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A Rebellion through Confession – A Note on the Confessional Tone of the Poems of Kamala Das and Forough Farrokhzad**Angela Sadeghi Tehrani***Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Bharati Vidyapeeth University, Pune (M.S.), India***Abstract**

Kamala Das (1934-2009) and Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967) are perhaps one of the most controversial poets in the contemporary literature of their countries – India and Iran. They write with frankness and openness unusual in the Eastern countries contexts. These poets write consciously as women; what distinguish their poetries are their confessional and autobiographical notes, candid, bold, realistic, and honest expressions of their attitude to woman. With a remarkable sense of honesty and conviction, these two poets have helped establish an entirely new poetic, a new way of women to recreate themselves in art as figures of power, in their passionate concern for women and for a more humane society.

Key Words: Rebellion, confession, patriarchy, suppression

One of the most important groups to have emerged on the poetic scene after the Second World War, the Confessional poets are the primary continuators of a tradition that attempts to make significance and beauty out of the terror of our modern condition which is marked by a retreat into privatism and a progressive alienation of the artist from society. Emily Dickinson once called publication “the auction of the mind”,¹ but today, many of our writers regard such psychological self-probing as the soul’s therapy. While the romantic poet lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness, the confessional poet aims at making explicit what was once implied, by stripping off the persona or mask and making the speaking voice unequivocally his own. The private life of the poet, especially under stress of psychological crisis, therefore, becomes a major theme. Confessional poetry is further marked by sexual or erotic candour,

frankness about family life, confession of private humiliations of varying pathological degrees and kinds, proliferating images of failure, in short, by a literal self-exposure.

Kamala Das and Forough Farrokhzad are the poets of great accomplishments; they are among the selected few women of letters who have, at the same time, been poets, critics, fictionists, artists, and true women. Having written on a variety of themes, they seem to be excelling one another as poets of love. They share a community of thought and feeling. With unusual openness, they express their views on love. What is overpowering about their poems is their sense of urgency. At the same time, they impress by being very much themselves in their poems. Their tone, throughout, is distinctively feminine. Matured and experienced poets, they have made pronouncements on life, love, and literature. These poets write poetry in a language learnt at school. Though conscious of being true to

the native soil, they feel free to write about any theme under the sun and employ any mode of articulation that suits them. Extremely well-informed about the latest developments in Europe or America, they cleverly refuse to emulate impress them. Yet they are not altogether insensitive to the use of new words and images. Their poetry is, in fact, replete with these examples – new words, new images and new techniques, thus transcending the narrow individual and national frontiers.

The two share generously the world of their thoughts on the writing of poetry and their own responses to it. The special power of their poetry, irrespective of their diverse milieu, springs from their strength of belief in love. Women as they are, they are convinced that there is an eternal magic potency informing such themes as love. It is a part of their long worship of the Muse incarnated in the beloved. Many have found that the doctrine of love, whether sexual or Platonic, is a proper stuff for poetry. But unlike other poets (Auden, Graves and Yates), they give the reader a sense of inclusion and do not keep their privacy. Their poetry, therefore, with some justification can be called Confessional. All the two have written lyrics, free verse on love. Forough Farrokhzad and Kamala Das, frank and aggressive utterances about sex, love marriage, and extra-marital ventures leave the reader quiet baffled and overwhelmed by their power to use words with pointed effect. The ferocious intensity of this passion, this boiling cauldron of heated emotion, which Farrokhzad and Das articulate in their poetry, stirs deep chords in the reader's mind.

In subject matter, Forough Farrokhzad was daring and brave enough to express the hidden feelings and emotions of the Iranian women. Her earlier poems clearly reflected the sorrows and the aspirations of contemporary Iranian young women, who felt drowned in their innocent youth and confined to a repressed life behind the curtains of traditions. She clearly voices her feelings in the mid-1950s about conventional marriage, the plight of women in Iran and her own situation as a wife and mother no longer able to live a conventional life.

Kamala Das also is against the traditional norms of her society in India. Das' poetry has been labelled as poetry of protest, or anguish, of love, of pain, of disgust, of despair, of bitterness. The woman in Kamala Das poems is also struggling between passion and tradition. Das, similar to Farrokhzad wants to break the chains around her and wants to be free and not to be silent.

Fascinated by the details of her personal life, reviewers of the time focused almost exclusively on the erotic aspects of Farrokhzad's poetry. Erotic poetry, in fact, has a long history in Iranian literature; passion is a frequent theme of ancient Persian poets like Hafez, Rumi, and Khayyam. Farrokhzad, however, was the first woman in Iranian history to write erotic verse. Rather than placing her in a tradition of the great lyric poets, critics deemed her erotic poems the product of a depraved female sentimentality. In a society where historically, women, their beauty, breasts, hair, etc., had freely been made the subjects of poems, Forough Farrokhzad made men her poetic subjects, her objects of love and reverie, of passion and

sexual desire. Her poems are autobiographical and from a clearly feminine perspective.

The poem entitled *The Sin*, one of Farrokhzad's best-known and most widely anthologized early poems, confessionally epitomizes one such unprecedented expression of female desire. *The Sin* is the sensual communion between two lovers; but in Farrokhzad's poem, the 'beloved' of ancient verse becomes herself the 'lover'. The reversal upends not only poetic but also moral convention. Here, it is the woman whose eyes linger on the man's body and who captures her own "sin" with poetic rapture.

*I sinned, a sin all filled with pleasure
wrapped in an embraced, warm and fiery
I sinned in a pair of arms
that were vibrant, virile, violent.*

*In that dim and quiet place of seclusion
I looked into his eyes brimming with mystery
my heart throbbed in my chest all too excited
by the desire glowing in his eyes.*

*In that dim and quiet place of seclusion
as I sat next to him all scattered inside
his lips poured lust on my lips
and I left behind the sorrows of my heart.*

*I whispered in his ear these words of love:
"I want you, mate of my soul
I want you, life-giving embrace
I want you, lover gone mad"*

*Desire surged in his eyes
red wine swirled in the cup
my body surfed all over his
in the softness of the downy bed.*

*I sinned, a sin all filled with pleasure
next to a body now limp and languid
I know not what I did, God
in that dim and quiet place of seclusion.*

(The Sin, Book 2: Wall)

However, in a culture in which anxieties about female sexuality stand at the heart of legal and moral control of women's lives, Farrokhzad's treatment of sexual themes was without precedent or parallel, and it would produce a revolution in Iranian women's writing. According to Reza Baraheni¹ (1996), Farrokhzad was the first woman in Iranian literature who revolted against the patriarchy through a woman's poetic art. This rebelliousness has been mirrored in both her personal life and her career.

Sensationalism has always been part of Kamala Das intent, need and strategy to jolt a complacent patriarchy and orthodoxy. Her life and confessional writings have often aroused diverse and strong reactions that swing between the two extremes of admiration and outrage. Her fundamental rejection of the traditional Hindu woman's virtues, for a candid articulation of her sexuality and identity as a woman, has earned her the sobriquet of Kerala's 'Queen of Erotica'.

*Getting a man to love you is easy
Only be honest about your wants as
Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your*

*Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom
floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life when you move*

¹ An exiled Iranian novelist, poet, critic, and political activist (b.1935)

*Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
His last voice calling out your name and your
Body which once under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.*

(The Looking Glass: *The Descendants*)

Das may sound modern and liberated because of her outspokenness in the matter of sex but hedonism can be seen in Sanskrit poetry where we find it in abundance and variety.

Kamala Das speaks of the woman's identity in many of her poems. She writes of roles and modules the society expects of a woman. She seems to reject them although she does not offer any alternative. A woman is a woman but society wants conformity:

*...Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroidered, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizer. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped
windows.
Be Amy or be Kamala or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending
games.*

(An Introduction: *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*)

The society and family impose a name and role on woman and she has to carry it. Kamala questions it; she questions the traditional role of woman as good wife, mother and householder. Why should she have a name given by someone else? Why cannot she have her own existence and personality? Now this name is the role that she has to live and she is weighed down by it:

*I have a name, had it for thirty
Years, chosen by someone else
For convenience...
.....
...Why? Why should I remember or bear
That sweet-sounding names, pinned to*

*Me, a medal undeservingly
Gained.....
You ask of
Me a silly thing. Carry
This gift of a name like a corpse and
Totter beneath its weight
And perhaps even fall ... I who love
This gift of life more than all!*

(Spoiling the Name: *Summer in Calcutta*)

Forough Farrokhzad was the product of a repressive society, which had closed all the doors to voices that she tried to promote: moderation, inclusion, freedom of speech, and freedom itself. Farrokhzad was one of these thinkers who experienced this suppression within her modern family life and society. She as an individual and poet captures the repression of women and people, without slogans. Her politics was her body and her experience as a woman, and her message was against traditional society, which was in a macabre dance with modernity. Her struggle was to expose all hypocrisy regardless of their names and isms. Her poetry runs against the social and ancient norms and attitudes of a male society, which prevented her from being herself. From the time she began writing, she searched for the space of selfhood. She started from the simplicity of a young and inexperienced poet and insisted to become an experienced poet and woman, in order to declare herself to the world. This is explicit in her last work. She changed herself and the world around her in the course of ten years, and sat to enjoy the freedom that she worked so hard and paid so gravely for.

*I must say something
I must say something
In the shivering moment at daybreak
When space blends with something strange
Like the portents of puberty
I want
To surrender to some revolt*

*I want
To pour down out of that vast cloud
I want
To say no no no.*

(Eternal Sunset, *Book 4: Another Birth*)

In modern Iranian literature, Forough Farrokhzad, undoubtedly, occupies a pivotal position. Her poetry presents the singular voice of an Iranian woman who dared to challenge the social and patriarchal boundaries imposed on Iranian women for centuries. Farrokhzad's pioneering artistic career and her bold lifestyle created an unprecedented legacy for the woman artist in Iran. Her work defies all categories as she not only confronted the stereotypes forced on Iranian women's identity, but she also challenged the long-established tradition of the classic Persian poetry. In both arenas, Farrokhzad proved herself resilient and uncompromising. Her unique poetic voice articulates inclusion in literary and social activism and subversion from the mainstream male-dominated literary circles. Confronting the individual and collective definitions of identity, and sexual and textual territories, Farrokhzad broke many boundaries and expressed the need for self-awareness and affirmation of female identity.

A confessional poet places no barriers between his / her self and direct expression of that self. The confessional poet does not accept restriction on subject matter. Being a confessional poet, Kamala Das takes the reader into the world of her personal and private life and unveils the delicate facts and even the bedroom secrets. The theme of most of her poems is love or lust and marriage. In dealing with these themes, she hides nothing. The orthodox reader would even accuse her of being immodest, shameless in the use of

language through which she lays the secrets of her private life.

The confessional poets were dubbed as neurotics by the society, as they did not follow any tradition nor respected any conventions. They wanted to be unique and not a part of the conventional social set up. This conflict with the society leads them to introspection. In the course, comes a breaking point when they could not compromise with themselves. They lose themselves helplessly in the battle and start searching for the lost self. This conflict has given birth to a number of beautiful poems as we can observe in the poetries of these two poets. Their work reflects diversity and provides a sample of some fine writings by women in the two countries. Their narrative traces the desire for freedom from gender oppression, from its abstract underpinnings to its concrete manifestation, even while it examines the construction of female identity through by the framework of a common concern and engagement with communal obligation. In its commitment towards building and renewing a sense of collective life, their work records a movement from spectatorial detachment, to the predicament of unscrolling a map on which gender intersects in a shared landscape. Their shared project is to bring into being, the symbolic weight of women's consciousness to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak.

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