



# EXISTENTIAL CONCERN IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS AND SYLVIA PLATH: A STUDY

**Ms.Subhrajyoti Saikia**

Assistant Professor, Department of English

D.K.D College, Dergaon, Assam

## ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath was an American poet of the post-world war period whose poetical works strongly reflect existentialist themes emphasizing individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a seemingly bleak and absurd world. Kamala Das, belonged to a period of patriarchal order in India, when women had to move on, in the stereotypical roles of a daughter, wife or a mother irrespective of the kind of education, any recognition or the society they lived in. Both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, despite their different socio-cultural backgrounds and tensions, explored diverse themes of women experiences that are deeply rooted in existential concerns raised by female experience and societal constraints. Both the poets dealt with issues of identity, alienation, sexuality and the search for freedom, within the confinement of their respective patriarchal structures. This study is an attempt to highlight the existential concerns in both the poets on the basis of comparative and thematic analysis of a few poems .

**Keywords:** existentialism, patriarchy, freedom, society, identity, alienation, experience

## Introduction

In a patriarchal society a woman's role is usually seen as being centred upon the interests of her male counterparts often adhered to the expected traditional roles of caregivers in both her private and public life despite the education or any honourable designation she receives. At certain junctures of life any woman with a conscious self may be afflicted by existential crisis resulting from her unwillingness to accept her condition or from her inability to voice her situation. One who undergoes such a conflict often seeks to claim purpose and meaning in the activities they conduct and show deep cravings for love and support.

## Discussion

So far as the style and content of their poetry are considered both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das express themselves as victims of patriarchy using confessional voice, both are victims of authoritarian father figures, both are let down by their husbands, both show a remarkable love for their children and both are prone to nervous breakdown. Plath's poetic works, namely "The Colossus and Other Poems"(1960), "Ariel"(1965), "Crossing the Water"(1971), "Winter Trees"(1971), "The Collected Poems"(1981) and "Selected Poems(1985) have placed her as a powerful writer. Kamala Das's poetry collections include

Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967) and The Old Playhouse, and Other Poems (1973), where her voice represents the silent, untold experiences of the common Indian women that also accentuates the existential pressure generated during the modern Indian women's journey from tradition to modernity.

Being a well educated and sensitive individual and a woman of literary talent Kamala Das had to undergo acute mental stress and psychological trauma throughout her life as she reveals in her autobiography *My Story*. Her quest for identity, meaning and purpose in life, which may be argued as a ramification of the existential conflicts in her life effortlessly got manifested in her modes of self expression, especially in her poetry. Das's assertion of identity in her poem "An Introduction",

"I am Indian, very brown,  
born in Malabar,  
I speak three languages, write in two,  
dream in one,"

not only reflects a strong sense of self-awareness, but also reveals the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. Living amidst a dark scenario where the future appeared futile provoked existential anxieties in the post-world war individuals, especially the female writers. Sylvia Plath's characters, trapped in a stagnant present grappled with such ideas of alienation, anxiety, and the struggle to create their own identities in the face of societal expectations and the inherent meaninglessness of existence. Sylvia Plath, too addresses identity but she mostly reflects on the internal and psychological conflicts that arise from societal pressures. In her poem "Lady Lazarus", Plath uses the metaphor of resurrection to depict her ongoing battle with her sense of self. The acts of "dying" and "coming back to life" used in repetition in the poem symbolize a struggle to maintain her identity in the face of overwhelming societal expectations and personal trauma.

One of the significant themes in the works of both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath is the portrayal of female sexuality and both of them address it with a level of frankness that was exclusively extraordinary for their time. Beneath their exploration of sexuality there also lies the power dynamics and societal norms that govern women's bodies. In poems like "The Looking Glass" Kamala Das challenges the traditional expectations generally associated with women and their sexuality. She writes about the female body and sexual desire with an openness that was rare and quite a daring effort in Indian literature during her time. Her portrayal of sexuality appears to be both a celebration of female desire and a critique of the societal constraints that seek to suppress it. Sylvia Plath's approach to sexuality is more complex and is often intertwined with themes of power and control. In her poem "Daddy", Plath uses the relationship between father and daughter as a metaphor for the larger power relations that exist in society, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. The poem's exploration of sexuality is not just about desire but also about the ways in which women's bodies are controlled and dominated by societal expectations. Plath's treatment of sexuality is often dark and unsettling, reflecting her internal conflicts and the broader societal contradictions that shape women's experiences. In the poem "Daddy", Plath confronts the oppressive figures of her father and husband, portraying them as figures of control and domination,

"If I've killed one man,  
I've killed two—  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.

Daddy, you can lie back now.

By means of their poetry both the poets vocalised their protest against the societal norms that dictate women's sexuality. Das does this by openly celebrating female desire and challenging the traditional roles assigned to women. Plath, on the other hand, explores the darker aspects of sexuality, and highlight the ways in which it can be used as a tool of rule and oppression. Together, their works offer a powerful commentary on the complex relationship between female sexuality and societal norms.

Mental health emerges to be a recurrent theme in the poetry of both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. Both the poets use their personal experiences with mental illness as a lens through which they explore broader societal issues, particularly those related to gender. Kamala Das often touches on the theme of mental health in her poetry and she records her periods of severe mental breakdown in her autobiography, *My Story*. In poems like "The Old Playhouse", Das uses the metaphor of a decaying house to symbolize the psychological and emotional confinement she feels within the traditional roles assigned to women. Das's portrayal of mental health is often subtle, reflecting the despair and poignant frustration that come with trying to assert one's identity in a world that seeks to suppress it. Sylvia Plath's exploration of mental health is much more direct and intense. Her poetry is often seen as a reflection of her own struggles with depression and anxiety. In 'Lady Lazarus', Plath uses the metaphor of resurrection to depict her repeated attempts to overcome the psychological trauma that often haunts her. The poem is a powerful exploration of the cyclical nature of mental illness, capturing the despair and determination that come with one trying to survive in a world that feels both oppressive and overwhelming. However, both the poets use their work in a confessional mode to explore the impact of these pressures on their mental well-being, offering powerful insights on the ways in which society contributes to emotional and psychological crisis of an individual.

Kamala Das discusses the theme of marital dissatisfaction and freedom of sexual code often tinged with a note of protest and sarcasm that most contemporary writers hesitated to deal with. Her poetry collections chiefly *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse*, and *Other Poems* concerning with such unconventional themes offer insights to relook into her life as a writer who represented a new feminine identity that was ahead of her times. Das's poetry is deeply personal and often celebrates female desire and expose the predicament of women conditioned by the constraints of traditional Indian society while Plath's work deals with the darker psychological struggles associated with gender roles in mid-20th century America.

Both the poets highlight the universal aspects of the female experience, such as the struggle for identity and autonomy, while also underscore the role and importance of cultural context in shaping how these experiences are articulated. Sylvia Plath never considered herself a feminist but she has taken up the problem of male tyranny over enslaved women in many of her famous poems like "Ariel", "Purdah", "Fever103". As such, she may be considered to be a forerunner of the Feminist women. She is one of those writers, who have preferred womanhood in every field of life even in her poetry that greatly supports Cixous' ideology of '*écriture féminine*'. Poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are considered as a woman's effort to voice herself in modern society. The poems provide deep insight into a suicidal mind, a glimpse at the horror of being a woman in a patriarchal world, and at the same time a critique of the patriarchal society that denies women's equality, individuality, freedom, rights and dignity as humans. Her feminine sensibility is fully expressed in "The Music Party" where she challenges male domination of women in the patriarchal tradition. Her feminism is clearly seen in her bold portrayal of sex in her poems. She frankly and fearlessly depicts her marital and extra-marital relationships in her autobiographical poems. Plath is more a confessional poet than feminist like Kamala Das. Both take the reader into confidence about their personal and private life and reveal the facts of life and frankly vocalise the wrongs, the injustice, and humiliation that they endured in the male-dominated world.

## Conclusion

Despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, both Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das are known for their powerful critiques of patriarchy in their poetry which although tied to their respective cultural contexts reflect broader existential struggles that come with living in a world that often feels hostile and oppressive. It is there that lies the universality of female experience that transcends from the private to the public level. Both of them scorn hypocrisy and are painfully aware of their consequent degradation and used their confessional and often autobiographical mode to expose the oppressive forces of patriarchy and their psychological impact on women in general. As perceived in both the poets, writing which was initially a passion also served as a strong voice of their burdened souls against the patriarchal tradition.

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