



ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access

Vol.10 No.3, September 2025

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
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ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025

Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath: A Comparative Reading Confessionalism, Gender Politics and Self-Destructive Desire

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Received- 10/07/2025, Revised-25/07/2025, Accepted-28/07/2025, Published-31/07/2025

Abstract: This research paper presents a comparative work of the works of two prominent poets of the 20th century, Kamala Das (1934- 2009) and Sylvia Plath (1932- 1963). Both scandalously personal and controversial authors, they both use confessional forms of writing to deal with one aspect of confession and the politics of feminine and self-destructive desire. Although Plath wrote in America during the mid-20th century and Das in a postcolonial India, both broke the patriarchal codes by expressing psychological angst, sexuality, mental illness, and suicidal desires. They transgress boundaries of literature by introducing their works into the domain of the discussion of private pain. What comes out in the analysis are significant differences: Plath seems to be impersonal and archetypal with her treatment of suffering, whereas Das is more intimate and conversational in her confessions. Both are critical of gender politics, but their attitude toward feminism is stronger and more forceful in expression. The way they present their own experiences with self-destruction differs as well: Plath presents it as an act of rebellious self-assertion and transformation, and Das as a way of escape from suffering. They combine into female subordination, which becomes universal and opens up new avenues in feminist self-definition in literature.

Keywords: Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath, Gender Politics, Self-Destructive Desire, confessional poetry.

Introduction:

Kamala Das (1934-2009) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) are two iconic names in 20th-century poetry, which were popularised by their highly personal and provocative writing. Both are considered visionary authors whose work has paved the way in confessional writing by women, and it has allowed them to express experiences that are otherwise unspoken. There is an uncouth quality about their works that, to this day, still continues to shock and inspire generations of readers.

The confessional poetry, or as it is also known, confessionalism started as a different style in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States. The peculiarities of this genre are its deep interest in extreme moments



of individual experience, inner psyche and individual trauma. It does not hesitate to touch such topics that were once taboo in poetics as mental illness, sexuality and even suicide. The movement also corresponded to a radical break with the impersonality and disengaged quality of previous Modernist poetry represented by the theory of art as an escape or evasion of emotion projected by T.S. Eliot and the dictums of New Criticism. The confessions of the confessional poets were against impersonalism, but still each of them maintained high standards of craftsmanship and structure of work that could show that a personal revelation was not equivalent to the absence of artistic application.

The increasing popularity of confessional poetry was not just a part of stylistical transformation, but rather the cultural reaction to the changes taking place in the second part of the 20th century. It was the time when society experienced massive social anxieties, such as the consequences of the holocaust, the Cold War, and the danger of nuclear proliferation. These are some of the frightening social issues. Besides these issues, the 1950s were characterised by the romanticisation of home life, which in many cases veiled dissatisfaction at home. Confessional poetry arose and appeared with a wider cultural transition towards more openness and self-expression, similar to such phenomena as the Beat Generation and the counterculture. This implies that there was a direct correlation between the dominant socio-political context and the art scene, where individual trauma served as a microcosm of the general social ills. The move to the deeply personal in poetry is one that the poet and his or her reader might have made as a response to these frighteningly real phenomena of the outside world in search of a certain authenticity and personal truth in a world that was not only more daunting in its limitations at that, but more fully constrictive than ever.

By engaging in their converging and differing poetics of confession, Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath both articulated and fought against patriarchal norms through the extremely personalised narratives of highlighting gender disparities and expressing complicated self-annihilation yearnings and universalised the female experience of oppression and thus the struggle to find agency.

M.L. Rosenthal developed the term confessional in 1959 as the title of his review of *the Life Studies of Robert Lowell*. He was reading literature of the preceding decade, finding it the natural extension of a style that had already appeared earlier, such as in the poetry of Midway Moderns like James Wright or Donald



Justice. Rosenthal contrasted this style with other forms of lyric poetry in the way that it deals with confidences that had surpassed the customary limits of reticence or individual embarrassment.

Other works, such as *Genesis* (1943) by Delmore Schwartz or *sonnet sequence* (1947) by John Berryman, showed confessionally-associated characteristics; it was Lowell with his *Life Studies* that conquered the interest of the majority of the population and openly came to be known as confessional.

The category of confessional poetry has not passed without controversy. Poets such as John Berryman have even eschewed the term with rage and contempt, as they believe that the word does not mean anything. Critics, like Richard Wilbur and Robert Bly, have also been criticising that confessional poetry is self-absorbed, or as Robert Bly calls it, the navel-gazing kind, in that poetry should transform the unbearable into something bearable instead of being too much about having mischanced it once. Nevertheless, the defenders point to the fact that the majority of confessional poets were not just telling the story of their inner feelings but followed the sober obligation of poetic craft.

In academic terms, confessional poetry can be seen as a narrative self-making in language, a rhetorical exchange in which language constructs an experience of self for the poet and the reader. This is aimed at convincing the audience of the truth and authenticity of its narration construction, and it frequently acts as a healing process or mechanism to the poet in forming a consistent life-story based on mythic accounts. Historically, these autobiographical traditions run very deep, back to works such as the Confessions of Saint Augustine (c. 400 CE) and *The Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and echoes also with Freudian psychoanalysis.

Confession: Revealing of the Self

Both writers Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath adopted the use of the I voice, where their own experiences became the immediate subject of their poetry, which is considered to be a characteristic of confessionism. The poem by Plath, *Daddy*, is considered to be autobiographical indeed, because it is written by the woman to her father. Likewise, her poetry is plentiful with autobiographical factors as Das boldly puts in the spotlight experiences that traditionally remained in the realm of the domestic. This mutual animation to expose their inner worlds is an indication of the same desire to make sense and express extreme sufferings and pains, both



physical and mental, personal, via the literary works. In their writings, both poets sought some kind of mystic relief or a catharsis; they made their suffering into art.

Although both of the poets were dedicated to telling the raw truth, they were accused of being too open. There were people who criticised Plath as being ego-absorbed, and people saw Das as using attention-seeking measures because of her unrestrained exploitation of female sexuality. However, it is important to note that they both upheld an assured level of crafts and construction in their own work, and this showed their confessional style was not just a cry of the heart but a well-calculated effect on the artistic process.

Yet, on further observation, the two have a continuum in their practices of confessional disclosure. The confessions of Plath can be described in terms of a frenzied brilliance and conviction and a raw, lurid display of personal agony. Her style of narration can be said to be somewhat detached, although very personal.

The events themselves have become the focus of attention as opposed to the immediate feelings and emotions of a living poet. She frequently has transformed her powerful psychological pain, especially in the subject of mental illness, into general or even archetypal metaphors, as in her Holocaust imagery in *Daddy*, where she notes,

“An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.” (Plath 222)

By contrast, Das confessionalism is characterised by a kind of daring frankness as well as an unapologetic tack with sexuality and identity. Her tone has been termed as conversational, colloquial, fluent and graceful, giving a sketch of intimacy with the reader as something that is immediate. Her autobiography, entitled *My Story* has been described as being more venting than talking, meaning that there is no mediation as there is a direct and immediate expression of experience. She writes,

Today at Nariman Point the tall buildings crowd one another. But when I was young and in love with a grey-eyed man it was a marshy waste. We used to walk aimlessly along the quiet Panday Road or cross the Cuffe Parade to walk towards the sun. We did not have a place to rest. But in the glow of



those evening suns, we felt that we were Gods who had lost their way and had strayed into an unkind planet. (Das 92)

Whereas Plath in her examination stresses mental health directly and desperately, Das is more subliminal in her description showing a hint of helplessness and anger that is a silent result of the attempt to liberate identity amidst social stifling. This difference implies that despite the fact that the two poets are confessional, they have different ways of confessing. Plath tended to render her own pain into a less individual and more universal, even quasi-archetypal, distress, in detached and symbolic language. Das on the contrary, took a more head-on, verging on chatty, preaching of her own life, and thus her confession was more directly personal and direct subversion of norms. This serves as an indication of the subtle resoluteness in the level of artistic mediation of individual experience in the confessional poetry.

Gender Politics: Revolution The Patriarchal Cage:

Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das were quite formidable voices against the patriarchal systems that multiplied both in their respective societies. They vociferously opposed the male-dominated societies and the patriarchal construction, and felt so much anger and anguish at the prejudice faced on the basis of gender, and the male domination over the slave women. In their works, they always pay attention to the issues of autonomy and self-expression as central to female identity.

The work by Plath has been a major icon relating to the feminist movement. The poem *Daddy* clearly spells out the battle between the male power and the right of a female to exercise her own rights and be independent of male dominance. She writes,

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You (Plath 222)

She criticized the constraining stereotype of the 1960s, that a woman should be and, in poems such as *Edge*, she notes,



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ISSN 2455-7544

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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. (Plath 272)

She depicted motherhood as a climax of gender oppression, with the woman being idealised only on death, when she had given everything up to her children. Their potency is extremely well-driven by Plath in two poems; in both of them, Holocaust imagery is presented as a vivid metaphor to represent female oppression and gender power structure, thus interwoven between the personal experience of subjugation and historical atrocity.

Kamala Das, however, is categorical in opposing the imposition of any traditional social rules on women by patriarchal society. In her poetry, she has directly confronted the subject of role and the place of women in patriarchal society and whether or not they are autonomous. The poems, such as *The Sunshine Cat* and *The Old Playhouse*, are well-known examples of how women were stifled and crippled in the suffocation and disastrous married life experiences they had to live. In *The Old Playhouse*, she writes,

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. It was not to gather knowledge

Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn

What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every

The lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased



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With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions. (Das 32)

The defiant presentation of sex by Das and the fearless presentation of marital and extra-marital relations are at the heart of her feminist standpoint, which defies societal mores that tried to suppress the female sexual desire and power. She has been considered by many as a major advocate of women's causes and feminism in Indian poetry.

Both of these poets certainly made a far-reaching feminist contribution by attacking patriarchy and expressing female experience; there is a difference in the motivation or self-description of poets as part of the feminist movement. Therefore, Plath, who never describes herself as a feminist, was a pioneer because of her unflinching portrayal of personal pain as part of the patriarchal system. Das, by contrast, made a more articulate political cause of feminine liberation and quite frequently expressed the female desire in saying no to the stereotypical roles. The disparity in the outright positioning, therefore, indicates the diversity of cultural settings and individual inclinations towards political movements, but both eventually made great contributions to the feminist literature tradition.

The Self-Destructive Desire: The Attraction Annihilation:

Self-destructive desire, frequently accompanied by psychological suffering or even suicidal thought, is one of the most intense and recurring subjects of both the work and life of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. Both poets wrote in their poems about diseases of misery, alienation, degradation, suicidal thinking, and anticipation. Unfortunately, suicide formed part of Plath's life, and it has been a recurring theme in both their lives, demonstrating the excessive psychological pressure they received. Strong drives to destruction and creation can be seen very often in the poems of Plath. Written in the days when she committed suicide, *Edge* presents death in chilling tones as a perfection and a smile of accomplishment, hinting on a performative aesthetic destruction of the self as very complex. She writes,

The moon has nothing to be sad about,

Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her blacks crackle and drag. (Plath 272)



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An element of powerful struggle in the mind is indicated in her suicide attempts, which have been associated with the urge to be reunited with the oppressive father figure that is highlighted in the poem, *Daddy*. Her documented difficulty with bipolar disorder also informs these themes. Critics have pointed out that her poetry is a means of gaining dominance over destructive emotions, resulting in a rather stagnant, rather than a processional, state in certain cases. To Plath, death might be seen as the only means through which women would get out of male dominance. Yet in poems such as *Lady Lazarus*, the example of the suicidal act is visualised as a kind of risky yet liberating re-creation that can be recovered in a sense that death can be an agent that can bring her out of her pain and at the same time transform her into a new personality, through resurrection and rebirth. She notes here that,

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath

Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be

At home on me

And I am a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die. (Plath 244)

Kamala Das' poetry, on the other hand, is full of the desire of death which is symbolic of calmness. She explains that sexuality makes the victimized women of a patriarchal society vulnerable to the blow emotionally and spiritually and this in some cases it reaches to the extent of committing suicide. In the poem, *The Sunshine Cat* she explains this when she says she has grown into a cold dead half lady, in other words she is too desperate and in a mood of permanent and morbid depression, therefore very sterile emotionally. *The Old Playhouse* is a clear example of a stifled and crippled spirit as the mind is turned into an old playhouse with all the lights out, a symbol of utter loss of interest in life, individuality under repressive marital circumstances. Her idea of lethal love implies that bad love affairs, especially the ones that are not based on true love, may cause a destructive end to women who have encountered them.



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Although both poets struggle with self-destructive thoughts, the reasons behind them and the symbolic interpretations are not the same. In several poems, especially the second poem of *The Collected*, Plath presents suicide or near-death as a forceful act of will, a sort of rebirth, or a forceful statement against those who are torturing. In the case of Das, self-destructiveness is based on a desperate desolation or a sense of half-death or having one spirit stifled by a patriarchal tradition and frustrated yearning to the point that death is a sought-after kind of stasis or reprieve to an intolerable abnormality. Here, one sees a subtle distinction between active, rebellious self-destruction versus passive, hopelessly masochistic desire to end.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath are the legendary 20th-century poets due to their willingness to go to the places where literature had been silent before. In their bold confessional poetry, they made the most intimate aspects of life their own: mind, emotional anguish, sex life and brought them topics of open discussion. Their literature is an expression of not only fighting the patriarchal system, but also of an intense claim to female agency, as well as evidence of their unique cultural traditions. The fierceness of their self-destructive adventure not only indicated self-agony but was also a symbolic gesture of the choking they were going through in society. Their confessional poetry was more than just personal accounts, and rather became such an empowering instrument, which resonated and even bolstered early feminist movements of those times. Their explicit documentation of the experiences of female suffering and expression of taboo topics did highlight the oppression of women in the system, whilst setting literary precedents of female expression. Their poems highlighted the fact that the personal is political, and thus, discussed the personal struggles that women face as individuals are now engaged in the matters of collective discourse on identity, gender, and mental health. In their essence, the works of Das and Plath find common ground, as they represent not only the global female experiences, love, identity, and release, but also provide culturally-specific realities and enrich the global view of female life and struggle.

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