

Minor Project
On
A Brief Study of Confessional Poetry

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Award of Degree of
B.A English (Hons)



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DECLARATION

Date: 7th October 2016

I, Vrinda Maheshwari student of B.A English (H) of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, hereby declare that I have completed the Summer Project on 'A Brief Study of Confessional Poetry' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A English (H)

I declare that it is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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Date: 7th October 2016

CERTIFICATE

- This Summer Project titled 'A Brief Study of Confessional Poetry' submitted by Vrinda Maheshwari Enrolment No. A0706115096 of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A. English (H), is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This Summer Project may be placed before the examiner/s for evaluation.

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A Brief Study of Confessional Poetry

The focus of this research paper shall be on the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. The difference and the similarity in their styles of writing, the cultural and the personal difference and, personal history are a few points that will be tackled to better understand how confessional poetry is manipulated by each individual according to her own desire. Also, the element of feminism, individuality and identity, morbid and depressing thoughts, etc. will be touched and lamented upon. The style of confessional poetry will be concisely studied in this paper.

The literary genre of Confessional Poetry came into existence in the early 1950s, mainly with the writings of Robert Lowell, who is heralded as the initiator for this particular style of writing. Confessional poetry is poetry of the self, the I. It is a highly individualistic form of rhymes with the main emphasis on “I”, the self. This style of writing emerged in the period of the 1950s and the 1960s, when the English world had just entered the epoch of Modernity. The term “confessional” can be related to the Christian custom of confessing to a priest in a church of their sins. The poets write with utmost frankness, and do not shy away from topics that were considered “...unmentionable kinds of private distress” (Baldick, 67)

“The genuine strengths of confessional poets, combined with their high suicide rates (Berryman, Sexton, and Plath all killed themselves), encouraged in the reading public a romantic confusion between and inner torment.” (Baldick, 67)

The history of confessional poetry can be traced back to 1959, with the publication of a collection of poems, *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell. Along with him, his students Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and even Snodgrass circulated works which became emblematic of the poetry as we know it today. Although this genre isn't a new phenomenon, having been used by both

Petrarch and Shakespeare to express inner most thoughts, what sets this modern genre apart is their content. They completely reject the appropriate and expected themes and instead shocked the world by using highly personal matter which wasn't expected to be talked about in public. They touched sensitive topics like sexual encounters, suicides, and childhood experiences. Plath went as far as comparing her father to a Nazi soldier in one of the most famous examples of confessional poetry, "Daddy".

"I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (Plath, "Daddy")

Undoubtedly, *Life Studies*, can be considered as one of the first books that could capture the idea of the confessional mode and bring it to the attention of the public. The poems, at the end of the book, in the last segment, are the ones where Lowell discusses and talks about his involvements in a mental hospital and his psychological illness. The poems in this section mainly deal with his family, particularly the disturbing marriage of his parents. Lowell probably revolutionized the field of poetry in the Modern Age by bringing in the new style of poetry.

"Bushed by the late spring snow,
they cannot meet
another year's snowballing enervation.
I keep no rank nor station.
Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small." (Lowell, "Home after Three Months Away")

It is quite apparent from this extract from the poem "Home After three Months Away", that this poem was an awfully personal account of his experiences at a mental hospital. He

recounts his experiences in vivid details and bares his naked soul for the reader to read and to realize the painful truth.

One of the first female poets that this paper will discuss is Kamala Das. Das is regarded to be one of the first female writers in English who defied the patriarchal rule and wrote verses that had shocked the orthodox Indian beliefs. She explicitly and with an unashamed voice, wrote of female sexual longing, the importance for a female to voice her opinions and even about her own marriage. There wasn't a stone that this controversial poetess left unturned to make herself be heard and mark her place in the literary arena. Her poems rang with a strong quality and called out the unjust nature of the patriarchal society, the chains that it had bound her in, and her unrelenting and headstrong passion to break them apart and be free. She truly believes that "True literature can originate only from tragedies and sorrows of life".

Kamala Das had been writing poems from a tender age, and blossomed under the care of her uncle, and a renowned writer, Narapat Narayan Menon. Born around the same time as Sylvia Plath, around the 1930s, one can find a lot of similarities between the two female writers, both having faced the turmoil of war and upheaval, and had felt quashed in the bonds of patriarchy. The most important similarity became that of "confessional poetry". Although, Kamala Das had once claimed that "poetry does not sell in this country [India]".

Kamala Das had been married off at a young age of fifteen, to a man, double her innocent years. And, a lot of her poems reflect that she, as a young bride, faced and had to go through. One of her most famous poems, "An Introduction" can be taken as the best example of her writings as a confessional poet. It is an extremely personal poem wherein she talks about her various experiences growing up and how she, herself, liberated her own self.

"...It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself, I" (Das, "An Introduction")

Kamala Das was born into a respected, cultured Hindu family, yet she converted to Islam at the age of 65, having fallen in love with Sadiq Ali. One of her most controversial poems, "In Love" spoke of the naked desire of a woman for the man she loved, or lusted. It is left for the reader's mind to interpret and for her to really know. Without a doubt, one can regard the brilliance of this female poet as a daring act. She wrote in times when it was unheard for a woman to shout, and she wrote about themes forbidden in an Indian society.

"O what does the burning mouth
Of sun, burning in today's,
Sky, remind me....oh, yes, his
Mouth, and....his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
out for me, and the sad lie
of my unending lust."(Das, "In Love")

Another great poet of the 20th century is namely Sylvia Plath. Akin to Kamala Das, she was born in the 1930s as well, and had a childhood that shaped her intellectual capabilities as poet. Since a young age, Plath had been writing and composing poetry and getting them published. Although Plath came from a family of academics, her life soon spiralled into a turmoil. Her first breakdown came with the death of her father, due to a long suffering illness, although she was only eight at that time. She felt betrayed by him and believed that he had deceived her on purpose, leaving her alone and "fatherless". The concluding line of a poem,

“Sheep in the Fog” written two weeks before her own suicide alluded to her father and foreshadowed her impending death.

“They threaten to let me through to a heaven starless and fatherless, a dark water” (Plath)

Her feelings about her father are clearly captured in her poem, “Daddy”. She ended the poem by calling her father a “bastard”, who abandoned her when she needed him the most. For her, it was a selfish act on his part. The poem strongly reflects her feelings and angers towards a man who was supposed to take care of her and protect her, a patriarchal protector. After many years, her husband, another celebrated poet, Ted Hughes, did the same thing. He abandoned her for another woman. Her latent fears, and her “daddy-issues” all came rushing back to her and she soon culminated in her killing herself and ending her manic, depressive life.

“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.” (Plath, “Daddy”)

Her confessional poems were extremely personal in nature and often dealt about death, her depression and even her broken marriage. Her writings expressed strong fundamental forces and instinctive fears. They also hinted at the way America was reeling in fear and trying to get itself back on its feet after the war. One can say that the best work that Plath produced were right before the tempestuous weeks of her life, spent writing fervently. The pen soon stopped, the writings soon ceased. The troubled yet, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, committed suicide, by suffocating herself in her kitchen in early hours of the mornings of January, 1963.

Plath’s works can be traced with a trajectory, the first volume of her poetic works, *The Colossus*, was published in the year 1960, was extremely well crafted and intimately personal, a quality present in all of her works. *Ariel* (1968), is considered to be her best work of poetry and

was composed in the last stages of her life, right before her tragic end. It was edited by her ex-husband, Ted Hughes and was published posthumously. Subsequently, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, respectively 1971 and 1972 were soon published. In the poetic compilation *Ariel*, a reader can clearly make out her clear and intense detachment for life, and a growing attraction towards Death. She even went as far ahead as to give a colourful description to death in her poem, “Lady Lazarus”.

“Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well. I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels real. I guess you could say I've a call.” (Plath, “Lady Lazarus”)

Plath’s semi-autobiographical work, *The Bell Jar*, was, at first, published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. It, at first, received mediocre and tepid reviews from the critics. It was at best a novel written by a small town girl, blown by the wonders of the big city and troubled by her depressing and sad past. Saul Maloof, in 1971, gave a cutting review of the novel in an article titled, *Waiting for the Voice to Crack*.

“Fund fellowship and felt toward its terms an urgent sense of commitment and obligation; the painstaking quality of the writing—but above all, its subject: her own pain and sickness, treated with literal fidelity, a journal done up as a novel, manifestly re-experienced, and not from any great distance of glowing health.” (Saul Maloof)

“She laid out the elements of her life, one after the other, and left to the late poems the necessary work of imagining and creating it: it is for this reason that we feel in the book an absence of weight and complexity sufficient to the subject.

On balance, *The Bell Jar*, good as it is, must be counted part of Sylvia Plath's juvenilia, along with most of the poems of her first volume; though in the novel as in a few of the early poems she foretells the last voice she was ever to command.” (Saul Maloof)

To conclude the sad, disappointing life of a poet who made a huge mark on the lives on many, Plath made noteworthy contributions in the field of literature, marking her place in the literary arena. She let her troubled childhood, her depression, her failed love marriage to Ted Hughes and many other factors guide her, and lift her as she confessed to the world of her “sins” and her story. A poet like Plath can only be celebrated and never forgotten. To quote one of the

best lines she ever wrote, “I listen to the old brag of my heart. I am. I am. I am.” (Plath, *The Bell Jar*)

One can also compare Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, although neither was influenced by the other. Both the writers were composing their poems in a time of great turmoil and both felt that they didn't belong in their particular country, having faced the oppressive hands of those in power. Kamala Das explicitly wrote in her autobiography, *My Story*, how she longed to be born to any parents but those who are Indians. Plath felt unwelcomed in her society and her poems sometimes reflected this thought quiet clearly and emphatically.

Both being poets of the confessional kind, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das came together on the page with the magnetic pull of familiarity and similarity. Sylvia Plath wrote of the gross injustice doled out to her by the society, how her “neurotic” behaviour was against the rules and regulations of a respected society. In a similar way, Kamala Das, a traditional Indian woman wrote about the female sexuality explicitly, an oxymoron in itself. It was unheard of, even tabooed for a woman to touch a topic so ‘sacred’ according to the Hindu scriptures. Her poems were deemed sacrilegious by the critics of those times and resonated it all as a part of her “histrionics”.

Kamala Das was acutely aware of her ethnicity and her colour. But, that didn't stop her from dreaming in the universal language of poetry and words. For Kamala Das, writing was the mode through which she could exhibit and cabinet her deepest thoughts, her feelings and even her sexuality. Das's work is uncharacteristically sexually explicit as she believes that the sex and female sensuality are a vital part of her poetry, although her words are sharp and are quick to ire. The critics of those days were not **swift** in accepting such bold moves yet. Although Das quickly

proved her worth as a poet and left little to the imagination of her brilliance. In her poem, “An Introduction”, she attacked society for imposing the “roles” demanded and felt proper for a woman of her status and her caste and respected position in society. All Das wished was for liberation and for peace, and to be accepted as who she was.

“..It is time to

Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a

Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when

Jilted in love ...” (Das, “An Introduction”)

Individuality was an important feature of the Modern period which ranged roughly from the early 20th Century to the late 1960s. The Modern Period was a time of great turmoil and unrest, and cultural shocks that shook the very being of human existence. One of the reasons, probably the most important one, was World War One (1914-1918). It seemed only natural then, that the literature of this period turned towards a darker, more unconventional styles of writing. Individualism, self-reflection, and identity became a few of the key features of this literary movement. The world was spiralling into a chaotic regime, faith in morality had shaken, and doubts rose about the adequacy of the existing literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant reality of the post war trauma that the world was reeling into.

The poetry was Plath clearly captured the basis of the post war literary movement and her work reflected the strain and distress of the post-war period. Her poems were highly individualistic in nature, a key aspect of Modern poetry and she insisted on talking about the self and the emotions that she, as an individual felt. Her internal struggled and her emotional uproar

were unashamedly talked about in her poetry and she wasn't afraid to speak her mind. Her poems rang with truth and brutal honesty. She was successfully able to embrace the Modernistic period of literature and wrote what she felt without holding back the truth.

Kamala Das, although she wasn't directly affected by the mayhems of World War One, her poetry showcases the elements of Modern English literature. She was an Indian Hindu woman, writing in the "master's tongue" in the years before and after Independence. It could, then, only seem fair that her works resonate with the ideas of individuality of the Modern Period, since she grew up reading in English. However, Kamala Das's use of the first person singular pronoun is in sync with the American poetic influence. Das, unlike her contemporaries, wanted to talk about her self, unapologetically and with a brazen, self-righteous attitude. She wanted the world to know of her innermost thoughts, her feelings, know the "real Kamala Das", in her pure and egalitarian and untainted form. Because of her emphasis on the individual so much, her own self, Das has often been associated with the movement of the confessional poets of the American literary society on innumerable occasions. She keeps on oscillating between her past and her present

"I am a million, million people
Talking all at once, with voices raised in clamour." (Das, "Someone Else's Song")

Her poetry is the medium through which she wishes to break the shackles that society has imposed upon her and liberate herself, her soul. She believes that the pessimism of people lays all around her and is crushing her identity and individuality. Her poems are songs of despair.

"I also know that by confessing
By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
And,

The bone's
supreme indifference" (Das)

The element of feminism is a recurring and strong theme in both the works of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. Both were feminine writers in a domain inadvertently conquered the males of the society. In a general sense, the poets were writing down their poems since a young age, and had entered this realm with the doubtfulness of an unfamiliarity. Although not the first female writers in English, both Das and Plath, in their respective ways marked a change in the literary world that no female was able to do before them. They changed the perspective of a woman writing in English and enlightened quite a few others to raise their voice from among the roar of the male growls, dominating the kingdom of the written world.

"Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced" (Das, "The Looking Glass")

Das explicitly wrote how, by gifting a man her core feminine being, everything that makes her a woman, and him a man, will make him fall in love with her, the woman. She wasn't shy to share her bold concepts with the world. She was a voice that the women of India had needed to hear.

"When the soles of my feet grow cold,
The blue eye of my turquoise will comfort me.
Let me have my copper cooking pots, let my rouge pots
Bloom about me like night flowers, with a good smell.
They will roll me up in bandages, they will store my heart
Under my feet in a neat parcel." (Plath, "Last Words")

This poem, "Last Words", in the first reading seems to be talking about her tift with death. Plath says like an Egyptian pharaohs, she wants to be surrounded by her most precious chattels when

she is finally buried. Not her poems, or her poetry. She wishes to be buried with her “copper cooking pots” and her “rouge pots”. In a subtle, subversive tone, Plath seems to mock the reader and society. She, as a woman, wants to be buried with the very things that make her a womanly woman, her utensils and her make-up.

The works of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are not very Romantic or happy in themes and nature. Both the confessional poets, instead, deal with morbid and depressing thoughts and leitmotif. Plath had tumbled into a vast abyss of depression and it had led to her “poetic” end. Probably, the final nail in her coffin was hammered when her husband, Ted Hughes, left her and their children for another woman. The two months after this are supposed to be the best in regard of her poetic career when the anger and depression led her to write poetry that still stings in the heart of many.

“As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.” (Plath, Lady Lazarus)

Similarly, Das was unhappy with the way her society, India was treating her and other Indian women. She felt suffocated in the binds of patriarchy and wished to fly free, uplifting herself and other Indian women in the process. The way Das wrote her poetry was a far cry from the other contemporaries of her time, Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu, who were writing minimalistic and traditionally ‘feminine’ poetry. Das wasn’t afraid to shout out her thoughts to the world and boldly and creatively confessed what she felt, and how she felt it.

“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, and the endless
Pathways of the sky.” (Das, “The Old Playhouse”)

We find in the paper, that although separated by miles and by cultures, and countries. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are two peas in a pod. Their verses ring with truth, beauty and love. They aren't afraid of society, they aren't afraid to enter an arena dominated by men. The words that both these female writes scribbled have been etched into the hearts of many, the words couldn't be more similar. United by the same thought, the two poetess, one American and one India, let the world realise that it doesn't matter if they were born a female, it doesn't matter that theirs was a rough path to climb. In the end, poetry and truth triumphs.

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