

## Research Paper

## The theme of Nostalgic Experiences in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper is an attempt to focus on the theme of nostalgic experience in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. As confessional poets, both have drawn vivid pictures of their nostalgic experiences in their poems. There is however a striking difference in their responses to events in childhood. Sylvia Plath seems to filter and retract her experiences more through the people she knew. Kamala Das seems to be much more emotional in her responses than Sylvia Plath.*

Childhood is a fascinating experience for one and all, more so for a poet, as her experience as a child, is responsible for the later developments in life. Experiences at this stage are raw, emotional, and inarticulate often only expressed through gestures and sounds. But the same experience takes, on larger meanings after a few years, when they are viewed objectively. Ruminating over the past events, putting the clock back, imagining with intensity and expressing them through a language which is provocative and beautiful, suggestive and intriguing -- this nostalgia for childhood is one of the characteristic qualities of confessional poetry. This strain of nostalgia in confessional writers, critics feel, is inevitable and they look at the future as uncertain which does not augur much hope, the present is full of tensions and contradictions, which seem unresolved. As such the poets are tempted, sometimes forced to look back on their past for recapturing happy moments.

The vital role played by the grandmother is a common element in Plath and Kamala Das. This theme is revealed in Plath's 'Grumpy.' When Sylvia Plath was a child, her parents were young and busy in pursuing their academic career or struggling to establish a marital rapport. During these stuffy unloved years, the grand parents made an entry into the childhood world of Sylvia Plath and added "their humour, love and laughter to that too academic atmosphere."<sup>1</sup> She was taught to read and write when she was barely two and a half years old. Aerostatic by temperament, the child grew up and was ready to welcome her brother Warren when he was born. Sylvia Plath's attachment to her grandmother is evident in the poem 'Point Shirley':

Grey waves the stub-necked eiders ride.  
A labor of love, and that labor lost.  
Steadily the sea  
eats at Point Shirley. She died blessed,  
And I come by  
Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed,  
A dog faced sea.

The sun sinks under Boston, bloody red.<sup>2</sup>

'Point Shirley' also evokes the tragic theme of impermanence of human experience. Sylvia Plath moves from the general to particular in the reflection of her own grandmother, prompted, presumably by her visit to their old house, which had withstood the hurricane, gallantly. The house still stands

on the steadily encroaching sea. This brings out her intense sense of desolation and hostility of the natural world against which only her grandmother might have offered protection. This sense of security she found in her grandmother was reinforced by her father's death. Her attachment grew more desperately along with her grandfather too. There is a fusion of her father and grandfather says Sylvia Plath's mother in her preface to Letters Home. Essentially, Sylvia Plath was her father's girl. Otto Plath, wanted his first child to be a girl. He doted on her and "his love for the child took the form of enthusiastic, scientific, pedantry, so that, at four, she was a female imitation of himself naming number of insects in Latin."<sup>3</sup>

Sylvia Plath adored her father. This gave way to that love-hate relationship and felt strongly that he was solely responsible for her unhappiness later in life. His untimely death, when she was just eight and a half years old made her feel desolate. She curses him for that:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
you died before I had time ---  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal.<sup>4</sup>

The image of the father as a statue echoes the similar sentiments of The Colossus many critics stresses that the ambivalent feelings of fear and love have remained with the daughter as an obsession which dwarfs and restricts her own life, and in an attempt to rid her self of it, she must ritually destroy the memory of her father.

In The Bell Jar she counts upon her experience from that stage, when she won the Mademoiselle Prize for her story, which got her a paid trip to New York and a guest editorship as well. This does not mean that she didn't have any strong feelings about her childhood. Sylvia Plath grew up with the same restraint, which made her a good academician and a creative artist in her later life. For, poetry is a genre where the intense feelings are expressed with maximum restraint. She grew up too hastily. The sea-side childhood was over, although it was recalled later, as a time of remote, perfect happiness.

The tragic experience of losing her father was to be compensated by her loving and understanding mother; her grandparents who showered all their affection on her, but

these were no compensation at all. The suffering of her beloved father, which she had witnessed in her early stages as a child, had left an indelible mark on her poetry. She wrote a series of poems referred to as 'Bee Poems' by critics. The heavy bee box was like a 'coffin' and it was 'dark'. The noise of the bees, which appealed to her, was like 'Roman mob' with 'unintelligible syllables'. She felt she was 'no source of honey' and realized the 'bitter position' of hers without her father. All these phrases from her various poems suggest the inheritance of interest of father's Beekeeping.

Both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath can be termed as child prodigies. They started writing poetry at a very young stage. Plath inherited her literary taste from her mother reading aloud Mathew Arnold's 'Forsaken Merman,' she responded immediately and intensely. Her first publication appeared in 'Boston News Papers' when she was just eight years old.

Kamala Das too was barely "six and very sentimental"<sup>5</sup> when she started writing poetry. She wrote tragic poems about her dolls who lost their heads and limbs and confesses that "each poem of mine made me cry."<sup>6</sup> It was no surprise that she had such intense feelings as she was left to herself. She could not fit into the 'English' boarding school or get used to the idea about her mother being lonely and detached and her father so deeply involved in politics. Thus as a first and last resort she tuned to writing. Kamala Das had a fine library at Nalapat and her grand uncle Narayana Menon was a famous poet of his time. The whole atmosphere of the Nalapat house was influenced by Gandhiji's thought. Gandhiji was not considered as a person who fought for our independent alone, but "was considered one among the family members."<sup>7</sup>In such an atmosphere, the child, Kamala Das, left alone by her, fed herself on poetry. There is a vivid description of her childhood days in her autobiographical novel My Story and a few chapters are devoted to her growing up stages, where as, Sylvia Plath's life story starts when she was a teenager.

Nature and landscape imagery abound in the poems of Plath and Kamala Das. As such in Kamala Das, even the landscape acquires meaning and significance as an extension of her memories, so that it externalizes her interior sensibility. Kamala Das thus, uses the landscape more effectively in the background, to add a further dimension to her poems.

But, lying beside my grandmother,  
Quite often I thought  
That I could hear at night  
The surf breaking on the shore,  
The sea was only two miles away.<sup>8</sup>

The Sea imagery is powerful and meaningful because of its association with her Grand mother. Her house at Nalapat makes the little as well as the central theme of her poetry. As a child when she could not adjust herself to the boarding school, she was sent to her grand mother's house at Nalapat which becomes her 'Paradise'. She says, "It had been clear to me that my home was broken up for incomprehensible reasons. My mother was living in Malabar while my father stayed at Calcutta. It was not a complete family like everybody else...."<sup>9</sup>

She could not help falling in love with her Grand mother who was as Kamala Das describes:

She was really simple.  
Fed on God for years  
All her feasts were monotonous  
For the only dish was always God.  
And the rest mere condiments.<sup>10</sup>

She was the woman who kindled the royal ego of Kamala

Das. She always imagined her self to be a born aristocrat and played a 'queen' in her dreams and also the plays in which she took part. In later years, after marriage, when she became aware of her middleclass life, the nostalgia becomes stronger. The frustration of living in a different class reality is reflected in the poem:

There is a house now far away where once  
I received love ..... That woman died,  
.....  
.... You cannot believe, darling,  
Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
Was proud and loved .... I who have lost  
My way and beg now at stranger's door to  
Receive love, at least in small change.<sup>11</sup>

But, for Kamala Das childhood was not a disjointed process but a continuous experience. She was scared of growing old and could not accept it till was reminded about it.

My grand mother cried,  
Darling, you must stop this bathing now.  
You are much too big to play  
naked in the pond.<sup>12</sup>

Growing up was a tragedy for her.  
The tragedy of life  
is not death but growth,  
the child growing into adult  
and growing out of needs,  
discovering,  
that the old have black rimmed nails,  
and scalps that emanate  
a sweet, mouldy smell.<sup>13</sup>

Kamala Das never excused her father for putting an abrupt end to her childhood by pushing her in to a hasty arranged marriage, when she was just content with tenderness. It shattered all her dreams of childhood.

In conclusion any one can say that Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das used the theme of Nostalgic Experiences in there Poetry.

#### Notes and References

1. Plath, Aurelia Schober. (ed.), Letters Home. New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p.11.
2. Plath, Sylvia. 'Point Shirley.' The Collected Poems. London: Harper and Row, 1984, p.110-111.
3. Plath, Aurelia Schober. (ed.), Letters Home. New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p.87.
4. Plath, Sylvia. 'Daddy.' Ariel New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p.49.
5. Das, Kamala. My Story. New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 1976, p.8.
6. Ibid. p.10.
7. Ibid. p.11.
8. Das, Kamala. 'Composition.' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems. Madras: Orient Longman, 1973, p.3.
9. Das, Kamala. My Story. New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 1976, p.3.
10. Das, Kamala. 'Blood.' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems. Madras: Orient Longman, 1973. p.17.
11. Das, Kamala. 'My Grandmother's House.' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems. Madras: Orient Longman, 1973. p.32.
12. Das, Kamala. 'The Suicide.' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems: Madras: Orient Longman, 1973, p.36.
13. Das, Kamala. 'Composition.' The Old Playhouse and Other Poems: Madras: Orient Longman, 1973, p.4.