

Intimation of Mortality in Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT: Sylvia Plath died in London in 1963 leaving behind her a collection of terrifying poems. The fable of her abrupt, defiant death sees her as immolated on the altar of a cruel society. Sylvia Plath's talent, though intensely cultivated, did not bloom into genius until the last month of her life. It is her vision of life's imperfections which gives forceful birth to Sylvia Plath's poetry. Truly, retrospective knowledge of the poet's impending death imbues the poems with a sacramental quality, as if each utterance signifies a ceremonial purification or gives voice to painful ecstasy to which death is the inevitable conclusion. Sylvia Plath is usually assigned the epithet of a confessional poet and that view is facilitated by an apparent autobiographical element in her work. Her poetry can be recommended as 'garden of tortures' in which mutilation and annihilation take nightmarishly protean poems. The images of Sylvia Plath depict her inner alienation. In her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. This expresses the poet's distaste for the life of a person and her complimentary yearning for union with that intense like passion that is death. It is interesting to note that Kamala Das' love obsession has an undercurrent of melancholy feeling for death. Her poetry dealing with the theme of death recalls the practice of a great writer Sylvia Plath. The foregoing survey of Kamala Das verse reveals the fact that she is a deeply distressed woman, languishing for true love, repenting her hollow marriage, complaining of her situations. She is distressed at the inhuman behavior of her husband towards her. Time and again Kamala Das lodges her complaint against the same person, the person who is responsible for failing her completely in love. When the light of love is put out, an encircling gloom pervades the mind. A thorough investigation of Kamala Das' poetry reveals that her vision is essentially tragic and pessimistic. Instead of a robust optimism of the kind of Robert Browning, we find a tragic outlook in Sylvia Plath. Though Kamala Das is not directly influenced by modern American poet Sylvia Plath, yet some of her poems seem to echo certain element of the American poets. For instance, intimation of mortality in her poetry is quite akin to mortality wished by Sylvia Plath.

KEYWORDS: Femininity, conviction, autobiographical, catharsis, abyss, annihilation, complimentary, melancholy, conflict.

The bereaved and betrayed child (Plath's father died when she was eight), the dutiful daughter, the young woman caught in a classic double bind between a fifties' model of femininity and her conviction of artistic vocation, the seductive chronicler of breakdown and suicide, the mythologizer of womanly archetypes, the exalted wife in a marriage of true minds, the passionately loving mother, the tormented truth-teller, the cold death voice—all these speaking images are screens in Sylvia Plath's lyrics. No single image or combination of images wholly identifies the voices of a Plath poem. Rather, these self-generated icons stand totemically behind the poems, hiding and figuring forth still deeper ghosts whose power they imply. Plath saw herself entering a society in which marriage and child bearing were irreconcilable with career.

The best correctives to the view that Plath's poetry is so autobiographical as to somehow cross the line between art and self-indulgence is that for each writer the poem is only a means of raising the objects and emotions of life to art. For Plath, the creation of commonplace experience had, of necessity, to be a female experience; but it was no less authentic in its gender-based domesticity. Plath, the housewife, shares much experience of their common experience, Plath would also have agreed on the premise that the material of that art had to come from one's real life—and that the poet had the responsibility of choosing which details and emotions would transform into effective art. Plath had learned a great deal from the modernistic poets, especially from Eliot, Roethk, Yeats and Dylan Thomas. But while these poets had moved beyond the didactic to the catalyzing of pure experience through a concentration on the objective, the catching of thing, pure, removed from the rationalizations of life, Plath did more: she infused those objects with a sense of her own life and emotion. The object that was so important to some strands of modernist art was in the Plath canon not by itself enough. The modernist object has become an artifact of a culture; an artifact rather than an object because we as readers are more interested in what is being done with the object than just the fact that the object exists. Our complete attention falls on the characterization within the poem, on what the character is able to do with the object in question. Plath has, then succeeded in removing the sterility inherent in William's "No ideas but in



things” as she has shifted the reader’s focus from object to persons. For Barbara Hardy, Plath’s poetry is best understood using the terms derangement and enlargement: “The poetry constantly breaks beyond its own personal cries of pain and horror, in ways more sane than mad, enlarging and generalizing the particulars, attaching its maladies to a profoundly moved and moving sense of human ills” (Wagner 03).

Sylvia Plath’s only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is a piece of catharsis, useful as background to the lyrics. This rating of the novel is supported by the author herself, who as we learn in *Biographical Notes*, explained to her mother:

“What I done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color- it’s a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. I have tried to picture my world and the people in it seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar.

My second book will show the same world as seen through the eyes of health” (Notes 294-95).

Esther Greenwood, central protagonist of the novel, narrator and thinly disguised version of Sylvia, is a brilliant straight. The witty satire of the first half of the novel acquires darker meaning as the heroine (like Sylvia) lapses into madness and makes a most determined suicide attempt. Granted that Esther-Sylvia suffered from fixation on her childhood relation to her parents, we also must ask how failure to find any feasible road to maturity contributed to her illness. Her longing to regress permeates the novel. In New York, Esther acknowledges the inadequacy of the compulsive achievement which dominated her childhood and adolescence, yet cannot find a mature identity to replace it. In a significantly mechanical metaphor she sees her life as through forced in confessional tone:

“I saw the years of my life speed along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three . . . nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn’t see a single pole beyond the nineteenth” (Plath Sylvia 137). This transition from childhood to maturity is as a daring leap across an abyss. Describing *The Bell Jar* Sylvia calls it ‘an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past’ (Notes 293).

Sylvia Plath died in London in 1963 leaving behind her a sheaf of terrifying poems. The fable of her abrupt, defiant death sees her as immolated on the altar of a cruel society. Sylvia Plath’s talent, though intensely cultivated, did not bloom into genius until the last month of her life, when if we take internal evidence of the poems in *Ariel* as our guide, she stood at the edge of the abyss of existence and looked, steadily, courageously, with holy curiosity to the very bottom. Every artist, and almost everyone else, at one time or another, fetches up against the stark facts of life and death. The greatest writers have been able to record these terrible moments against the larger canvas of ordinary life, adjusting the threatened catastrophes of death and destruction among related and contrasting themes of life and death and renewal. It has become fashionable, at least common, for poets to set down their autobiographical crises as a qualifying confession. Such terrifying lines as these from several of the poems in *Ariel* have the inevitable preface to doom.

From ‘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” (Ellmann 1041)

It is her vision of life’s imperfections which gives forceful birth to Sylvia Plath’s poetry.

Generally considered as “confessional” poetry, the poems of Sylvia Plath make the reader intensely aware of an individual voice, a decisively personal character and display. ‘Daddy’, perhaps the most personal and vituperative of her poems, escapes being what it might have become in a more truly ‘confessional’ treatment. It is a nasty harangue or the hacking of a helpless scapegoat. There is hatred and frustration as she says, “If I have killed one man, I have killed two” (Ellman 1048). ‘Daddy’ becomes a communal expurgation of evil, embodied in a figure as broad as a continent and inescapable as the sky:

“There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you” (Ellman 1048)

Thus the subject of death and suicide happens to be an obsession with the confessional poets.

Truly, retrospective knowledge of the poet’s impending death imbues the poems with a sacramental quality, as if each utterance signifies a ceremonial purification or gives voice to painful ecstasy to which death is the inevitable conclusion. In ‘Lady Lazarus’ a suicide attempt is figured with what are probably the most chilling lines in the book:-

“I rocked shut
As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls” (Ellman 1041)

Her father’s death played havoc with her life and she never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. Memory of father arouses ambivalent feeling of love and hate. Alvarez writes truly, “She seemed convinced, in the poems, that root of her suffering was the death of her father, whom she loved, who abandoned her and who dragged her, after him, into death” (Alvarez 65).

In the poem ‘Daddy’, she expresses her desires for death as a result of the breaking of her childhood relationship with her father when he died and she can recreate this relationship by killing herself. The killing of herself and death of her persecutor and the reuniting with the figure she loves are all united in one final act of suicide:

“So daddy, I am finally through.
The black telephone’s off at the root.
The voices just can’t worm through” (Macbeth 300).

Sylvia Plath risked death. Alvarez speculates, “Sylvia did not entirely want to kill herself. She risked death and lost suicide, in the view is thought of as a cry for help, one that cannot be uttered in usual way” (Sexton 176).

Sylvia Plath is usually assigned the epithet of a confessional poet and that view is facilitated by an apparent autobiographical element in her work. Her poetry can be recommended as ‘garden of tortures’ in which mutilation and annihilation take nightmarishly protean poems. The images of Sylvia Plath depict her inner alienation. In her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Esther wishes to end her life after many unsuccessful suicide attempts. She takes a drastic step and swallows a bottle of sleeping pills. This is how Esther recounts the experience:

“I plummeted down past the zig zaggars, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromises, into my own past” (Bold 239).

Sylvia Plath had twice attempted suicide. Her third attempt would end her life a few months after the composition of ‘Lady Lazarus’. These lines have been taken as her personal suicidal credo, her manifesto of destruction.

“I have done it again
One year in every ten I manage it” (Ellman 1040)

As Annette Lavers rightly says, “the dialectic of life and death is the sole subject of the poem” (Lavers 105). Plath was cultivating her own hysteria and her poems are representative of the emotional life of the time. If her personal life was plagued by doubts and misgivings, so was her creative life. In fact, both life and art were at loggerheads. Being aware of her ranging as a means of containment, a sense of doom is present in all of her poetry. In her book, *Sylvia Plath*, Caroline King Bernard says, “virtually all of the early poetry is death directed” (Bernard King 37). The deep sense of personal disappointment at having to cut short the vacation sours her imagination and makes her view everything distastefully. ‘All The Dead Dears’ deals with the interrelatedness of life and death with the latter as being the only reality. Everything in the poem is death-directed. The narrator of the poem experiences a kind of kinship with the dead. The museum-cased lady is so pathologically caught up with the idea of death that she imagines her ancestors beckoning her:

“Mother, grandmother, great grandmother
Reach hag hands to draw me in” (Hughes Tedd 70)

This expresses the poet’s distaste for the life of a person and her complimentary yearning for union with that intense like that is death. Plath strips herself of her own experience in an attempt to find freedom from the painful, constricting nature of that experience. She pours the hot volcano of her heart as she states:

“Let us eat our lost supper at it,
Like a hospital plate” (Birthday Present).

She has a way of putting catastrophe casually, without frills, and reader wince at the Zombie decorum with which she does it. Reading her is like standing on the San Andres’ fault or crawling on a glass roof; she sets up a nerve-wracking excitement after which reader feels drained and down. She cannot be read aloofly.

Kamala Das has mostly been assessed as a writer in the genre of confessional poetry. She has been ranked with the poet of dissatisfaction and discontent as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Confessional poets court death and disintegration as well as psychic wholeness and insights. It is interesting to note that Kamala Das’ love obsession has an undercurrent of melancholy feeling for death. Her poetry dealing with the theme of death recalls the practice of great

American writer Sylvia Plath. One thing that these confessional writers have in common is the conception of the self as passive; these confessional poets alternately flagellate and flaunt, punish and cosset themselves. Both see themselves as victims and sufferers through their sensitivity, heroic in their suffering which renders a peculiar tone or rather range of tone—nervous and hardboiled, sullen and self-pitying, the nervous breakdown often ending up in suicide. Suicide as the guarantor of integrity and the procurer of authenticity is the true identifying preoccupation of the school. The chaos of the psychic situation becomes the ground of a re-oriented art in which the beset self is the testing ground and embodiment of all human possibilities—the terror, pains, early miseries, regrets, vexation, remain as the proof of one's existence. As for Kamala Das, the tension is issued forth in her poetry from a pressure of her complex family background. She was not well attended to in her married life. Her marriage was doomed to fail from the beginning. As she confesses in My Story: "My husband was immersed in his office work, and after work there was the dinner followed by sex" (Das Kamala 102). Possibly, the failure of love is linked with the birth of death-theme of her poetry. The discontented love as a legitimate source is definitely responsible for this condition of hers, and through the poet-persona the whole Hindu social set up comes in for a sharp criticism. Kamala Das raises her voice of resentment against this hollow set-up. The following lines are written with the sole purpose of complaint against a hollow marital relationship:

"And even death no where else but here in
My betrayer's arms" (Summer in Calcutta).

Her autobiography, bordering on fiction occasionally, was actually written during one of her serious illness. During illness, she become very weak and lost all energy. This illness had rendered her so gloomy and dispirited that death become to dangle before her like a living reality. Even in the midst of modern amenities of life, she was obsessed with the idea of death: "I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality" (Das Kamala 218).

The adverse circumstances have rendered Das' vision tragic and melancholic. Her dissatisfaction in marriage and life has sharpened her consciousness and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium. In her autobiography she writes about woeful situations.

She had made compromises in life and exists in a state of utter helplessness. This hopelessness is expressed metaphorically in the following passage:

"I did not have the educational qualification which would have got me a job either. I could not opt for a life of prostitute, for I know that I was frigid. I was a misfit everywhere" (Das Kamala 103).

Living in such a horrible state, life and death become indistinguishable for her. When life is no more than a dark circle of routine and restriction, it is no better than death. She wishes as:

"Each night when darkness turns
Me blind, I think of death" (Summer in Calcutta 61).

The foregoing survey of Kamala Das verse reveals the fact that she is a deeply distressed woman, languishing for true love, repenting her hollow marriage, complaining of her situations. She is distressed at the inhuman behavior of her husband towards her. Time and again Kamala Das lodges her complaint against the same person, the person who is responsible for failing her completely in love. When the light of love is put out, an encircling gloom pervades the mind:

"If love is not to be had
I want to be dead" (Summer in Calcutta 02).

One of the moving poems is "A Request" which is straight forward in expression. It denotes that life has been worthless for Kamala Das, that love has totally deserted her. The inevitable result was that the black shadow of a crippling world around her began to darken her dreams of a happy, settled life. In great anguish she denotes:

"When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth" (The Descendent 05).

A thorough investigation of Kamala Das' poetry reveals that her vision is essentially tragic and pessimistic. Instead of a robust optimism of the kind of Robert Browning, we find a tragic outlook in Sylvia Plath. Though Kamala Das is not directly influenced by modern American poet Sylvia Plath, yet some of her poems seem to echo certain American poets. For instance, her death wish in her poetry is quite akin to the poetic death wished by Sylvia Plath.



In “The Invitation”, one finds the poet at the edge of the sea, contemplating suicide in order to free herself from a life of physical emptiness. She feels oppressed and suppressed and wants to take refuge in “Death”. As the hopes of lover’s return fades and as the sea’s invitation gather a corresponding force and validity, though she earnestly endeavours to cope with a trying situation and a tantalizing call:

“The sea is garrulous today come in,
Come in. what do you loss by dying” (The Descendent 14).

In other words, the poem is the externalization of Kamala Das’ inner conflict. She attempts to get the physical extinction as if she has already become a wasteland. Mina Surjit Singh feels that Kamala Das in “her frustration driven delirium, reads in the waves of the sea an invitation suggesting her to commit suicide (Surjit Mina 91).

Kamala Das has taken an appropriate metaphor for the depiction of inner conflict in her frustrated life. She failed to get permanent love response and therefore her death wish grew stronger in spite of all her effort to maintain mental balance. The idea of taking sea as her lover has been quite dominant in her life because throughout her life she has been toying with the idea of killing herself in the sea: “Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself into sea, be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea” (Kamala Das 215). Kamala Das’ wish to merge with the sea is her search of the right man who could nourish the demand of the soul as well. The sea stands here both as an image and as a metaphor of her quest.

In ‘Substitute’, the poetess craves for the silence, peace and tranquility of the quiet night in order to ensure for herself a lasting sense of relief from the burdensome life. The poetess turns to night and begs:

“Dear night, be my tomb” (The Descendent 07).

In this poetical collection, the fury of the poetess at not receiving adequate love from the proper person deepens into the debunking irony and tragic vision of a pitiable nature. There is no laughter, no humour in it and Kamala’s pessimism touches a hellish depth like that of Sylvia Plath. Poem after poem she hammers hard at her husband-lover and articulates her intense desire of escaping from his clutches attaining her freedom by death.

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