicide, but Kamala Das developed a spiritual consciousness and a deep sensitivity to replace her strong urge of committing suicide.

Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das acted out familiar scenes and wrote about their struggles to bring out their confessions in a poignant manner. Being realists and dealing with their personal experiences, both of them have marked similarities in their poetry. Both of them represented the same age, were married and affected by their respective cultures and dominant societies. Confessional poets like Robert Lowell regain peace through self-revelations. But Sylvia Plath’s and Kamala Das’s poetry does not evince any perceptible therapeutic changes; they are only pushed further towards the edge.

Confessional poetry is the expression of thoughts and words in which emotion embodies itself. For this, a suitable control over poetic terms and a distinctive language is required. In Plath and Das, the emergence of an idea, a feeling or a sensation is immediately followed by
its expression in words. Kamala Das displays a great power of virtuosity in the use of language. While giving the impression of writing in haste, she reveals a mastery of phrase and control over rhythm - the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly alive.

Das believes that honesty of expression and sincerity to one's own feelings are fundamental to good poetry than the language employed. She writes in a language that "is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest. She chooses words by their tone of voice and uses them with an unmistakable instinct to convey her inner frustrations.

To these confessional poets, language becomes the form of defense against their extreme suffering. In their poetry, rhyme is mostly absent and their verse becomes a kind of blank verse or light verse. T. S. Eliot once remarked that "blank verse is no verse". But this statement cannot hold good for Das and Plath. They adopted blank verse or light verse for revealing their individual experiences but their poetry still contains rhythm and music. There is a total fusion of thought and words, which embodies visual, auditory and emotive images. Regarding Sylvia Plath's language, Uroff suggests:

The speaker's simplistic language, rhyme and rhythm become one means by which she attempts to charm and hold off the evil spirits.8

The verse used by Sylvia Plath has perfected a way of treating the most intimate experiences without being sentimental and without any trace of pathos. The crucial factor for such poetry is the tone of expression. She defines poetry as a blood jet signifying the basic relations between art and life:
Symbols and metaphors are emotionally conceived to represent the structure of feelings in her poetry. Some common symbols are generally used by the two poets in order to define a specific meaning. These are: ‘roses’ is defined for love, ‘satan’, and ‘serpent’ for evil, ‘green’ colour for jealousy and so on. There are also open-ended symbols representing a cluster of ideas. For example, ‘sea’ represents ‘a zest for life’, or ‘immortality’ or a ‘destructive agent’; and ‘sun’ represents ‘heat’, ‘life’, ‘loneliness’ and ‘dryness’.

Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath also use all kinds of symbols effectively. In “The Blind Walk” Das declares: “I have always had a passion for symbols”. She has used them to interpret various themes. Some frequently used symbols are ‘sun’, ‘sea’, ‘Nalapat House’ and ‘human body’. Sylvia Plath has also used the symbols of ‘sun’, ‘sea’ and ‘moon’. ‘Sea’ is the most salutary and seminal symbol in both these poets. For them it was a part of their childhood. Coincidentally, both of them stayed near the sea. The symbol of ‘sea’ for Sylvia Plath serves to intensify her desolate sense of life in the face of the hostility for the world. Some of her poems like “The Colossus”, “Point Shirley”, “Lorelei” and “Full Fathom Five” are related to this symbol. These poems also express her obsession with death, to which ‘sea’ acts as a contemporary element. “Lorelei” is a description of a river at night, while “Full Fathom Five” and “The Colossus” contain references to her father’s death by drowning into the sea. “Point Shirley” also describes destruction caused by the ‘sea’ to her grandmother and also to her grandmother’s house.
... she is dead
Whose laundry snapped and froze here, who
Kept house against
What the sluttish... sea could do.

And again:

Steadily the sea
East at Point Shirley. She died blessed.

For Kamala Das sea becomes the central symbol in "Composition", "The Suicide", "Convicts", "The Invitation" and "The High Tide". The bright, quiet sea, splashing at the shore symbolises the mysterious interspace between life and immortality. The great blue 'sea' invites the poet to merge within for a quiet and peaceful transition to immortality.

... Think of yourself
Lying on a funeral pyre
With a burning head, oh, just think, Bathe cool
Stretch your limbs on cool
Secret hands, pillow your head on anemones.

In "Convicts" the sea acts as "libidinous re-enactment of the aching pleasure of sexual experience".

'Sun' is also a frequently used symbol in both Das and Plath. It acts as a warm and protective symbol and is considered as eternal.

The cell of the eternal sun
The blood of the eternal fire
The hue of the summer air.

In the poem "Ghanshyam", the sun later becomes oppressive when the poet compares her loneliness with "bleached bones cracking in the desert sun". The hot and warm 'sun' also symbolises dryness, anger and terror. 'Fire', 'Flame' and 'Lamp' are also used as parallel symbols for sun. They represent death, funeral and share the quality of hope, peace, love and affection. In Das's poetry, coherence is achieved around articulated themes by the artful enlistment of symbols, images and other figurative devices. She draws her symbols from the earth, air, fire and water, plant and animal-life and from her own society. The moon is symbolic of a middle-aged woman's dream of her days of youth and love.

In Sylvia Plath's poetry, a sense of emptiness and pain generates bleakness and loneliness expressive of her inner solitude. The image of 'bald' moon symbolises a world of absolute despair in her gloomy self. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree", she says:

The moon is my mother, she is not sweet like Mary
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls
How would I believe in tenderness.

The moon is referred to as 'blank' and 'empty':

The moon lays a hand on my forehead
Blank-faced and mum as a nurse.

The symbols of 'sun' and 'moon' are associated with light and darkness, fertility and death, good and evil. In "Three Women", Plath contrasts the gentleness of the sun with the coldness of the moon:
How long can I be
Gentling the sun with shade of my hand,
Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?
The voice of loneliness, the voice of sorrow.
Lap at my back ineluctably.

A deep sense of alienation overpowers Sylvia Plath's inner self. "Blackness" and "Silence", reveal the poet's failure to establish an eternal bond with nature. Edward Butscher feels that "Her poetry is a brave attempt at merging personal despair with social significance". The loneliness and the trivial world in which Plath lives is penetrated by the mosaic of guilt, desire and revelations. She talks about her emotional life in confessional manner and explores the psychic trauma resulting in a frightening sense of desolation and fear in the mind of the poet. She is said to have created a climate for a more honest, revelatory confessional poetry. Her abundance of manners, with its repetition of words, phrases, symbols and its curious blend serves as a device for communicating the poet's sense of suffering. Her style becomes formal and derivative. According to Margaret Uroff:

She usurps the language of other poets; she shamelessly copies rhythms and styles; she frequently lapses into dullness or borrowed archaic language; she veers between arch literary style and prosaicemptiness.

To understand the poetic language of Plath, however, one should understand Plath's ideal which shapes the world.
In Sylvia Plath’s poetry, as in Kamala Das’s we find a perfect blend a social woman with an intellectual being. As ambitious women both these poets forced themselves to grow out of their patriarchy and to forget their belongings. They lived in a world where men are the possessors as well as the dispensers of reason. Anything outside the norms set by men became unreasonable, and to fight against such norms and to make it seem more reasonable, they had to face heavy odds. This fight made them rebellious and disoriented from their life, which resulted in identity crisis and isolation from the society which gets reflected even through their language because

... language is the starting point, the tool by which to order the world. To capture reality is to name it, to fix it with the apt description or definition.\textsuperscript{12}

To project their trauma and tribulations these poets took to pen and vented their confessions and revelations honestly, baring their inner personal feelings. The outer world is despairingly bleak, grotesque and disintegrated, and the two poets have laid bare the terrible discrepancy between the actual and the desirable. The honest and frank revelation of their personal life and predicament in their poetry, has earned for them a permanent place in confessional literature.

References


