



Confessional Poetry Revealing Contemporary Realities Through Self Agonies

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Abstract— Poetry is the communication of experiences in the form of art. The experiences which defined as poetry of the personal is called confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is the frank expression of personality. This poetry is of self-revealing in nature as it seeks to reveal the poets' state of mind and their feelings. Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das, Anne Sexton and Andrienne Rich are best examples of confessional poets. They universalized the sufferings and surmounting pain of womanhood through the lens of their own experiences in their lives. Their works demonstrate the tragedy of life of being a woman in a patriarchal based structure of society. In subject matter, confessional poets concentrate on the history of their own lives.



Keywords— Confessional, Poetry, Poets, Self-revealing, Expression, Own lives

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a genre of literature and a medium for expressing emotions in a rhythmic way. Different eras of literature have come up with different kinds and patterns of poetry. Confessional poetry is a branch of modern poetry that emerged in the United States in the 1950s. It is a style of poetry that is personal often making use of a first person narrator. The phrase confessional poetry burst into common usage in September of 1959, when the critique M.L. Rosenthal coined it in his review of Robert Lowell's “Life Studies”, the book, which contained poems that unsparingly details Lowell's experiences of marital strife, generation struggle and mental illness marked a dramatic turn in his career.

Lowell Rosenthal claimed, “Removes the mask” that previous poet had worn when writing about their own lives. The poems in life studies felt like a series of personal confidences rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal. (Zach Meyer, 202)

In a glossary of literary terms, M.H. Abrams defines confessional poetry designates a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by the American Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), which deals with the facts and

intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life. Confessional poetry was written in a rebellion against the demand for impersonality by T.S. Eliot and the New critics. (Abrams, 56)

Aspects of Confessional Poetry:

Confessional poems provide a clear picture of the private lives of the poets. In case of subject matter, confessional poets concentrate on the history of their own lives; in case of expression, they remove psychological barriers and poetic artifice that arrested the free flow of poetic consciousness. They adopt personal history or autobiography as their central theme and direct expression as their methods.

David Perkins writer of “A History of Modern Poetry”.. Modernism.. and After, established that:—confession indicates a poetry, in which the expression is personal, or is conventionally accepted as personal, and reveals experience or emotions that are more or less shocking, hatred of one's parents, children, spouse or self, lust voyeurism, suicidal fantasies, madness, horror and fascination with death. (P-2-08 Chapter)

Hence, confessional writing is a sub-genre of autobiographical writing. Though autobiographical writing

is based on writer's personal experience but it also represents an era, different issues and different ideas of that era. Confessional autobiography is neither spiritual, not intellectual, nor social but emotional. We can simply define confessional poetry as poetry of the personal. According to M. L. Rosenthal,

“In the confessional poems, the private life of the poet himself, specially under the stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme.”
(Page 4, Israt)

Therefore, this genre is focused on extreme moments of the poets and their personal experiences. Confession is a purification of soul and poetry is an expression of soul. Hence it is obvious that confession is the integral part of this literary sphere. Confession is the quality of sensitive souls and poets are more sensitive. But when we talk about the founder of confessional poetry, then the credit goes to American poets of 1950s and 1960s like John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. They are the founder of a new stream of poetry that is confessional poetry.

Confessional poetry is a hybrid product of poetry that came into being as a result of the popularization of psychological studies, the spread of the Freudian and Jungian theories and the emergence of the feminist movement. (Page no. 6, confessional mood). It is an analytical observation of incidence from one's own life whether tinged with comedy or irony. It is a medium to express poet's deepest emotion through poems and about most personal subject. There is no doubt that feelings and emotions are the keynote of the poetry, but in the case of confessional poetry, it differs on that ground, because its contents are not of traditional. As romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge added a new chapter in literature by making common things or people or unimportant events as a subject matter of their poetry and they brought revolution in the field of literature. They changed the mindset of people and appealed the heart of even an ordinary people. (Confessional Mood,) The same revolution was brought by modern women poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich in America and kamala Das in India. Though, confessional poetry is generally associated with male poets like Lowell, Berryman, but many critics considered this genre as women's writing, because women confessional writers explored how this genre brings out issues of women's experience and gender identity. Confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Saxton and Kamala Das wrote poetry for defining their sufferings. These women writers went against the feminine decorum and vented out their frustrations and sufferings through their writings.

As we know, that confessional writings exemplify the problems of the everyday life of the female and distinguishes among those experiences which may be of stronger importance in relating to the women it reaches out. In the words of Rita Felski,

“It self consciously addresses a community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated general public.” (Page no 6, Israt)

So, it can be said that through the confessional writings, the feminist writers actually tries to commune with her women readers by emphasizing the deeply personal aspects, experiences of one's life, feminism connects these with social and the nature of female oppression. Therefore, feminist confessional writing is not only self-awareness therapy, it is the representation of all oppressed voice.

Contributions of prominent Confessional Women Poets:

Coming towards the famous women confessional writers, such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Saxton, Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das. Among them Sylvia Plath is one of the most prominent and leading poets of the twenty century, American literature. She challenged the traditional literary prioritization of female experience. In her writings, she tried to explore her obsession with death, self and nature. She has an ambivalent attitude towards society that is reflected in her writing. She wrote “The Colossus” and one novel “The Bell Jar”. After her death, another well-known poetry book was published “The Ariel”. A confessional poet, however, is not different from common poets. Both uses artistic techniques and poetic qualities to demonstrate their experiences. In simple words, the only difference between them is of “I”. Confessional poets are more personal, where as other poets are more universal. For Sylvia Plath, poetry is less objective, but more autobiographical and confessional. She mentioned each and every incident of her life. Her early life was not cheerful. She died at the very young age of 30. Her collection, The collected poems was published in 1981 and was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1982. She became the first poet to win Pulitzer Prize posthumously.

Her feelings of grief, anger and guilt disturbed her for the whole life and led her to create most of her poems. The life and works of Plath are well thought out to be a notable contribution to the genre of confessional poetry. Her personal life experiences acted as an inspiration for her great art. Writing proved as a therapy for her. She is mainly concerned with a question of gender and specially the role of daughter, wife and mother are prevalent in Plath's works. She demonstrated her personal life directly. One of her famous poem “Lady Lazarus” illustrates her obsession with death. In this poem she confesses,

“I have done it again,

One year in every ten,
I managed it.” (Lady Lazarus, Page No 426)

In this poem she illustrated her obsession with death. It gives us glimpse, that she had attempted suicide again and again. When we see her other poem “Daddy”, in this poem she expressed her tragic and painful thoughts about her father. She was also left by her husband, Ted Hughes. So her feelings of rejection and loss became the vast issue that resides in her poetry.

Sylvia Plath bares her heart, mind and soul through her confessional writings. Jacqueline Rose in the introduction of her work “The Haunting of Sylvia Plath”, she said:-

“There is no direct access to the writer, that the only thing available for commentary and analysis is the text. We do not know Plath, what we do know is what she gives us in writing, and what she gives in writing is there to be read.”

Hence, we see that her writing indisputably expresses her frustration. In her poems, Plath is not concerned with the nature of her experience, rather she is engaged in demonstrating the way in which mind deals excessive sensitivity. Most of Plath's poems are considered to be the master pieces known for depicting the incidents from her personal life which were full of sadness and turmoil. Her poems are about death, birth, rebirth, breakdown, recovery, sickness and health. One thing is clear from her poetry, that her significance in contemporary American poetry lies not only in revealing her personal life, but also in the ways in which she expresses herself.

Lets' moving towards other important figure of this genre. Kamala Das is one of the best known contemporary confessional India women writers. Her poetry always demonstrates the private humiliation and sufferings that are major themes of confessional poetry. In her poems, she explores the struggle of womanhood by presenting her own experience. She is also known as a feminist poet, because she raised her female voice by writing about taboo subjects and her poems share her most personal experiences.

India in the twentieth century was a very constructive society for women, but Kamala Das wanted to break down all the boundaries for women. In her poem, she openly talks about her hesitations, failures, ignorance, shame and feelings of guilt which clearly expose her personality. (Israt, 24) Kamala Das's poetry collection included “Summer in Calcutta” (1965), “The Descendants” (1967) and “The Old Play House”, and other poems (1973). Perhaps, her best known work was an Autobiography, which was first appeared as a series of columns in the weekly “Malayalanadu”. She received many literary

awards, including the Asian World Prize for Literature in 1985. It can be said that just like Sylvia Plath, she also used poetry as a medium to vent out her agony. She was the type of morose soul, which wanted pure love and freedom. Generally, we see there is an explorative of man-woman relationship in her poetry. She describes about her sexual and physical life frankly in her poems.

We can say that her poetry is meant for her self-expression. In the poem “An Introduction” encapsulates her personality. As it illustrates some incidents of her life, her rejection of patriarchal norms and rebellion again the gender role as well. This revolt end with “I”. In these following lines,

“It is I who laugh,
It is I who make love,
And then feel Shame,
It is I who lie dying,
With a rattle in my throat,
I am sinner,
I am saint,
I am the beloved
and the
Betrayed.”

(“An Introduction”, Page no 43, Indian Poetry in English)

In the concluding lines of this poem, we can easily glimpse that she identifies herself “I” and narrating she loved and had a painful experience of betrayal. The theme of this poem is her quest for identifying in a male dominated patriarchal society. She writes frankly without any hesitation about married life or man-woman relationship in many of her poems. She also frequently complains about man's callousness and wantonness and woman's sufferings on that account. Numerous of her poems deal with interior life. She writes of her private anguish in an effortless manner. In the poem “Too Early the Autumn Sights”, in this poem she illustrates her pain and anguish,

“Too early the autumn sights,
Have come, too soon my lips,
Have lost their hunger, too soon,
The singing birds have
Left.” (To early the Autumn Sights)

Coming towards Anne Sexton, she began her writing career as a therapy to get rid of serious depressions. Personal problems like abortion, menstruation, and the allure of suicide, where explored in her poetry. She got the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 for “Love and Die” (1964). She committed suicide in 1974. According to Diane Hume

George, “Anne Sexton poetry tells stories that are immensely significant to mid twentieth century, artistic and psychic life.” (poetryfoundation.org) She explored the myths by and through, in which our culture lives and dies. The archetypal relationship among mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, Gods and humans, men and women. She perceived, and consistently patterned in the images of her art, the paradoxes deeply rooted in human behaviour and motivation. In less abstract terms, she made explicit the intimacy of forces persistently treated as opposites by the society she lived in. (poetryfoundation.org). Sexton's books “To Bedlam” and “Part Way Back” included *All my Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966) which won the Pulitzer Prize, *Love Poems* (1969), the play *Mercy Street* (1969), *Transformations* (1972), a series of retellings of Grimm's fairy tales is often described as her least overtly “Confessional and most feminist work.

Andrienne Rich is the most significant confessional poet after Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. She gathers the world into her account of private incident, feelings and problems of her life. In her poetry she expressed her pain, confusion, inner turmoil and severe disappointment. The poem “The Key” illustrates her pain in the following lines,

“How long I have gone round
And round, spiritless with foreknown defeat
In search of that glitter.” (The Key)

Andrienne Rich tries to awake her own conscience and boost herself to make life useful through creativity.

Keynote:- “I” in confessional poetry:

The one most important concept which we see in confessional poetry is subjectivity which is the key note of confessional poetry. “I” is present in almost all the poems of confessional mode. There is no other person in the poems. “I” in the poem is the poet and nobody else. They do not talk about others and their feelings. Poems are highly emotional in tone and narrative in structure. The confessional poets vividly talk about herself, her needs, her desires, and her surmounting pains and complains. Confessional poets record their emotions in their writings to get therapeutic value. They do not accept any redemption. It is just, that they naked their souls to get a psyche relief.

CONCLUSION

Thus, confessional poetry is all about its frank expression in its bare for whether it is about hollowness of their life, their sour relationship. They illuminate sufferings

and unbearable pains and anguish. Confessional poetry erases boundary between the conscious and the unconscious. Ultimately, this poetry evolves out of victimisation. The aim behind this type of poetry is the urge to identify the truth of one's life, however painful and hurting it may be. Confessional poetry works as a mirror of the poets because it reveals the life and the psychology of a poet.

Confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das, Andrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, they all reveal all the layers of their psyche through their poems. Their poetry function as a bridge between a reader and their soul which is suffering and traumatized. Their poems provide a clear picture of their private lives. Confessional poetry is all about frankness, poets talk about the personal matter without any hesitations. This type of poetry is woven around the poetic self as the chief symbol. Confessional poets concentrate on the history of their own lives. But the poetry of these women poets not only bears the stamp of women's sensibility and perceptive of realities of common place, but also acknowledge the complex nature of the problems confounded by women in the contemporary society.

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