

CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF EUNICE DE SOUZA AND SYLVIA PLATH: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

Dr. Tanu Gupta

Associate Professor
Dept. of Mathematics and Humanities
M. M. University, Mullana (INDIA)

Anju Bala Sharma

Research Scholar
Dept. of Mathematics and Humanities
M. M. University, Mullana (INDIA)

ABSTRACT: *Confessional poetry is the poetry of personal or 'I'. It is the poetry which springs from the personal life of the poet. Private experiences, alcoholism, masturbation, and feelings about trauma, depression, relationship and suicidal attempts are expressed in this poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. The poet reveals directly or indirectly his or her own experiences, problems and psychological complex in his or her poetry. While these poems frequently engage in what is repressed, hidden and falsified, defining them as 'confessional' undermines the creative ability of the writer to construct a persona or imaginary scenario that is separate from their lives. The new poets adopted personal history or autobiography as their central theme and direct expression as their method. The confessional style of writing is associated with Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath etc. In 1967, M. L. Rosenthal wrote: The term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959. He further said that because of the way Lowell brought his humiliation, sufferings and psychological problems into the Life Studies, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough. (Qtd. in Hall, Barnard, 33).*

KEYWORDS: Confessional poetry, Catharsis, Therapeutic value, Psychic relief.

INTRODUCTION

The confessional poetry of mid-twentieth century dealt with the subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. But the confessional poets are not merely interested in recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction are also extremely important. The poet does not expect any redemption. It is just, that they naked their soul to get a psychic relief. It is of some therapeutic value. They focus too exclusively upon the pain, anguish and viciousness of life at the expense of its pleasure and beauty. Needless to say that confessional poetry initiated a new direction in poetry, and influenced a good number of young poets.

Like many Indian English poets of her generation, Eunice de Souza also draws heavily from her personal life and she successfully manages to connect her personal life experiences to the broader context of the cultural and political setting around her. Many poets use poetry as a form of communicating to the world, use instances that take place in their personal life. After

Kamala Das' bold confession and Imtiaz Dharker's open challenge to the purdah-system, Eunice de Souza, the Mumbai-based, Goan-originated poet offers a wide range of themes and subject matter in her poetry. De Souza offers a range of highly volatile emotions with her poems, changing direction and gaining effect from her inner contrasts, conflicts, ironies and satires. Eunice de Souza belongs to that generation of Post-Independence women poets who have given a convincing assurance that Indian English poetry matches the best everywhere. In her poetry the directness of speech rhythm and colloquial language is an expression of emotional involvement.

A comparative study of Sylvia Plath and Eunice de Souza reveals not only their achievements as confessional poets but also the strength and weakness of this mode in addressing the complexities of the modern life. Obviously, they are known for their confessional poetry for the shocking disclosures of the most intimate and private experiences of physical type or precisely their experiences as females. While this mode enables them to unburden their guilt-ridden self, they on their part, shape and perfect the mode, taking it to the utmost point. The confessional mode achieves its most glorious form in their poetic exploits.

The flexibility and freedom offered by the confessional form of expression eventually enables Plath and Eunice de Souza to give voice to the cries of their heart. Plath through her poems relives her childhood guilt, her anguish suffered during the hospital days, during which she sometimes imagines herself as the empress of the clinical world. It is this mode which enables her to ventilate her predicaments as a daughter as well as a mother and wife.

In the same way Eunice de Souza also expresses her depression and inner feeling through this confessional mode. She takes poetry as a medium to express her experiences of life. She openly writes about her birth as an unwanted child, her father's early death, her suicidal attempt and other autobiographical facts in her poem *Autobiographical*:

*Right, now here it comes
I killed my father when I was three.
I have muddled through several affairs
and always come out badly.
I've learned almost nothing from experience.
I head for the abyss with
monotonous regularity. ("Autobiographical" 1-7)*

The confessional mode enables Plath to lay bare her guilt ridden consciousness burdened with a self which holds itself responsible for the death of her father "Daddy, I have had to kill you" ("Daddy" 6). This guilt consciousness is a complex emotion which cannot be articulated by an objective or even by ordinary subjective forms. However Plath exorcises these ghosts of memory with the help of her confessions in a poetic form recalling them repeatedly till their fury is silenced and guilt consciousness is portaged. Poetry becomes an incantation as well as a vehicle of catharsis to her. No wonder, it is not through psychiatry but poetry that Plath regains her mental equilibrium and confidence in herself.

Interestingly, the confessional mode helps Sylvia Plath and Eunice de Souza to verbalize not only their personal experiences but also their search for truth and the fulfillment of her social commitments. Their aim as a poet is not merely to ventilate their pent-up feelings but to reveal the emotional truth behind the factual truth or the experiences of their life. While exploring their inner self, they want to produce the inward look of the psyche, which the society does not want to acknowledge. Plath actually wants to show the ugly face of the society, which is instrumental in causing individual and social sickness. She finds in confessional poetry the form of her life that can record each and every moment of her turbulent psychic self and poetize the quirks and qualms which quicken the pulse of her life. In confessional strokes she peels off the multiple layers of herself which assumes a number of roles both private and public.

Eunice de Souza, like Plath uses poetry as an instrument of catharsis or mental purgation, for getting rid of her inhibitions and obsessions, which hinder the progress of life. To her, poetry also becomes a vehicle of religious experience, which finds its outlet in the poems dealing with the mythical love. Like Plath, De Souza finds confessional mode, a perfect medium for ventilating her struggle, her suicidal instinct. But Plath's wish of death is strong than De Souza. Her life experiences produce in her an acute sense of depression, making her fed up with life.

While expressing their inmost experiences in the confessional mode, De Souza and Plath go on to shape it into a vehicle, capable of voicing the most secret motions and deepest emotions of human psyche. In their hands this mode becomes a language of thousand moods ranging from the depressions of the disturbed psyche and desperate cries of human heart and the spiritual stirrings of the intoxicated soul. In their effort to expand the horizons of the confessional mode, Plath and De Souza experiment with certain technical innovations to make their poetry an instrument of social awaking, private and public catharsis and even religious awakening. In their hands the most private mode assumes the form of a universal mode capable of projecting the consciousness of two countries of different cultural background and attitudes.

Plath and Eunice de Souza make confessionalism a mode of female emancipation and an embodiment of truths, valid to all humanity. Social and universal strains mark the poetry of Plath as well as of De Souza. In their poetic journey, they proceed from a purely personal to a social stance. When they came to describe their mental anguish and acute manic depressions, they assume a representative female voice. But very soon they came to realize that these experiences were not individual but universal.

In her poems dealing with sexual experience with her husband, Plath seems portrays only the most personal. In her poems Plath deals with the voice of all those women who are fed up with life and who seek peace in the lap of the savage god i.e. death. In this way the confessional mode, which they initially used to express their pent up feelings becomes a powerful medium of inspiration to all women.

Sylvia Plath began to write the poetry as self-therapy. But when her psychiatrist told her that her poetry might help others to recover from their mental imbalance, she began to write with a social commitment and subsequently became the champion of the female cause.

Although confessionalism in itself is cathartic, but the element of catharsis found in old confessionalism is rather of a religious kind, aimed at achieving an experience of conversion or spiritual enlightenment or peace of mind with all passions spent. But Plath moulds the old confessional mode to deal with the new psychological consciousness, revealed by the epoch-making researches of Freud and Jung. She invests her poetic confessionalism with the latest insights provided by psychology and develops it as a powerful instrument. In many of her poems she raises the mode to work as a recipe for erasing the memories of unpleasant experiences. In doing so, she develops confessional poetry into a school of literary psychiatry that can exorcise the memory lane and causing mental and physical disturbances.

Eunice de Souza makes also a tremendous effort to develop confessional mode as a sort of poetic medicine to treat mental vacancy and even physical ailments. She wrote most of her poetry, when she was undergoing mental and sexual suffering and, as she confessed several times, an emotional volcano was building inside her. It was only poetry that gave her a legitimate outlet to purge the fiery substance. Voicing her agonies through her poetry she appeases the fury of the domestic, social and even female consciousness. Poetry for her became just another branch of pathology.

Indeed, confessional mode suffers from suffocating solipsistic tendencies, mirroring all forms of reality in the self of the poetic persona. But in the hands of Sylvia Plath and Eunice de Souza, this mode develops as a technique to accommodate the external world in the form of concrete imagery and symbolic representations of an objective type. The various forms of embellishment used by these poets bring it closer to the external world.

With the use of objective imagery, Plath takes confessional poetry to the heights of an unprecedented greatness and transcendence. Plath frequently objectifies her inner restlessness with the image of sea and its immeasurable world inside. She uses most concrete images in her poems. Likewise De Souza fortifies the confessional mode with physical and natural imagery which externalizes her mental states of internal suffering. In her poem *de Souza Prabhu* she objectifies her parents desire to get a male child and her birth as an undesired child.

*I heard it said
my parents wanted a boy
I've done my best to qualify.
I hid the bloodstains
on my clothes
and let my breasts sag.
Words the weapon
to crucify. ("de Souza Prabhu" 14-21)*

There are strong autobiographical elements in the poems of both these poets. Plath claimed that she had no sympathy for cries of the heart and merely these could not constitute good poetry.

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. In *Daddy* she identifies with the Jews driven to concentration camps by the Nazis (her father and husband) while in *Lady Lazarus* she talks about the physical exploitation of women in the world ruled by men. The anger and promise of vengeance to herself which one finds in the poems of Plath are also present in the poems of Eunice. Plath in *Lady Lazarus* promises herself a grand and triumphant comeback:

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair,
And I eat men like air. ("Lady Lazarus" 52-54)*

Both these poets are angry with the society for trying to bind them through custom and traditions or just attitudes. Plath feels exposed and unprotected "In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection, / And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?" ("The Bee Meeting" 3-4). Domesticity according to Plath means measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus, and adhering to rules. She talks of herself comparing herself to other women

*I stand in a column
Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.
And seen my strangeness evaporate. ("String" 20-26)*

Plath never gives us the impression of being the battered woman feeling under the burden of her womanhood. She searches for a place in this world not as a woman but as an individual. Her failure to do so, manifested in her suicide in 1963, indicates the failure of a so called advanced society to allow her to live as one.

However, the greatest contribution of Plath and Eunice de Souza in shaping and exploiting the potentialities of confessional mode is undoubtedly their tremendous effort to develop it into a vehicle of transcendental experience, which is the hallmark of great poetry. Indeed, both Plath and De Souza are confessional poets of excellence. Through their path-breaking poetry, they reveal the unrevealed i.e. the truth hitherto unknown to the common man. They describe in the most aesthetic terms the agonies of the humiliated, guilt-ridden, bruised and buried human psyche and human body. They sing of the female body with its moods and cycles and seasons. They describe the marriage system and woman as a procreation machine.

CONCLUSION

Both these writers taken for study write not merely their biographies but create mythologies of their self. With an imaginative mixture of fact and fiction, they develop and perfect the confessional poetry, elevating it from a mere instrument of unfolding psychic history, to a literary mode. Using all tricks of the poetic trade, assuming objective undertones, and they ultimately flower it into a vehicle of cosmic and mystic experience.

Like other confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Eunice de Souza use poetry as a medium to communicate to the world. They write in their poetry what they actually feel, use instances that take place in their life. After reading their poetry, we came to know a lot about them and what they have gone through in their life. After the thorough examination of the poetry of these two confessional poets it has been found that these poets are still in the midst of dualities, because of the dilemma between what they actually want to do and what they expected to do.

The ensuing conflicts that arise in their unconscious minds result in the development of depression and frustration in them. Although both the poets belong to two different countries and cultures, yet they share the same dissatisfaction with the given world order, and their inner desire of the need for the transformation in the state of women leaves them baffled and perplexed. Both of them found themselves caught between the conflict of tradition bound self and the self looking for the freedom. They reveal acute awareness of the tragic fate which comes with the feeling of being born as a woman.

Their poetry reveals cultural presumptions of the people which identify home-making and child bearing with femininity. The reality of marriage, wifhood and motherhood has been expressed by these poets. Eunice de Souza has shown her resentment against the conventional practices of marriage of her time which are in practice even today in some sectors of India. But the desire for freedom from the existing social system has ultimately led to a conflict in the minds of these poets. De Souza while defying the norms on one side has been found to be suppressing her inner desires and trying to smile on the other hand.

One consequence of these poets is that they heightened the female frustration and depression under the pressure of patriarchy in their poetry. The extent of the frustration of these women with the existing social system can be judged by the fact that they do not even hesitate to express it openly in their poetry. By using confessional mode of writing they not even express their own feelings of the oppression and frustration but also the same feelings faced by the women in society. We know that the creation of art is something creative by the whole psyche, by the conscious and the unconscious and we accept that a temporary regression from the world of rational consciousness may be a necessary moment in poetic creation. "An oscillation between regression and full vigilance . . . results in a creative product" (Graziano 51).

Poets have used different ways to tackle the passivity imposed on them and ensuing harshness in their tone. Both these poets taken for study have adopted irony and ordinariness

in their confessional mode of writing poetry to express their anger and dissatisfaction with their lives. The anger and annoyance against the Goan-Catholic community emerge as one of the distinct characteristics of De Souza's poetry. It is the study of psychoanalytical feminism which helps to understand the process of growth and development of a woman in the society, and how the repressed unconscious desires affects her future life. It has shown that gender is constructed; it is not wholly natural but produced.

Eunice de Souza also acknowledges that a woman "finally learn/to claim nothing" ("Aubade" 10-11). She now wants to give up her earlier resentment against all established orders of society and wants to go with what her hair-dresser says, "take it as it comes" ("Bequest" 8). This reflects loss of interest in life which has been perceived in her later poetry.

The themes of their poetry have related to life in all its aspects. The poetry has struggled to break the boundaries of tradition while describing the conflict between the old and the new. It has endeavoured to express the desire of a woman to break the bonds that have restricted her since times immemorial. However, the problem she faces is that the entrenched patriarchal structure is still controlling and restricting her life in one way or the other. It still considers that she is someone's daughter, wife or mother, minus her own identity. The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Eunice de Souza also reveal the frustration which a woman faces because of the patriarchal structure and the discrepancy between the way she wants to behave and the way she is made to behave.

Thus they are found similar for several reasons. First, both were classified as confessional poets, along with Robert Lowell and others, because they exposed intimate personal feelings in their poetry. Second, both poets discussed common issues in their poetry like father-daughter relationship, their obsession with death, treatment of female in male-dominated society, female exploitation etc. They used confessional poetry as a medium of communication to the world.

However, in spite of the similarities between these two poets, each poet's work remains unique. Both the poets belong to different countries. There is difference of cultural background. This is not to equate two poet's achievements. In fact, Plath's work, especially her last poetry surpassing Eunice de Souza's work. Plath became the first poet to win Pulitzer Prize posthumously for *The Collected Poems* in 1982. The death drive is less in De Souza's if compared with Plath's. Much of Plath's poetry seeks the father's power to advance her ambitions, to accept her as an equal. It can be argued that Plath differs from De Souza in her ability to confront the power of the symbolic father through negativity and abjection. Plath was married to famous poet Ted Hughes while Eunice de Souza is unmarried. Plath committed suicide in London on 11th Feb. 1963 by hailing the gas of oven and is buried in the churchyard at Heptonstall, West Yorkshire while De Souza is still alive.

It is quite a coincidence that these two poets, with an age difference should make themselves the subject matter of their poetry in such diverse cultural set-ups. The study of the impact of culture on their lives especially because of the diversity in the cultural milieu to which the two belong has been found very important. American society has always been considered

more advanced as compared to Indian society. With its famous practices of Sati and Child marriage the Indian society seems to be traditional bound and backward. The effect of social suppression on women in India has been quiet disastrous and Eunice's poetry stands testimony to this.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, Suman. (2003) *Sylvia Plath*, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi.
- Alexander, Paul. (1991) *Rough Magic: Sylvia Plath*, Viking Penguin, New York. P.106, 338-356
- Butscher, Edward. (1977) *Method and Madness*, Dodd and Co., New York. P.11
- Daruwala, K.N. (1989) "Confessional Poetry as Social Commentary: A View of Indian Poetry in English by Indian Women Poets". *Contemporary Indian English Poetry*, Ed. Atma Ram, Writers Workshop, Calcutta.
- De Souza, Eunice. (2009) *A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems*, Penguin Books Ltd., New Delhi.
- (1979) *Fix*, New Ground, Bombay.
- Ed. (1997) *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- (1990) *Ways of Belonging: Selected Poems*, Polygon, Edinburgh.
- Fernandes, Keith. (1994) *Introduction: Selected and New Poems by Eunice de Souza*, St. Xavier's, Bombay.
- King, Bruce. (1987) *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi. P.3
- Kukil, Karen V. Ed. (2000) *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. Ed. (1990) *Twenty Indian Poets*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Ed. (1992) *Twelve Modern Indian English Poets*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi. P.114
- Naik, M.K. (2006) *Indian English Poetry from Beginning upto 2000*, Pencraft International, New Delhi.
- Philips, Robert. (1973) *The Confessional Poets*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
- Plath, Sylvia. (1971) *Crossing the Water*, Harper Perennial, London.
- (1998) *The Colossus and other Poems*, Vintage Books, New York.
- (1982) *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, The Dial Press, New York. P.92
- Plath, Sylvia. and Hughes Ted. (2008) *The Collected Poems*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York.
- Rosenthal, M.L. (1959) "Poetry as Confession". *The Nation* 19 Sept. P.154-155
- Singh, Mina Surjit. (2003) *Six Women Poets: A Cross Cultural Study*, Prestige Books, New Delhi.
- Williams, H.M. (1976) *Indo-Anglian Literature (1800-1970): A Survey*, Orient Longman, Bombay. P. 113

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. TANU GUPTA whose encouragement, guidance and support from the initial to the final level enabled me to develop an understanding of the subject. I also offer my regards and blessings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of this research paper. Above all, I express our gratitude to God, the almighty, who aided me with his strength, gave me wisdom and patience to complete this paper. Moreover, I am indebted to my husband, my daughter and other family members for their help and supports.

ANJU BALA SHARMA