

The Autobiographical Voice in Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" and in the Indian Poet Kamala Das' Poem "An Introduction": A Comparative Study

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Since a work of art is more or less linked with the personality of the artist, analyzing a poem, for that matter, in the strictly American New Critical mode, might frustrate one's appreciation of it in its completeness. Again, there are writers studied more as persons than as artists, that is, while their works are studied, the art and the artist stand indistinguishable. In this light, two contemporary poets, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Kamala Das (1934-2009)* may be compared. Usually, every significant work of either Plath or Das tends to be read in conjunction with their biographies, since most of their works are often avowedly confessional or autobiographical. For them, life held an intensity of personal experience that became the focus of their work. Confronting the chaos of their own lives, with a vital sense of their inner self, they forged their art. Plath's anguished obsession with death, or as M. L. Rosenthal says, Plath's "long, escalating drive toward suicide," or Das' treatment of the theme of sexuality, are rooted in their personal experiences (83). Both poets narrowed the boundary between life and art and revealed themselves in their expressions. Thus, full appreciation of their works requires insight into their lives.

This paper examines the autobiographical voice in Plath's poem "Mirror" and Kamala Das' confessional poem "An Introduction" in her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). While comparing the autobiographical, monologic voice in both poems, this paper throws light on the complexities of their lives and examines their voices from a psychoanalytical perspective in order to probe into what David Holbrook calls: the "symbolism of inner disturbance" (533).

It is a normal practice to readily classify either Plath's poetry or Das' as "confessional." But there is not a shred of untruth about it. Chris Baldick's definition of "confessional poetry" succinctly highlights what it is to be "confessional": "The term is sometimes used more loosely

* A pioneering post-Independence Indian poet, Kamala Das contributed immensely to the growth and development of Indo-Anglian poetry. Known for her unusual frankness in depicting the theme of love, she is famed for such works like *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *My Story* (1975). She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985.

to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its distinctive sense depends on the candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress. The genuine strengths of confessional poets, combined with the pity evoked by their high suicide rate (Berryman, Sexton, and Plath all killed themselves), encouraged in the reading public a romantic confusion between poetic excellence and inner torment" (43). Further, Douglas Hunt comments on Plath appropriately: "Her writing, which typifies what has come to be called 'confessional' poetry, embodies the frantic, white-knuckled grip on sanity that her troubled emotional history would suggest" (2132).

But Louis Simpson contends that Rosenthal's label "confessional poet," "misses the most important thing about Sylvia Plath, her conversion of life into art," and again goes on to say: "Plath writes about her life but her poems are works of art, the images going down to a level of feeling that is shared by others... The poems make connections with 'the language of the tribe'; this is what distinguishes them from confessional writing" (120, 121).

What expressly makes "Mirror" and "An Introduction" autobiographical is the repeated use of the personal pronoun "I." In "Mirror," this is uttered by the personified mirror, although it is readily understood as the mouthpiece through which Plath expresses her own feelings or anguish. This happens because we readily associate our biographical knowledge of Plath with the poem. On the other hand, "An Introduction" does not personify an object through which the poet speaks, since the poet herself speaks directly, laying bare her feelings and experiences and despair. In both poems, which are undeniably self-portraits, the anguish and the affected appeal of the speakers surface prominently. Moreover, the autobiographical voice gives to the reader an experience of empathy. In any case, the autobiographical voice balances in the writer a condition of being both separate and complete. As James Olney writes in *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*: "What is... of particular interest to us is a consideration of the creative achievements of individual men and the relationship of these achievements to a life lived, on the one hand, and an autobiography of that life on the other is... the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience" (20-21).

In "Mirror," the mirror describes what happens to the girl in question; in "An Introduction," the narrator describes what happens to her *own* self. In both cases the autobiographical voice is perceptible, and further, it suggests the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity in writing. Paul

Smith, in his introduction to *Discerning the Subject* (1988), suggests the term "subject" can be used to indicate a variety of things:

Over the last ten or twenty years [discourses of the human sciences] have adopted this term, the 'subject,' to do multifarious theoretical jobs. In some instances, the 'subject' will appear to be synonymous with the 'individual,' the 'personal'. In others—for example, in psychoanalytical discourse—it will take on a more specialized meaning and refer to the unconsciously structured illusion of plenitude which we usually call 'the self'. Or elsewhere, the 'subject' might be understood as the specifically subjected object of social and historical forces and determinations (Smith, xxvii).

As for subjectivity, "Mirror" and "An Introduction" convey subjective, personal experiences, and highlight the writers' primary concern with conveying personal experience and feeling. The poems are subjective or autobiographical, since both poets incorporate personal experiences, or project into the discourse their personal disposition, judgements, values and feelings. However, "Mirror" seems to be more "objective" since in an objective work, the writer presents a situation that is invented for the purpose, or for that matter, she presents fictional characters and their thoughts and feelings and actions to remain detached and non-committal. Again, in Das' "An Introduction," the "I," or lyric speaker, is readily associated with the poet, but such association does not take place in "Mirror," whereas it does in her poem "Daddy." As for the question of identity, the linguists Muhlhausler and Harre comment on the traditional humanist beliefs about the subject: "Central amongst the conditions for personhood is the possession of a sense of identity, of being one's self and continuously one's self. The Cartesian tradition treats this sense of identity as the intuition of, perhaps even the direct experience of 'an inner core' of being, and ego, which is *the self*, that to which all other mental and moral attributes belong" (87).

Objectivity, on the other hand, suggests a degree of detachment the writer achieves in his work by an expulsion of his self, thereby focusing more on other people rather than about himself. It is, however, difficult to altogether dissociate subjectivity from objectivity. As J.A. Cuddon rightly observes:

In fact, any writer of any merit is simultaneously subjective and objective. He is subjectively engrossed in his work and the quality and intensity of his personal vision will be dictated in a subjective way. At the same time he must be removed from and in control of his material. Thus he is involved in a paradoxical activity: an intellectually creative balancing act in which invention and judgement coalesce or co-ordinate to achieve and preserve equilibrium (874).

"Mirror" and "An Introduction" may be studied in the light of this simultaneity of the subjective and the objective in order that the authorial and/or the autobiographical voice could be fairly situated. Since the stated objective of the essay is to silhouette the autobiographical voice in the poems, against the backdrop of a psychoanalytical perspective, examining the poems in this light, that is, tracing the psychoanalytical cues in the poems would be germane to the analysis. However, this cannot be done without referring to the lives of the poets. Thus references to their biographies or the intimate, personal content in the works, whether direct or suggested, becomes necessary in order to facilitate a closer analysis. On the other hand, as Judith Kroll writes, "To see the autobiographical details only as such is to regard Plath's vision of suffering and death as morbid, but to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence" (Kroll, 1976).

The visible autobiographical note is marked by the use of "I," but the nature of the "I" in "Mirror" is different from the "I" in "An Introduction." The "Mirror" starts with the mirror's professed claim to superiority as an austere counterpoint to man's baseness:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately
 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
 I am not cruel, only truthful
 The eye of a little god, four-cornered (Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 173).

In highlighting all the positive qualities about itself, the mirror, in reality, hints at a persona which is at the back of it. A succession of expressions using personal pronouns gives an apparent picture of a fidgety, breathless confession which does seem to border on self-aggrandizement or declamation. However, behind such apparent protestations, the poet's ire in the lines is also visible. The mirror, thus, stands as a cathexis where the psychological energy is invested; that is, it exceeds mere excitation in that it is ordained by the unconscious. Thus, it is apparent that a process of identification of the poet with the mirror has already taken place. Julia Kristeva in her essay, "Identification and the Real" writes:

The psychoanalytic term *identification* covers various stages in the process of the creation of the subject: narcissistic identification, hysterical identification, projective identification, primary identification, ego-ideal... (p.168)

"The generic term *identification* presupposes the tendency specific to the speaking subject to assimilate, *in symbolic and real terms*, another being separate from itself (p.168).

We see an act of assimilation by the speaking subject into another being who is separate from itself. As Simpson remarks, "Psychoanalyzing oneself and looking for associations were common in intellectual circles in the fifties; this appeared in poetry as the creation of metaphors, the more remarkable, the better" (117).

"An Introduction" starts in the selfsame way, as the "Mirror" does, with the first few lines approximating a resume, differing from that of the above lines in "Mirror," where the import is rather metaphorical:

I don't know politics but I know the names
 Of those in power, and can repeat them like
 Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
 Nehru, I am Indian, very brown, born in
 Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
 Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
 English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
 Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins
 Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
 Any language I like? (Das, "An Introduction" 1-10).

The critic K.R. Srinivas Iyengar states: "In her confessional 'An Introduction,' Kamala Das tells us with disarming sang-froid why she prefers to write in English," and further, "This claim for autonomy really flows from the felt sovereignty of her own individual existence" (678). Her monologic utterances are autobiographical, feverish and an assertion of her mnemonic strength, but nevertheless sarcastic as well. The speaker's nonchalant attitude toward politics but her remembrance of "the names of those in power" is an apparent contradiction, camouflaging in her an interest for power, which is, in fact, her veritable claim to selfhood. In her linguistic itinerary from dreaming to writing, to speaking, Das wishes for a liberty unimpeded by "critics, friends, visiting cousins." In desperation, the poet speaks: "Why not leave/ Me alone?" The plausible urgency to have this leeway contests with a patriarchal hegemony in terms of a refusal to condescend to others' dictates and caprices. As R. Parthasarathy views Das' poems: "What is overpowering about her poems is their sense of urgency" (22). However, the autobiographical voice takes the form of a memoir in the poet's recounting of a bitter experience:

I was a child, and later they
Told me I grew, 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 (Das, "An Introduction" 23-29).

The revelation of private, clinical matters in the lines exact a psychoanalytic insight into her subjective experience. Such an insight is useful for probing into the latent aspects of a work. As M.H. Abrams writes: "The chief enterprise of the psychoanalytic critic, in a way that parallels the enterprise of the psychoanalyst as a therapist, is to reveal the true content, and also to explain the effect on the reader, of a literary work by translating its manifest elements into the unconscious determinants that constitute their suppressed meanings" (265). As for the latent aspects of "An Introduction," it is similar to Plath's lines in "Mirror": "Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall. / It is pink with speckles. I have looked at it so long/ I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers" (173). The autobiographical voice manifests itself with an undercurrent of sadness about the perceived impossibility of uninterrupted union. However, the regularity of the resolve to "meditate on the opposite wall" hints at a possible psychoanalytical explanation for such meditations. The continual separation between the mirror and the wall, brought on by the intrusion of faces and darkness, points to the speaker's anguished references to external forces which never fail to underscore, or point to the onslaught of a patriarchal order. The poem, then, takes a capricious turn, suggesting a metaphor for death, and the focus shifts to a woman whose relationship with the mirror borders on a narcissistic precipitation toward destruction:

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back and reflect it faithfully (Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 173).

The mirror's claim to superiority reveals its chauvinistic delight in sheltering the woman in that it is possibly the only haven of solace to which she could turn. This calls for a psychoanalytical link to the poet's mind bedeviled by male dominance; thus an indignation and a revolt within. Further, the mirror itself is veritably masculine insofar as it has the eye of a little "god." In order to see herself, the woman looks at the mirror, consequently subjecting herself to an assessment

by the masculine Other. As William Freedman writes in his essay: "The Monster in Plath's 'Mirror,' for Plath, symbolizes female passivity and subjugation, and it reflects Plath's own conflicted self-identity concurrent with an insuperable task to reconcile the competing obligations of her artistic life and domestic life" (152-169). Das also depicts a similar condition and despairs at her subjection to "the categorizers":

I shrank
 Pitifully. Then...I wore a shirt and my
 Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
 My womanliness. Dress in saris, be girl
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
 Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
 Belong, cried the categorizers (Das, "An Introduction" 31-36).

It is certainly an imperfection of any social order where a woman is pressurized to prostitute her volition to the demands of "the categorizers." The catastrophic annihilation of womanhood consequent upon a chain of directives runs in consonance with the imperative "Fit in." The poet is critical of the arbitrary configuration of a woman's role. Iyengar comments on Das' fierce vociferation: "Kamala Das's is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world" (680). The lines, thus, express scorn at this patronizing attitude toward woman. Das paints a typical, albeit traditional Indian society where a woman's roles are defined, that is, a woman is not supposed to cross the demarcated bounds of womanhood. Of course, our present Indian society does not impose such restrictions, but years back it was true. Kamala Das represents this suffering women and raises deep concerns over the perpetuation of subjugation. When she writes that she "ignored" her womanliness, it is tantamount to saying that she *was denied* her womanliness. The accretion of such denial gives the persona's problem a psychoanalytical touch.

Das' poem is a pensive reflection of her dismal past, and naturally, the smouldering anguish surfaces. As Das shows, the code of conduct defined by a patriarchal society is formulated to curb the life and freedom of women. Her ire becomes intense after being subject to a volley of imperatives, the most critical being: "Don't cry embarrassingly loud when/ Jilted in love..." (Das, "An Introduction" 42-43).

The autobiographical voice in Das' "An Introduction" exacts a psychoanalytical study of the poet. Throughout the poem, a voice of revolt resonates, and not for nothing the lines have

such reverberations. For a psychoanalyst, the art is the symptom of the artist and thus, an inalienable relationship exists between them, where the overt and the covert, the obvious and the latent, the conscious and the subconscious elements enter into a dynamic operation. Thus Das reminisces her terrible past:

I met a man, loved him, call
Him not by any name, he is every man,
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him...the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me...the ocean's tireless
Waiting (Das, "An Introduction" 43-48).

She reduces "every man" to an epitome of lust. Underneath this apparent description of biological attraction of a man for a woman lies a sinister patriarchal desire subjecting "every woman" to "the hungry haste." In "An Introduction," the persona places herself *contra* to society that dehumanizes her; in Plath's "Mirror," the personae happen to be essentially the same. It is like taking refuge in oneself, in that the mirror stands only as a front. But the mirror that is portrayed as an icon of a "male" world does have a saving grace, since it highlights a failing in the woman if she succumbs to temptations of "those liars, the candles or the moon" (173). But this is again frustrated by the declamation: "I am important to her" (173). Pamela J. Annas describes in her study of Plath's poetry the fragmentation of the self: "To see yourself between sets of mutually exclusive alternatives neither of which fits, is to live in a circus hall of mirrors, where the self is distorted, disguised or shattered into slivers of reflection" (Annas, 1988).

Plath's expression of cynicism in the "I" in "Mirror" finds a similarity in "An Introduction":

Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
I in the world, he is tightly-packed like the
Sword in its sheath (Das, "An Introduction" 48-52).

This egotistical assertion is tinged with irony because it reeks of a crisis of identity on the one hand, and on the other, a sense of pride that is self-effacing. The "I" is to be taken as the autobiographical voice of the poets; rather, it is at times used to lay bare and lambaste male hegemony.

Plath's horrid portrayal of senescence in the woman in "Mirror": "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish" evokes

frightening pictures of comparison (173). The rise of "an old woman," consequent upon the drowning of a young girl, presents a temporal dimension spanning youth and decrepitude, but at the same time it hints at the vortex of the lake where youth is drowned. "Sylvia Plath obviously sensed that if one were to experience imminent death, the inessential aspects of self and personal history could separate from and be regarded by the permanent true self, leaving a sense of eternity and unity with the world" (Kroll, 169). This again calls for Plath's reference to the cruelty in the mirror behind its facile claim to be the bastion of refuge.

Das, too, ends her poem with a note of despair, being sandwiched between an irresolvable quandary of the "I" typifying "the categorizers" and her own identity:

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 shame, it is I who die dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I (Das, "An Introduction" 52-59).

The speaker's quest for identity here, in a society fraught with a perceived impossibility of emancipation, where "womanliness" is conditioned by chauvinism, is materialized through sets of role-playing. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim views: "Das's autobiography specifies the connections between personal/sexual and social/political struggles for a female protagonist in this traditional male-dominated society" (350). Das has called for a possibility of asserting womanhood, although at a personal level. This is contrapuntal to the note of despair at the ending lines of "Mirror." However, the despair in "An Introduction" provides, what Parthasarathy writes, "a focus for an exercise in autobiography" (22). Be it in Plath or Das, the autobiographical voice at the backdrop of psychoanalysis presents a chiaroscuro of dissent and emancipation.

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