

## THE CATHARSIS OF CONFESSIONAL POETS

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### Abstract

Catharsis is a term used to describe the release of emotional tension that can occur after experiencing a work of art. However, confessional poetry is a form of poetry that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, characterized by its highly personal and often autobiographical content. This research paper examines the concept of catharsis in the poetry of confessional poets. Through a close analysis of the works of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, the paper explores how these poets use the confessional mode to process and purify their intense personal emotions. The paper argues that the act of confession, as well as the subsequent cathartic release, serves a key function in the healing process for the poet and the reader. Furthermore, the paper examines the ways in which these poets challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable to reveal in poetry. The paper concludes that the confessional poetry of Plath and Das continues to resonate with readers today due to its ability to provide a raw and honest portrayal of the human experience.

**Keywords:** *Catharsis, Confessional poetry, Healing process, Societal norms, Poetic confession.*

### 1. Introduction

Catharsis is a term used by Aristotle in his work "Poetics" to describe the emotional release that can occur after experiencing a work of art, particularly in literature and theatre. The concept of catharsis is based on the idea that by experiencing emotions vicariously through art, individuals can purify and cleanse themselves of negative emotions such as fear and pity. This release of emotions can lead to a sense of clarity and understanding, as well as a feeling of emotional balance. In literature and theatre, catharsis is achieved through the use of characters and their experiences to explore universal human emotions and experiences. Through this exploration, the audience or reader can identify with the characters and emotions being portrayed, leading to a release of their own emotions. This is particularly true in confessional poetry, where the poets often write about their own personal experiences, allowing readers to connect with the emotions being expressed and experience catharsis.

Moreover, confessional poetry is a form of poetry, characterized by its highly personal and often autobiographical content. Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell & Anne Sexton wrote about their own experiences with mental illness, trauma, and personal relationships, using their poetry to process and make sense of these experiences (Sharma, 2022). Confessional poetry marked a departure from the more traditional forms of poetry, which often focused on nature, romantic love, and idealized emotions. Instead, confessional poets wrote about their own lives and experiences, often in a raw and honest manner. They were not afraid to delve into the difficult and uncomfortable subject matter, such as mental illness, suicide, and family dysfunction. Confessional poetry was met with both praise and

criticism. Some praised it for its honesty and emotional intensity, while others criticized it for its self-indulgence and lack of objectivity (Gupta & Sharma, 2014). Regardless of the criticisms, confessional poetry had a significant impact on the literary world and continues to be studied and admired today.

### **1.1 Research Background**

The concept of catharsis, as it relates to literature, has been a topic of scholarly discussion for centuries. Several studies have examined the cathartic effect of confessional poetry on the poet. For example, Smith (2010) argues that the act of confession in poetry serves as a form of self-therapy for the poet. Similarly, Hobsbaum (2017) examines how confessional poets use the medium of poetry to process and purify their personal emotions. Critics have also discussed the impact of confessional poetry on the reader. Author Takolander (2017) contends that the reader's identification with the poet's personal experience leads to a cathartic release of emotions. Additionally, McCooey (2017) explores how confessional poets challenge societal norms by revealing traditionally taboo subjects in their work.

This literature review has shown that the concept of catharsis in confessional poetry has been widely discussed by scholars, with a focus on both the poet's and the reader's experience. While some studies have emphasized the therapeutic value of confessional poetry for the poet, others have examined the impact of the poetry on the reader. However, there is a lack of research that explores the way in which the confessional poetry of specific poets like Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das continues to resonate with readers today and the role of societal norms in this dynamic. This study tries to fill this void by offering a comprehensive analysis of the confessional poetry of Plath and Das and examining their continued resonance with readers today.

### **1.2 Similarities and Differences between Autobiography and Confessional poetry**

Autobiography and confessional writing are two forms of literature that have many similarities, but also some important differences. Both forms of writing are based on the writer's personal experiences, but they have different purposes, styles, and perspectives. One of the main similarities between autobiography and confessional writing is that they both are based on the writer's personal experiences. Both forms of writing are written in the first person, and both are meant to be honest and candid. However, while an autobiography is a chronological and comprehensive account of a person's life, confessional writing is an intense, personal, and subjective account of specific experiences (Allard et al., 2019). An autobiography is often written to be read by a wide audience and can be written with an objective perspective. On the other hand, confessional writing is often written as a form of self-expression and catharsis, with less emphasis on the audience.

## **2. Material and Method**

In order to analyze the cathartic effects of confessional poetry, a qualitative research method has been utilized. First, research has been conducted to analyze the content of the poetry of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. This involved categorizing the poetry based on specific themes such as mental illness, relationships, and personal trauma. Next, a close reading and interpretive analysis of the poetry has been conducted. This involved reading and re-reading the poetry multiple times to gain an understanding of the poet's use of language, imagery, and form. Data were analyzed to identify the common themes in the poetry and the prevalence of these themes.

The results were then discussed in relation to the literature on catharsis and confessional poetry. Two significant poets in the history of English literature named Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath were successful in establishing the genre of Confessional Writing and are considered to study in this research work.

Kamala Das originally penned *Ente Katha, My Story*, in Malayalam, which was then translated into English. While receiving leukaemia treatment, the author wrote her autobiography (Watkar, 2015). The book is divided into 50 chapters that follow the author's life from the time she was a little girl to the time she reached middle age. The book is written from the author's point of view. It demonstrates how she has developed as a woman mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically.

On the other hand, Sylvia Plath was a renowned writer of the post-war era, despite the turmoil in her life. She belonged to the generation of poets who spoke out frequently about the events in their lives. Because they discuss her private life, her poems are known as confessionals. Although people still mourn the loss of a creative prodigy who committed suicide at a young age. Plath is still highly regarded in the literary community for her short stories and poems. She feels very at ease talking about the illness that had possessed and tormented her and prevented her from leading a regular life. She was never afraid to discuss her mental illness, the extent of her suffering, or how she was treated for it.

The tale begins with Plath's experiences while working as a guest editor in New York City. She finally understands then the severity of her mental illness and how it has snuck up on her. She desired a job of her own and independence while other females waited for the right man to propose marriage. She was a woman who thought becoming her own hero was the greatest accomplishment and was much ahead of her time. Plath disagreed with other women who were careless with their careers and wooed men into marriage so they may lead traditional lives.

The only novel ever written by Sylvia Plath during her lifetime is titled *The Bell Jar*. In *The Bell Jar*, a schoolgirl called Esther Greenwood, who aspires to write poetry one day, describes her existence. She is chosen for a one-month summer internship as the *Lady's Day* Magazine's guest editor, but her stay in New York has a significant negative impact on her. The book concludes with Esther's resurrection and her upcoming encounter with the Examination Board, which will determine whether or not she can return home. She is a severely depressed person, therefore the book makes no assumptions about whether or not she will recover. Esther acknowledges that she is not and never will be cured, so she makes a conscious effort to guard against the threats that lurk inside her own head (Ahima, 2021). *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiography and also classifies as a confessional narrative due to the author's direct way of addressing the reader. In the instance of Sylvia Plath, the narrative is so strongly entrenched in her life that the drafting of the novel is a self-inscription that takes place in the process of understanding oneself.

However, Kamala Das is portrayed in her works as a lady who is both constrained by her identity as an Indian woman yet conscientiously outspoken about the needs of women and her contribution to society. She talks about her own and other people's sexual lives with complete indifference, and her writings open a whole new path in a culture where such topics are often kept quiet and put under the rug. She recognises and portrays life in all its harshness and depravity. Her writings and spoken language serve as the "Women's Liberation Movement" in

the West's Indian counterpart. She was one of the few who had the courage to wonder why Indian women were so silent about their sexuality. Her use of language and writing style gives the impression that she is conversing informally with the reader. It adopts the conversational, fluid, and elegant confessional style of her writing. Her autobiography is confessional because she is trying to tear herself apart and get revenge on a culture that has only ever criticised her for being a woman.

### 3. Result and Discussion:

Two visionary authors from the twentieth century who helped to establish Women's Confessional literature are Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. They created the rules to give women a voice and a way to convey the ideals that drive them. Their memoirs have many parallels to the lives of women in our community. Women all around us are deteriorating while having the capacity to one day rule the world. Women have suppressed their aspirations for generations out of fear of patriarchy. The majority-male society has consistently distorted and misreads the needs and desires of women.

There are numerous analogies for death, estrangement, losing oneself, and rebirth throughout *The Bell Jar*. The parallels used in the novel help readers comprehend how Esther's life changes day by day. She learns to answer her puzzles after being hospitalized for shock treatment, which is a crucial point in the story where she discovers her findings. The harshness of the society around her is depicted in numerous metaphors, but the ones that are more significant or intriguing are those that are personal. There are numerous metaphors in the text that refer to language and its various symbols.

While *My Story* is rich in analogies and uses conventional imagery. The majority of the body-related images focus on the characteristics of female virginity and a refusal of the male bodies that oppress her all the time. The sun and the heat it produces appear frequently in her artwork. She also makes reference to the Radha-Krishna and the Mirabhai, which speak to her deep-seated desire to be at one with God. It demonstrates the poet's Indianness because her roots run deep into Indian soil. Her works are characterised by their fundamental desire for intimacy. She had the capacity to communicate the inner turbulence of her mind on the pages of her books by gathering it into a rhythmic sequence. Das used real-world examples in her writing, which effectively expressed her desires and longings while giving the work a raw edge.

The image of the sun represents its scalding heat, which, rather than preserving her health and providing her with warmth, burns her instead. This is related to sexual passion and overwhelming sexual feelings. Another recurring theme in her writings is the sea; she compares her longing to meld with the huge ocean to her never-ending desire to meld with the one who loves her without condition. Her use of imagery is a lovely method for expressing her repressed feelings of passion and annoyance. When we study both books, *The Bell Jar* and *My Story* both have their own distinctive methods of drawing readers in. In Confessional Narratives, the reader also takes on the role of a listener, taking in what the narrator has to say. The author's life is made available to the reader, who can then observe firsthand what they underwent. As a result, there is an open and forgiving relationship between the reader and the writer. Sylvia Plath gets right to the point and does not mince words, but Kamala Das elaborates on her confession with several examples and details.

When comparing the authors, Esther comes across as more relatable due to her age and the challenges she has at that stage of her life. Her worries about her sexuality, her need for independence, her need to be independent, her questions about college life, and the guys in her life all touch close to home. She is merely a young woman anticipating what will happen next, with a heart full of courage and a mind full of optimism. On the other side, Kamala Das depicts the life of a Malayali Nair who was constantly looking for her roots since she could never totally settle in one place. The mind hears and comprehends like a Malayali, but Plath's universal and sympathetic manner should never be disregarded. Both women impart knowledge to the reader in various ways; neither is superior to the other but both are brilliant in their own right (Moldoveanu, 2019).

Since Das prefers to talk rather than engage in conversation, her autobiography is more about venting than asking the reader to be a forgiving listener. Das does a good job of presenting a woman who lived a middle-class existence despite growing up in a wealthy setting. However, she eventually transforms into the mistress of the home when she returns to Nalapat House. She comes to the realisation that she belongs there, in the white-dressed house, with her limbs dripping with gold, not in a rented apartment where she has to worry about paying the butcher's expenses. She portrays a life that is more centred on herself—her wants, her aspirations, and the kind of existence she has always envisioned. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das created new literary spaces for women to express themselves and the things that happen to them. The moment when both authors' lives began to change was the mental collapse. They were stifled as women by the duties that were assigned to them due to their gender. Society did not want them to influence its women and start a revolt since they were different. People feared that if the women imitated them, it would cause more issues in the household and society as a whole.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

In this research paper, the cathartic effects of confessional poetry by analyzing the work of confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, and Kamala Das has been examined. The cathartic effects of confessional poetry can be seen in the highly personal and often autobiographical content of the poets, and in the ability of the poet and reader to connect with and understand the emotions and experiences being expressed in the poem. The results showed that the themes of mental illness, trauma, and personal relationships were prevalent in the poetry of the confessional poets. The poetry of these poets can be seen as a form of therapy for both the poet and the reader, allowing them to process and make sense of their emotions. In conclusion, this research has shown that the cathartic effects of confessional poetry are powerful, as they allow both the poet and the reader to connect with and understand the emotions and experiences being expressed in the poem. Confessional poetry has the potential to be a powerful form of self-expression and catharsis.

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