

## POETRY OF PROTEST AND CONFESSION: A STUDY OF KAMALA DAS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to investigate the element of confession in the poetry of the renowned Indian writer of the twentieth century Kamala Das (1934-2009). Das learnt about this genre of writing from her contemporary American writers and applied it as a source of articulation and resistance to project the self. She celebrates the personal freedom in her poetry bursting with the mirth of womanhood and sexuality. The paradigm shift from sexual slavery to enjoyment of sensuality throws the light on changed mentality of women.

**KEYWORDS:** English Poetry, Indian Writing, Women Writers, Confessional Mode.

Confessional poetry or "Confessionalism" is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is sometimes also classified as a form of Postmodernism. [ It has been described as poetry of the personal or "I", focusing on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma, including previously and occasionally still taboo matters such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide, often set in relation to broader social themes. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessional\\_poetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessional_poetry))

'Confessional' is an adjective first applied to the poems of the American poets Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman and Theodore Roethke to refer to the autobiographical nature of their work. The confessional poet considers the world, an extension of herself. All confessional poetry springs from the need to confess; confessional poets bare their soul and body and hide nothing between their self and their direct expression of that self. They put no restrictions on subject matter, no matter how personal. Usually anti-elegant and anti-establishment, confessional poems are almost like war-cries triumphing over pain and defeat. The best confessional poems are more than confessions: they are revelations, about their creator's personal vexations, dilemmas and predicaments, and above all about the human condition. This review work tries to prove that confessional poetry was always present in Writings by women in India. This work is a literature review of known writings by women in India. (<https://hrdc.gujaratuniversity.ac.in/Uploads/EJournal>)

Kamala Das (1934-2009), was a prolific Indian woman writer of the twentieth century. She did not have a long term formal education, but literature had a very special place in her family. Her mother a well-known Malayalam writer and her great uncle was a leading poet and philosopher. In addition, she had access to a library of sacred scripts maintained by her matrilineal Nair community. In such an environment, Das grew soon as a capable writer both in English and Malayalam. (Sameni, 18-20)

Art is the extension of life for Kamala Das and a means of expression. Being a modernist writer, Das chooses confessional poetry as the frame for her writing. Through this literary style,

she publishes her unspoken words and confidentialities of her life which create much controversy and dispute in the news media. This shocking quality of her writing is frequently attributed to the influence of the school of confessional poetry developed by American writers during the 1950s and 1960s. To name a few of forerunners of this literary school, figures including John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and W. D. Snodgrass can be mentioned. Critic N. Ramadevi believes that this poetry is a by-product of popularisation of psychological theories and studies of Freud and Jung, and the feminist movement. (Ramadevi: 140-146)

Discussing Kamala Das' Confessional elements mean a range of themes including familial issues, physical and psychological sickness, highlighting those issues such as body and sexuality, which are taboos. To write about sexuality breaks down all protective barriers of politeness which are the touchstone of a civilised male dominating society. As her autobiography reveals, her father was from a traditional family with an aristocratic atmosphere. Her father was employed in an automobile company in Calcutta. Kamala Das Madavikutty first went to a European school in Calcutta then the elementary school at PanayurKulam, and later to a boarding school which was being run by the Roman Catholic nuns where she got ill and was sent to Calcutta, where from a private teacher she learned her fine arts. Nalapat Narayana Menon (Her grand uncle) was a "Poet Philosopher" and her mother Balamanyamma, was an eminent poet in Malayalam. Kamala Das was deeply influenced with the Malayalam literature. Speaking of her parents she wrote:

My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony....Out of such an arid union were born the first two children, my brother and I, bearing the burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features. (Kamala Das)

Craving for paternal love is of the major themes in the poetry of Kamala Das. "My Father's Death" is a long poem in which Das explains her relationship with her father:

Only the insincere shed tears  
At my father's death, those who came  
To get photographed with the corpse...  
Only those who lost their yearly  
Baksheesh wept at my father's death.  
He was generous with money  
As generous as I was with  
Love. There was a cloud of tension  
Between him and me...  
Only in coma  
Did he seem close to me, and I  
Whispered into his ears that I  
Loved him although I was bad, a bad daughter, a writer of tales that  
Hurt, but in the task of loving  
The bad ones were the ablest, yes  
You should have hugged me, father... (Das, Kamala, 1996: 117-118)

Then in the poem "Next to Indira Gandhi" the same pain and anger is audible:

Did you want me?  
Did you ever want a daughter?  
Did I disappoint you much?  
With my skin as dark as yours  
You are dead, nobody fears you now...

The confessional poet's engagement with personal experience has been explained by literary critics as an effort to distance oneself from the horrifying social realities of the twentieth century. Events like the Holocaust, the Cold War, and existential threat brought by the proliferation of nuclear weapons had made public matters daunting for both confessional poets and their readers. The confessional poets also worked in opposition to the idealization of domesticity in the 1950s, by revealing unhappiness in their own homes.

Indian poets writing in English started writing poetry in a manner that resembled with that pattern and used the 'self' as a poetic symbol around which hover a personal mythology. Among them Kamala Das excels the position. She chose professional writing as frame for her writing. She started writing to express the suppressed emotions in openly. Kamala Das is considered a revolutionary poet as it was she who started writing the poetry of frankness and candor which was almost taboo and her contemporary women poets particularly hesitated to voice the same issues. Her poetry brings to light the miseries of forlorn women in a patriarchal society. Criticism and controversies became the constant companion of her poetic achievements. The candid presentation of her personal life through her poetry gave an opportunity to the critics who labelled her poetry as "erotic". The orthodox conservative community titled her poetry as unconventional because of her frank and uninhibited treatment of sexual love and treatment of the human body.

Kamala Das raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal. The struggle of oneself ultimately becomes the struggle of the whole humanity and here and lays her forte: for, "the best confessional poetry is that which rises above subject matter to achieve some sort of victory over pain and defeat poems which are glasses on the triumph of life". (<https://www.thefreshreads.com/kamala-das-as-a-confessional-poet/>)

We have to think over confessional treat as the clue of confessional poetry. All types confessional poetry emerges from the need to confess and so we can say that each form caste in this mod is in some way or the other according to Robert Phillips court a declaration of dependence or of guilt or of anguish and suffering. A confessional poet follows no limits between himself and direct expression of that self TS Eliot and Ezra pound used to do.

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sweetheart anything with experience may form the same it takes the help of an open language for an individual expression of his emotion and by open language is meant free verse or blank verse as opposed to rind it doesn't suggest however that the confessional poet course death and destruction in order to arrive at higher level of perception personal failure as well as mental illness is his favourite theme.

Subjectivity is very much evident in the poetry of Das. She uses the self to discuss the identity crisis of every woman. The lines from the poem "An Introduction" gives an example:

...I met a man, loved him...  
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 sham, it is I who lie dying  
With a rattle in my throat. I am a sinner,  
I am a saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed... **(Summer in Calcutta, 60)**

This poetry is often anti structural anti elegant anti-establishment as for as the poetry of Kamala Das is concerned. She is typical confessional poet as we represent her poetry as below there is too much of anguish and suffering inverse of Kamala Das. The configuration also highlights the poetess' silent suffering in the company of a cruel man.

The poetry of Kamala Das has a strong load of subjectivism similar to the romantic poets of England like Shelley and Keats in particular. The trait of grievance in her poetry is the outcome of her personal life experiences, the neglect of feminine needs and existence. She rejected the negligence of women by Indian society. She writes:

You let me use my youth like coins  
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,  
You late me sing in empty shrines, you late your wife  
Seek ecstasy in others' arms. ("A man is a season")

Her poem "Captive" presents her hollow marital relationship:

My love is an empty gift, a glided  
Empty container, good for show nothing else. **(Das, The Descendants: 17)**

In one place in "My Story" she says in the orbit of illicit sex, they seem to be only crudeness and violence. All her quest for true love lies in disasters of love. All her poetry is an expression of a private experience in matters of love and sex. In The Descendants, we have the following poetic passage where in her subject, feelings are predominant

but I must force  
I must attend  
I must act the role of happy woman, happy wife.

In her poem "An Introduction," Das talks about her physical maturity and criticises the arranged marriage due to the absence of – mental readiness to accept the change and love. Through this poem, she brings to notice the issue that even after marriage sex without consent is no less than a rape:

I was child, and later they  
Told me I grow, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When  
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank  
Pitifully...

The female persona in her novels yearns for carnal love:

.....Can't this man with  
Nimble finger – tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers. (“The Freaks”)

Through the poem “Spoiling the Name,” Kamala Das becomes vocal about the problem of identity crisis and directs to her sexual exploitation indirectly. In “Spoiling the Name,” Das begins with the problem of identity crisis and indirectly points to her sexual exploitation.

I have a name, had it for thirty  
Years, chosen by someone else  
Convenience, but when you say  
Don't spoil your name, I feel I  
Must laugh, for I know I have a life  
To be lived, and each nameless  
Corpuscle in me, has its life to  
Be lived...

Where I go to meet a man  
Who gives me nothing but himself, who  
Calls me in his private hours

By no names...

In the poem “The Suicide”, she writes about her desire to die when she is unable to find true love. She says:

O Sea, I am fed up  
I want to be simple  
I want to be loved  
And  
If love is not to be had,  
I want to be dead .....

([https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/kamala\\_das\\_2012\\_4.pdf](https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/kamala_das_2012_4.pdf))

The above extract may be marked as running without use of commas, full stops and capital letters and gives the best of technique of American poet becoming in the light of above illustration. We may conclude Kamala Das as typical confessional poet who chose her very heart

in her poetry. She is largely subjective and autobiographical anguished and tortured. The confessional poetry by her emerged as the “self-revelation of her dilemma, predicament and loss. This is one of the most prominent themes not only of her writings but also of women writings. Das' “Someone Else's Song” is a tribute to every woman:

I am a million, million people  
Talking all at once...  
I am a million, million silence  
Strung like crystal beads  
Onto someone else's Song. (Das, Kamala, 1965: 31)

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