

Love, Sex and the Body in *The Bell Jar* and *My Story*: A Feminist Reading

Subrata Chandra Mozumder

Assistant Professor of English, Daffodil International University, Dhaka

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the themes of love, sex, and the body in The Bell Jar and My Story, two much-read autobiographical texts by Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das respectively, which reveal the writers' feminist "self." These books were published in the mid-twentieth century when women started fighting for their individual freedom by interrogating patriarchal hegemony responsible for delimiting women's familial, social, economic, educational, industrial, and political rights. Both Plath and Das possess unconventional approaches towards love, sex, and the body. Their texts come out as threats to the patriarchal practice which pushes women to "stay at home, cook meals, clean house and bear children" (Lamb 1). For these poets, the woman's body, which patriarchy mostly considers an object of sexual pleasure, is a significant tool for transgressing the dictums of patriarchy. The present study, therefore, aims at showing the themes of love, sex, and the body in the above mentioned texts as a means for the poets to interrogate patriarchal restraints and to create a new identity with self-esteem and self-worth. In this way, they refuse to accept the hegemonic role of oppression and assert their gender identity.

Keywords: love, sex, body, The Bell Jar, My Story, feminist reading

Sylvia Plath (1932 -1963) and Kamala Das (1934-2009), considered iconoclasts for lashing out at patriarchy through their poetry as well as prose, hold an unconventional approach towards love, sex, and the body in *The Bell Jar* and *My Story* respectively. A woman's body, which patriarchy mostly considers an object of men's carnal pleasure, is a symbol for these two poets to express gender identity. They fight for women's freedom and identity by representing their gendered "self" though there are differences between the two poets in terms of caste, creed, religion, culture, and nationality. Their gender consciousness seems to make them social reformers determined to overthrow all restraints that delimit the power and individuality of women. By revealing their resentment against patriarchy, male-domination, and sexual violence, they not only announce their gender stance but also shatter predominant patriarchal norms and customs. Their life experiences lead to the realization that a woman in a patriarchal world is subjugated both as an individual and as a group. Hence, the present study is an attempt to explore how the themes of love, sex, and the body projected in *The Bell Jar* and *My Story* represent their feminist identity.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* was written in the late 1950s, a time when it was rarely possible for women to come out of the world of domesticity, when women were limited and confined to mundane chores such as to "have dinner ready, prepare yourself, prepare the children, minimize all noise, be happy to see him, listen to him, make the evening his" (Lamb 3). It was also a time when women began to realize that "there is something missing" (3) in their life.

In Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist Esther Greenwood struggles to redefine her "self" by going against traditional patriarchal culture. Throughout the novel, the protagonist plays the role of a performer who comes on stage to fulfill a feminine agenda and rejects the "archetypes of femininity she sees around her" (Smith 34). The themes of love, sex, and the body are thus manifested in her feminist stance.

Esther Greenwood does not find any independent personality in her mother, Mrs. Greenwood. This is certainly one of the main reasons for having a damaged/unfulfilled mother-daughter relationship. Mrs. Greenwood who is a "paragon of parental indifference because she does not hear what Esther tells her, nor does she respond to Esther's needs in any meaningful way" (Martin 38), is a typical woman of her time since she conforms to patriarchal norms and customs. Her attitude towards love and marriage is conventional. Even the double standard of men towards sex does not affect her. Esther cannot love her mother for all these reasons. She states in *The Bell Jar*: "My mother took care never to tell me to do anything. She would only reason with me sweetly, like one mature person with another" (116) and she does not have "a gentle, intuitive touch" (121). Hence, the lack of motherly affection along with her mother's conformity towards convention-ridden norms and customs make the mother-daughter relationship an unhappy one. On the other hand, she loves Dr. Nolan, a psychiatrist who becomes a model of not only self-respect and self-worth but also motherly love and affection for Plath. Plath writes in *The Bell Jar*: "Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother" (203). She looks after Esther, acknowledges all her demands, and allows her to enjoy freedom. She does not allow visitors to meet Esther for "she understands that what Esther needs is freedom from outside expectations in a safe environment," and thus "does everything she can to support Esther's efforts to gain autonomy" (Blair 17, 18).

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther challenges the archetypal attitude of love and marriage. She is supposed to marry Buddy Willard and love him, as in the eyes of society he is the perfect match for Esther. Buddy, having social status with money and education, considers himself to be a hero, but to Esther, Buddy is a hypocrite. Buddy believes that an unmarried woman has to remain a virgin: "a girl should not sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married" (76). But he seduces many girls including a waitress, thus showing his double standards and contradictory attitude. So she rejects the love that society settles for her. She refuses the marriage proposal from Buddy Willard saying "I'm never going to get married" (89), for "when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (81). The poet emphasizes that marriage leads a woman towards a slave-like life in a patriarchal world. So, Buddy Willard, a representative figure of the patriarchal world, is refused by Esther, a woman who tries to establish an identity which is distinct and beyond societal custom: "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb" (212). Again, she does not want to be "the place the arrow shoots off from" (67), rather she considers herself to be the arrow, for she wants to possess her own world and hates the idea of serving men in any form. Esther also identifies herself with Doreen. She appreciates her confident sexuality and sophisticated personality. She praises this strong willed woman's adventurous attitude towards life which

is made possible by her sheer willpower. We see that Esther is unconventional in her attitude towards love and also in interactions with people around her. In every aspect of love and relationships, she values herself, enjoys her freedom, and listens to her inner psyche.

Plath's unconventional treatment of the theme of sex in *The Bell Jar* is a further illustration of her feminist stance. Throughout the novel, the protagonist shows a strong resolution in terms of having sex and also not having it. She always gives priority to her own feelings and desires, never yielding herself to please a man or to the force of male domination. She rejects the concept of purity or virginity prescribed by the male world. In *The Bell Jar*, we see that she refuses Buddy Willard when he tells her to be naked, though she agrees to see him naked. She does not agree to sleep with Buddy even though she refuses the idea of remaining a virgin or "pure" in life. Instead of sleeping with Buddy Willard, she wants to sleep with somebody else and wants to lose her virginity which seems to be a burden to her. To her, virginity indicates suffocation and confinement, because it is not equally treated in men and women. She believes that remaining a virgin suggests conformity to patriarchal norms, customs, and values. Esther points out in *The Bell Jar*: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (77). She opposes the notion that with regard to sex a man's world should be different from that of a woman's. Again, she does not want to submit herself to forced sex. So she fights against the brute sexual attack of Marco who is a "woman-hater" (102), and who tries to rape her: "It's happening, I thought. It's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen" (104). She, however, fights and saves herself with heavy blows. Esther protests against the rape attempt on her, not for fear of losing her virginity, but being conscious of her "self" identity. At one stage of her life, as we see in *The Bell Jar*, she loses her virginity by making love with Irwin whom, in fact, she seduces: "what I decided [is] to seduce him" (216). Losing her virginity, she feels empowered for she is "perfectly free" now (232). The tradition of the patriarchal society is thus challenged by her sexual intercourse with Irwin. She describes how she gains freedom and lashes out at patriarchal conventions when she says in *The Bell Jar*: "I wondered how much I would bleed, and lay down, nursing the towel. It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn't possibly be a virgin anymore. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition" (219). Now, she becomes her "own woman" (213), so her mind is dancing saying, "I am, I am, I am" (233).

In *The Bell Jar*, the female body emerges as an agency. Esther takes absolute control over her body. In the 1950s, the female body was constructed as an object to fulfill man's carnal pleasure only, but Sylvia Plath in her only novel presents the body as a weapon for women to attain freedom and autonomy. The protagonist of the novel is a neurotic patient. Her illness is so severe that she behaves irrationally like a mad woman. Also she tries to commit suicide several times. Many chapters of the novel describe her hospitalized life. Plath's illness, madness, and neurosis help her to avoid the orthodox principles of patriarchy and act autonomously: "madness and illness enable the protagonist's every autonomous action" (Blair 9). Iga Helena Drobnik says that there is a close "relationship between Esther's diminished health and freedom of behaviour" (8), hence her suicide attempts through which she tortures her body are considered to be effective steps to set her free from the bell jar, or social confinement.

As an American woman, Esther fights against stereotypical roles, and her rebellious spirit helps her to overturn the shackles of social imprisonment. It is undeniable that Esther's insanity is the product of stereotypical social gender confinement and torture affecting both body and mind. At the same time, this insanity gives her the freedom to break the customary role of a woman and be relieved of the control of social convention, and thus she emerges as a threat to patriarchal norms and customs. In the novel, Plath writes about her insane suicide attempt: "What I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (142). Thus, through attacking her body, she wants to kill the "self" which is delimited, which conforms to society and which is the barrier to her road to freedom, self-esteem, and self-worth. Her neurosis leads her to the world which is her own, where she can be her own master, where there is no depression. She further says: "I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex" (213). We see that the theme of the body is interwoven with the protagonist's madness, illness, and her attempt to commit suicide presents the body as an agency to fulfill the feminist agenda, and challenges the customary notion that "the body is the object and target in power relations, and the purpose is to discipline the body in order to ensure the continuity of society" (Sabanci 60).

Plath, in *The Bell Jar*, fictionalizes her life. Esther, the creation, and Sylvia Plath, the creator, are two beings having the same impulse and experiences. The novelist articulates what most women in 1950s America were experiencing. They began to think that the home was not the only place they need to be concerned with. So, *The Bell Jar* serves as a model for all women of the world who not only want to escape from the socially constructed gender hegemony but also create their own world of willpower. Women everywhere undergo the same treatment and so Plath proclaims in *The Bell Jar*: "Wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship, or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (178).

Like Plath, Kamala Das, being subjective in voice, confessional in tone, and autobiographical in nature, very boldly expresses the themes of love, sex, and the body in *My Story*. Though she is considered a confessional poet, she is much discussed for her autobiography, *My Story*, where she describes her life openly. She consciously demonstrates how she was psycho-sexually tortured and beaten by her husband and other patriarchal agencies as well. The themes of love, sex, and the body in *My Story* chiefly highlight how Kamala Das represents her feminist stance protesting against patriarchal oppression.

Das' *My Story* can be acclaimed as an account of her disastrous love-sex-relationship with her husband. In the poem "The Freaks" which is included in her anthology *Summer in Calcutta*, Das mourns that her husband, who maintains a routine-bound monotonous life, considers love to be only a mechanical act of fulfilling "skin's lazy hungers" (8). She writes how she was detached psychologically and how she was a victim of marital rape. Sex came to her as a symbol of pain and violence for "every penetrative sex is violent" (Rebecca 9). The author, however, tries to come out of this orbit through her own strategies. One of these strategies is

writing against the injustices of a patriarchal world towards women to create a new identity. Das in *My Story* portrays that her marriage turned her into a “victim of a young man’s carnal hunger” (81), as her husband never cared for “loving words,” “conversation,” “companionship,” or “warmth,” which ultimately made her feel “lost and unhappy” (80). She exposes how her husband attacked her brutally on her wedding night: “Then without warning, he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack” and “again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me” (84, 85). The love that she received from her husband was “purely physical” (105) and her condition “was like a house with all its lights put out” (98). The love between her and her husband was reduced to mechanical sex, turning her life distasteful and horrible. She writes in *My Story*: “The man threw himself down on my body with two strange groans. He smelt of stale liquor and under his weight my limbs became rigid and I wished to raise myself to vomit” (101). As sexual violence was an inevitable event in the life of Kamala Das, she did not have any alternative except to yield herself to her “furious husband” (122). She was forced to behave like a freak with a grand flamboyant lust though she “was never a nymphomaniac” (186). Many questions may arise such as why does the poet describe sexual violence in detail? Is this an individual experience? Is this a common scenario in the contemporary world? Does the author share everything from sheer disgust only? Does she articulate her revolutionary voice as an agent of matriarchy? Many critics including A.N. Dwivedi and Ann Juli James have pointed out that Das’ delineation of sexual violence is a medium of sexual awakening; it is her endeavour to raise collective consciousness of women against sexual violence.

Both sexuality and the body function as an umbrella term in the works of Kamala Das. The image of sexuality that she portrays in *My Story* describes how she was psycho-physically tortured by her husband. Like any other woman of her time, torture on her, in fact, started at her father’s house in her childhood. Das did not have any opportunity to cherish her desire at her father’s house. When she was just eight, her father forced her to stop practicing dance though she was quite passionate about it. She felt heartbroken when her father dismissed her dance master. She also had to wear “Khadar saris” before her marriage on her father’s orders. Once, when she wanted her father to buy a silk frock for her, he replied thus: “Whose child are you? You know your father and mother never wear silk. Learn from your mother – don’t you know she wears only Khadar saris?” (*Childhood* 126). In *My Story*, she describes her father’s house as a “house of cards,” her father as an “autocrat” and her mother as “vague and indifferent.” Before marriage, she was dominated by her father, and after marriage the authority went to her husband. Thus, marriage becomes nothing but an exchange of masters for her. Simone de Beauvoir’s comment in *The Second Sex* echoes what happened to Kamala Das:

There is unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a “protector” – She will free herself from the paternal home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future, not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile into the hands of a new master. (352)

Das discloses every aspect of her life in her autobiography because she felt relief by doing so. She found people around her, particularly males, very critical of her feminist stance. So

she writes to challenge them, to fight back. Though patriarchy does not allow a woman to speak of taboo subjects, Das achieves this rebellion confidently and successfully. One of the prominent issues that Das describes in *My Story* is the breaking of the conventional approach to sex, i.e., remaining chaste and faithful towards one's husband by tolerating his psycho-physical torture, and accepting his extra-marital relationships with other women. She writes, "in the orbit of lawful sex, there is only crudeness and violence" (24). She again declares, "Whenever he found me alone in a room, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin" (79). However, though she lets him take her body every night and wound her soul in the hope that she can make an emotional attachment with him, her attempt is in vain. She, again and again, mentions her husband's crude sexuality in her autobiography: "He drew me to him as a serpent draws its dazed victim. I was his slave" (174). This kind of physical attack brings eternal suffering to the author. So she writes to be free from sexual violence, psychological trauma, man's lascivious desire, and the hegemonic gender oppression.

Das narrates both heterosexual and homosexual loves in her autobiography. As she fails to mentally communicate with her husband, she looks for a love out of the box because of her burning sense of revenge and disgust. Though her heterosexual love experience was not confined to her husband only, she discovered that all men possess the same attitude in terms of love, sex, and the female body. Every male who came into her life betrayed her and possessed the same flaws. Das discovered that, in every way, the male-dominated world subjugates women. Even in bed, the relationship between a man and a woman is mostly a relationship of power, for here the sole purpose of a man is "sexploitation." The ultimate result is that a woman is simply considered an object for sexual pleasure and production of children. Hence, Das could not satisfy her burning soul which she described in "The Dance of the Eunuch," the first poem of her *Summer in Calcutta* as: "She is now like a half-burnt log from/Funeral pyres" (7).

Some critics contend that Das promotes adultery; she is a woman of lust and amorality. However, A.N. Dwivedi in *Kamala Das and Her Poetry* argues that "when she speaks of love outside marriage, she does not necessarily propagate the institution of adultery or infidelity, but seems to be merely searching for a relationship which gives both genuine love and impenetrable security" (116). Dwivedi sounds quite logical because Das uses her extra-marital relation to break social customs and to come out of the shackles under which she is psychologically burnt like a "Sati." Her unconventional approach towards love is, in fact, an attempt to rediscover her "self" and to "subvert patriarchal stereotypes" (V.T. 5). She describes her heterosexual and homosexual relationship in *My Story* very openly, for "I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable" (90). The same stance of the poet is also presented in her poem "My Grandmother's House," one of the most renowned poems of her anthology *Summer in Calcutta*, thus: "I who have lost / My way and beg now at strangers' doors to / Receive love, at least in small change" (13). Das' unusual sexual activities throw a challenge to patriarchal tradition, question the heteronormative matrix and transgress patriarchal hegemony. In *My Story*, she describes her same-sex experience with a college girl in this way:

She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, so very sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling. ... It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that, no one, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all through that night. (90)

Das' homosexual yearning thus leads her to create a new identity which empowers her and allows her to overthrow patriarchal norms and customs that chiefly delimit the mobility of women: "like a phoenix, I rose from the ashes of my past" (164) and enters into a new world of being. Hence, "the same-sex desire in the work of Kamala Das does not operate along a hetero-homo divide, nor does it confer an identity as lesbian" (George 780), but rather it is a blow to the patriarchal oppression of women.

Kamala Das compares herself with the mythical character Radha who longs for the love of Krishna. In *My Story*, she expresses her desire for Krishna in this way: "I yearned for a change, a new life. I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha" (165). Radha, according to Hindu mythology, "relinquishes the ties of marriage in search of Lord Krishna, the true and eternal lover who is also the epitome of the fullest consciousness that a human being can contemplate" (James 67). She breaks family ties and meets Krishna to satisfy her "self," her psycho-physical thirst. Radha is not only a married woman, but also a common milkmaid, older than Krishna, the lover for whom she risks social acceptance, and her very life. However, she does not mourn for it because the new identity is more desirable than the earlier one. The poet's psychological identification with Radha, rather than Sita, is her way of inverting the ideologies, beliefs, and practices of patriarchy. As Radha is the symbol of self-love rather than self-denial, it is clear that Das "represents a kind of new awareness among her fraternity and reveals a deeply sustaining strength of her own identity as woman and artist" (Wadhwa 81).

It can be argued that the themes of love, sex, and the female body in Das' autobiography, *My Story*, are an essence of her protest against the heteropatriarchal matrix. Hence, it is one of the projects of her feminist agenda through which she aims to shatter patriarchal ideologies and thereby create a new identity.

To sum up, we can say that though Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das were born and brought up in two different societies, one being modern America, the other convention-ridden Indian Hindu society, though the setting and the time of their texts are different, though the individual experiences are distinct, at one point their experiences merge as the manifestation of gender consciousness. Both writers delineate the sufferings of heteropatriarchal delimitations. Hence, in terms of gender issues, they have identical experiences. They are both victims of patriarchal gendered norms and customs. So, both Das and Plath, in portraying unconventional attitudes towards love, sex, and the body, protest against sexual violence and gender discrimination. Both poets, therefore, assert their identity as the "New Woman" and fulfill a feminist agenda through their work.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. Vintage Books, 2009.
- Blair, Cathleen Elizabeth. *Fetishizing Innocence, Performing Sickness, and Achieving Wholeness: The Body as Weapon in The Bell Jar*. U of North Carolina, 2008.
- Das, Kamala. *A Childhood in Malabar: A Memoir*. Trans. Gita Krishnankutty. Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *My Story*. Sterling, 1988.
- . *Summer in Calcutta*. DC Books, 1965.
- Drobnik, Iga Helena. *Life Narrative in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar*. Thesis. Roskilde U, 2014.
- Dwivedi, A.N. *Kamala Das and Her Poetry*. Atlantic, 2000.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly. "Calling Kamala Das Queer: Rereading *My Story*." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2000, pp. 731-763.
- James, Ann Juli. *Figures in Fine Print and Hindustani Hopes and Fears: Identity and Expectations in the Poetry of Kamala Das*. U of Pretoria, 2010.
- Lamb, Vanessa Martins. *The 1950s and 1960s and the American Woman: The Transition to the 'Housewife' to the Feminist*. Université du Sud Toulon-Var, 2011.
- Martin, Linda Wagner. *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber, 1963.
- Sabancı, Gamze. "Resistance as the Discourse of Docile Bodies in Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2013, pp. 59-79.
- Smith, Rosi. "Seeing through *The Bell Jar*: Distorted Female Identity in Cold War America." *Aspeers*, vol. 1, 2008, pp. 33-55.
- V. T., Usha. "One Woman's Autobiography: Kamala Das's *My Story*." *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum*. Edited by Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucchio, Atlantic, 2013, pp. 1-9.
- Wadhwa, Poonam. "Kamala Das' Bold Poetic Foray of Articulating Female Desire: A Step towards Emancipation." *International Indexed & Referred Research Journal*, vol. 36, 2012, pp. 80-82.

