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Kamala Das and Anne Sexton as confessional poets.

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Abstract

Kamala Das and Anne Sexton are confessional poets who write in the mode and pattern of American confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman and Theodore Roethke. A confessional poet places no barrier between his self and direct expression of that self. There is too much of anguish and suffering in the verses of both the poets.

Keywords: Confessional, Suffering, Therapy, Articulate

Introduction

Kamala Das has contributed to Indian English literature by opening a new vision of human nature, man-women relationship and socio-political consciousness. Kamala Das, the sophisticated Indian poetess, was born in Malabar in the maritime state of Kerala to V.M. Nair, an ex-managing editor of a leading newspaper and Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess. She was profoundly impressed by the poetry of her mother Nalapat Balamani Amma and her great uncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon, a prominent writer.

Kamala Das, who is a 'confessional' poet, writes in the mode and pattern of several 'new' American poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman and Theodore Roethke. To all these American poets the critic M.L. Rosenthal gave the adjective 'confessional'. All these poets are highly subjective and write with considerable frankness and sincerity. They usually focus the reader's attention on 'the trials of life, their misery and heartache, often at the sacrifice of beauty for its own sake. The three outstanding books written in this mode are : Lowell's *Life studies* (1959), Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (1967) and Roethke's *The Lost Son* (1948) of these, Lowell's book exerted the most profound influence upon the other poets in the genre, including Kamala Das.

A 'confessional' poet places no barrier between his self and direct expression of that self, as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound used to do. The confessional poet does not accept restrictions on subject matter, though they are usually personal. In his book, *The New Poets* (1967), M.L. Rosenthal, who gave a suitable title to the school of 'confessional poets' rightly points out that the best confessional poetry is that which rises above the subject matter to achieve a kind of victory over pain and defeat, poems which are glosses on the triumph of life. And Robert Philips adds to this that the best confessional poems are more than conceptions. They are revelations. They are revelations about their creator's personal vexations and predicaments.

If we take into account the above specifications about confessional poetry and poets, it would be not wrong to characterize Kamala Das as a confessional poet in the true sense of the term. Although she shows no signs of insanity or madness in her verse, as many 'new' American poets do, she exhibits all the essential features of a true confessional poet. There is also too much of anguish and suffering in the verse of Kamala Das. Her dissatisfaction in marriage and life sharpened her consciousness, and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium, because many palatable things can be said in this medium without incurring the wrath of powerful persons. Her autobiography, *My Story*, in prose is more baffling and dazing than her poetry.

Kamala Das's poetry has a strong note of subjectivism, the same sort of subjectivism as we witness in the romantic poets of England. The poetess is mostly concerned with herself as a victim of circumstances and sexual humiliations. In one place in *My Story*, she says:

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In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.

All her quest for true love lands in disaster of love. All her poetry is an expression of her private experiences in matters of love and sex. It operates from the level of the personal and the particular rather than from that of the general and the universal. There is strong autobiographical touch in it. Thus, in *summer in Calcutta*, we have the poem, *The Dance of the Eunuchs* which corresponds to her own feeling of prosecution and inadequacy.

Although a 'confessional' poet, Kamala Das can make use of any subject for her treatment. She mostly confines herself to the regions of her own experience. By doing so she becomes frank and honest, close and intimate, in her details. She hardly ever writes about 'old, unhappy, far-off things', as Wordsworth and his band of followers did. That's why 'confessional' poetry sounds so appealing and so convincing. It frequently takes resort to personal failures and mental illnesses of its composer and Kamala's verse is a brilliant illustration, of it.

A 'confessional' poet often writes about death, disease and destruction. He is much concerned with the decay of the body and its aftermath effects. Mrs. Das's story has also been a story of recurrent attacks of diseases and illnesses. In her autobiography, we have several accounts of them. Chapter 32 of *My Story* offers us this:

After my return from home, I slipped into a phase of poor health and like a hibiscus shedding its dark petals my poor body shed red clots on the bathroom floor and no amount of rest did it any good.

A gentle lady doctor took her nursing home and there she recovered. Another account of her illness occurs in chapter 40 of her autobiography:

I had lost during that illness the resemblance to anything human. I looked like a moulting bird. My skin had turned dark and scaly. My voice had thinned to a whisper My little son frightened of my looks and burst out crying. My second son tried for several days to rub mustard oil on my scaly legs to make me normal again.

As in the confessional poetry in general, Kamala's verse distils emotions through the medium of free verse. Kamala knows the limitations of rhymed verses, and opts for verse libre to be able to articulate her open heart for the benefit of her readers. The lines from *The Old Play-houses* justify that:

Love

I no longer need, with tenderness I am most content.

I have learnt that friendship cannot endure

That blood, ties do not satisfy.

Kamala Das is a typical confessional poet who pours her very heart into her poetry. She is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche. Thanks to her that a reliable poetic voice has been heard in contemporary Indo-English verse.

Anne Sexton, the poet and playwright was born in Newton, Massachusetts. She was raised in comfortable middle class circumstances in Weston, Massachusetts but she was never

at ease with the life prescribed for her. Her father was alcoholic and her mother's literary aspirations had been frustrated by family life. Anne took refuge from her troubled family and formed close relationship with Nana (Anne Dingley) her maiden great aunt who lived with the family during Anne's adolescence. Anne felt that her parents were hostile to her and feared that they might abandon her. Her aunt's breakdown and hospitalization also traumatized her.

Depressed after the death of her beloved Nana in 1954 and the birth of her second daughter in 1955, Sexton went back into therapy. Her depression worsened, however, and during times when her husband was gone. She occasionally abused the children, several attempts at suicide led to intermittent institutionalization of which her parents disapproved. During these years, Sexton's therapist encouraged her to write.

In 1959 Sexton unexpectedly lost both of her parents, and the memory of her difficult relationships with them so abruptly ended, led to further breakdowns. Poetry seemed the only route to stability, though at times the friendships she made through her art, which led to sexual affairs, also were unsettling. Her marriage was torn by discord and physical abuse as her husband saw his formerly dependent wife become a celebrity.

It was Snodgrass who became her friend and mentor and whose work inspired Sexton to explore the mother-daughter relationship in her poetry. The first example is *Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward*, a tragic poem that tells the story of a mother whose child is taken away from her after giving birth.

The mother-daughter relationship seems to occupy an important position among Sexton's favourite themes, as if the poetess would try to express and develop in her writing whatever she could not accomplish in real life. In *The Double Image*, for example Sexton brings into question her relationship with her mother as well as her relationship with her daughter Joyce. The poem refers to the period in Sexton's life when she was recovering after a suicide attempt and trying to connect with her youngest daughter, while her mother was also fighting for her life and instead of forgiving Anne for what she had done, she decided to have her portrait done so that all her pain and suffering remained forever engraved.

Sexton joined the meetings organised by Holmes with some of his best students, among which we can mention, Maxine Kumin, Sam Alberts and George Starbuck. Sexton too was among Holmes' favourite students, despite their differences regarding her writing style. He did not encourage her to publish the poems that speak about her psychiatric experience, for he believed she would be able to completely recover from her illness and then she would regret having exposed herself in such manner. Sexton, however, was not discouraged by his advice and she explained her reasons for maintaining the 'confessional' character of her poems in a letter and also in the poem, *For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further*.

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