

**PASSION AND CONFESSION IN THE POEMS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF KAMALA DAS**

Parminder Singh  
Research Scholar,  
Dept. of English & Cultural Studies,  
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India  
*parmindersinghaziz@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

*Kamala Das's poems and other writings unfold her candour and chutzpah and there is an apparent autobiographical reflection of the poetess in almost each work of her. The bitterness of her sexual experiences turns her towards spilling her feelings on paper and produces some candid poems, strong stories and an autobiography that consists of a "habitually tense" tone. She tends to be attracted towards the "forbidden fruit" and her quest to find a soul-mate goes in vain. She finds love in some illicit relationships but that is not of permanent nature. Her poetry likens that of Sylvia Plath, another confessional poetess who belonged to the same period as Das. Das also touches upon the subject of homosexuality in her autobiography. The chief elements in her writings are passion and confession and no study about the author should be considered complete without a mention of these elements. Excessive passion, strong, intriguing vocabulary laughing in the face of the conservative society and fight against the societal taboos are some of the features apparent in the works of Das. She does not repent for what she is and what she writes. She does not ask for anybody's forgiveness.*

**Key Words:** autobiographical, passion and confession, candidness, forbidden fruit, Sylvia Plath, homosexuality, conservative society.

"A poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote."

- Yevgeny Yevtushenko

The quest for identity is the quintessential feature of postcolonial literature and it has been an intrinsic part of the works of many women writers across the globe. One can easily demarcate the spots of an endless search for identity and quest for fulfilment through love in the words of the author while reading *My Story*, the autobiography of Kamala Das. Even though her

passionate poems unfold her candour and chutzpah, Kamala Das has been fallaciously identified as a nymphomaniac, a title that she herself disapproves of in her autobiography. When Kamala Das says, "A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality" (Das, *My Story* 133), it promises that her own personality will get reflected in her poems and stories and she even explicitly writes, "... I write with a lot of detachment, I do figure in my writings. . ." (qtd. in Kohli 19). She is one of the earliest among the Indian women poets who have dared to talk about their sexual experiences through their poetic as well as prose narratives. Hailing from a conservative Nayar society, she has chosen to break her silence and write about a subject which was considered a taboo. She chooses some rudiments from her life and portrays those in a colour typical of herself and she does it effortlessly in her verse and prose "due largely to her tendency to highlight the sensational aspect of an incident or happening" (Kohli 16). She also tends to fall for sadness and other emotions of aversion. She yearns for sadness in her eyes because she wanted to imitate the heroines of Bengali novels who "were supposed to bear in their eyes a sadness which made them irresistible to their heroes. I too tried to look sad, but it was a difficult task" (Das, *My Story* 50-51). The bitterness that her sexual experiences had instilled inside her is apparent in most of her writings, be it her autobiography, stories, or poems. Her poetic style borders on candidness. Her poems reveal her passion for love, reluctance to sex and lust but as de Souza suggests, "it is not useful... to read back from the poetry into the life" and that "[t]he 'I' of the autobiography is as much a persona as the 'I' of the poems" and "Kamala Das plays out her various roles in the poems, unhappy woman, unhappy wife, reluctant nymphomaniac" (de Souza 7). She asserts: "I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy." (Das, *My Story* 165). Out of this obsession of her husband and dissatisfaction stemming out of their relationship, she starts feeling the hunger for love even more. She writes:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger  
To take in with greed, like a forest fire that  
Consumes, and with each killing gains a wilder  
Brighter charm, all that comes my way. (Das, *My Story* 105)

She undergoes many bouts of depression due to the void that she feels in the bond that she shares with her husband. She is aware of the fact that she is in a position of subordination to her husband and that she is expected to do the chores like any other woman in her position. These lines portray how badly she laments the loss of her identity and dislikes the subservient position for being a woman:

You called me wife,  
i was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf. / lost my will and reason, to all your

Questions / mumbled incoherent replies. (Das, My Story 157)

She detests sexual pleasure (or pain) to the limits that she starts experiencing a feeling of self-hatred and self-pity. She starts doubting and questioning her own womanhood. She writes:

I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through (Das, My Story 86).

Das's poetry gives glimpses of a tortured psyche constructed upon the sufferings and despair that she undergoes in her life. She gets comfort only in her motherly responsibilities. Otherwise, she finds some solace in publishing her poems and other writings in magazines but she is fully aware of the emptiness of her own life. She writes at one place that her "articles on free love had titillated many" (Das, My Story 165). She maintains:

. . . I've stretched my two-dimensional

Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,

Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. (Das, My Story 129)

A key characteristic of the stories as well as poems of Kamala Das is that they contain a tone which is "habitually tense" (Kohli 16) and her being can be perceived as an ensemble of contradictory feelings – a laughter emanating from an infuriated self, a pleasure springing out of pain and life sprouting from a death-like situation. Even when she is yearning for an ideal love, she is aware of a cruelty that she is seeking:

I was looking for an ideal lover. . . . Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart. . . . I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two. . . . You are always dissatisfied, cried my husband. (Das, My Story 147-148)

The kind of love she craves for is mystical which unites the lovers, transcends their physical existence, and reaches out to the spiritual heights. The following lines define her idea of love which unifies the lovers at physical, emotional as well as spiritual level:

. . . That was the only kind of love . . .

. . . When he

And I were one, we were neither

Male nor female. There were no more

Words left, all words lay imprisoned

In the ageing arms of night. In

Darkness we grew, as in silence

We sang, each note rising out of

Sea, out of wind, out of earth and

Out of each sad night like an ache.... (Das, My Story 109)

But this failure in attaining true love and repeatedly experiencing the pain at the hands of her husband, she turns to writing. She likens her scribbling down poems with the falling of grief “like drops of honey on the white sheets . . . [and] sorrows floated over the pages of the magazines darkly as heavy monsoon clouds”(Das, *My Story* 87). Her poems bare her innermost self and contain highly autobiographical elements. The very secrets of her personal life and relationships are portrayed throughout the canvas of her writings. Das’s “troubled sexual relationship with her husband has left its imprint on her attitude towards all men. She can think of men only in terms of a lover, or a potential lover” (Rane 168). She writes about the emptiness that she feels in these lines:

The heart,  
An empty cistern, waiting  
Through long hours, fills itself  
With coiling snakes of silence.  
I am a freak. It's only  
To save my face, I flaunt, at  
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (Das, *My Story* 132)

Longing for the “forbidden fruit” is another pervading feature in *My Story*. At more than one instance, she admits being drawn towards the evil, the wicked, the notorious, the unacceptable, and the forbidden. She writes:

A friend of my family had warned me against associating with an 18-year-old girl residing in a College hostel, but when I went there with my mother, visiting her friends, I met her and felt instantly drawn towards her. (Das, *My Story* 64)

When her teacher warns her against “a dark man walking in, wearing not a suit but a bush shirt”, she accepts before her teacher that she had liked his looks. She admits:

It was the first time that I had seen somebody who was notorious. I felt that I ought to meet him when I grew up, and perhaps become his mistress. All the wisdom of early adolescence told me that it would not do to marry a wicked man. Being a mistress to him meant pain in a bearably moderate dose and plenty of chances to forgive the sweet sinner. (Das, *My Story* 48)

Her husband is also aware of her tendency to fall for the forbidden and her inclination to get swayed. She mentions an incident about a visitor from Bombay “who was intelligent and well-read . . . his hand crept under my thigh and became immobile . . . [o]ne day when he held me close and kissed me on my mouth. . .” and she is honest to share this with her husband. She writes:

When I told my husband about it, he warned me against loving such a man. He is not capable of loving anyone except himself, my husband said. You are always a child in my eyes. Amy, he said, you may play around with love but be choosy about your playmates. I do not want you ever to get hurt in your life.... (Das, *My Story* 128)

Betrayal is a ubiquitous component in confessional poetry and its seeds can be witnessed in Das's poetry too as she confesses in her "writings to have had a couple of love affairs" after her marriage (Das, *My Story* 173). She was not aware of love and was not prepared for marriage at the time when she was married off, and after her marriage, she experiences what can be called the harsh realities of married life. She has no emotional bonding at all with her husband. Their relationship is completely based on physical liaison which one of them is obsessed with and the other detests. She admits: "I would not have gained the hate and the notoriety that my indifference to sex has earned for me" (Das, *My Story* 165). This passivity that she experiences in her marital relationship leads her to generalize that "In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence." (Das, *My Story* 21).

There is nothing common in their interests. They are at the opposite poles in their perspectives. Whereas she yearns for a soul-mate, her husband needs to quench his physical thirst through their marital relationship. She writes in her autobiography:

My husband . . . was obsessed with sex. If it was not sex, it was the Co-operative Movement in India, and both these bored me. But I endured both, knowing that there was no escape from either. I even learnt to pretend an interest that I never once really felt. (Das, *My Story* 108)

When she has had enough from this relationship, she starts looking for someone whom she can actually love and she is not seeking to indulge in "adultery and infidel[i]ty, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security" (Kohli 27). She admits: "I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit". (Das, *My Story* 77). She idolizes Radha and at one place mentions: "The only heroine whose sex-life seemed comparatively untumultuous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jumna for her blue skinned lover. But she was another's wife and so an adulteress." (Das, *My Story* 21). The thought starts lingering on in her mind to be in an affair as she questions herself about her beauty, charm, sexual prowess:

What was happening to me, I wondered. Was it no longer possible to lure a charming male into a complicated and satisfying love affair with the right words, the right glances, the right gestures? Was I finished as a charmer? (Das, *My Story* 153)

There is always a question of the possibility of comparison when it comes to the confessional poetry; and whenever any discourse related to such poetry takes place, Sylvia Plath's name would certainly feature. There is a lot of similarity in the way Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath have expressed themselves. Both of them have loved their grandmothers. Both of them talk nostalgically about their past and there is a yearning to return to their roots in their writings. Both endure oppression at the hands of male-dominated society and therefore their opinions about males are also similar. While Plath projects her father and husband "as vampires who suck the life blood out of women", Das holds her husband "responsible for all

the suffering she had to undergo in her life” (Rane 163). Despite some commonalities, there is a lot of difference between the approaches in their poetry. Whereas “Plath’s poetry provides a wider spectrum”, she “is concerned not only about her own self body and mind; but also all those who are suppressed by the powerful elements of the world”, “[i]n the poems of Das we find self-deprecation, desperation, and self-pity” (Rane 164). Also, while Plath keeps reminding “herself that she has a self to recover” (Rane 170), Das “accepts the present unquestioningly as if it were her preordained fate” (Rane 169). While both Das and Plath are dissatisfied with their marital life and search for an exit from this unhappiness, Das “tries to find happiness in the arms of illicit lovers or in motherhood, . . . [Plath] wants to live on her own terms” (Rane 170) failing which led the latter to commit suicide. Even yearning for death is common to these two poetesses. While Plath attempted and finally committed suicide, Das too confesses an obsession for death in these lines:

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water. (Das, My Story 190)

There is a reference to homosexuality at a few places in her autobiography. Das writes about her bench mate Mamata who fell in love with their Maths teacher and “and gazed at her with adoration” (Das, My Story 47). She talks about another instance of a train journey where she is accompanied by her family as well as the girl she admires. The girl lies close to her and “[h]er fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet. . .” (Das, My Story 64-65). When she talks about Sarada and her woman admirer visiting them in their room, she touches upon the subject of queerness, unthinkable to write for an Indian woman writer during the times when she wrote this:

The lesbian admirer came into our room once when Sarada was away taking a bath and kissed her pillowcase and her undies hanging out to dry in the dressing room. I lay on my bed watching her performance but she was half-crazed with love, and hardly noticed me. (Das, My Story 32)

When she mentions the incident of her husband locking himself in their bedroom along with his male friend who “behaved like lovers in my presence” on the occasion of her birthday, Das writes:

To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time, my pride made me move away. (Das, *My Story* 86)

In the narrative of her autobiography, Das also portrays an awareness of the revulsion her relatives feel towards her due to her honesty and candidness to write the blatant, unvarnished truth. She says, "I was an eyesore to my relatives who thought me to be a threat to their respectability"(Das, *My Story* 172). Her parents "were embarrassed but totally helpless "about it. She "had become a truth-addict "and she could even leave her husband and sons in case they came in the way of the factual interpretation of her life through this autobiographical story. She admits: "I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons." (Das, *My Story* 173)

It can be justifiably summarized that passion and confession are the two essential elements that can be found in the poetry, stories and autobiography of Kamala Das. Any study about the author should be considered incomplete without a mention of these elements. Excessive passion, strong, intriguing vocabulary laughing in the face of the conservative society and fight against the societal taboos are some of the features apparent in the works of Kamala Das taken for the current study, and these works and their features have influenced many literary writings thereafter. She does not repent for what she is and what she writes. She does not ask for anybody's forgiveness. It will be appropriate to conclude with these lines:

City fathers, friends and moralists, if I were a sinner, do not forgive my sin. If I were innocent, do not forgive my innocence. Bum me with torches blood-red in the night, burn my proud Dravidian skin and bum the tumult at the core. (Das, *My Story* 159)

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