

Confessional Mode In Kamala Das' Poetry

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Abstract

In this research article “Confessional Mode in Kamala Das' Poetry,” the findings are based on bold and frank expression of personal experiences and life of Kamala Das. All her works have autobiographical elements which resemble her matrimonial and sexual relationships. Her confessional mode is razor sharp on its issues. She is frankly confessional and exclusively an articulate voice. Most of her poems express her yearnings for love. Disillusionment, emotional distress in marital life, failures, and frustrations in the patriarchal world are some of the important aspects of her poetry. Kamala Das always deals with her own sufferings and humiliation. Her personal agony and pain show human predicament. Her poems consist of a detailed study which reveals her utter sincerity and self-scrutiny. She raises the voice of a liberated woman in India. This research article focuses on the value, right, and position of women in a conservative society. It also puts light on the women's problems in the current world.

Keywords: Kamala Das, poetry, confessional poetry, confession, relationships, women, society, male-domination

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Introduction

Kamala Das pens her name as Madhavi Kutty in Malayalam writings. In 1995, she was converted to Islam and named herself “Kamala Suraiyya”. She is one of the renowned names in Indian English poetry. Kamala Das was born on March 31, 1934 and belonged to Malabar, Kerala. She studied at home and married when she was only 15 years old. Her husband was completely into sex as physical pleasure, while it should be a spiritual and emotional bond according to her. Her husband was very cold and apathetic in the matter of spirituality. Hence, she ended up with emotional starvation. This emptiness was the major cause of her sadness in conjugal life. She replaced her partners one by one but her sexual pleasure was not enough. Both her grandfather and mother were Malayalam poets and poetry was hereditary for her. She had written her first poetry in school and won laurels for her writings in Malayalam, before she entered into Indian English poetry. She preferred writing fiction in Malayalam and poetry in English as a bilingual writer. She bagged Asian Poetry Award (1963), Sahitya Akademi Award (1984), and Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (1969) for being a

creative artist. In 1965, she published her first volume “Summer in Calcutta” and then “The Descendants” in 1967. In 1973, she enjoyed great recognition and fame with “The Old Playhouse and other poems”. All her works feature a self-revelation that can mirror her sexual and married life. She is well regarded for her candid and bold expressions. The use of confessional mode and her sharp obsession with love are common in her poetry. Most of her writings express her craving for emotional disintegration in married life, yearnings for love, frustrations, disillusionments, and failures in patriarchal society. Her personality longs for a fresh start of life as she feels suffocated in the current world.

2. Discussion

As the name suggests, confessional poetry is an autobiographical approach and confession of an author in the form of poetry. The origin of this form of poetry is dated back to the middle of the 1900s. It consists of the poet's personal life experiences expressed in a dramatic language. This style of poetry is light and confessional poetry is not that easy to read. During the 20th century, some of the legendary confessional

poets used this style as a passage for their fury, depression, anger, and loneliness for social injustices uncovering the world. The major theme of this poetry is the personal life of a poet. However, it is important to keep in mind that the poet's self-revelation approach is something started in the mid-20th century or recently. This confessional approach has come a long way since thousands of years. Around two thousand years ago, Catullus weaved confessional aspects in his poetry. He was even more autobiographical than Sylvia Plath, who is also one of the legendary confessional poets of her era. In 1959, M.L. Rosenthal was the first who brought the term "Confessional Poetry" after publishing a volume of poems "*Life Studies*" by Robert Lowell. He featured confessional material in a poetic form, which is also featured by great intimacy, but also by extreme madness (Rosenthal, 1959). *Life Studies* explores flattering experiences of self-revelation. The confessional mode has recently been associated with excessive self-revelation by Frank Bidart and it was a risk for formal achievement (Robert Lowell, 2003). The society considers confessional poets as lunatics because they don't follow any rules and traditions, nor they respect any gatherings. All they want is to stand out and not to be a part of any conservative social setup. They end up being judged as they usually have conflicts with the society. At a certain point, they no longer are able to compromise with themselves in the course. This conflict makes them come up with a lot of beautiful poems. A sensitive poet doesn't take failure lightly. The call of death is overpowering and life is unbearable at this point. Hence, death seems much easier than life for them. Anne Sexton purposely chose the way of confession to express her thoughts. She considered being objected to as a confessional poet oversimplified. Her poems looked like her therapy while going through mental trauma. So, critics didn't consider all the visits described to her mad house, her childhood traumas, and marital issues were real. She describes her sincerity in poems. "Each poem has its own truth. The poetic truth is not necessarily

autobiographical. ... I do not adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. Concrete examples give a verisimilitude. I want the reader to feel Yes, yes, that's the way it is. I want them to feel as if they were touching me. I would alter any word, attitude, image or persona for the sake of the poem. ... It's a difficult label, confessional, because I often confess to things that never happened." (Janice Markey, 1985) An ideal confessional poem is never completely individualistic or personal. In fact, it is good for others. Confessional poets write their own story to make others aware of what they feel and what their issues are. Confessional poetry expresses the individual personality of a poet and it is never meant to escape from it. These poets go through the Romantics and break through the Neoclassical aesthetics on the diversity of her writings. The poets don't demolish their characters in their creations and one can easily get an insight to their lives. Kamala Das always refused to be conquered by any familial or social considerations and she had a truly self-confident personality. She considered it her duty being a poet to put herself in a subjugated woman's shoes and she confronts the double standards of the society, disregarding the risks involved in it. She doesn't protect herself from extreme criticism and care about her reputation by taking any precautionary measure. She challenges the malice and hypocrisy that lives in the society under respectability, while she exposing herself too. The confessional mode seems suitable to her poetic persona as it makes her to showcase her inner world. She is inspired to write from her own experiences and personal life. She admitted in an interview very frankly, "I can only write about my personal experiences, and being versatile, I see poems in an experience, and then see good prose coming out of the same experience" (P.P. Raveendran, p.49). According to Devendra Kohli, the poetry of Kamala Das speaks about her failure in love. Confessional poetry is based on the poetic self as the key sign. The poet expresses the personal mythology as a focal point. The poem expresses the truth which is poetic. She speaks about imaginary lovers in

her poems like Gino and Carlo (Devendra Kohli, 1991).

"If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness
Or grief? Garnering them within my heart
would have grown heavy as a vault one that
only death might open, a release then
I would not be able to feel or sense"

Kamala Das remembers an incident passionately
which occurred around 13 years back. Her
grandmother waited for her whole night but she
couldn't spend a night with the old lady. She
confesses the burden of loss and guilt -

". . . by confessing
by peeling off layers
I reach closer to the soul"

The speaker connects herself with the
need for confession of her guilt. Her fear of
ageing is described beautifully in "*Too Early the
Autumn sights*." Her loneliness confronts the
terror she can't get away with. The panic was
created by lifeless leaves dancing -

". . . the fallen
Leaves do not rest, but raise themselves
Like ghosts to perform
A blind and ugly dance."

The poem explores a conflict between
the experienced aging self and the lively and
young physical self. The speaker's "fear of
change" is described in "The End of Spring". It
is a conversation between the experienced entity
that handles situations sensibly and a youthful
self that is too emotional to deal with the
external world. The conversation revolves
around the speaker herself and the speaker's
lover "the reader". She rejects the love which
develops terror in the lovers -

". . . What is the use
Of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, you the fear of storms asleep in you,
And me the fear of hurting you?"

In its serious mood, confessional poetry
isn't content with the features of the psychic
state of every woman and man but it describes
the feeling of higher mystic and religious states.
Kamala Das made a move from psychical to
religious confessionalism. She realizes that the
physical pleasures are temporary. Hence, she

switched to the spiritual and mystical world of
Vrindavan as she was deeply influenced by the
eternal love of Radha and Krishna since
childhood. She talked about absolute self-submit
and pious love. She destined spiritual affection
as "complete union of her entity with Shri
Krishna."

She added,

"I was entirely without lust. I hoped that
some day as I lay with a man, somewhere
beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, an act
would be made, and afterwards each movement
of my life become meaningful. I looked for the
beautiful Krishna in every man; every Hindu girl
in reality is wedded to lord Krishna"
(Khushwant Singh, 1973). The confessional
poets who eagerly enjoy and celebrate unlocking
the mysteries of their physical self usually end
up revealing the mysteries of the soul's journey
at the end. The confessional poetry is actually a
spiritual autobiography. The identity and
evolution of the self occupies the confessional
poetry. It is focused on the front-runners of
existence and inchoate and ultimate sources of
well-being. The poet confronts the painful
encounters of the self. Her anxiety comes up
from the egoistic world. The poet's life
fabricates historical and imaginary thoughts and
becomes the true story for humanity. For
example, "Ghanashyam" is the most celebrated
poem by Kamala Das, which speaks of the love
between the aged lover and poet. Kamala Das
invites the Lord passionately leaving his
playmates. The Radha-Krishna tale provides an
objective relating to her repressed urges and
ardent longings.

"We played once a husk-game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need
for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don't you want me any longer
Don't you want me."

Kamala Das achieves mystic and
religious states in her poetic journey.
Confessionalism is a fictional tool for her and
makes her poetry a means of personal and

impersonal truth. Prof. S.D. Sharma explains the scope of her confessionalism, “Yes, kamala Das confesses a number of things exclusively related to her own self –self as a woman with her strong feminine sensibilities, self as a person with powerful proclivities, antipathies, caprices and whims” (Kaur, 1998).

Kamala Das’s quest for Ghanashyam is the symbol of her desperation of self-discovery. Here, the “I” refers to the personal experiences as well as overall lack of bravery to measure under the surface of reality. Her experiences simply strengthen her sense of freakishness and remoteness. The self pretends as a freak in “The Freaks” and flaunts “a huge, flashy lust”. Another poem “Composition” expresses the concern of a poet for the self.

Confessional poets usually share the same real-life experiences, and Kamala Das’ life is no exception. Her life was full of struggle and sadness. She has had even more fascinating experience as she waged a tireless initiative against the patriarchal society. Kamala’s story embodies suffering and struggles in her poetry. She talks about the money-minded, cruel, heartless, unimaginative father, a loving grandmother, an indifferent mother, and selfless lovers. She writes like other confessional writers.

“The poetry never reaches a stage of sickness and breakdown but in her morbid moods kamala Das comes close to the more pathological states of confessional poetry when she steers clear of self pity on the one hand, and the exhibitionism on the other, she is profoundly moving and the loneliness and despair come through.” (My Story, P. 81)

Most of her poems explore the gender responsibilities of an average Indian woman that she plays, such as the resistance she calls, the embarrassment they have, and the pain she feels. She dramatizes the same in the confessional mode.

Her conflict between Love and Marriage

Kamala Das conveys her romantic beliefs and image of an ideal lover in her autobiography named “My Story”. She added –

“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life (My Story, P. 84).”

In India, marriages are not usually based on love. No matter how much Indian mass media celebrates and portrays romantic love, such as in folklore and films, the tradition of arranged marriages doesn’t have any official legal support or recognition. The institution has been very robust to settle with changing social dynamics and has refused guesses of decline with the modernization of India. When Vedic culture made way to classic Hinduism, arranged marriages gained prominence in India, i.e. around 500BC. At the end, it removed other options that were more popular once. The conflicts between love and arranged marriages have always been considered as a wrong dichotomy in the urban culture with the growth of phenomena like free-choice and self-arranged marriages for potential partners. Kamala Das was never asked before her marriage. Here’s what she has to say about her marriage in her autobiography –

My Story:

“My life had been planned and its course chartered by my parents and relatives. I was to be a victim of a young man’s carnal hunger and, perhaps out of our union, there would be born a few children. I will be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream only for mercy. I would wash my husband’s cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride. . .” (My Story, P. 81)

She was married in February when the mango trees were blowing to the fullest and blue bees

used to humming around, especially during this time in South India (My Story, P.82). Her husband didn't ask her to get physical and he almost raped her. She was obviously very terrified after her marriage. Her strings were either held by her parents or her partner. She was almost a puppet. Her parents never gave a second thought about what she liked. According to her, the lack of concern for her independence was the one which hurts her most. The way her parents fixed her marriage was really unacceptable for her.

Her husband was an employee in the Reserve Bank of India, Mr. Madhava Das who was posted in Bombay. She got married when she was only fifteen years old. Hence, her married life was really terrible. Due to her failed married life, she had to look for the kind of love that she didn't get from her husband. She was indulged in extra-marital relationships for the love she starved for. She didn't want to be a sex object for her husband, while he was always hungry for sex. On the other side, marriage is a spiritual and emotional bond for her. But her husband was exactly the opposite. Hence, she was completely discontented and dissatisfied in her life. She slid into a lifestyle full of sexual chaos, instead of finding true love in her love affairs. Her frustration became deeper and deeper as she moved on from one partner to another. Finally, she ended up with total misery. Her confessional poetry explains her personal experiences, especially in the aspects of sex and marriage, despite having few other sides of life.

The imperialist authority of her husband over women is justified by the centuries-old social structures and sanctions, especially in the association of marriage. The poet speaks about her personal feeling with irony which seems like her resistance in these lines –

“You chose my clothes for me
My tutors, my hobbies, my friends
And at fifteen with the first saree you picked me
a husband.”
She had a tiring married life behind closed
doors. Her husband failed her and never gave the

true love she deserved. Since the first day of her marriage, she hated her husband. Her husband was lustful and heartless. She never liked her husband's company. Mr. Madhava Das was arrogant and known for having many nymphomaniacs and sluts and she even went physical with his maid. He was almost brutal and cruel to his wife, who had no other option, but to live a mundane life. She became aggressive against him and countered him in a non-acceptable fashion. She got physical with any wealthy or good-looking man who met her and she forgave everyone. Her husband never spared any time with her and told no comforting words to her. He was always busy in paperwork and affixing his stamps on files. Kamala must have performed her domestic roles ideally and took care of her husband to be accepted in a traditional society. She laments over all the roles and responsibilities imposed on her in a patriarchal society –

“... Dress in Sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be
cook,
Be a quarreler with servants.”

It seems that Kamala Das lost her motivation and will-power. She mumbles jumbled responses to all the questions. It showcases her strong resistance against a void and forced marital bond which she is unable to untie. Her longings and tender desires for emotional relationships were overlooked and her life became miserable with her husband. Neither her parents nor her husband cared and loved her properly after her marriage. At the end, she was lost and felt lonely even with a family. She conveyed her emotions in her autobiography about her husband, “My Home” –

“My husband left for his office every morning before nine and returned at ten in the night after our son had fallen asleep in his room, on the baby-cot beneath which the old ayah spread out her own mattress. There was no opportunity for the father to get to know the child, or to learn to regard him as a distinct personality. (My Story, p. 101)”

It clearly shows that her failed and miserable married life became the main reason for her poetry. Some of the best poems about her married life are "Advice to Fellow Swimmers", "The Suicide", "Captive", and "The Prisoner". She tells that her intimacy was completely physical with her husband and she never found anything like true love from him. At the end, love deteriorates into lust and she turns loud and savage as she is tired of her life. She firmly convicts that women are not sex toys and they have their own choices. She must not be considered as a toy that anyone can marry and do anything with. She speaks about her personal life and struggles for her presence and independence. Her poem "The Old Playhouse" exposes her discontent. She shows how she failed to build relationships with society, her husband, and her family. She was forced to pretend accompanying with them. In "The Suicide", here's what she has to say –

"I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife."

She strongly believes that women had no liberty of choice in India from the association of marriage. Her forced marriage was not her choice. She has strong desires for companionship, warmth, and conversations. Sex is not her preference at all. She is hopeful that he can get rid of all her loneliness with one sweep of arms. But her dreams were ruined as marriage turned out to be a game of physical intimacy to her. It filled a rebellious behavior into her against marriage. She tells why she hated marriage. She asks whether every married adult is a circus-performer or clown in bed. She turned out to be a disobedient lady after marriage. She tried balancing and settling with social norms and the society, but she failed and went crazy. She felt the loss of her true self and identity as a female in this world. Mrs. Das mourns the death of her soul after her marriage in "The Old Playhouse". She was nothing but a "swallow" for her husband. She is taught and

conditioned to get away from herself, her actual path, her nature, her father's home she leaves behind, her ambitions, and desires for independence and her life. She becomes an object without her soul and body.

All she wanted was love, care, and attention from her partner. She wanted to feel free under the care of her husband. But he overwhelms her by his forceful physical encounter and is happy only with her physical response. This way, patriarchal society and husband's desires are the true culprit that affect women's freedom. She sincerely desired her husband to love and admire her beauty and charm. She wanted him to show his affection towards her with priceless surprises. A woman doesn't express her desire under the vicious male ego and her mind is restricted under the patriarchal society.

Constant Harassment and Feeling of Insecurity

Both Kamala Das and her mother lost into the hustles and bustles of city life from the serene and tranquil warmth of her Nalapat House. They were completely clueless about their new environment. From a matri-local and matri-singular structure which was aimed for women safety, their children were pushed into a male-dominated society. Women who were prepared for certainty of gentle maternal care are suffering in the male-dominated society. Nayar Tharvad's male population became efficient to deal with the economic and emotional needs of their counterparts. Subaltern structures, which support the role of women in society, had shattered by male dominance. Women were degraded drastically as they once used to control the whole family. Considering the timidity of women which made "domestic harmony" a far reached reality, Das speaks -

She was scared of a dark stranger mortally who came up to take her out of her comfort and her village. She was afraid of her uncle and father. These two people conspired and plotted to bring her into a bridegroom's family for the first time that was neither Brahmin, nor belonged to any royal family. "I must let my mind striptease

I must extrude
autobiography.”

Her Turbulent Journey of Betrayal

Kamala Das strongly opinionated that love is an important part of life for a lady. She wishes to share love. Her ruthless partner has shattered her beliefs on love and home. She was deeply in love with her husband when she was married and she was prepared for any troubles from him. But she was not prepared for getting physical. He had practiced louder sexual behaviors with his maids. The working maids offered water for bathing in the dark bathrooms when he visited Nalapat house by the maids. Das also added that her companion also had a zesty homosexual affair. Hence, the couple was completely incompatible due to their age gap.

The trouble of finding ideal love relates to her quest for identity. She recognized both selfishness and hypocrisy of men. Her female personalities are longing for mutual-understanding, compassion, and love from their partners, but they just want lust. This is the reason she has to oppose men and their selfish attitude. She utters the lack of will and loss of identity in women as a true feminist, and reason as the destructive effects of her marriage. Since she is unable to find comfort and true love from her legitimate soul mate, she is looking for a man who cares and loves her. She cannot get true love as men's nature stays the same, despite fulfilling her desires from strangers.

She asks her readers to throw themselves to their lovers as a moth on the flame and fall in love with the person who is most unsuitable for them. This is the only way to feel misery in every way possible. She ends up thinking that all the impurities of mind would be cleansed by feeling the spasms of unanswered love.

Most of the poems written by Kamala Das portrays women's persona in despair and misery, and it is mostly because of failed and unreturned love. The women are the eternal seeker of pure and true love and she is truly a Radha. Her selfless devotion, endless wait, and heartfelt sacrifice expect the same feelings from her male counterpart naturally. But the woman doesn't get any kind of love and respect. Love

has been turned into lust due to the self-centered and insensitive attitude of men. Hence, a woman is deprived of the passion and delight she deserves from love. A man mostly needs the fulfillment of his carnal fantasies. He is no longer interested in understanding anything that has soul. He has no patience to know what his partner desires and he has no guilt about the pain and suffering he gives to her soul. Even her first volume of the poem "Summer in Calcutta" presents these frustrations of a woman about turning love into lust and its throbbing aftershock.

A tropical sun parched the world of shrunk emotions with unbearable heat and the dust reflects the poet's disgust. The poem "The Freaks" explores the human soul's emptiness when true love evolves painful despair. In this poem, the lover is excited with physical attraction only. He is introduced with a mouth like "dark cavern" and "sun-stained cheek" and his uneven teeth suggest the dark, hot, and sharp lustfulness.

A woman needs the consolation of love which she cannot get from her lover. Another shallow love drama enacts in search of her eternal lover in "The Testing of the Sirens". With a pockmarked face, her lover takes her out and the sound of the sirens greets them, which seem like the wailing of a distressed soul. The endless irony of turning love into lust by the lovers is depicted by the phallic icon of disappointment. The woman becomes indifferent totally for life and she learns smiling while being disappointed.

Religious Mayhem

Kamala Das is well renowned for her poetic creed and tells that love is the growth process of a soul from consciousness to the peak of self-discovery. She says that love can take both partners to the paradise where life is full of joy in "The Seashore". According to her, love means growth, understanding, and liberation from all boundaries. According to her, she is aimed to overcome your own self in "Advice to Fellow Swimmers". She narrates –

“Go swim in the great blue sea
where the first tide you meet is your body

that familiar pest;
 but if you learn to cross it
 you are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe ...”
 She always ends up with lust in the name of love.
 Love is a spiritual self of a woman. But for men,
 it is just an animal passion. Woman is done with
 raw sex and pretence of respect, but man is
 fulfilled with sexual fantasies alone and he gets
 social status with it. She is against this bleak
 love due to which she seeks Krishna. Emotional
 love is a basic and psychological need of life,
 just like man’s biological need is physical love.
 Krishna gives this emotional love to her and it
 stays with her in her journey. According to her,
 Krishna is the symbol of love and her poetry
 moves around the basic theme of love. She
 cannot think of another lover. She considers
 herself as Radha who wants to achieve Krishna
 against all odds. She gets light and darkness,
 pain and pleasure from love. For her, love cannot
 be monotonous, despite being repetitive. Every
 Indian woman has a Radha in her mind and life
 is an endless search for love according to her.
 Loving Lord Krishna is itself a blissful feeling
 and she believes that love is a dynamic force
 which gives freedom from all cheap obligations.

3. Conclusion

Confessional poetry is a self-revelation of a poet
 and is rooted in their personal experiences.
 Kamala Das apparently confesses a lot of things
 related to her life in her poetry. Kamala Das
 emerges strongly in her poetry and probes her
 own psyche. She describes her jobs, physical
 experiences, and failures in love. She comments
 on different concerns, especially women coming
 from specific traditions and assumes a broad
 persona. She became a cult favorite as she has
 played a vital role as a creative writer and she
 kept on exercising a significant influence on
 women from the society.

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