CHAPTER 2

SYLVIA PLATH AND KAMALA DAS: A PSYCHOANALYSIS

Confessional writing, in its literary qualities, is considered to be a psychological analogue which compels our attention to the problems of the writer on account of its reference to life and its challenges. A confessional poet passes through a chain of situations, is acted upon by variety of forces, personal and impersonal, and becomes a complex figure usually preoccupied with extreme mental states. The central experience of such a poet is psychological, for he often acts as a rebel against the society, culture and tradition, suffering in the process from frequent depressions and psychic disintegration, sometimes even verging on insanity.

The disorientation in the minds of modern confessional poets might also be seen against the background of the sixties, which valued irrational experiences for their own sake. The sixties in America and India were a period of change, through fierce individualism, paranoid fear and drug induced psychological ‘trips’. They were obliged to deal with the most intimate feelings and to search for the existential truth, which involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and propriety. Confessional writings of these modern poets also explain the courses of stress in their life, in the contemporary world. They dramatise all their personal and universal concerns through an inimitable confessional mode of self-expression. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, among others, are two female confessional poets of the sixties, who have made serious efforts to explore certain inherited problems like horrors, humiliations, tortures and sufferings of the contemporary man, in a totally hostile set-up. The present chapter aims at discussing some of these psychological modes
which forced these two women poets to adopt the confessional tone in their poetry.

The 'New World' of America in the early nineteenth century was a world of cultural and political diversities and American literature continued to swing between a receding dream and a souring reality. As Robert Spiller puts it, American literature was destined to be "a literature of beauty, irony, affirmation and despair". The widening gulf between impulse and will, conscience and necessity, imagination and reality is widely reflected in nearly all the emerging periods of American literary consciousness. Confessional literature, however, became more and more complex and intractable with the passage of time.

Cultural changes also affected India in the early sixties. The terrible and frightful disturbances occurred during the fight for independence, which caused an insecurity and anxiety among the masses. Some writers of that period tried to project the fear of the people to while others tried to reflect their disappointment and frustration. Writings also appeared from the pen of confessional poets like Kamala Das.

I

Sylvia Plath, born on 27 October, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, was typically a writer of confessional poetry. Confession for her was a result of cultural clash of the society and a fearfully alienated family background, which made it difficult for her to cope with the changing period of times. Born out of a mixed American-European parentage, she developed an identity crisis and a craving for cultural accommodation, which can be seen in her poems. Her Polish father, Otto Emile Plath, was a professor (with a special interest in bees) of Biology and German at Boston University, and Aurelia Schober Plath, her mother, a first generation American of Austrian descent, who acquired a Master's
Degree in English and German from Boston University. The confluence of two cultures with a German background was very much responsible for shaping the poetic life and career of Sylvia Plath.

In this period, America was much influenced by European culture, which was due to its search for refinement, tradition and heritage particularly in the higher levels of the new society. The Jewish race was being eliminated by Nazis in Germany, and the Jewish culture was in a state of exhaustion, though for immigrants their culture was strong in roots and rich in experience. Most of the American writers accepted this tradition not by intent and purpose but by circumstances and heredity. This kind of pluralistic mainstream in America affected Sylvia Plath immensely, and an awful sense of rootlessness developed in her. Being born as an American, she developed a kind of insecurity and possessed a desire to be a Jew and a part of Jewish history. Irving Howe refers to such Jewish-American writers who had to face double alienation, as having a complex fate'. A sense of an alienation and isolation in a hostile universe runs throughout Sylvia Plath's works, so much so that she developed an obsession of her father being a Nazi German and her mother a Jew. She had a constant fear of being swapped away by her Nazi father and a stretched and painful ordeal of identity and survival always hanging on to her mind. She comments:

In particular my background is, may I say, German and Austrian... my concern with concentration camps and so on, is uniquely intense. And then, again I am rather a political person as well...²

Sylvia Plath often felt that her father, who was an American of German origin, might have become a Nazi if he had stayed in Germany, and would have murdered her mother, who was a Jew. This obsession
resulted in a hatred towards her father, whom she calls a German autocrat, "Gothic and barbarous, pure German". Her hatred for the German language and Jew-German relationships finds expression in many of her poems like "The Colossus", "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and "Pursuit". The German language as well as her Austrian descent reminded her of a victimized state. Her hatred towards German people and their language is writ large in the following lines:

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off... a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen,
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be like a Jew.

The untimely death of Sylvia Plath's father, after a prolonged illness, in 1940, however, left her shattered and lost. Before Otto Plath's death she was undoubtedly 'her father's daughter', fascinated by his robust and scholarly figure. In her early writings she has revealed her fascination for her father. For example, in poems like "The Bee Keeper's Daughter", "Electra on Azalea Plath" and "The Colossus", she talks about the qualities of her dead father. Her strange relationship with her father brings out the love-and-hate complex between them, which is described by her as the "Electra Complex". This is present in most of her poems devoted to her father, which generally bring out her unique relationship with her father and herself. The poem "Daddy" is a case in point. In an interview she admits to Peter Orr:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex.
Her father died while she sought he was God. her case is
complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother a Jew. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other—she has to act out the awful allegory before she is free of it.\(^3\)

Notwithstanding the "Electra Complex" that she has assigned to herself and that her critics have persisted in citing, Plath’s ambivalent descriptions of her father and his love for her were always laced with hostility. She used the cover of the "Electra Complex" to soften her guilt over patricidal anger. The images depicted in her poems show him suffering a "strange injury", "a lightening stroke", and drowning "face down in the sea", his mutilation and deformity being aggravated with "one gray toe" and "one leg". Such images are at once "guilty visions of him".

Plath’s father died at the time when her mind was psychologically more involved with him, a life-long search was devoted to a father figure and a consequent feeling of guilt resulted from a fear of incest. Her peculiar relation with her father brings out the guilt factor in her mental make-up which adds to an existential vision that she tries to project. While the "Electra Complex" obscures the hostility and guilt in her poems, the melancholia clarifies her negative feelings and mourning. Her negative feelings towards the entire world are responsible for anger in her poems and she wishes to reach for a peace of mind through death. She tries "to get back, back, back" to her father by drowning herself and attempting suicide, and finds herself obsessed with death. Her constant struggle to be with her father is finally achieved when she marries a model of him. In the Bohemian personality of her husband, Ted Hughes, she finds an image of her father, "a Gothic man" or "a man with a Meinkamph look". Being with him metaphorically does not satisfy her
needs and she moves from the role of a victim to that of a victimiser. Robert Phillips remarks:

The only way Plath could achieve relief, to become an independent self was to kill her father’s memory, which in “Daddy” she does by a metaphorical murder of her father figure.4

Sylvia Plath’s marriage with Ted Hughes in 1956 was not a happy one. They stayed at 55 Eltisley Avenue, near the Grandchester Meadows in Cambridge and at this time she produced powerful poetry along with her husband who was also a renowned poet. The influence of other poets like Yeats and Lowell was too much for her and her poems needed a personal voice of her own. The confessional urgency, which took birth long time ago in Plath, became intense and mature. The financial stringency they faced after marriage and the depressions she underwent due to her inability to conceive forced her to define the dialectics of violence ingrained in her. She faced tremors of change, sweeping in her life, left behind her land of birth and headed for England, isolated and deserted from her friends and society, and rejected the whole world of romanticism and academics to face squarely her existence in which “each moment is a crisis”. Eileen Aird comments on this significant phase of Plath’s life:

Her abandoning a lucrative academic career and its concept of success had something to do with her development towards maturity. She was also turning her back on her family and cultural heritage as well as the
obvious career towards which all her efforts were previously directed.\textsuperscript{5}

During Sylvia Plath’s last days of stay in America, she came in contact with other confessional poets and explored their areas of confessional writings. She was immensely delighted by the powerful poetry of Lowell and Roethke and enlarged her mind by reading their poems, trying to relieve her emotional stress recurring from imminent changes in her life. Memories of her experience in mental hospital, her unhappy married life, her tortured self and her rejection of an academic career— all these brought to her mind onrushing images of birth and death, fear and expectations. She has a peculiar Roethkean style in which the identity crisis is expressed in terms of the self’s encounter with nature. Her biographer Edward Butscher notes:

Internal storms and contradictory impulses must have raged in the conscious and unconscious regions of her mind. Her sense of myth and man’s primitive roots was enlarged by reading Paul Radin’s collection of African folk-tales and linking this with the interior, animistic world of childhood — a union which became inevitable with her continual re-reading of the poetry of Theodre Roethke.\textsuperscript{6}

Roethke’s attitudes and interests, like his search for his identity through an association of human and natural world, as well as his own poetic confrontation with insanity find adequate expression in Sylvia Plath’s poems. The vicissitude in her life acts as a true source for developing
confessional poetry. She summons a violent anger towards the inhuman world and intensifies her aggression, mourning for the tortured self.

Sylvia Plath’s attitude became more profoundly confessional when she began to view herself as a victim of her own culture. The nihilistic vision of Plath should be seen against the background of the twentieth century genocide and the general collapse of values. A glimpse of the world threatened by nuclear extinction and a hysteria generated by the possibility of war may be observed in her poems, along with a sense of crisis and insecurity regarding the aftermath. A highly sensitive person, she vicariously shared the lingering, lacerating memories of World War II and correlates the external dangers and horrors with her psychic crisis. She projects in her poems a gruesome sense of unjust threat persisting in the nocturnal world of darkness and doom. She is haunted even by a fear of bearing deformed children due to nuclear war, and a kind of feminine fear persists in her poems.

In Three Women Plath describes the prevailing despair and menace of the mother’s world. The emptiness, flatness and barrenness of infertility is related to the torture and pain inflicted by the hostile world:

That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas and destructions
Builodosers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed.
Endlessly proceed.

She uses jarring words like "bleak", "barren", "black", "wound" and "empty" in describing her miscarriages and writes in an intense language. She portrays sterility as "worse than a horrible disease" and a looming barrenness as "unbearable". The inadequacies and fear of losing her man haunted her mind and the emptiness and isolation developed into intense pain and sense of loss of identity. She laments:
. . . There is an emptiness.
I am so vulnerable suddenly.
I am a wound walking out of the hospital.
I am a wound they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me.
I undo her fingers like bandages; I go.

A sterile body is described as a source of various types of destruction, physical as well as spiritual, and worsens her emotional stability of marriage. She writes about her fears in a journal:

If I could not have children — and if I do not evaluate
how can I? I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body.

. . . My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life,
real feeling . . . How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren
woman? Barren, barren."

Sylvia Plath's poetry is the poetry of experience, where she defines the relationship between the self and the outside world. The social set-up, which taught her to be intellectually desirable also taught her to be violent in life. She matches the stringencies faced by her with the hostility of nature and surroundings, which give rise to suicidal thoughts in her, and the violent expressions demand a quick end to the lingering pain of her body. She longs for death and not only desires it but readily accepts it, thus making it a substance for her self elegies. She made several attempts to end her life and every time she had "done it again" she survived. The first suicide attempt was tried at the age of ten when she failed in drowning herself. The second time she took a large number of
pills but remained alive. And the third time she made an attempt to drive off the road deliberately, but she survived again. After so many death attempts she finally did succeed in ending her life by thrusting her head in a gas oven on 11 February, 1963. Her proneness to the act of dying is seen in her poems, where she talks about the relation between art and death:

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

Death comes to her as a rescue from the gruesome world she is surrounded by. It appears to be the only source of achieving peace from the threatened self, and also from the insufficient sense of self-confidence and ontological insecurity which lurks constantly in her mind. She relates the outer world of death to the personal world of love and love and death become the part of the same reality. Sylvia Plath is divinely inspired by death and the miraculous escapes from suicides were nothing less than “A miracle” and “the theatrical / Comeback”. She rises above the ordinary death and talks about rebirth and a life after death:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And eat men like air.

Rising from the dead, achieving a fiery redness and summoning up the power of her poetic manoeuvre, Plath indicates her taking charge of the destructive act and enacts her rebirth as a healer and no longer as a victim. Rebirth means for her a triumph over the threatened patriarch.
Sylvia Plath’s childhood fascination with ‘Sea’ plays an important function in her life, providing a major role of imagination in her verses. ‘Sea’ in her early poems acts as a destructive element and causes a fearful mind for her, describing not only her everlasting fascination for it but also a threat against it. In 1935 when her brother was born, young Plath was left in the care of her grandparents at Point Shirley, her home being surrounded by sea. Here she had to live in isolation and a deep sense of insecurity developed in her, to which ‘sea’ came as a source of relief. In an autobiographical essay “OCEAN 1212 - W” she recollects her experiences at a sea-coast. The sights and sounds of the Atlantic coast made an indelible impression on her life and poetry. She describes ‘Sea’ in the following terms:

... like a deep woman, it had a good deal,
It has many faces, many delicate terrible veils.
It spoke of miracles and distances,
If it could court, it could also kill.

On one side sea acts as a soothing agent from the torturous world, while on the other it is vigorous and rebellious and takes away her father’s life. She describes her father as the colossus, but he is destroyed by the rugged waves of the sea. She imaginatively tries to glue the pieces back to form the figure and also tries to be with her father by drowning herself. Poems like “Point Shirley”, “Suicide of Egg Rock”, “The Hermit at Outer-most House” and “Full Fathom Five” both articulate and obscure the relation between herself and the ‘Sea’.

In Sylvia Plath’s poetry the hysteria generated by the aftermath of World War II and the violence and death resulting account of it, are reflected in many ways. In her writings everything, everywhere is in a chaos; no discipline or order is discerned by the poet anywhere. Neither love nor life could provide any relief from fear; even nature failed to
console her. Like many other confessional poets, Plath tried to struggle with the hostile world and searched for her identity in the dark and dangerous world and resorted to annihilation. She related the outer world of hostility to the inner world of peace, the past of her childhood with the present of her youth, the fantasy of myths with the reality of dream-like experiences and the 'neutrality' of the everyday life with the freedom of creative imagination.

The world of Sylvia Plath can be described as a world of isolation, bleakness and barrenness with entirely despairing and disturbing attitude and it is full of fear. In short, it is a world of nightmare, where maimed human creatures embrace each other in disgust and later ignore. Birth and death are at the core of Sylvia Plath's poems. The whole picture of the hostile world is brought out in a very frank and candid manner and she acquires a descent towards a subjective centre where 'self' becomes the nucleus. Her desperate efforts to gain peace and comfort out of the nocturnal world of pain and suffering form a volcano full of frustration and grief which erupts through her confessional poetry.

Sylvia Plath was a bright and intelligent girl at Smith's College and won innumerable scholarships, awards and financial aids for her professional accomplishments. Her room-mate Nancy Hunter Steinner describes her as one of the "most distinctive girls" in the college. She writes about her mannerisms:

... clothes and manners as deliberately cultivated to disguise any distinction... Sylvia Plath was remarkably attractive young woman. She was impressively tall, almost statuesque, and she carried her height with an easy assurances.8
Though Sylvia Plath was a charming young lady, excelling in cultivating social pleasures, yet a feminine insecurity was ingrained deep in her heart. On a less serious scale than the existential dread, there are feminine fears in her poetry. She aimed for the best in her academic career placing all her rigorous efforts, yet there was a constant creeping of guilt in her mind about being a woman, which was considered to be a big obstruction in her way. This resulted in a sense of identity crisis and hatred towards men, which gradually overtook her artistic endeavour. Mere thought of breathing in a man-made world and the inconsolable sight of the male strength overpowering the weaknesses of the female body caused a sense of frustration and disappointment in her life.

Gender envy was a marked feature of Sylvia Plath’s character which made her a “female always in danger of assault and battery. Her bitterness to be born as a woman was an awful tragedy . . . , the whole circle of actions, thoughts and feelings was rigidly circumscribed by inescapable femininity.” Traces of feminine fears can be seen in Plath’s poetry, where the persona wants to be distinguished herself as a poet and expresses her individual talent through her creative art. In the poem “Spinsters” (1956), she describes the conflict between the talented intellectual career-headed sensuous woman on one hand and the tempting conventional role of a “chocolate fancy” woman on the other. She finds herself locked in utter loneliness, where no man is allowed to peep inside her personal agony, for she has set a barricade around herself:

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, fist, threat
Sylvia Plath may be seen at times hanging between the two terminuses. She creates a barricade round her, but insecurity of being without a mate constantly assault her creative urges. Her desire to work outside the realm of her innate nature and not to loose herself to her man is evident throughout her early writings. An extraordinary sensitive girl as she was, she does not react to the gestures of her lover easily and rather reveals her disturbed 'self' in her early poems. These poems display on the whole her amateur and experimental quality, which is distinctively self-conscious in nature.

As a writer, Sylvia Plath is a typical product of America. Her intense encounters with death are reminiscent of Melville's and Hemingway's physical and moral encounters with death. Her vulnerability to fear, hollowness and identity crisis is in the same tradition as of other American poets. The themes of Plath have come down through generations and are reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's unbearable sensitivity to others, of Robert Frost's fear of darkness and nothingness and even of the isolation and alienation of T. S. Eliot. She handles her personal themes in a manner similar to that of other confessional poets. Like Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Anne Sexton, she relates her private sufferings, which later verge into insanity and finally culminate in suicide. Her poems are surcharged with open violence, emotional and physical pain and the note of sensuous exhaustion. All resistance to keep pace with horror, torture, fear, pain and violence is, however, brushed aside at the end and the movement becomes a pure, formless energy, self-propelled and self-created. Poetically, she becomes as fierce and scathing in her rage as Byron: she attacks all people and succeeds in exacting poetic revenge on them. But personally, all her efforts to live in tranquility fail leaving no prospects for her life in future.
II

Like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das also suffers from the grappling violence and feminine insecurity. The confessional urgency for both the poets becomes equally prominent, yet the difference in their cultural traditions with varied social sets-up accounts for their psychological complexities. Different lifestyles of their respective countries and contrasting environments of their background bring out the varied aspects of thought and style in their poems. Sylvia Plath can be considered as a highly sensitive person who was affected by the horrors of war and the fast changing way of life of Americans, due to which had to face a lot of stress and strain in her life. The hysteria prevailing in such a surrounding makes her poems more and more personal. In Kamala Das’s poems also one comes across certain aggressive moods which led her to think in a confessional way, bringing out in her poetry the most intimate details of her experiences. She writes about her most personal feelings with truth and sincerity, which makes her poems confessional rather than autobiographical. It is the events and happenings of her overshadowed life which forced her to adopt a confessional mode of writing.

Kamala Das occupies an important position among the confessional in the modern tradition of Indian English poetry. Born in 1934 in Malabar, Kerala, she was brought up in a pure Indian culture and in a traditional, orthodox family. As a woman belonging to middle class, she brings out the trivialities and shallowness of the life she was condemned to live. She hails from a family of poets and writers - her granduncle and her mother were renowned poets and philosophers. She was deeply influenced by them and adopted love for literature quite early in her life and started writing poems at an early age. She established a good flair for words in her childhood. In her autobiography she writes:
Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Materlink, Masfield and Virginia Woolf? The sounds that our real parents made in our presence had been so indistinct while the dead ones filled our ears with their philosophy.¹⁰

Her close contact with Malayalam and English literature in her childhood left a deep impress on her attitude towards life. She took to pen at a young age. She made a mark in Malayalam literature by producing several books and was honoured by the Sahitya Academy for her work Tanuppu. She later switched over to Indian writing in English.

Kamala Das’s childhood was spent mostly in her grandmaternal house at Nalapat and metropolitan cities of India. She was unconsciously influenced by both. She was particularly affected by the pressures of “dusty cities” and also developed a strange affection for “sea”. She calls the first volume of her poems Summer in Calcutta, which presents her indifference to adopt the pleasures of being in a city and an anguish awareness of the lost self in the vastness of the metropolis. In poems like “A New City”, she talks about the integrity of big cities and describes their streets as “fragrant and murky” where she “felt very young, very lovely and delightfully carefree”. In the peaceful landscape of Delhi, for example, the shepherds walk on the dusty street in harmony:

Delhi:
Our house crouches in dust in the
Evenings when the buffaloes tramp
Up the road, the weary herdsmen
Singing soft Punjabi songs...
She also writes about her fascination for Calcutta in *My Story*. Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox-carts moving along the Strand Road early in the morning with heavy turbaned men.

It is the strength of Kamala Das as a poet and a deep influence of the metropolitan life which allow her to incorporate the dust, heat, crowd, poverty and other minor details of India into the texture of her work without being either over-realistic or cynical. She excels in responding to the external despite her inner restlessness, world with visual details and her description is characterised by an admirable sense of poise. She delineates faithfully the outer landscape of her turbulence, while the inner details are retained objectively.

Das's memories of the scorching summer heat of Calcutta, restless crowds of Bombay and the dusty, polluted streets of Delhi provide an imaginative equivalence to the pains and sufferings borne by her. The frequent use of the symbols of 'sun' and 'sea' are closely associated with the dry and drab background of her life, and instead of soothing and warming her heart they echo the hollowness within, challenging the very existence of the poet. In her early volumes she regarded 'sea' as a place of retreat from the time ridden existence:

Yes, the only movements I really know,
Is swimming.
It comes naturally to me.

And she further writes:

I swam about and floated
I lay sparkled green and gold.
In her later volumes, she became aware of the consciousness to be united with the sea by submerging and submitting her soul to it:

Only her soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.

Because of her close association with it, the image of 'sea' fascinated Das so much that at the time of threat and emotional displacement she finds no other place to hide her but 'the great blue sea'.

During Kamala Das's stay in Malabar she underwent certain pressures regarding her complex background. Her parents separated for incomprehensible reasons, which resulted in a sense of loneliness in her. It was not a complete family but a 'broken home', with her father staying in Calcutta and her mother in Malabar. She candidly wrote about her alienated self and revealed how her parents always took her for granted and considered her as a mere puppet. She writes about her family house in Malabar and evokes its ethos imprinted by the tradition-bound parents and grandparents. She was forced to rely upon ancestral traditions and other orthodox social conventions, against her wishes. Her grandmother was very particular about old conventional attitudes, like bathing her head with chilled Amla gruel in the mornings and getting her palms and feet anointed with henna every Tuesday by the maid servants. Das was also forced to learn Sanskrit and sorcery in which her grand-uncle was very well versed.

Das's attitude became rebellious against the social conventions and bourgeois morality which prescribed the tying of the peepal leaf and black thread for curing dreadful diseases and also for protecting him from evil sight. Her struggle for freedom and refuge from such traditions developed in her a nostalgia for the lost heritage. Although the house is cobwebbed with ethnic decorations, yet she admits:
If there is a paradise on earth for me
it is this, this old house beside the sea.

In "My Grandmothers House" she writes about her urge for returning,
which meant to her a symbolic return to her matrilineal traditions:

... You cannot believe, darling,
Can you that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, ...
... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?

She developed an obsession with loneliness and constantly brooded over
her traditional make-up and ceaselessly rebelled against the society.
Neither her parents nor the atmosphere she grew in helped Das to free
herself from such isolation and bleakness. As a tortured, rebellious
passive young woman, she tries to escape from the desolation of her
orthodox background and gets involved in search for meaning and
certitude in life.

Das's tragic, confessional tale began soon after her marriage at the
age of fifteen, when she met her husband and sought in him intellectual
companionship and love. To her, identification of love with physical
relationship is an attempt to redefine her identity and sustain a
meaningful relationship, but her experience brought her the awareness of
her offended feminine self bereft of spontaneity. Instead of offering her
any solace from loneliness, her married life brought in her sterility and
vacant ecstasy, which she relates candidly in her poem "Dance of the
Eunuchs" comparing herself with the eunuchs:
They
Were thin in limbs; like half burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, A drought and rottenness
Were each in them.

What she encountered in her married life was a male-oriented world of sex and lust, and her traumatic experiences of marriage intensified in her an identity crisis. In “The Sunshine” her feminine self—a cat, realises that she is only an object of mistrust and humiliation in the hands of her own man. Protesting against the constraints of her married life and male-dominated world, she begins to experiment with sexual adventures and suicide attempts. In “Glass” she tries to pursue the inordinate desires of passion and her desperate attempts to:

... enter other
lives, and
make every trap of lust
a temporary home.

But such love-making outside the “legal orbits” do not give her tranquillity or peace of mind and she continually struggles against her own self like a prisoner of loneliness.

In Kamala Das there was a good deal of conventional make-up and this duality of being in a traditional family for the need of domestic security and nurturing a desire for independence to seek physical love outside marriage, merges together and a sense of frustration occupies in her poetic self. Thus her poems become the saga of feminine self caught in a peculiar social phenomenon of India, constantly searching the relationship which gives both love and security. It is at this stage that her poems speak with a sense of confessional urgency and the failure of love and the birth of poetry seem to be significantly related to each other.
Without undermining her merit of the other confessional poets, it should be acknowledged that the spontaneity and uninhibited treatment of woman's passions in Kamala Das is unique because it is written against the background of a more conservative and tradition-bound culture than any other poet. Devendra Kohli remarks that Kamala Das's poems portray:

... the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity.  

The themes of Kamala Das's poems concentrate more particularly on sexual love and feminine fears. The woman persona finds a candid confrontation in a traditional image of woman in bourgeois society. The failure of love and of desires produces a sense of vacant ecstasy for her, depicting the rootlessness and the loneliness within, giving rise to certain other physical handicaps. Her feeling of physical inferiority that she was born with a dark skin in an orthodox, rural background, a frustration for being a female and other unpleasant complexities, result in the sense of alienated and emotional unfulfilment. As a true confessional poet, her views on marriage, love, friendship, sex are uttered with such a gusto as to assume an air of unconventionality.

Kamala Das has suffered incredibly. As a girl, she felt that she was not given proper rights in her childhood by her parents and society, later she was lagging behind in terms of education and was not treated with respect as a wife. Her parents who were in desperate need of a son at the time of her birth could not bear the shock of getting a baby girl and she was cursed heavily for it. This affected her intensely and she started hating herself right from her childhood. Later, society too refused to accept her as an independent woman with an unhappy and broken married life and she was left with nothingness and was guided by a sense
of feminine weakness and redefining her identity through ruthless self-analysis:

To be frank
I have failed
I feel my age and my / Uselessness.

The continuing sense of futility and the emptiness of heart are suggested by:

An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours which fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence . . .

It is a "shamefully helpless situation", and Das is filled with utter disgust and isolation, mocking her feminine integrity and in despair calling herself as a 'freak'. She thus discovers that writing is the only source of overcoming the internal frustration and thus adopts to confessional poetry. Feroze Jussawalla observes:

it is only when she comes up against the moments of frustration
for her personal self that Kamala Das seems to produce
poetry.\textsuperscript{13}

She wrote with honesty, relating all the intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage and her living in matriarchal rural South India. In some of her poems we come across an optimistic tone:

It will be all right, it will be all right
I am the time that endures.
It will be all right, it will be all right
It will be all right between the world and me.

She also tries to convince herself by narrating what she calls as "the ordinary events of an ordinary life". She finds herself unable to conform to the conventions of a hypocritical society, making her feelings of emptiness and alienation all the more painful. The existential despair, the sense of futility and the luridness faced by Das make her obsessed with death which she finds to be the only source of relief from her painful agony. Disgusted with the physical experience of love, she tries to put an end to herself.

Ever since her childhood 'sea' lurked in Das's memory both as a seductive and a destructive element. The first image which occurs in her mind is the idea of drowning herself into the sea. The self-devouring and self-mocking nature of an experience of unfulfilled love makes her death conscious, and 'sea' comes to her as a source of eternal solace and peace from the existing world. It symbolises the central mood in her poems and also an emotional restlessness intoning a confessional sense. Furthermore, it allows her silent passions to melt and disintegrate into nothingness:

In
Darkness we grow, as in silence
We sang, each note rising out of
Sea...

'The Invitation' from the sea is readily accepted, and she herself admits in her autobiography:

Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way, but is natural to
all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements.¹⁴

For Das, ‘sea’ represents an urge and temptation to negate all drudgery arising out of her emotional displacement; she feels that the death offered by sea is more graceful than the one through her man. In such attempts at extinguishing herself in the sea, she finally comes to the realisation that we are immortal. Such an inescapable guilt was later replaced by love, which is the outcome of her more matured state of mind. The spiritual realisation and the growth of her basic poetic vision depend on a juxtaposition of the present physical world of realities and the spiritual idealistic world of dreams, emphasizing the mystic awareness of her evolution of self.

Poetry for Kamala Das is expressively redemptive. Her discovery of love and gloomy features of the past are coalesced to evolve an overall poetic process. She seizes control of the society’s own cultural codes, particularly those formed by dominant religious ideologies. She often uses traditional religious imagery to sustain and dignify her thought. She also claims to search for an incarnation of Lord Krishna in her love affairs and worship him when the real men turn out to have flaws.

In her childhood Das was extremely fascinated by the mythological figure of Lord Krishna. She had learnt about mythological figures from her grandfather, and Krishna myth clung to her consciousness from that time. Her frequent reading of Sanskrit plays in childhood also brought her close to Him, whom she accepted later as her counterpart to find relief and solace from the complexities of the world. She writes about her relationship with Him in one of her essays:

... I have always thought of Krishna as my mate.
When I was a child I used to regard Him as my only friend,
when I became adult
I thought of Him as my lover . . . Now in my middle age, having no more desire unfulfilled, I think of Krishna as my friend, like me grown wiser with the years, a householder and a patriarch. And illogically again, I believe, in death, I might come face to face with Him.\textsuperscript{15}

She refers to Hindu myths not because she is truly devotional but only to lighten the burden of her heart. Some of her poems that mention the stories from Hindu mythology include "Radha", "Radhakrishna", "The Maggats", "Line Addressed to Devdasi" and "Ghanashyam". She thinks of herself as goddess Durga and identifies herself with Radha and Mira and in the process she subconsciously finds justification for her quest for love outside marriage and support for her defiant individuality. She writes about the Krishna myth:

I was entirely without lust . . . I looked for a beauteous Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna.\textsuperscript{16}

She tries to find an objective correlative in the myths related to Lord Krishna, a true, eternal lover. Although she fails to identify the metamorphosis of herself yet she is certainly provided with a temporary distraction from her obsession with death.

Pain being the central and all-pervading element of her consciousness, Das makes use of her poetry a metaphor of relief in order to transcend the aches of her lonely soul. She represents an average Indian woman who is ready to sacrifice her 'self' for fulfilment of her family and her man's desire. This consciousness of being a truly
conventional woman with Indian cultural moorings, she is obliged to surrender her 'self' to the ultimate:

    I must linger on
    trapped in immortality,
    My only freedom being
    the freedom to
    decompose.

In the poem "A Relationship" she deals with the wisdom of body and physical love by surrendering her senses fully to the "union of minds", her femininity celebrating the body "male and beautiful". She is aware that:

    My body's wisdom tells and tells again
    That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace
    And even my death nowhere else but here in
    My Betrayer's arms . . .

While initiating severe trials, her poetic self gains identity in its total surrender to the experience. She soon realises that craving for emotional identity remains a desperate longing, and as committed poet of deep feminine sensibility she cannot surrender to abstractions that have only utilitarian value. In fact, the enthusiasm to taste "this gift of life" disdains all other gifts.

In her later poems Das, after experiencing the horrible aspects of life, tries to learn the best out of it. She experienced death quite closely, examined the passions outside married life, interpreted myths and legends and dealt with the conventional culture of her country. Unravelling the whole world, she finally comes to the conclusion of being patient and accepts the world as it is. She writes:
I wished to escape from my home and walk on and on until at last my feet reached the end of the world. I did not think then that the traveller would only reach ultimately his starting place and that our ends, our destinations are our beginnings.17

Das was brought up in a traditional cultural climate where patience, tolerance and calmness of mind were highly valued, and in her later poems she adopts those qualities. She develops a more mature attitude towards pain and sufferings and a respect for traditions. Like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das was obsessed with death and passed through a phase of tortures yet sacrificing her ‘self’, she learns to accept the hardships. Plath, however, had perhaps no time for any improvement of her ‘self’.

Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das reveal their inner ‘self’ and relate their tortures, horrors and fears of their surroundings in a very natural and personal way. Both try to project their feminine self and feminine fears in relation to love, desires, crisis and existential dread, yet their different social backgrounds lead them to adopt different aspects of contemporary life styles. Sylvia Plath, an American product with an American soul, loves to lead an adventurous life full of challenges and has a deep-rooted desire to lead a free, uncomplicated and uncovenanted life. Hastening her desires, she wishes to overcome all the impediments in her life. And when she is unable to do so she develops hysteria and frustration. Death for her becomes the ultimate aim for attaining peace and redemption. Kamala Das also desperately tries to move away from male tyranny to achieve a distinction in the male-oriented world. But she soon realises her traditional make-up and sacrifices her ‘self’ for the family welfare. For her, death is not the source of perfection but the surrender of will is the ultimate way to redemption.

Both, Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath show the large human catholicities in their poems and acquire a technique of sincerity while
expressing tangible experiences. Their poetry establishes an intimate
tone, giving unashamed expression to the most personal experiences and
transforming them to the semblance of universal truth. Das violates
systematic and traditional norms and values of her life, and her approach
is on the whole characterised by an unconventional and modern point of
view. This form of life is honestly reflected in her poetic practice and her
poetry mirrors her oft-experienced horrors and rare joys of love. She
herself admits:

I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a
rash of prickly heat in certain season.\textsuperscript{18}

Sylvia Plath, too, brings into focus intimate details which she transformed
into personal art by sheer intensity and craftsmanship. Her individual
traumas and travails are transmuted into a pattern of universal suffering.
She writes:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and
emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise
with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing
except a needle or a knife . . . I believe that one should be able to
control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying,
like madness, being tortured . . . with an informed and
intelligent mind . . . \textsuperscript{19}

Das, in later poetry, tends to become more of an experimental poet. Plath
goes a step further in looking for archetypal images to elevate her
personal suffering beyond the biographical realities. This poetic
transformation of going beyond the confessional core of dereliction and
darkness and the effort involved in it is the real outcome of “an informed
and intelligent mind” Plath possessed.
For these two poets, the true worth of poetry lies in unravelling inner urges and in a sincere treatment of material. The cultural identity of their countries and the guilt factors involved in their lives, play an important role in bringing out the confessional element in their poems. The only way out to maintain their authenticity in a corrupt world was to confess, minutely unravelling the innermost feelings of ‘self’ and disclosing the most haunted experiences of their personal life. The confessional poems of Das and Plath also enshrine their revolt against a male-dominated culture and reveal the quintessential woman within. They have also produced poems of social reference, dominated by politics and general conditions of the twentieth-century society, which affected their life and poetry. Their realms of private experiences are vented through a confessional tone.

References

3. Ibid. p. 167.


11. Ibid., p. 15.


18. Ibid., p. 18.