CHAPTER IV

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

This Chapter compares the use of mythological elements in the two woman poets, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. The two poets belonging to entirely different backgrounds are taken for comparison essentially for being women, confessional writers, who have made use of mythological elements in their poems. Both these poets have been compared many a time for their bold depiction of subjects considered taboo. The key word which calls for their comparison is ‘confessional’. Their autobiographical writings, amounting to confessions have created a new genre of writing.

Sylvia Plath, was a poet belonging to the confessional group of poets which began under the tutelage of Robert Lowell. Her poems show an intense analysis of the self, which is the typical characteristic of the confessional poets, exhibiting the human mind with all its obsessions. The intimate aspects of life those which one would instinctively keep away from public sight, were openly expressed by the confessional poets. Their sufferings are portrayed through images, metaphor and colours. The narcissistic obsession with suffering becomes a unique feature of these poets. The topics taken up by these poets were mental illness, father complex, hospitalization, incestuous desires, grief for the death of a dear one, sense of failure, alienation and despair. Suicide and death were the most sought after themes by these poets.
Although these poets shared similar topics, the poems were rendered differently. If one is to understand Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet, the, above mentioned themes can easily be identified in her poems. Only an in-depth study of her poems shows the greatness of her creativity in employing mythical elements in her poems woven with the confessional characteristics. Sylvia Plath makes use of five myths in her poems. The first is the myth of ‘Oedipus’, where she becomes Electra with incestual desires for her dead father and initiates the beginning of the mythic pattern. The second is the myth of ‘Medusa’, which is complementary to the first myth where she rejects her mother, and accepts the ‘Lunar’ muse, the third and the main one is the ‘White Goddess’ myth which weaves the first two myths into a mythic schema. The fourth is the ‘Horatio Alger myth’, which increases the tension in her life between the woman/wife and the poet in her. It was the Horatio Alger myth that motivated her mother’s dreams for her children. The Horatio Alger myth fuelled the intensity of Sylvia Plath’s conflict between the aesthetic drive and material desires. Her desire to create irrespective of material achievements was thwarted due to this myth. The result of her work was inextricably linked to the myth. The fifth one is the myth of Nazism of the Aryan’s enacted by Hitler needs mentioning because her poems abound in Nazi imagery and also because her father was a German and her mother partly Jewish. All the other myths are minor ones, yet, connected to the main ones through the ‘moon’ symbol. The main concern of Sylvia Plath’s work is the tension existing in man and woman relationship.
Kamala Das too is called a confessional poet, as she is the first of her kind in Indian poetry in English who wrote on topics considered taboo. Unlike Sylvia Plath, she did not belong to any School or Movement labelled as 'confessional.' Her mode of writing was her own and does not the psychic obsessions as in Sylvia Plath’s poems, but indignance at a society, which suppresses the feelings of a woman in the name of tradition and religion. Her outburst is directed at the problems existing in the society and not exactly problems of the mind as in the poems of Sylvia Plath. Kamala Das too deals with the tension existing between man and woman, but with a different demand. Mythological elements in her poems work on two levels, the sub-conscious and the conscious level. On the sub-conscious level is Shaiva mythology and her conscious use of Nayar heritage, through which her Dravidian ancestry finds an outlet. On the conscious level is the use of Radha-Krishna myth.

As both poets belong to the confessional group of writers, their works have to be studied with their autobiographical background in mind. Although the autobiographical details may have been consciously or unconsciously tinkered with, they definitely prove as powerful insights into the factors which inspired them to select the myths and use them in their works. The influence of the family atmosphere and the socio-religious obligations feature prominently both as positive and negative forces in their works. Sylvia Plath, as already mentioned, was the daughter of a German father, Otto Plath, and an Austrian mother Aurelia Schober, who in Sylvia Plath’s words was partly Jewish. This inherent predator-victim dichotomy in her poems
led to Sylvia Plath's use of the Nazi imagery in her poems. According to Sylvia Plath this myth of the racial superiority of the Aryans was enacted between the parents, Otto Plath, a Professor, had married his student, Aurelia, who was much younger to him. He was dominating and Aurelia became completely submissive to maintain marital harmony. The picture of her father imprinted in her mind was a huge and colossal one. A man, who was obstinate and dared everyone and everything, Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932, and at luncheon that day, Otto Plath told his colleagues, "I hope for one more thing in life- a son, two and a half years from now." 1 Warren, her brother was, born on 27 April 1935, only two hours ahead of schedule and Otto Plath, was known by his colleagues as, "the man who gets what he wants when he wants it." 2 Reading through the commentary written by Aurelia in the Letters Home, it would be an easy guessing that she had described this incident to her daughter. When Aurelia gave birth to Warren, Sylvia Plath grew closer to her father. Although a man of few words, there developed a deep bond between the father and the daughter. Sylvia Plath became his companion in his hobby of bee-keeping. His lack of fear for the bees encouraged her to make a God out of him. In "The Colossus", one finds Sylvia Plath blowing the father image into a gigantic proportion, as she says:

2. Ibid.
Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered
In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum - color:
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  

When she was thinking of him as God, his leg was amputated due to an advanced state of diabetes. His subsequent death shocked her tender mind as she stated to her mother: "I'll never speak to God again!"  

This was the first glimpse of the death of her God. The God here can be interpreted both as the 'all merciful' Christian God who failed her and the real father at whom she had developed a sense of anger for having let her down. She could not imagine her life without him and thus, felt that the part of her life associated with him died along with him and let only the false-self to remain behind to mourn his death. This sense of loss and mourning led her to the selection of the 'White Goddess Myth'. This death in the family of the God-like figure, left her feeling insecure and vulnerable, as if the center of the family had

collapsed. The mother's silence added to her sense of guilt that somehow she was responsible for the calamity. She started developing a hatred towards her mother who took over the family responsibility. To add to this was the moving in of Aurelia's parents to live with them to help her, creating an impression of matriarchal culture. Sylvia Plath had to somehow defend her father's position and she continued to keep him alive in her mind. This powerful influence of the father image is seen in her poems, where she converts her relation with him into an incestual relation claiming responsibility for his death and the acknowledgement of having borrowed an old tragedy to mythicize the relationship. In "Electra on Azalea Path," she says,

\begin{quote}
The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.
I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;

\ldots

I brought my love to bear, and then you died.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Sylvia Plath could not react normally to the death of her father, "My mother said; you died like any man. / How shall I age into that state of mind?" \textsuperscript{6}

The death of her father had been etched on her memory so strongly that her future could never be free from it. The mother's silent

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
acceptance of his death seems to Sylvia Plath an injustice to the man whom she loved deeply. She therefore feels herself bound to grieve for her father, knowing full well that it has incestual overtones. She does not mourn as a normal daughter but like ‘Electra.’ The direct reference to Oresteia seen in “The Colossus,” is an indication of the direction in which her mind was working. The father is identified as a Greek God:

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum. 7

From there onwards, the mythic pattern becomes more and more lucid, as seen in “Electra on Azalea Path,” “O Pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death. “8 The acceptance of the incestual relationship leads to the imagery of the ‘Bees’ and it is in keeping both with the autobiographical element and the myth adopted.

7. Ibid. p. 129.
8. Ibid. p. 117.
The Queen bee kills the male after the mating is over. The imagery in "The Bee-Keeper’s Daughter," describes a passionate scene, reminding one of a Freudian drama:

A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet-speckled, black
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in.
Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,
You move among the many-breasted hives,
My heart under your foot, sister of a stone 9

And the ritual of marriage is completed in the following lines,
"Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses / The queen bee marries the winter of your year."10

She expresses her triumph over her mother for her father’s love in the following line “Here is a Queenship no mother can contest” - 11

The marriage to a dead father is presented not only as a marriage ceremony, but also consummated in:

A garden of mouthings, Purple, scarlet-speckled, black
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in. 12

9. Ibid. p. 118.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
Knowing full well that her relationship with her father could only lead to death as expressed in the following line “A fruit that’s death to taste.” The father image thus led to Sylvia Plath’s selection of a myth, which suited her mythic pattern.

Kamala Das’s relation with her father is free of incestual desires. Her childhood was devoid of fatherly love even though her father was alive because of the Nayar heritage. Her father was a Nayar, and according to her words Nayar men were not capable of emotions. This is based on the myth of Parasurama, who created the Nayar class men to be warrior like and the women as objects of sexual gratification. Although the concubinage system changed with times, and men rose steadily in the society and amassed wealth, which they spent for the welfare of the family members, they lacked emotional overtures. Childhood for Kamala Das was one of humiliation due to the colour of her skin, which made her aware of her Dravidian ancestry hailing from the Southern part of India. In “An Introduction,” she says, “... I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar.” And strict discipline at home as described in “Afterwards”:

... Growth was
Definiteness, the much-ironed folds
Of a school uniform;
A man who let me take his name
To make me feel I belonged.  

13. Ibid.
15. Ibid. p. 57.
The men of the family considered taking care of their women-folk, their education and marriage of their progeny as duties and performed them accordingly. Love and affection were unknown, these emotions were to be found only in the grand-parents. All that the men of the family ever noticed was the physical growth of the girl-child. In "An Introduction," she says, "...I was child, and later they / Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs / Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair." 16

The children were rag dolls who moved their limbs when the elders pulled at the strings. Her father died when she was old enough to understand its reality and therefore it did not upset her the way it upset Sylvia Plath. In "My Fathers Death," she speaks of her relationship with her father for the first time, "...I feared my father. / Only in that last coma did he seem close to me, and / I whispered into his ears that I loved him." 17

Perhaps, it was this lack of fatherly love or its demonstration that made her search for an ideal relationship in her marriage. The reminiscences of childhood devoid of fatherly love perhaps made her expect love and tenderness from the man she was wedded. Kamala Das wanted affections, which were denied to her in her childhood from the father when she grew up. Her Nayar ancestors being Shiva

worshippers believed in the elemental passions of man-woman relationship, where emotions of love and tenderness were immaterial.

Unlike Sylvia Plath, who has incestual overtones regarding the memory of her father, a sign of Freudian influence, in Kamala Das we find a nostalgic regret for having missed fatherly love and affection. Both the poets for their respective reasons looked for a father figure in the men they were to marry. Sylvia Plath’s life can be charted as follows:
- First the search for a man like her father, leading to her intense love for him - culminating in her marriage to him, then her disillusionment in marriage due to the demands of a society as a wife and finally, the realization of her need as a poet and woman are traced in the first stage of comparison. A linear development is then followed till the end of the comparison. Sylvia looked for a man huge enough to fill her father’s boots. She wanted a dominating, intelligent, handsome man on whom she could impose a god-like character. In her own words she found Ted Hughes who suited her purpose, that of a father figure for whom she was looking out, “Her words uttered in 1950 at the age of twenty were “I need a strong mate; something like a demi god.”¹⁸ Her meeting Ted Hughes on 26 February in the year 1956 is described by a passion totally in contrast to the sweet ‘Sivvy’ of the Letters Home. She was twenty-three and her meeting, it was one of clash of two people equally strong. She fell head over heels in love with the huge man in the room. Their first meeting itself was marked with blood “And when he kissed my

neck, I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down from his face." 19 The desire burning in her was the naked feminine urge longing for a union with the male
“This love is a falcon, striking once and for all: blood sacrifice.” 20 These were her words regarding the first meeting. Her longing was not only for physical love, which only a virile man, strong like her father; a big man could give her, which she found in Ted Hughes, but for guidance and support. The following lines echo her desire for mentor and husband reflecting the ideologies of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s.

... I see the power and voice in him that will shake the world alive. Even as he sees into my poems and will work with me to make me a woman poet like the world well at; even as he sees into my character and will tolerate no falling away from my best right self. 21

She sees her marriage in mythic terms - “I am a woman and glad of it, and my songs will be of fertility of the earth.” 22 Ironically, her poems hardly reflect the much awaited, happiness in the marriage. One can only attribute it to the ideologies of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s which spoke of the bliss of married life, and also the double standard where a woman however efficient had to have a man, a father or a husband as a mentor through whom she had to channelize her creativity. The choice that a woman had was a tragic one she either had

19. Ibid.
22. Ibid. p. 256.
to select a partner leading to a wedded life or reject a partner leading to
spinsterhood. The fear of remaining unmarried, or marriage to a weak,
and worthless person might have made her idolize Ted Hughes. Even
his negative qualities might have seemed appealing as she describes in
“Daddy,” as she says, “Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the
face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.” 23

Sylvia Plath’s meeting with Ted Hughes had brought her into
contact with the White Goddess Cult, within a few months of their
acquaintance, which she took up as an initiate. Both the husband and
wife, had accepted this ‘Moon Goddess Muse’. Sylvia Plath’s mind,
bent upon the mythic structure of her poem, seems to have paved the
way for the destruction of her marriage. The love for which she had
longed in marriage proved to be a shadow. In “Elm,” she says, “Love is
a shadow. / How you lie and cry after it / Listen: these are its hooves: it
has gone off, like a horse.” 24

The ideologies of a domesticated wife must have smothered her
creativity, as she could find no time amidst the house-hold chores to
pursue her literary career. She had to work as a home-keeper, along
with a secretary’s job for Ted Hughes, just like her mother who worked
for Otto Plath. The desire for a father-husband seems to have ended
there as she could not see herself slogging for her husband at the cost of
her creativity. The souring of a beautiful dream of marriage is seen in
“The Couriers,” in the following lines:

24. Ibid. p. 192.
The word of snail on the plate of a leaf?
It is not mine. Do not accept it.

Acetic acid in a sealed tin?
Do not accept it. It is not genuine.

A ring of gold with three sun in it?
Lies, Lies, and a grief. 25

Sylvia Plath was caught between marriage as a social obligation to fulfill her womanly hungers and the urge of creativity which needed independence. This conflict damaged the already split-self further. Her desire for perfection in performing the role of a mother, wife and a poet led to a conflict from which she could not free herself. Any breaking away from convention, she knew, would lead to a disaster as seen in “Aerialist,” where she observes:

Now in penalty for her skill,
By day she must walk in dread
Steel gauntlets of traffic, terror-struck
Lest, out of spite, the whole
Elaborate scaffold of sky overhead
Fall racketing final on her luck. 26

In “Lesbos,” she describes how love has transformed into hate for the very same domestic life she had longed for and says,

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,

25. Ibid. p. 247.
26. Ibid. p. 332.
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats.
O vase of acid,
It is love you are full of.  

Her domestic chores have become monotonous and she attends to them thinking that it is out of love. Sylvia Plath also feels that it was exactly this feeling which was killing her creativity and subjugating herself to a male, which was not in keeping with the myth selected by her, that of the 'White Goddess,' whose dictums state that the 'muse' should never be domesticated. The myth keeps cropping up at intervals even when she assumes an apparent compromise. The hatred towards a society, which demands conformation is described in "The Applicant," as:

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.  

She feels that it was the conformation demanded by the society, which makes her hate her own husband and family life. The society is also responsible for making her into a doll, devoid of independence. In "Pursuit," she compares her husband to a Panther:

27. Ibid. p. 229.
28. Ibid. pp. 221-222.
There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I'll have my death of him;

Meat must glut his mouths raw wound.
Entering the tower of my fears,
I shut my doors on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.
Blood quickens, gonging in my ears. 29

There is the awareness of enjoying sex with a man whom she has identified as a father and the guilt becomes unbearable. The heat in the poems is compared to fire and is indicative of the fire of sex, equated with death. In 'Pursuit' the poem describes the sexual heat as fire, both the hunger in the man and the woman. The man hunts his women and the women, knowing the consequences are unable to resist it and says,

Along red network of his veins
What fires run, what craving wakes?

Keen the rending teeth and sweet
The singing fury of his fur;
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,
Doom consummates that appetite.
In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait.

Appalled by a secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance. 30

29. Ibid. pp. 22-23.
30. Ibid.
Sex is both attractive and destructive to Sylvia Plath, but she is not prepared for ‘total sacrifice’ demanded by the man. She has to rise from this burning fire of sexual desire in order to be free from it and male domination. The ‘fire,’ in the poem here is representative of both the fire of Hell and the fire of purification. The passionate heat of the body was annihilating her ‘self’ by letting her self be subjugated by man. In “Lady Lazarus,” too she identifies fire with that of both hell, the burning inferno, and that of purification. In “Fever 103,” she highlights the concept of purity as she says, “I am too pure for you or anyone. / Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God.” 31

Sylvia Plath’s married life turns out to be entirely different from her dreams and the ideologies of late 1950’s and early 1960’s. She realizes in ‘Kindness’, that poetry is her life and nothing was worth sacrificing it. The only motivation in her life proves to be poetry, “The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it.” 32

Sylvia Plath being an initiate of the White Goddess Muse could not afford to continue smothering her creativity in domesticity. She had to escape from the life of drudgery.

Kamala Das’s life can be charted as follows - The first is her marriage to a man selected by her father, the description of her husband’s haste for physical satisfaction in contrast to her desire for affection and love leading to her desire for a man’s love to satisfy her

33. Ibid. p. 270.
womanly needs and disappointment at her husband's attitude towards sex. The demands of a society as a wife and finally, the demands of her own self as woman and poet are traced. The linear development is then followed till the end of the comparison. Kamala Das had no say in the selection of her life partner. If Sylvia Plath selected a man to fit the boots of her father, Kamala Das sought tenderness in love in the man to whom she was married-off according to the wishes of her elders. She was not even aware of man-woman relationship at the time of her marriage. "An Introduction," beautifully describes her life after marriage as:

... I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall

...........

...........
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. 33

Kamala Das did not know about sex at the time of her marriage. The way her husband violently satisfied his bodily hunger created in her an anger towards the female anatomy. The poem further explains the society's demand for blind conformation in the name of propriety as described:

... Then... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers. 34

Kamala Das’s mind nurtured on mythological stories of love and tenderness longed for it from her husband. Belonging to Hinduism, traditionally nurtured, she was taught to believe in the sanctity of marriage as a union blessed by the divine and a fulfillment of love. Love was one thing her husband could not understand and sex for him was merely a physical thing. He could not understand her emotional thirst. Like Sylvia Plath, she too compares her married life to that of a living doll, where a woman is expected according to Manu Smriti to be as she remark:

Kāryesu dasi, Karanesu Mantri  
Rupeca Laksmi, Ksamaya Dharitri  
Bhojyesu Mata, Sayanesu Rambhā  
Ṣat Karma yukta, kula Dharmāpatni. 35

In translation, it means ‘an ideal wife is one who inculcates the following attributes in relation to a man whom she weds. In service like a maid servant, in counselling like a minister, in appearance as beautiful as Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, and as forgiving as mother earth, while feeding a mother and in bed Rambha, a celestial prostitute.’ Every Hindu girl is trained in the art of self-negation by holding up

34. Ibid. p. 60.
mythological characters as role models ‘Sita’ of Ramayana being the favorite. The Hindu girl is also told that she is unworthy of freedom and has to be taken care of by her father, brother, husband and son.

A Hindu girl in the name of protection is made a captive. Kamala Das describes her life after marriage in “Of Calcutta,” as, “… I am a trained circus dog / Jumping my routine hoops each day, where is my soul, / My spirit, where the muted tongue of my desire? “36

The heartless demand of a society, which expects a wife to be exemplary in her duties neglecting her emotions and desire is highlighted. In “The Old Play House,” she says,

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her 
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget 
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but 
Also her nature, the urge to fly 37

In the same poem she continues to describe the slow process by which her identity is erased and she continues to say,

... You called me wife, 
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and 
To offer at the sight moment the vitamins. Cowering 
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and 
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your 
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. 38

38. Ibid.
These lines remind one of "The Applicant," "A living doll, everywhere you look / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk," and "Words for a Nursery," by Sylvia Plath which echo the same sentiments. In "Words for a Nursery," Sylvia Plath says,

I learn, good circus
Dog that I am, how
To move, serve, steer food,
Index the arrow,
Thumbhead, blunt helper,
My master's fetcher. 40

If society expected Kamala Das to be a docile, living doll in the role of a wife and her husband expected her to be a trained dog, religion bound her to her husband even in death. A woman's dying before her husband's death raised her status, and according to religious belief she becomes a 'Sumangali' as described in "Of Calcutta," she says,

And, each dead wife's feet are painted red before
They carry her to the pyre so that we see, while
Passing by, tiny alta-tinted feet wagging,
Red flags of triumph, bragging of a widowhood,
Cleverly avoided; 41

This poem too echoes the tragic fate of a widow described in Sylvia Plath's poem "Widow," where a woman's life is linked interminably to her dead husband and she remarks:

Widow. The bitter spider sits
And sits in the center of her loveless spokes.
Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar,
The moth-face of her husband, moonwhite and ill,
Circles her like a prey she’d love to kill.  

Despite the socio-cultural and religious differences the fate of the
widow seems to be the same in both situations.

Like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das too craved for sexual satisfaction,
which would not endanger her individuality. Sex without love in its
destructive form is murder to her as in “The Doubt,” she says,

... How well I can see him
After a murder, conscientiously
Tidy up the scene, wash
The bloodstains under
Faucet, bury the knife...  

Sex without love becomes murder. To Kamala Das, this bloody
scene is also reminiscent of the mythological stories where sex is
associated with bloodshed as in the death of Ravana for carrying away
Sita, and Kichaka for coveting Draupadi, etc. The concept of sex as
natural phenomenon is not openly explained to Sylvia Plath and
Kamala Das by their parents. Kamala Das too uses the ‘fire’ imagery and
almost all her poems have the images of either heat, or fire. ‘Fire,’ of
Hinduism in the ‘Myth of Agni,’ has two references. ‘Kama,’ the fire of
passion, is rejuvenating and ‘Agni,’ is the destroyer. In the Shaiva
mythology it is this fire – Kama, which leads to the flow of water – i.e.,

semen, sweat or blood. Thus, water and fire form the elemental motifs in the Vedic symbolism. The heat of the body should bring rejuvenation, which the modern husband and wife fail to produce. Kamala Das's "Dance of the Eunuchs," describes the incomplete formation or union, which is 'vacant' ecstasy and results only in 'meager rain' raising all sorts of stinks. The poem beautifully describes the modern concept of marriage devoid of love, faith and fertilization. There is a similar strain of thought in Sylvia Plath regarding her husband's mistress, Assia Gutman, as seen in "The Munich Mannequins," "The Rival," "Barren Woman," "Childless Woman" and "The Fearful." "Dance of the Eunuchs," and "The Fearful" reflect the same concept, that of failure of modern in bringing about rejuvenation, as she described, "Reflecting only her mate in. / The Silver limbo of each eye / Where the child can never swim." 44

The indulgence in sex for its own sake is not Sylvia Plath's idea of love, for she had given up her career to be a fruitful wife. Judith Kroll in her notes refers to that fact that Sylvia Plath had copied the following passage from the Golden Bough, which shows her opposition of the Rival in her life as a way of being "The magic virtue of a pregnant woman to communicate fertility..." On the other hand, "... a barren wife infects her husband's garden with her own sterility & prevents the trees from bearing fruit; hence a childless woman is usually divorced." 45

Religion too becomes hateful, for it forces the wife to be pure, but fails to control the adulterous behaviour of her husband. The Poets Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, were disillusioned by the religion, in which they had believed. The two poets in their own ways and for their own reasons reject the concept of marriage as a socio-religious obligation. They want to be free from the shackles of the wedlock, which to them has proved itself to be an inconvenience to be endured. Sylvia Plath has to free herself not only from the living husband but also the dead father to whom she is bound with incestual over tones, to describe which she has taken refuge in the ‘Oedipal myth.’ Sylvia Plath desires freedom from all kinds of male domination and she begins with her husband in “Purdah,” when she makes use of sympathetic magic in this poem to destroy him, as she says in “Purdah”:

Jade-
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical.

Shifting my clarities. 46

She was part of her husband, and she could destroy him through herself, because as she says, there exists a strong bond between them even when he is physically absent,

She begins the poem by accepting to be a jade statuette and establishes the basis for Sympathetic Magic influenced by Frazer. She is a part of her husband, born from “the agonized side of green Adam,” and thus being a part carved out of Adam she can cure his pain by attaching herself to him the opposite also holds good. Being of Adam’s substance, a neutral sympathy exists between them and so “as the image suffers, so will the man.” What happens to her has to happen to him. This poem has its origin in her feelings for Ted when they were newly married and she had kept her marriage a secret from the college authorities. She was forced to stay away from Ted and in a letter to her mother written during that period, she says,

It is the longest I have ever been away from Ted and . . . we have mystically become one. I can appreciate the legend of Eve coming from Adam’s rib, as I never did before; the damn story’s true! . . . Away from Ted, I feel as if I were living with one eyelash of myself only. It is a really igony. 48

“Purdah,” actually means a veil, a curtain in Persian and Hindi used for seclusion of women. The veil hides the reality behind and so

47. Ibid. p. 243.
does her false-self hide her real self. The veil prevents her from exposing her real self and the poor husband considers her false-self to be a real self. She will use her real-self to destroy the false-self and destroy him also along with it:

I shall unloose -
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart -

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes. 49

She cannot be free unless she kills the male in her life. There is reference to Clytemnestra who killed Agamemnon. In the last two lines, where the 'Shriek' is Agamemnon's death cry and the 'cloak of holes' refers to the raiment in which Clytemnestra enmeshed him before stabbing him. According to Robert Graves, "Clytemnestra is related to Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, whom he considers male-destroying embodiments of the 'White Goddess.'" 50 The 'White Goddess' has to kill the old consort before taking a new one. Ted falls in love with another woman, because Sylvia Plath has smothered herself as his muse through domestication and his murder is justified. She had to achieve her freedom through murder, according to the dictums of the 'White Goddess' myth. In "Daddy," one sees the assimilated male, the father and husband being exorcised. He is converted into a Vampire, a devil

and curses are heaped upon him to justify his murder in a ceremonial manner:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time.  

All words related to the Nazi regime, are used to express her pentup anger against him: 'Your neat mustache', 'Aryan eye', 'Swastika', 'Frisco Seal', 'Panzer Mar', 'Man in Black', 'Meinkampf look'. Sylvia Plath also uses the mythical time period here to refer to her attempts at suicide, when she says,

I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back to you.

.........

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look
And a love of the rack and screw.
And I said I do, I do,
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two -

The Vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. 52

The poem enacts the assimilation of the husband and father figure
and the killing of both at one stroke. The words ‘I do’ ‘I do’ echo the
marriage vows, and “the you do not do; you do not do,” nullify the
marriage vows. Just the killing of the male is not sufficient, she needs a
rebirth, a pure life, free from the past stigma, she wants to be a virgin
again ready to begin anew. In “Fever 103,” the fever burns her and
purges her until she becomes pure:

. . . I
Am pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,
By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you nor him

Not him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) ---
To Paradise. 53

52. Ibid. p. 224.
53. Ibid. p. 232.
In contrast to the ghastly scene enacted in "Daddy," one has a beautiful description of her ascendance to paradise with heavenly beings attending her in "Fever 103." ‘Paradise,’ promised by myths is used in the above lines.

Sylvia Plath attains the life of the Queen Bee, a rebirth, totally free from male domination and a return to the matriarchal culture. She is unlike other women who are not miraculous; they are all drudges, with no minds of their own. In “Stings,” she asserts herself by saying,

I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-Machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her -
The mausoleum, the wax house. 54

It was her false-self, working in the disguise of a drudge. As already discussed in the previous poem, it was only her false-self connected to her husband as her real-self is the 'Moon' and is indestructible. She frees her real-self and it soars high in its terrible form like a 'Scar in the Sky' and a 'red comet'. Like other female bees she had no wish to continue as drudge for life. The 'drudges,' are women who have smothered their muse like qualities through domestication. They have found ways to be happy in a domesticated surrounding where they are, subjugated by men. They have lost their mysterious and miraculous characteristics. Sylvia Plath who tried the same life for a short while has realized that it is not her true nature. There is a rejection of religion in “And dried plates with my dense hair” reminding one of Mary Magdalene, symbolic of tears shed by Sylvia Plath for following the patriarchal religion of Christianity. There is a recovery as Queen Bee with a pagan faith in “Have a self to recover, a queen.” In ‘Wintering’, Sylvia Plath says,

They have got rid of the men,
The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.
Winter is for women -
The woman, still at her knitting.  

The lines are reminiscent of the spider, which sits calmly waiting for its prey. The spider is symbolic of the ‘great mother,’ whose embrace is death. Sylvia Plath’s hatred is towards the male in general. She has no notion of reconciliation or compromise.

Kamala Das does not want freedom from men as a whole, she wants the union of love and sex. She longs for a freedom from the dull domesticity of wifehood and mechanical aspect of sex. She hungers for kind words and tender caresses. Marriage has become a social obligation, which she has to endure for fear of the society. The society and religion consider her the repository of family honour and force her to suppress her feelings. The married life, as described in “The Prisoner,” where she observes,

As the convict studies  
his prison’s geography  
I study the trappings  
of your body, dear love,  
for, I must some day find  
an escape from its snare.

Kamala Das wants to escape like Sylvia Plath, as she says in “I Shall Someday”:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon  
You built around me with morning tea,  
Love-words flung from door ways and of course  
Your tired lust. I shall someday take  
Wings, fly around, as often petals  
Do when free in air, and you dear one,  
Just the sad remnant of a root, must  
Lie behind, sans pride, on double-beds  
And grieve.

The freedom, which she longed for was not a freedom devoid of male presence. Kamala being nurtured as a Hindu, had it ingrained in her that life could be complete and meaningful only when lived for the sake of a man, i.e., her husband, irrespective of her likes and dislikes. She did not therefore reject ‘man’ as an entity, she desired for a man with whom she could express her needs and desires. She did not want the freedom given to her by her husband, which was unasked for and amounted to rejection. The freedom she wanted was from the doll-like existence, and where her feminine longings could be shared with a man who shared her life as a husband. As already discussed the Hindu girl or wife did not enjoy any freedom, as she was always dominated in the name of protection. In “Composition,” she describes her feelings of rejection during the early period of her married life where she was earnestly expecting her husband to be possessive about her:

... I began to have doubts.
I asked my husband,
am I hetero
am I lesbian
or am I just plain frigid?
He only laughed.
For such questions
probably there are no answers
or else
the answers must emerge
from within. 58

Kamala Das knew that for some questions, their were no answers. She had to find the answer by herself. Religion in which she had

believed, she felt, failed to give her any answer. Unlike Sylvia Plath who sought her freedom through the killing of the male, Kamala Das went in search of the ‘ideal-love’, which gave her the title of being an adulteress. She moved from man to man in search of love, which could transcend the physicality of love, knowing full well that the ‘bodily wisdom’ was myriad years older than her emotional need.

Motherhood for both the poets Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das meant different things. For Sylvia Plath, it was a celebration of fertility, the duty of a wife to be fulfilled. About her children, she remarked that, like her they too would be inheritors of an infamous suicide. Sylvia Plath’s antagonism towards her mother’s altruistic nature, which burdened her with filial obligation is seen in the First Voice in the verse drama Three women -A Poem for Three Voices, when she says,

'I do not will him to exceptional.
It is the exception that interest the devil.
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill
Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother’s heart.
I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him,
And to marry what he wants and where he will. 59

There is awareness of the fact that the birth of children is predetermined and she is only a medium in the process. There is nothing great about being a mother. It also shows Sylvia Plath’s indirect resentment against her mother’s desire of continuing her hold on Sylvia Plath’s life denying her freedom. In “Morning Song,” she says,

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand. 60

Although in a letter to her mother she writes of being 'mother earth', the feelings about being mother earth in it, refer only to the aspect of fertility as a way of being, "I am a woman and glad of it, and my songs will be of fertility of the earth..." 61

Kamala Das, on the other hand realizes the beauty of being a mother. Irrespective of the emotion involved, a woman becomes a mother, an identity which no one can deprive her off. In "Jaisurya," she says,

Love is not important that
akes the blood carouse
nor the man who brands you
with his lust but is
shed as slough at the end of
each embrace. 62

60. Ibid. pp. 156-157.
The reality of the child in the womb and its birth was much more permanent than the bodily lust, it was a proof of her womanhood. Yet, she has no love for her children who would belong to a generation as she describes in "My Sons":

Users of vulgar words and of jeans that
Chafe desire to a hot flame, they swing
Round and round with the females of their tribe. 63

The lines "jeans that chafe desire," "they swing round and round," are reminiscent of the lines from "The Dance of the Eunuchs." The modern generation too lacks depth of emotions and their enjoyment seems like 'vacant ecstasy' of the eunuchs:

We ate our forefathers
To gather the vigor for living
Our grandchildren shall perhaps eat us
when their turn arrives. 64

Kamala Das too uses the imagery of earth during the birth of a son. In "Jaisurya," she says:

For a while I too was earth.
In me the seed was silent,
Waiting as a baby does,
For the womb's quiet expulsion. 65

63. Ibid. p. 119.
64. Ibid. p. 140.
65. Ibid. p. 62.
The last role of their gender, i.e., motherhood being performed, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das move on towards salvation. Permitting her to complete the three stages of her life, that of a daughter, wife and mother, the lunar muse, who presided over Sylvia Plath, expects a complete surrender, which is seen in her poem "Edge" and which is also acceptable to Sylvia Plath, as she remarks:

The woman is perfected,
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose .........
.............

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone. 66

The picture of Cleopatra who committed suicide by putting the 'asp' to her breast is unmistakably seen here. Death was the only way left for Sylvia Plath as a gateway to freedom. Yet, before that she had to reject her mother as a rival and she uses the 'Medusa' as the symbol and myth. She shows her wrath at the altruistic mother who refuses to let her lead an independent life, smothering her with unwanted help. She blames her mother for her fate in "The Disquieting Muses," and asks:

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unrightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
sent these ladies in her stead 67

Sylvia Plath unhappily accepts the fact that she cannot follow the guidelines given to her by her mother. She hates herself for hating her mother who had sacrificed everything in her life to give Sylvia Plath the best that she could afford. In "The Moon and The Yew Tree," she accepts a pagan muse, rejecting the Christian Mother Mary, where she admits:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary,
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness -
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

67. Ibid. p. 74.
I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
Inside the Church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces still with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness
and silence. 68

The incapability of the religion in bringing peace to a disturbed
mind in the modern world is highlighted. Sylvia Plath accepts the moon
muse, a pagan concept, rejecting the Christian values, which have
become as numb as the statues within the Church. The only way out for
her is to retrace her footsteps and go back in search of a myth, which
will free her from the torture of her life. Death becomes the sole
alternative. The Moon-muse is oblivious of Christian preachings, that
considers suicide a sin. The Moon-muse tempts Sylvia Plath to kill
herself.

The influence of Yeat's in Sylvia Plath's life is noteworthy. In the
year 1960, she was happily married to Ted and was living in London.
One evening she was walking her daughter Frieda feeling a little
depressed and in a letter to her mother she writes, "half dreamily I let
my feet carry me down a road I'd never been down before' this walk of
her's led her to '41 Fitzroy Road the street where Yeats lived."69

Sylvia Plath was excited and took Ted to see the house, a huge
one which she wanted to buy, but couldn't afford at that time. Perhaps,

68. Ibid. p. 173.
this chancing upon the house was a ‘message’ or a premonition, because later in 1962 after Ted deserted her, leaving her depressed and penniless with two children to care for, she once again found the flat in which Yeats had lived. The excitement of discovering “W.B. Yeats house – with a blue plaque over the door, saying he lived Here!” is mentioned once again in another letter to her mother dated 19 November 1962. In the same letter when she was anxious about getting the flat she mentions her feelings to her mother as “I had the uncanny feeling I had got in touch with Yeats’ spirit. (he was a sort of medium himself) When I went to his tower in Ireland. I opened a book of his plays in front of Susan as a joke for a ‘message’ and read. “Get wine and food to give you strength and courage, and I will get the house ready Isn’t it fantastic?” 70

For a person like Sylvia Plath who was deeply interested in the occult this must have been highly significant. The next month she moved into the house and after that her letters always described of her happiness of living in that house. In a letter written on 14 December 1962 she mentions once again to her mother “I feel Yeats’ spirit blessings me.” 71 Ironically, even after living in Yeats’ house she could not muster enough courage to overcome the death wish. It was a year as her mother describes, “Then the worst cold, snow storm, and black outs in

70. Ibid. p. 480.
71. Ibid. p. 490.
over a hundred years engulfed London for months.”72 Sylvia Plath’s letter of 14 December 1962 seems so pathetically ironic when one compares her letter to her mother, in which, she says, “Well, here I am! Safely in Yeats’ house.” 73 She lived in the same house till her suicide in 1963. Judith Kroll, mentioning Sylvia Plath’s stay in Yeats’ house and its influence on her poem “Getting There,” which deals with the problem of ‘the incompleteness’ of an individual life, or the ‘incompleteness of a process which involves endless repetitions of the same self,’ says that “Ted Hughes in conversation had acknowledged that Sylvia Plath had encountered Yeats’ translation of the Upanishads in the latter part of 1962.”74

The influence of Zen Buddhism too is seen in her works. In “Lesbos,” she ends with the lines that, life is full of lies, yet, these lies make life bearable by fulfilling the desire for illusion, as no one wants to know the truth. Truth would mean giving up of the process of being, which itself is life, as she observes, “I say I may be back, / You know what lies are for. / Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet.” 75 In “Paralytic,” she says, “I smile, a buddha, all / Wants, desire / Falling from me like rings / Hugging their lights.”76

73. Ibid. p. 488.
76 Ibid. p. 266.
In the above lines, one sees the basic teachings of Buddhism where Buddha preaches man to overcome his desires. It is desire, which causes misery and freedom from desire can lead to happiness and peace. A person who is a paralytic inevitably stops functioning bodily, and only his mind functions. It speaks of detachment in attachment. Although, physically his body is present, he cannot participate. He experiences freedom from the burden of physical desires. Creativity is a mental process, and the physical body with its desires proves an obstruction to it, Sylvia Plath, therefore decided to commit suicide. "The claw of / Of the magnolia, / Drunk on its own scents, / Asks nothing of life." 77

The lines are suggestive of a way of being where there is nothing to strive for, because, being is complete in itself. A flower just lives as a flower, with nothing to achieve unlike a man burdened with wants and desires. The Horatio Alger myth and precepts of filial gratitude preached by Christianity were in contrast to this idea. Only the transcendent self can express 'self sufficiency' like a flower. The resonance of Buddhist preaching is seen very clearly in the "Words," where she reflects:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from the centre like horses.

Words dry and riderless
The indefatigable hoof-taps.

77. Ibid. p. 267.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern life. 78

Sylvia Plath says that, no words or sentences can successfully convey the experience of a person. They are dry and riderless horses, their meanings go astray, failing to convey the thoughts of a person. No words can change the pre-destined fate of a man - reflected in the last two lines of the poem. The Buddhist scripture the Lankavataara Sutra, preaches that, "But neither words nor sentences can exactly express meanings, for words are only sweet sounds that are arbitrarily chosen to represent things." 79

The mystical experiences are emotional and any amount of effort put into expressing them will not be successful. They cannot be verbalized. We find Sylvia Plath struggling to use every possible symbol and metaphor to convey her thoughts, which were forming themselves into the mythical pattern in her mind. The symbols and metaphor proved to be only pointers to what she has experienced. Critics, therefore, are still exploring the depth of her emotions which led to her work and suicide. One cannot make another person experience his own experience. As Buddha says, one has to work out one’s own salvation, and not go on speaking about it struggling for verbalization. Sylvia Plath also describes the dangers in the pursuit of truth. If

78. Ibid. p. 270.
illusions are killing, then truth is sharper than a knife. Poems like "Totem," "Mystic," and "Paralytic," deal with this themes. In "Mystic," she says,

> The air is a mill of hooks-
> Questions without answer,
> Glittering and drunk as flies
> Whose kiss stings unbearably
> In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

I remember
The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,
The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.
Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over,
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals
What is the remedy? 80

Man's struggle has forever been one for realization of God, yet the question is how can one be sure that it will satisfy man's thirst for knowledge and bring him peace. Man, she feels, is not ready for the ultimate truth. His greatness lies in the process of realizing and not in the realization. In "Getting There," Sylvia Plath says:

> Is there no still place
> Turning and turning in the middle air,
> Untouched and untouchable.

The train is dragging itself, it is screaming------
An animal
Insane for destination,
the blood spot,
The face at the end of the flare. 81

Yet, the tragedy of man's fate is that he longs for destinations.

Kamala Das too realizes the worthlessness of words. In "Words are birds", she says, "Words are birds. / Where have they gone to roost, / Wings, tired, / Hiding from the dusk?" 82 The words fail in their mission of conveying meaning and can bring no solace. No words of promises can assure a human mind of the certainty of life. In "Words" she says,

All round me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop them slow growing
From within....

Can be so many things, . . .
They never seem to stop their coming
From a silence, somewhere deep within . . . 83

The uncontrollable urge of man to convey his feelings becomes a curse. The achievement of silence becomes impossible. Buddha preached silence, like all great people who advocated silence as the medium to secure answers, but these confessional poets irrespective of their cultural backgrounds selected the medium of speech to pour out

81. Ibid, p. 249.
their innermost thoughts, only to realize that the inner vessel would never become empty. Kamala Das says in “Nani,” where she is seen contemplating:

.... They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answers come, those wise ones who reside
In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubts
For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
In life, like music in the Koel’s egg.
Like lust in blood, or like the sap in a tree...  

Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das both seem to have read a lot of books on religion and philosophy but lacked the capacity to use them. They could not come out of the dark house they built for themselves. In his Myth of the Cave, Plato expanded on the doctrine of the good. The life of a man, he said, is a life in a cave, “the prison house of sensation.” According to him this world is of appearance rather than reality, there is a veil, which hides the ‘real’ from the man’s vision, which can be considered to be Indian equivalent of ‘Maya’, the veil, which hides the reality or the ultimate truth. In “The Dark House”, Sylvia Plath says,

This is a dark house, very big.
I made it myself,
Cell by cell from a Quiet Corner... 

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84. Ibid. p. 18.
In "Krishna," Kamala Das acknowledges her mistake of imprisoning herself in the darkness of desires, and expresses a desire to be a prisoner of divine union and says,

Your body is my prison, Krishna
I cannot see beyond it.
You darkness blinds me
Your love words shut out the wise world’s din’ 87

Both the Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are aware of their need for seclusion from the busy world, which is full of ‘sensations’. Their need is to move away from the normal way of life and search for a meaning to their lives of unjustified sufferings.

Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are both aware of the fact that they too are partially responsible for their sufferings. Their two selves are so blended that it becomes next to impossible to separate them. The external self is indulging in material activities is the cause of suffering. The inner self or the real-self keeps watching silently waiting to come out. It is totally detached from the material world. “In Plaster”, Sylvia Plath develops this idea by saying,

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now;
This new absolutely white person and old yellow one,
And the white person is certainly the superior one.
She doesn’t need food, she is one of the real saints.
At the beginning I hated her, She had no personality-
She lay in bed with me like a dead body

And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was.

I blamed her for everything but she didn’t answer. 88

Kamala Das speaks of the deep silence within, which is longing for the real-self being in the hypnotic spell of Goutama. This real self is free from material bondages and can bring her the much-needed solace. Only the physical body is in the hands of her husband, the soul is in another’s arms. In “An Apology to Goutama”, Kamala says,

... Another’s name brings tears, your’s
A calm, and a smile, and yet Goutama,
That other owns me; while your arms hold
My woman-form, his hurting arms
Hold my very soul 89

The conflict between the physical and spiritual where the mind is torn between the desires of flesh and spirit is depicted in both poets. Sylvia Plath in a “Letter to a Purist”, says,

O my great idiot, who
With one foot
Caught (as it were) in the muck-trap
Of skin and bone,

Dithers with the other way out
In preposterous provinces of madcap
Cloud-cuckoo,
Agawp at the impeccable moon. 90

The life of flesh and blood is acceptable to the society. It cannot comprehend the concept of pure creativity at the cost of material desires. This creative impulse, which makes the poet different from the rest is considered as madness by the society. The poet's reality is different from that of an ordinary man without poetic vision. In Kamala Das too we find the same conflict of the two selves.

... the inward
path you take that carries you step
by weary step beyond the blood's illogical arrogance, yes,
beyond the bone and the marrow into that invisible abode of pain,
yes, that deathless creation tethered to your self,
and constantly struggling to wrest itself free, tethered to your soul as your shadow is to your form,
your Siamese twin no surgeon can cut away from you. 91

"In Plaster," by Sylvia Plath, we find a deeper awareness of the conflict between the two selves, where one self tries to get the better of the other. "I shall never get out of this! / There are two of me now; /

This new absolutely White persona / and old yellow one, / And the white person is certainly the superior one."92 The conflict between the two ways of life i.e., life pattern dictated by the society and the life pattern dictated by the poetic vision is manifest in the above poems.

The father image and the marriage of both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das proved to be the catalysts in sending them on the path of self discovery. Although they belonged to entirely different cultural backgrounds, nourished on entirely different traditions, one finds their reaction towards the violence in marriage to be similar. The role of religion and society forces two individuals to live together and makes the primary institution of society i.e., marriage into a prison house. The rules and regulations laid down for the benefit of mankind fail to cater to the needs of the changing society. The main concept i.e., man and woman relationship bound in holy wedlock, intended to complement each other, is shows as getting progressively devalued. The basic instincts remain the same, but get smothered by the demands of a changing society. The primitive man's respectful acceptance of natural forces, today have become fields of exploration and scientific investigation in the West, and has also infiltrated into the Eastern culture, and led to a sense of rootlessness in its people. Man has been slowly destroying the sanctity of nature in the name of science. The search for truth has even entered the field of religion. Alienated from nature, man has nowhere to turn to, for solace. The modern concept of marriage as a biological necessity or a pathological sickness without emotional content or spiritual intensity has become a curse. Sex, the

most primary and private of man’s experiences, too has become a subject for scientific study. Marriage as a medium through which they had searched protective love in their husbands took on different colours. When the marriage, which Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das accepted as holy-union proved to be devoid of faith, loyalty and religious significance, they went to the myths easily available to them in search of solutions to their marital problems. Sylvia Plath went to the myth which was easily available to her in Robert Graves “The White Goddess”, adapting it along with her knowledge of Freud, Jung, Kafka, Nietzsche, and Zen Buddhism. Sylvia Plath’s main aim became freedom for creation through freedom from oppression. The most important of her poems dealing with the concept of is “Getting There,” where she desires rebirth, to be born as a new babe, pure and innocent, where she describes the pattern of death and rebirth, as:

The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby. 93

Sylvia Plath does not want to be repaired. What she wants is not to be ‘as good as new,’ but completely new and fresh, an idea seen in “The Eye-mote,” where she says,

What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife,

Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis;
Horses fluent in the wind,
A place, a time gone out of mind. 94

She wants her past to be annihilated completely and not just forgotten, because she is aware that she can never be free of her dead father's memory. This poem describes her mental crippling caused by her father's death as a homeopathic wound, which is caused through the homeopathic magic. Frazer describes homeopathic magic on the Law of Contact, the "magician infers that what ever he does to a material object will affect equally the her person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed a part of his body or not." 95 She does not want to be cured but wants to start a new. She also voices the Upanishadic words of the soul's immortality. The soul is believed to be indestructible and venturing on a long journey where it enters the never ending cycle of rebirths. In "Totem," she says, "There is no terminus, only suitcases / Out of which the same self-unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes... " 96

The 'Glass Coffin' mentioned by Robert Graves allows rebirth and therefore is a cradle "even while it is a coffin." 97 Her faith in fate too becomes responsible for her death. As in "Words," she says,

94. Ibid. p. 109.
Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life. 98

Human beings use words to shield themselves against fate and fear but the words fail to protect them from the dictates of fate. In “All The Dead Dears,” the past or the collective unconscious is described as very powerful, in fact as powerful as fate. The call of the past becomes too powerful for her to protest as she says, “From the mercury-backed glass / Mother, grandmother, great grandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in.” 99

The line, “Mother, grandmother, great grandmother,” reinforce her desire for a matriarchal culture. The desire for death as peace is picturized in “Lorelei,” where she is presented looking deep into the river:

O river, I see drifting
Deep in your flux of silver
Those great goddesses of peace.
Stone, stone, ferry me down there. 100

In “Tulips,” Sylvia Plath tries to accomplish the Buddhist preaching of letting her emotional attachments drop:

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

100. Ibid. p. 94.
I am nobody, ............... 
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

... Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage –
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free –
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you 101

The dramatic scenario, considering her knowledge of the
Bhrihdaranyaka, is reminiscent of the mythical kings, who became
sages. They had adopted a slow gradual process of delinking their soul
from their body and mind. A body devoid of the soul is nothing but a
“leather case.”

She does not even want to look at the photograph of her husband
and child. Their smiles are like hooks, which catch on to her skin – the
invisible emotional bond. The deep urge is to free herself from the
attractions of survival. The tragic irony of her choice was, that she
wanted death to be the full point of her life, although, she was aware of
the immortality of the soul. Even in death, she failed to accept the
Buddhist detachment. In “Lady Lazarus,” the most famous of her

poems, one sees her speaking of death in an almost non-chalant way giving an apparent illusion of having conquered her emotions desires a rebirth, to vindicate the sufferings caused by the patriarchal world. Her previous idea of being ‘born anew,’ without memories becomes a failure. “Dying / Is an art like everything else, / I do it exceptionally well.”

‘Death,’ as a concept of deep significance, which can ensure release from suffering and promise rebirth gets devalued. It becomes an act, like art, which can be perfected through rehearsal. Yet, when she continues to address the two male entities who threaten her being, one notices that she has failed to comprehend that not only love, even hate is bondage. The illusion that she has found peace by accepting death concretizes into a reality. The devaluation of death as an act, reaches a lower rung, when she treats it as a medium for rebirth. Sylvia Plath desires a rebirth to vindicate the sufferings caused the patriarchal world. Her desire for a new birth ‘pure as a baby,’ free from memories of the past fails miserably.

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

She threatens to destroy men in her new terrible feminine power, suppressed in the patriarchal culture. Robert Graves warning that the

102. Ibid. p. 245.
103. Ibid. pp. 246-247.
oppressed female nature will escape and rise to destroy the constrictions of a masculine and mechanical world is manifested in this poem.

Sylvia Plath, with her selection of the 'White Goddess' myth had charted out her life and death. The desire for a happy family seemed impossible, in the modern world, a product of male intellect. The maternal instincts and intuitions were completely suppressed, making a woman feel like a cog in a wheel, an instrument of necessity. The greatness of motherhood and home life glorified in religion had become devalued. Her wrath was not directed towards the concept of man and not just her father or husband. Sylvia Plath's letters to her mother regarding her anxiety about the fallout is described in the words,

well, I hope the Strontium 90 level doesn't go up too high in milk. I've been very gloomy about the bomb news; of course, the Americans have contributed to the poisonous level. The fallout-shelter craze in America sounds mad. Well, I would rather be in Devon, where I am in the country, than anywhere else just now.104

In another letter dated 7 December 1961 she writes,

I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of The Nation – "Juggernaut, the Warfare State" – all about the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America and the forces of the John Birch Society, etc.; and then another article about . . . . . I began to wonder if there was any point in trying to bring up children in such a mad, self-destructive world.' And also the brutal acceptance of religion to accept the political ideas 'One of the most distressing features about all this is the public announcements of Americans arming against each other – the citizens of Nevada announcing they will turn out

bombed and ill people from Los Angeles into the desert (all this official), and ministers and priests preaching that it is all right to shoot neighbors who try to come into one's bomb shelters.  

These letters justify her wrath against the modern world a product of male-intellect where even religion proves cruel, heartless and encourages war and blood shed.

Sylvia Plath's suicide was the final sacrifice to the myth of the 'White Goddess'. Sylvia Plath had decided that the world held no hopes for her. Her sacrifice of her freedom by accepting the role of a wife and mother had proved a waste. There was no chance of survival as she had closed all the doors of escape. Sylvia Plath's life and suicide can be called a life lived in "celebration of a myth unto death." (Thomas Mann, Chapter I.)

Kamala Das too suffered a failed marriage and did contemplate suicide, but her Hindu background helped her to survive the suicidal tendencies. She realized that death was nothing special, any fool could achieve it. In "Death is So Mediocre," "... Death is / So mediocre any fool can achieve / it effortlessly."  

She describes the common place aspect of death, when treated as a solution to suffering. The tradition on which she was nourished, and from which she had moved away, beckoned her back to its security. There was no need of physical death because the mind could imagine a bodily death through detachment. Although she despised her body she

knew that her salvation had to be achieved only through it. Every Hindu is familiar with the Sanskrit sayings of the great Indian poet, Kalidas, “Sharira mādhyam khalu Dharma / Sādhanam,” which emphasizes the value of a body in the attainment of goals.

Kamala Das’s poem, “Suicide,” contemplates on this aspect:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.

Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two?

I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.
Only the souls know how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.

The awareness of the immortality of the soul is realized in its positive angle. Each birth needs to be lived as best as possible to free oneself from the cycle of rebirth. Death would in no way help in attaining this freedom. Foolishness of giving too much importance to the physical demands of the body, which is subject to decay and death is realised.

The main difference between Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das appears in their attitude towards the mortality of body and the immortality of soul. Although Kamala Das felt just as suppressed and frustrated as Sylvia Plath, she moved around searching for an answer to her existential tension. The inherited values and acquired values, which were responsible for her sense of rootlessness prodded her on in life. The desire to love and face the challenge of life defeated the desire of death. The peace achieved through death could be had in this life itself, being alive. In “The Anamalai” poem, she reflects the wisdom of Hinduism when she says, “Life yields its true meaning only / in early youth or in weary age.”

It was this reality which saved Kamala from putting an end to her unhappy life. Being a Hindu girl, she knew that she had no short cut to wisdom. It had to happen in early youth, like in the case of ‘Buddha’, Dhruva or Prahlad who went in search of it, or in old age, the Sanyasa stage of life, being the last stage according to Hindu precepts. Only when an individual crosses the stages of Bhracharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and comes to Sanyasa, he is filled with the wisdom of life’s meaning. If she had to find peace she had to make use of the body or dress of the soul bestowed upon her by divine design. Kamala successfully adapted the Radha-Krishna Myth, which speaks of the ideal union of the male and the female. The desire of the female is not considered as abnormal, it is only the interpreters of the masculine society, who have shackled her in the name of honour and propriety. The Hindu mythology highlights the ‘Ardhanāriswarā’ concept,

worshipped by the devotees of Lord Shiva. Kamala was a Dravidian and her ancestors were worshippers of Lord Shiva. The 'Ardhanāriswarā concept elaborates on the bliss of union between man and woman. It decrees the worship of the coitus image as the elemental power of creation. The images, which seem outrageous in Kamala Das are those which can be safely said to be coming from the collective unconscious, in "Words," - "deep within" ...."growing on her like leaves"..."never seem to stop coming" and she has no control over them. Sex has never been considered a sin, except when it has been indulged in for wrong purposes. The four Purusharthas Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha advocated by Hinduism show its position in an individual's life. It comes just before salvation positioned as the last step towards salvation. This position accorded to it has lead to man-woman union being taken as an allegory for the soul's union with the Supreme soul. The Vedic precepts name the male power as Purusha identified with God and the female power as Prakriti identified with creativity. Shivā as God is static and can act only through Pārvati or Sakti. Thus, Man pours his seed into the female for creation. This union releases the tension existing in the polarities to move towards a common goal. This act of creation with actions like 'pouring of seeds,' needs to be used with caution. The actions in the myths belong to a different kind of reality, which are veiled in allegories, and illustrated through symbols.

In the Radha-Krishna myth, Radha symbolizes the eternal longing of the feminine for the masculine Krishna, once again an allegorical

representation of creative union. It was the Bhakti movement, which brought about the concept of salvation through love and devotion through a surrender of the self to the Supreme self. The surrender of self is not at the cost of the physical body but through it as a medium. Thus, we find Kamala Das identifying herself with Radha, basically a woman longing for a man’s love on a physical plane, with deeper echoes of the soul’s longing for the union with the divine. In “Radha,” she says:

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The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning
So that in his first embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me

Is melting. 111
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“The long waiting” also refers to the time spent in crossing the previous stages of life as wisdom comes only in the last stage. All doubts, leading to reasoning and argument come to an end, when man unites with the Supreme Soul. He melts and becomes one, like a river, joining an ocean. All the poems on the Radha-Krishna myth reaffirm her faith in the Hindu philosophy of an individual’s duty in life. The myth universalizes her longings in the poem “Vrindavan,” as she says,

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Vrindavan lives on in every women’s mind
and the flute luring her
from home and her husband
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who later asks her of the long scratch  
on the brown aureola of her breast  
and she shyly replies  
hiding flushed cheeks, it was so dark  
outside, I tripped over the brambles in the woods . . . 112

All women long for a lover who satisfies both their physical and emotional needs and that is possible only with the identification of the awakening of the divine within. The physical description of the 'Scratch' merely indicates the significance of the body in attaining salvation. In "Krishna," we find Kamala Das’s desire to be a prisoner of ‘Krishna’s’ body as a concept. The finality of acceptance shows the integral role of man and woman for the continuation of the human-race. One cannot exist without the other.

Sylvia Plath decided to destroy her gross body, which proved an obstacle for a new way of life. The female body became a hateful object, to which she attributed the causes of her sufferings. Sylvia Plath felt her body with its feminine hungers to be a chasm, which divided her dreams of creativity and role of a wife and mother. The chasm was too wide to be bridged. The conflict in her was between her two selves, which she externalized in the figures of her father and husband. It is a tragic irony that Sylvia Plath had to put an end to the very image i.e., the feminine body to prove the supremacy of the feminine consciousness. Sylvia Plath’s struggle can safely be called the struggle of the existentialist, striving to find a meaning in a meaningless world. The choices before her were not acceptable to her. She did not want to be another Aurelia of the altruistic nature who sacrificed her dreams and

desires for the sake of her husband and children. Aurelia’s sacrifice bound her children in an invisible bondage, which laid a heavy burden of filial obligation from which they could never free themselves. The altruistic nature of the mother had a smothering effect on Sylvia Plath’s life, for she could enjoy neither the joys of her life nor suffer her grief in private. Viewing life through her mother’s eye, Sylvia Plath married Ted Hughes to make her mother happy. Unfortunately, Ted, whom she refers to as her male-counterpart, too failed her. Ted Hughes was accurate when he said in a Guardian Interview that, “There was no rivalry between us... in these circumstances you begin to write out of one brain! He further said that they were like two feet of one body.” 113

As Lorna Sage states,

> the aspiration is suggested by Aristophane’s cruel picture in the Symposium of those four-armed, four-legged hermaphrodites who were split down the middle by envious gods, and doomed for ever to seek their other halves. 114

It would be relevant here to remember Milton’s words, when he said in one of his divorce pamphlets, that just as ideal marriage is enriching so its failures are poisonous. If you gamble on being augmented by a ‘fit conversing soul,’ you risk diminishment. He also produced an image that may serve as a context for some of Sylvia Plath’s necrophiliac versions of father/husband: “instead of being one

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114. Ibid.
flesh, they will rather be two carcases, chained unnaturally together, or, as it may happen, a living soul bound to a dead corpse." 115

Ted's reference to the hermaphrodites is similar to that of the Ardhanārisvarā concept of the Shaiva mythology. Tragically, it indicates the cutting up of the masculine and feminine into two separate parts longing for one another, the reconciliation found in the latter concept is missing. Frazer speaks of similarities in myths fond in different peoples, yet, the differences in its conception and application is found as contradicting as the Hermaphrodites of Aristophanes, and Ardhanārisvarā of Hinduism. The article by Blake Morrison on Elaine's biography of Ted Hughes shows his interest in Archeology and Anthropology. Thus, a remote chance of Ted's being aware of Shaiva mythology cannot be ruled out,

He had like minded friends to whom he played the roles of bard and bloke. The bard was into astrology, shamanism and Ouija boards. The bloke dispersed advice on how to reduce and subjugate women until they were 'doing the laundry without argument'. 116

The information on Ted's real nature, whereby, his poetic beliefs and practical beliefs must have been a shock to Sylvia Plath. She had planned a life, where Ted and herself would form a wonderful pair.

Where as, Sylvia Plath as evidenced in a letter written on 23 October 1950, about Ted and herself describes her plans for their future

115. Ibid.
as, "we shall become a team better than Mr. and Mrs. Yeats - he being a competent astrologist, reading horoscopes and me being a tarot-pack reader, and, when we have enough money, a crystal gazer." 117

Ted taught Sylvia Plath the arts of above mentioned things and she also had expressed the desire of becoming a Seeress. The title of her poems "Sorceress," "Crystal Gazer," "On the Decline of Oracles," "Ouja," "The Ghost’s Leave Taking," "The Death of Myth-Making," "Witch-Burning" etc., show her deep involvement in Shamanism and not just as a passing interest. Contrary to her dreams of a happy life with Ted, he proved unfaithful destroying her dreams of being a team better than Mr. and Mrs. Yeats. Ted was everything she longed for in a man and when he became unfaithful she could not endure it. Sylvia Plath was shocked not at Ted’s infidelity but her lack of judgment of a man whom she had made a God in her life. Ted’s love for her was not perfect, “that her idolized husband, her gentle giant had become a “little” man, was a blow her ego could not bear.” 118

Sylvia Plath’s God died for the second time. The first time, it was the death of her father, whom she had considered God. The death of her Gods, put her life into a disarray and ‘Man’ as God became a symbol of ‘Predator’ hunting for the ‘Woman.’ The only way of survival for the female she realized was through his destruction. Sylvia Plath’s suicide also highlights the inherent desire of the feminine for the masculine. Life without man was impossible, as she was keenly aware of her needs

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as a woman. She loved Ted and knew that she could not harm him. It was only through her works she could satisfy her urge to destroy him and being familiar with Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. She killed herself to destroy her male–counterpart through sympathetic magic.

The comparison does not become an easy one, as the two poets Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das come from entirely different backgrounds. On the superficial level the problems of the two poets seem the same, and some times giving an uncomfortable feeling of the Indian woman degenerating into a Western entity.

The chapter brings out the differences inherent in the attitudes of the two poets taken up for study Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, even when the problems faced are similar. These differences begin right from their childhood, and increase as they grow up. The differences become shockingly distinct in the selection of the myths by the two poets to solve the conflict in their life.
CONCLUSION

The major pre-occupation of the modern writers has been to analyze the causes, which have led to the monstrosities in the name of progress. The modern man has progressed a long way from the primitive man, who felt threatened by the forces of nature. Yet, ironically, the modern man is found to be as bewildered and frightened as the primitive man. Various scholars have initiated a study into the causes, which have led to this predicament of the modern man. The main field of study has been psychology. It tries to analyse the workings of the modern man's mind and reasons responsible for his behaviour. The Golden Bough, published by Frazer has given a new dimension to the understanding of man's behaviour.

Man's behaviour is now studied in relation to his primordial responses to natural forces. The primitive man's encounters led to the formation of a different type of reality. In his primitive wisdom, he put the experiences of these encounters in the form of 'myths.'

'Myths,' represent the initial form of man's intelligence. Observing the natural phenomenon, the primitive man created a different type of reality. This reality was veiled in allegory and illustrated through symbols. The basic forces observed by the primitive man were two, the masculine and feminine. The two forces were given equal prominence in his life. Gradually, the primitive man's concept of 'survival,' underwent a change and he learnt to improve on his techniques of survival. This led to his progress from observance to
imitation, which is manifested in magic and religion. The progress of man from his primitive environment to the modern scientific environment ironically shows a regression of man's mentality. The increase in his intelligence has made him into a living example of the forces, which threatened the primitive man. God and Devil, created by the primitive man to represent constructive and destructive forces are now, manifest in the modern man empowered with scientific knowledge. The modern poet, thus finds himself as vulnerable as the primitive man. Along with his fear for his survival is his guilt for being responsible for the chaos around him. Man's vanity in his power to change the natural environment form. Imaging himself to be the all powerful God, he has transformed himself into a Devil. Destruction, blood-shed, and exploitation have become the 'new mantra.' The two poets taken up for study need to be studied against this back drop.

Sylvia Plath, the American poet, and Kamala Das, the Indian poet have been taken up for study essentially for being woman confessional poets. The events leading to the failure of feminine aspirations, in a male dominated world, led to their confessional mode of writing. Both the poets have transcended the genre of confessional writing by making use of mythological elements in their works. The autobiographical events have been exquisitely interwoven with mythological elements to form a mythic schema. The modern method of analysing literary works through the myths used in them is called 'Myth Criticism.' This genre of criticism works on two levels.
As Harold Simonson says,

Myth Criticism requires the critic to account for the literary development of myth. After the poet uses myth for his creative purposes, the critic’s job is to observe how myth has germinated into what the artist has created.¹

The study does not merely locate the myths, but it traces the use of the myth in initiating a mythical schema and progressing towards its culmination. The myth is used by an artist basically to universalize his personal experiences or predicament. The poets predicament is the result of his background—religious, social political and cultural. As Rene Wellek and Austin Warren write, “Myth—a favourite term of modern criticism points to, hovers over, an important area of meaning shared by a religion, folklore, anthropology, sociology, psycho analysis and the fine arts.”² As myths generally mean a narration of recurring experiences, the poet uses the myth to give developmental direction to his creative impulses. The myths selected by the poet are inevitably influenced by his background.

The two woman poets, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, have traversed their life, inevitably entrenched in their gender roles. The problems faced by them are similar, but their reactions to these problems are as diverse as their backgrounds. The main element taken up for comparative study here is their depiction of the conflict between masculine and feminine forces and a deserve for its resolution. The two

poets exhibit significant contradiction in the selection of the myths to resolve this particular tension. The study confines itself to the study of the main myth selected in explicating the said tension. The modern world with its spirit of enquiry has devalued all aspects believed to be sacred. Even religion and God have not been spared the poets feel themselves cornered in a world full of - incestual desires, murderous impulses etc. hidden beneath the thin veneer of civilization. The failure of the modern, war-crazed world in offering an explanation to their unmerited suffering has made them turn the myths of past. As G.E. Woodberry says that poetry is a "highly developed mind working in a primitive way." The modern poet thus due to scarcity of significant myths, drawn from the past rich suggestive symbolism from the past. The natural protective instinct of feminine consciousness is felt threatened by the modern intellectual world. The two women poets, after accepting the dictates of religion and society, experiences the futility of these institutions and lash out at the hypocritical society of man.

Sylvia Plath is an American poet, with her roots firmly planted in the American cultural heritage. The Western heritage boasts of intensive study of man's life in various aspects. This leads to a polarization of opposites - male-female, poor-rich, black-white, physical-psychological, youth-old age, right-wrong, religion-science, man-God, freedom-law etc. Naturally, Sylvia Plath selected a myth that matched her cultural heritage i.e., of The White Goddess, of Robert Graves. The factor leading to the creation of the said myth were seen to coincide with her own life history. Three experiences had a direct
impact on the outlook of his poetry - his experience at school, his participation in the First World War, and his relationship with women. The fact that he was of German descent too had a very strong influence in his life and works. Robert Graves, influenced by Frazer's *Golden Bough*, bases his 'White Goddess' myth on three dimensions of his relationship with women, Mother - Bride and Burier. The relationship of the poet/man with 'death' as woman transcends the physical level of relationship. In simple terms it is the mother - wife / beloved / and death / layer out. Sylvia Plath found this myth to be her 'myth' as the incidents of her life coincided miraculously with those of the story of the myth, and life story of Robert Graves. The influence of Freud helped her to give a mythic schema to her personal traumas. Beginning with the father she initiated the Oedipal Concept by becoming 'Electra' and progressed towards the resolution of the masculine and feminine conflict, with the help of incidents from the *Golden Bough*. The myth of her country, which gave prominence to wealth the Horatio Alger myth, shackled her to the materialistic world. In “A Letter to a Purist,” she narrates the tragedy of living in a country where art for art's sake is considered lunacy. The heritage of her father and mother - German, and Austrian, (Partly Jewish) gave her the images for predatory - victim dichotomy. Sylvia Plath, was involuntarily controlled by the myths of her land, and consciously had to select a myth to find an explanation to her life's unmerited sufferings.

Kamala Das, the Indian poet had her roots firmly planted in Hinduism. *My Story*, her autobiographical work is populated with as many mythological characters as live people. The whole of her life was
shaped by mythological dictums. Religion, and joint family played a dominant role in moulding her life. Kamala Das belonged to a rich cultural heritage, where materialism is only secondary to spirituality. The advent of the British, with their English schooling dethroned these traditional people and created a sense of inferiority. The first being the colour complex – “I am brown,” which is seen in Introduction. The desire to regain the lost position led to the aping of Western values. My Story, gives a vivid description of the books the children were made to read. The one that especially appealed to Kamala Das was Isabella Duncan. The traditionally nurtured girl dreaming of being a ‘Draupadi,’ like ‘Kunti,’ asking ‘the Sun – God for a male-child,’ listening to the ‘Bhagavatham and Gita,’ started dreaming of parties and dances, and wealth to be a ‘snob.’ The change in role of money, made her father, and later husband move away from the cultural background. The life in the cities, in contrast to her native background increased the conflict between the masculine and feminine in her life. The fast city life, where men ‘pawed’ her under the guise of sympathy, nauseated her. A revaluation of her self led her to her call of the past, the ‘Parasurama’ myth that created the Nayar Community with men devoid of tenderness – father, husband and women deprived of legal marriage. The desire for sex, shunned in the so called refined society, which turned out to be hypocrisy, reminded her of the ‘Dravidian Blood’ in her.

A comparative study in the mythological elements of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das was under taken to isolate the main myth used in their works to resolve the tension between the masculine and feminine forces.
This study has also brought to the light the socio-cultural and religious factors which influenced the selection of the myths.

The first one is the inescapable influence of polarities existent in the Western culture - isolation of opposites - forced into destruction of the other. The selection of the 'White Goddess' myth by Sylvia is an illustration of this aspect. This also brings to light the treatment of sex in the Western culture. Despite being called an open society, sexual urges have not been accepted in a healthy manner. The myriad analysis of sexual behaviour highlight this concept, and the acceptance of Freudian analysis proves this. The beginning of Sylvia Plath's mythic schema is the relationship between her and her father, which is spoken of in incestual terminology with 'Oedipal images - of blindness, revenge, murder etc. Man-Woman relationship is studied as an inevitable compromise of polarities and not as a reconciliation leading to rejuvenation. The role of material gains is inextricably linked with creativity. The Horatio Alger myth judges all activity in relation to materialistic achievements. This added to Sylvia Plath's monitary anxieties. The Fear of failure dominates her works - fear of retribution and fear of economic failure. The Nazi imagery, proves the conflict existent between the individual conscience and national conscience. The reality hidden behind the veil of national welfare shocks the sensitive artist who realizes that public welfare, and public good are only verbal ideologies. In reality, both religion and politics sanction war as necessary for progress. Sylvia Plath had no other way out as her individual conscience was totally enstranged from the tradition which nourished her.
Kamala Das, the Indian poet had her roots firmly planted in Hinduism. The inescapable influence in her life and works were the religious scriptures. These scriptures especially the Vedas and Upanishads, work towards the reconciliation of polarities. All opposite forces co-exist, working towards the wholeness of a human being as a single entity. The opposites - good-bad, man-woman, day-night, religion-witch craft are seen to be qualities of a single entity. Krishna-God, was related to both Kauravas - the bad, and Pandavas - the good is an excellent illustration of the reconciliation polarities. Hinduism aims at transforming actual polarities into apparent polarities. Kamala Das’s selection of the Radha-Krishna myth is an illustration of this aspect. The concept of sex in East - Hinduism - is one of sublimation. The myth of ‘Agni,’ used by Kamala Das, indicates its acceptance in the life of Hindus. ‘Agni,’ both as fire and Kama plays a dominant role in the lives of Hindus. The Rg veda is considered as an exposition of the Agni doctrine. Man is born of fire, survives due to fire and is given back to fire. ‘Kama,’ or sexual heat is the agent which is responsible for the reconciliation of man and woman.

Kamala Das’s mythic schema begins from her disappointment in sexual union. The lack of emotional overtures from the men in her family - father and husband - leads to an analysis of her heritage. The Nayar community was created by ‘Parasurama,’ (myth) with dictates of men being warriors and women deprived of rights to legal marriages. Women therefore were just ‘sex objects,’ and social ladders. The prominence of money/wealth underwent a transformation after the advent of the British. Money and wealth, which was used only for
necessities, became a symbol of status. This led to the disintegration of the joint family and unconditional love became scarce. Kamala Das’s father and husband shifted residence to metropolitan cities. The city life of hypocritical values led to Kamala Das’s analysis of her own desires for sex in relation to her heritage. The Dravidian blood robust and full of life, sanctioned sexual union. The Shaiva mythology, with its Ardhanāriswarā myth, signifies the concept of both masculine and feminine found in every individual, and also the union elemental forces for creation and continuation of the universe. The Radha-Krishna myth, which is the main myth in her poems, describes the eternal longing of the feminine for the masculine and vice versa. The rich heritage with mythologies illustrating the ways to reconciliation of opposites, and the role of the body in attaining one’s goals saved Kamala Das from being completely estranged from her tradition which nourished her. The images used by her are of blood, senses, water, fire etc., all which indicate life and rejuvenation.

The second finding highlights the desire of the two poets in experimenting with a new faith. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das both were influenced by Buddhism. Influenced by Yeat’s and Jung’s concept of ‘psychic union.’ Sylvia Plath studied the translated version of the Bhrihadaranyaka Upanishad and also Zen Buddhism. The influence of these works only served as themes for some of the poems. “Getting There,” deals with the concept of immortality of the soul. “Moon and Yet Tree,” indicates the futility of words in bringing peace. “Mystic,” “Paralytic,” deals with the concept of mental detachment. But, Sylvia Plath could not inculcate the preachings of Buddha in her life.
Kamala Das too was influenced by Buddhism. The influence is seen in her poems, "An Apology to Gautama," "Words" and "Words are Birds." The first poem describes the conflict between the two selves - the physical and spiritual. The preachings of Buddha that words were sweet sounds and could bring no solace, only ended up as themes for her poems. Kamala Das could not inculcate it in her life.

The first finding deals with the inherent contradictions found in their socio-cultural and religious background. The second finding, highlights their turning to new faiths in search of an explanation for their unmerited suffering. The third one is the most important finding i.e., their inability of transcending the literal meanings of symbols.

Although, Thomas Mann, highlights the concept of mythical identity, one needs to bear in mind that myths were formed primarily to aid the primitive man in his struggle for survival. Sri. Aurobindo, speaking about Vedas as mythological works, vehemently opposes use of the word 'primitive,' in describing the ancient people who created them (Chapter I). They created a different form of reality, veiled in allegories and illustrated through symbols. The guidelines for the interpretation of these symbols were made available to those who sought the truth hidden behind them. These symbols yielded reality in proportion to the seekers earnestness and capability of interpretation. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, have defated the very purpose of Buddhism preaching, by adopting the confessional mode of writing. Buddhism, preaches silence as an answer to all problems. It warns people by saying that symbols are but pointers and not the reality. As Troy Wilson puts it, "They are fingers which point to the moon. One
must beware lest one concentrate on the word and miss the reality to
which the words point.” Her failure in heeding to Buddhist preaching
is seen in “Lady Lazarus.” In “Getting There,” she expresses a wish to
be born new, with no memories of the past. Yet, in “Lady Lazarus,” she
desires a rebirth to vindicate the sufferings of her present life caused by
men. Sylvia Plath fails to realize that both ‘love’ and ‘hate’ are shackles,
which bind a human being.

Kamala Das on the other hand, has made use of the Radha-
Krishna myth. The Krishna cult, which began on metaphysical level
gradually became physical and at times daringly erotic. Yet, Hinduism,
with its magnanimous characteristic accepted it into the folds of Bhakti
cult. Kamala Das nourished on tradition and mythology could have
easily transcended the symbol of Krishna, but she fails to bring / raise
Krishna beyond at the level of a dark lover.

The most important fact that needs mention is the danger of
transforming the Supreme God into a Personal God. In order to enable
the common man to understand the concept of a divine being, God the
Supreme Symbol is given a name or personality, thus humanizing him,
the Avatāra of Hinduism. Man forms this symbol in his own likeness
and this leads to a God with human qualities even dying, found in
Frazer’s Golden Bough, which led to dying God myths.

The two poets fell into the traps of being enchanted by the
symbols as reality itself, rather than as pointers towards reality. The
metaphors, symbols and analogies were taken at the literal level by
these poets. The myths that beckoned them were not of divine
realization. Instead of seeking answers through the symbols in silence
of their being, they poured out words hoping to bridge the conscious with the unconscious.

The stark difference between the two poets is seen in their attitude regarding the opposite sex. Sylvia Plath wanted to destroy the very concept called ‘male.’ Kamala Das on the other hand, directs her anger only towards the person to whom a woman is religiously bound for life and the obligation to live with him inspite of his unworthiness as a life partner.

Sylvia Plath’s suicide and Kamala Das’s survival can be attributed mainly to the inherent conflicts of polarities of Western culture and the reconciliation of polarities of Hinduism. In contrast to the Western culture, Hinduism becomes a Sādhanā – a comprehensive discipline for the complete development of man. Hinduism due to its cyclic concept of time succeeds in maintaining the past and it becomes the present and truth becomes eternal flowing river conveys with it all residues of the past. Kamala Das’s moving away from her roots, and a final return to it prove the power of Hinduism. In Hinduism, old age does not lead to death, but fulfillment of that birth an offering to God.

Sylvia Plath studied the translated versions of the Upanishads interpreted by Yeats and naturally were limited by his vision. The works available to the Westerners on Hinduism are those written by Westerners except for those like the ones written by Swami Vivekananda, Dr. Sarvpalli Radhakrishnan, Ananda Coomaraswamy etc. Ananda Coomaraswamy rightly remarks that it is next to impossible to translate the feeling of Sanskrit words verbatum, because,
“for every psychological term in English, there are four in Greek and forty in Sanskrit.”

This does not imply that Westerners have never made use of Hindu philosophy. Emerson, Thoreau, Yeats, Eliot and Whitman have successfully utilized the scriptures of Upanishad to seek solace from their existential loneliness.

In Conclusion, one can say that the result of an individual’s life depends on a self-reliant individual’s struggle against the forces of existence, where one tragically chooses and acts out one’s own destiny.

As the comparative study was taken up to find the influence of mythological elements in the lives and works of the two poets, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, it would be apt to conclude the study with the words of E.M.M. Tillyard:

Once a way of feeling or a mode of action has been embodied in the mythology of a large group of people, it acquires an incalculable power. A healthy mythology is a nation’s most precious possession.

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