

**The Concept of Death and Suicide in the Poetry of Kamala Das and that of the Western Confessionlists: A Thematic Study of their Verses**

**Dr. R.K. Mishra**

*Mahalaxmi Nagar, Bolangir (Odisha) India*

In the constellation of confessional poets of international reputation, Indian poet Kamala Das and the Western confessional poets Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Judith Wright and John Berryman luminously shine as accomplished poets in writing of verses on death and suicide. The themes of these issues are surfaced in their poetical works. The poets mentioned above were prodigiously preoccupied with the concept of suicide because of their constant obsession and irresistible impulse to divulge in their verses their innermost agony and depression resulting from their frustration and despondency in marital life. These poets were perpetually burning in the flame of agony of familial tragedy. When this flame of torment conflagrated due to intensification of misunderstanding with their husbands, they were psychologically and emotionally traumatized and disgusted beyond measure. They felt their existential predicament intolerable for survival and resorted to suicide as a panacea to all sufferings.

Among the Indian poets writing in English Kamala Das is acknowledged as an outstanding poet for her prodigious literary output and most particularly for exploitation of the concept of death and suicide in poetry. Her pre occupation with the theme of death and suicide in her verses stirs much discussion and debate among the critics.

A study of her verses highlights the various factors and incidents that occurred in her life

and aroused her death consciousness. Kamala Das was profoundly concerned with death in her life and she revealed her concept of it in her poetry. She heartily welcomed her end of life with a view to escaping the pangs of mental agony that sprang from her disillusionment in marital understanding and betrayal in her extramarital relationship.

In poem after Poem, Kamala Das has projected her own image obsessed with a sense of suicide. Like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton she has often contemplated to end her life prematurely on account of her bitterness of her marital life. She found her life unworthy of living because of her perpetual misunderstanding with her husband who was aggressive and obtrusive in dealing with her. As a result her agonized mind frequently yearned for suicidal death. In her poems Kamala Das has candidly confessed her discontent in her relationship with her husband and her frustration in attaining satiety in love with her lovers. She attributes the arousal of her mental agony to the cold indifference of her husband towards her thirst for love which she expected from him. She reveals this discontent in the following lines. "I was in love with a husband, who did not want love and it was a sweet torment to lie with my face buried against his feet while he slept, mine was a crushed love, a beautiful and futile emotion". (1) Her strong urge to escape from the grip of her husband and her

disappointment in desperate return to his grip find their revelation in the following lines:

If nowhere else

Here in your nest of familiar scorn

The poem "The Invitation" reveals how the poet is inclined towards suicide by the haunting pains of disillusionment in her marital life. As Kamala Das reflects, "her death by the sea provides some kind of comfort and the lover's company offers another kind of death" (2). She writes:

Think of your self

Lying on a funeral pyre

With a burning head

The death imagery of the funeral pyre is contrasted with the cool bath as suggested in the poem. This poem "The Invitation" is a meditation on death, life and suicide resulting from the feeling of torture that accompanies sexual love. The poet after contemplating death finally turns down the sea's invitation to death by suicide.

In the poem "The Suicide" the dominating metaphor is the sea. The poem is versified as a dialogue between the poet and the sea. This dialogue is interspersed with the poet's reflection on death. The sea symbolizes a temptation to return to simplicity and innocence through death. In her autobiography "My Story" Kamala Das confesses "Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness" (3)

"The poet's contemplated suicide is averted by her inability to choose between physical and spiritual death" (4). Like Walt Whitman

she also considers the body and the soul inseparable. However, the consolatory words of her husband who asked her to refrain from suicidal attempt served to extricate her from the impulsive desire for death. She writes:

I want to be loved

And

If love is not to be had

I want to be dead

Like Plath and Sexton she considers life benefit of love to be suicidal and hence she desires to welcome death being deprived of love. She is, however, able to overcome the temptation of suicide by her own assertion of life. She desists momentarily from contemplating death when she nostalgically looks back to her grandmother's house and her white lover. The pleasure that she derives from her recollection of her grandmother's love for her, deflects her from the path of suicide.

The poem "Substitute" opens with vague images of the sea and death. The poem is an attempt to escape from memories of frustration and disappointment. The poem "The Joss-sticks at Cadell Road" refers to the sight of cremation of corpses near the sea. The poem "The Seashore" also evokes thoughts on death.

On some evening I drive past the cremation ground

And seem to hear the crunch of bones in those vulgar

Mouths of fire or at times I see the smoke, in strands

In the poem "The Descendants" Kamala Das writes:

Not for us even to question death, but as  
child to mother's arms

We shall give ourselves to the fire or to

The hungry earth to be slowly eaten  
devoured

These lines are expressive of the inescapability and inevitability of death of human being. In the poem "Gino" too she writes about the perishability of human body:

This body that I wear without joy, this body

Burdened with lenience, slender toy owned

By man of substance shall wither

"The Flame", "Death is so Mediocre", "A Holiday for Me", "Tomorrow", "The Sensuous Woman-III", "Life's Obscure Parallel" and "A Souvenir of Bone" are the poems that manifest Kamala Das's obsession with death. Her concern with death and suicide finds a more mature and profound expression in the verses which echo the tone and sentiment of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Judith Wright and John Berryman.

In her concept of death and suicide Kamala Das seems to have been influenced by the American confessionalists like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman who expressed their desire and foretaste of suicide in their verses and resorted to this kind of unnatural death in the prime of their life. All these poets mentioned above were fascinated by suicide and they contemplated it before embracing death. This hunger for suicidal death manifests by and large in their

verses. Critics attribute the suicide of these poets to their creative madness that enticed their self-destructive urges.

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton suffered from creative madness due to mental depression that arose from their frustration in marital life. Plath invariably longed for suicide and once she expressed her death wish to her mother. Her confession alarmed her mother, who rushed her to a psychiatrist. In her first attempt of suicide she swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. She was discovered and hospitalized. In her second attempt she succeeded in killing herself in a gas oven. The news of her commission of suicide upset the mind of Anne Sexton who pronounced her own death wish in the following lines : "Sylvia Plath's death disturbs me, makes me want to do it, she took something that was mine, that death was mine (5) ? She versified her sentiment on Plath's death in the following lies:-

Thief

How did you crawl in to

Crawl down alone

In to the death I wanted so badly and for so long

(Sylvia's Death)

Alvarez a British critic observes "Plath's self-destructiveness is the very source of her creative energy, it was precisely a source of inspiration to her to exercise her creative power in writing. "Death is the price she pays for the immorality of her words" (6). The poems she wrote during the weeks before her death expose her strong desire to die and get released from her perpetual

agony. Her poem "Lady Lazarus" expresses her death-wish in the following lines:

Dying

Is an art like everything else?

I do it exceptionally well

Plath had already written a number of poems before her death suggesting her preoccupation with death in life. "All the Dead Deers" "Full Fathoms Five" "Suicide off Egg Rock" "The Ghost's Leave taking" "The Colossus" are the poems that give vent to Plath's desire for death. These poems are the outcome of her deep dejection and despondency in life. She visualizes her own death as a state of perfection. In the poem "Edge" she writes:

The women is perfected

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment

Like Plath, Anne Sexton too contemplates death and expresses her concept of death in the poems "The Double Images", "Live or Die" and "the Death Note Books." In the part II of the poem "The Double Image" Sexton describes her first suicidal attempt resulting from her guilt over her child's first seriousness due to illness. She writes:

I cannot forgive you suicide, my mother said  
And she never could. She had my portrait  
done instead.

In Part II she writes:

Only my mother grew ill

She turned from me as if death were  
catching

As if my dying had eaten inside of her

"The Death Baby" a poem from "The Death Note Book" consists of six parts. "The poem explores the nature of death in terms of woman's role as a daughter and a mother" (7). In this poem Sexton projects her own vision of death.

In the second part of the poem entitled "Dy-dee doll" the death of the doll is another form of experiencing death in imagination. The doll dies in misery and with knowledge. From the doll's two types of death Sexton moves to her own premature or false death of attempted suicide. In these attempts she was getting to know her death asking for a sign. She writes:

And death took root in the sleep and I  
rocked it

And was rocked by it

Oh! Madonna hold me

The baby is herself the baby is death

Both Plath and Anne Sexton influenced each other to welcome and experience death. They were contemporaries. Both were married and had children. They both experienced fits of madness. Their conjugal life had shattered. Both committed suicide. Their mental tensions and struggles are delineated in their works. Their poetry is born out of their deep agonies of life. Anne Sexton identified Plath and her own self as "death mongers". She comments on their suicidal tendencies: "We talked death with burned up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb sucking on it" (8). "In The complete poems" she writes

Suicides have a special language

Like carpenters they want to know which  
They never as why build tools

John Berryman is another confessional poet who was invariably obsessed with the desire for suicide. Like Plath and Sexton he killed himself prematurely. In his poem "Love and Fame" Berryman is closer to mortality; more profoundly aware of his own eventual death. In his elegy on Roethke No.18<sup>th</sup> he envies Roethke for gaining in death a freedom from the excessive cost of art and love. But his envy of Roethke in death is reminiscent of Anne Sexton's envy of Sylvia Plath's end of life. His yearning for suicide is revealed in his poem "Of Suicide". In the poem Berryman writes:

Age and the death and the ghosts

Her having gone away

In spirit from me, Hosts

Of regrets come and find me empty

Judith Wright a confessional poet of Australia projects her own perspective of death in her poems. In her interface III she continues to delineate the theme of death and suicide introduced in her Interface II. She interprets the suicidal tendency as some kind of madness, a mental disorder that propels a man towards self-annihilation. Unlike Plath, Sexton and Berryman, she expresses her contempt for suicide which people eagerly welcome and embrace with fascination and love. In the poem "Love and Death" she explains the syndrome of these two features of human life. The poems that are revelatory of her concept of death are "Dream" "Australia 1779" "Bullocky" "The Beann Stalk Meditated Later" "Brother and Sisters" and "Birds and Legends". Although

she has versified on death yet she never welcomed it in her verses.

Another American poetess who dwells on the theme of death in poetry and conceives of it theologically is Emily Dickinson. Her concept of death is based upon Puritan theology of redemption and immortality. To her, death leads to immortality and the general symbol of nature is death. Her poem "Chariot" may be quoted in this context:-

Because I could not stop death

He kindly stopped for me

The Carriage held but just our selves

And immortality

Her other poems of death are "After Great Pain a Formal Feeling comes" "I Felt a Funeral in my Brain" and "I Heard a fly buzz when I died".

Death is the greatest obsession for Dickinson and she never lets her idea go astray from the thought of death. Her approach to death is ontological. She presents it as eternal silence or stillness and even as darkness. Death is a final and painful companion. Her attitude to death is playful.

Both Judith Wright and Kamala Das are renowned for versification of the concept of death and suicide. They are recognized as exceptional in forsaking the temptation of death. Wright has professed her contempt for it with a negative attitude to it. She seems to have demotivated Kamala Das and enervated her spirit to embrace death and deflected her from accomplishing her predetermined goal. She has exemplified her tendency of self-restraint and self-resistance

to commission of suicide. Kamala Das seems to have been susceptible to the influence of Judith Wright who implanted in former's mind a tendency towards self-restraint to suicide Mrs. Das imbibed the way of life of wright and desisted from committing suicide by aspiring for experiencing transcendental love of Radha and Krishna. As she imagined that she had attained the spiritual level of celestial love, her urge for suicide gradually subsided and ultimately extinguished altogether.

With the emergence of her spiritual aspiration for realizing mythical love of Radha and Krishna she dissipated her urge for suicide and reconciled herself with conjugal life at all hazards. Consequently she derived immense solace and mental gratification from her contemplation of mythical love that impelled her to indulge in attaining spiritual ecstasy. Her monomaniac aspiration and pursuit for enjoying transcendental love spiritualized her sentiment and vision of life and led her to ruminate over this heavenly love of Radha Krishna. The imaginative spiritual experience with Krishna led her to feel that her love for Him has been sublimated because of her intensity of devotion to Him.

A thematic study of Kamala Das's verses on death brings to light her concept and aspiration about this issue as manifested in her poetry that bears close similarity with that of the Western confessionalists who ignited in her an urge for suicide through their verses. An insight into the resemblance of the verses of all these poets drives us to a conclusive assumption that the former was keenly susceptible to the influence of the Western poets and of her Indian predecessor

Sarojini Naidu who has written a number of poems on the theme of death. Kamala seems to have emulated and imbibed their mode of versification on the same theme. She has as a matter of fact traversed along the same path of exploitation of the concept of death as dwelt upon by the confessionalists in their poetical works. Most particularly the impact of the American poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman on Kamala Das's poetry is distinctively crystallized in her verses. The exuberance of influence exerted upon her poetry by those poets impels her to project her concept and perspective regarding death in her verses with thematic similarity. But Judith Wright like Sarojini Naidu remained invulnerable to temptation of suicide because of her insusceptibility to the influence of those American poets. She however infused in Kamala Das a sense and a spirit of self-restraint to suicide and deterred her from executing her premeditated and predetermined self-destruction. In consequence of Wright's instillation of feeling of self-consolation in to the mind of Mrs. Das, the latter's attention was diverted from rumination over marital strife to her contemplation of mythical love that impregnated her with unbounded rapture.

This comparative analysis of the poetry of Kamala Das and that of the Western confessionalists in respect of manifestation of their concepts of death and suicide in their poems focuses on their common tendency to yield to the temptation of suicide. It further highlights their similar responsive feeling and traumatic reaction due to bitterness in marital life that provoked them and dragged them towards

premature death. It is conclusively assumed that both Kamala Das and the Western confessionalists conceptualized death as the redeemer of suffering and bringer of eternal peace. With this conceptual assumption they welcome death with the intensity of eagerness to overtake them and extricate them from perpetual agony. They, therefore, exploited poetry as an instrument of voicing their grief and sorrow streaming out of their marital discord.

This article tends to explicate the conceptual implications of the verses by way of extraction of lines and illustrations. It enables the critics to project their contentions on the issue of death and beckons to readers to share their views in this regard. Besides, this article contributes to further explorations of new facts and figures regarding concept of death and suicide embedded in the poetry of the confessionalists.

#### **Notes and References-**

1. Kamala Das, *I have lived Beautifully*, Debonair-V-III, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1975, P.41.
2. K.R. Ramachandran Nair, *The Poetry of Kamala Das*, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1993, p.28.
3. Kamala Das, *My Story*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1974, p.215.
4. K.R. Ramachandran Nair, *The Poetry of Kamala Das*, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1993, p.65.
5. Lance Morrow, *Pains of the Poet and Miracles*, "Time" September, 1991, p.76.
6. Alfred Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, New York: Random House, 1972, p.99.
7. Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and fiery forms: Modern American Poetry by Women*, A New Tradition, New York, Octagon Books, 1978, p.134.
8. Charles Newman, *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, London: Faber and Faber, 1970, p.78.