CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

A comparative study of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das reveals not only their achievements as confessional poets but also the strength and weakness of the mode in expressing the complexities of the modern life. There is no denying the truth that the confessional mode provides poetic identity to both Sexton and Das. Obviously, they are known for their confessional poetry if not for the shocking disclosures of the most intimate and private experiences of physical type or, to be precise, their experiences as females. In a sense they are involved with the mode in a double bind of mutual grace. While the mode enables them to unburden their guilt-ridden self, they on their part, shape and perfect the mode, taking it to the utmost point, which a poetic mode can achieve. If Sexton and Das realize the heights and depths of their personality, 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 Sexton and Das to give voice to the cries of their heart. Sexton, 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, counting the rows of moccasins, and pretending to love her godlike doctor, the prince of all the foxes. Through this very mode she recreates her memories of the white lady of the heart, her angelic grandmother Anna Ladd Dingley. It is this mode which enables her to
ventilate her predicaments as a mother as well, when her child Joyce refuses to recognize her.

The confessional mode enables Sexton to lay bare her guilt-ridden consciousness burdened with a self which held itself responsible for the death of her parents and teacher. Guilt consciousness is a complex emotion which cannot be articulated by an objective or even by ordinary subjective forms. It is an obsessive emotion which continues to afflict one's bruised self for ever. Its shadows continue to hover over one's agonized mind. However, Sexton 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 purgated. To her poetry becomes an incantation as well as a vehicle of catharsis. Subsequently, poetry becomes more important than psychiatry. No, wonder, it is not through psychiatry but poetry that Sexton regains her mental equilibrium and confidence in her self.

Furthermore, the confessional mode enables Sexton to deal with her suicidal instinct with which even her parents, her friends, and even doctors failed to deal. Death wish is one of the most complex emotions, which evades expression. It is so ferocious in its operation that it knocks down the protective walls of sanity, emotional control systems, and instrument of self-security. Every form of poetry proves hopelessly inadequate to record minutely and meticulously the struggle for ascendancy between the life and death instincts. However, it is the confessional mode which facilitates Sexton to record how she came to develop suicidal tendencies and to inch towards her savage god.
She describes allurement offered by death that she finds difficult to resist. Her instinct seems to be more overwhelming than Hamlet's, though for different reasons. But the devils of death are challenged by the angels of life that disperse the shadows of the dark night from her soul. She comes to understand the riddles of life and death and goes on to realize that one has to accept the buffets of fortune in the same way as one welcomes the bouquets of life. With this realization, she visualizes the opening of the flower of life inside her, as she finds herself breathing in the beautiful dawn of life. This journey of the self from darkness of death to the light of life can be described in other forms as well. But in those forms it would seldom acquire energy, intensity, and vitality as it gets in the confessional mode.

Interestingly the confessional mode helps Sexton to verbalize not only her personal experiences but also her search for truth and the fulfilment of her social commitments. Her aim as a poet is not merely to ventilate her pent-up feelings but to reveal the emotional truth behind the factual truth or the experiences of her life. While exploring her inner self, she wants to produce the inward look of the psyche, which society scorns or does not want to acknowledge. Sexton actually wants to show the ugly face of the society, its dirt and filth, which are instrumental in causing individual and social sickness. But gradually her crude confessional fury subsides, undergoing a process of sublimation in which psychic exploration assumes the form of an intense religious search. Thus with the help of this mode, Sexton goes on to explore
not only psychic and social territories but also to fathom the oceanic depths of religious consciousness.

Kamala Das also finds in confessional mode 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, whether spent in the company of her husband and family or in the embrace of her lovers, real or fictitious. The confessional mode enables her to sing her body’s “convulsions,” her “skin’s lazy hunger,” her “body’s wisdom,” the endless “female hungers” of her lusty sexual life, along with the “musk of sweat between the breasts” and the “warm shock of menstrual blood.” It facilitates her to describe the charm and erotic magnetism of her lover’s body, the blind “kindness of his lips,” his “burning mouth,” the “jerky way,” he urinates and all those details, which make male, a male indeed.

The confessional mode offers her with a powerful medium to paint her miserable married life of uneasy honeymoons and physical humiliations. It enables her to speak of the hands of lovers like “hooded snake” clasping her pubis and his body like a felled free slumping against her breasts or his body hacking against her body like the clods of iron. It helps her to voice her sense of humiliation suffered at the hands of her husband, making her cower beneath his monstrous ego and reducing her to a dwarf. With its help, she can condemn her husband as an old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment and can sing of the ugliness of her body as an old playhouse with its lights put out of a body which she wears without joy. Confessional mode provides her with a vehicle
capable of giving vent to her horror of the female body growing gross and reaching large proportions before its end.

Obviously, the confessional mode gives Das an opportunity to develop her creed of love and lust. Through it, she tells her readers, how with the indifference of a cheap toy, she enters the lives of men and lays the traps of lust. Using the mode, she conveys her sense of happiness and contentment, as her life in love becomes like a curled old mongrel. She also expresses the magic strength of her desire, which draws maleness out of a male in whose arms she wants to end her life in peace. Writing in the mode, Sexton does not hesitate to confess the experience of heat generated by passion with her body burning and with lover’s limbs appearing like pale and carnivorous plants reaching out for her body. And above all this mode of direct expression enables her to confess her unrequited love and unfulfilled desires.

The confessional mode inspires Das to delineate less exciting experiences depicting the monotony of life and the dance of the eunuchs as well. With the description of the dance of the eunuchs beating their sorry breasts in the hot summer of Calcutta, she poetizes not only their “vacant ecstasy” but also the vacancy of the poet’s mind. In confessional strokes she peels off the multiple layers of her self which assumes a number of roles both private and public. Like Sexton, she uses poetry as an instrument of catharsis or mental purgation, for getting rid of her inhibitions and obsessions, which hinder her progress of life. Poetry also becomes a vehicle of religious
experience, which finds its outlet in poems dealing with the mythical love of Radha-Krishna.

Like Sexton, Das finds in the confessional mode, a perfect medium for ventilating his struggles with her suicidal instinct. Das’s death-wish is as strong as Sexton’s. But she does not treat death in elaborate terms. She rather gives us a succinct expression of her death-wish. She writes under the blinding darkness of night, with death coming like a night-fall. But this death-wish goes to assume a sterner form after the bouts of misery, grief, frustration, failure, frigidity, and coldness all legacies of her troubled life. These experiences produce in her an acute sense of depression, making her fed up with life. She has now only love and simplicity that one gets only after death.

While expressing their inmost experiences in the confessional mode, Sexton and Das 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 the human heart to the whisperings of the lover’s mind and the spiritual stirrings of the intoxicated soul. The mode, which was previously confined to make confessions and was associated with sensationalism becomes a powerful medium to air the most moving and engaging social concerns. Removing its inherent emotional constraints and psychical perils involving in digging one’s psyche, they bring out this mode from its subjective confines and sensationalism to breathe in the open air which partakes the qualities of both the internal and external worlds.
In their effort to expand the horizons of the confessional mode, Sexton and Das experiment with certain technical innovations to make their poetry an instrument of social awakening, private and public catharsis, transcendence, 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. Rescuing the mode from the regional prejudices, Sexton and Das make confessionalism, a mode of female emancipation and an embodiment of truths, valid to all humanity.

At the outset confessional mode was nothing more than sensational. It was used only for startling, upsetting, and shocking experience to shake human psyche. It is precisely for this purpose that most of the American poets, including Sexton, employed it. They poetized their humiliations, psychic disturbances, and even the secret workings of sex organs. But very soon they came to realize that these experiences were not individual but universal. Man and woman have their quota of emotional suffering, mental diseases, and sexual desires. With this realization confessional poets began to universalize their experience. Sexton too began to write 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. In almost all her poems, especially in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, All My Pretty Ones, Live or Die, and Love Poems, we find an undertone of a wider experience.
Social or universal strains mark the poetry of Kamala Das as well. In her poetic journey, she also proceeds from a purely personal to a social stance. In her poems dealing with sexual experience with the husband or the so-called lovers, she seems content to portray only the most personal. In poems like “The Old Playhouse,” where she speaks of her body’s responses, its weather and its convulsions; in “The Looking Glass,” in which she writes about the jerky way of her lover’s urination; and in “Jaisurya” in which she becomes gleefully aware of the soft stirrings of fetus in the womb, she describes only her personal experiences. But when she comes to describe her mental anguish and acute manic depressions, she assumes a representative female voice. In “Glass,” like a forlorn woman she seeks for her misplaced father. In “The Suicide,” her voice is 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 mode, which she initially used to express her pent up feelings, becomes a powerful medium of inspiration to Malayali as well as other Indian women.

Although confessionalism in itself is cathartic. But the element of catharsis found in old confessional traditions 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 Sexton 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, which can drive away the ghosts of parents and lovers. In many of
her poems like "Cripples and Other Stories," "Pain For a Daughter," "Flee on Your Donkey," 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 ghosts infesting the memory lane and causing mental and physical disturbances.

Das also makes 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 tremendous 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. Otherwise it might have rocked her total being causing enormous physical as well mental damage. Voicing her agony through poems like "Summer in Calcutta," "An Introduction," "My Grandmother's House," "The Suicide," "Gino," "The Dance of the Eunuchs," "Composition," "The Old Playhouse," "Glass," etc., she appeases the fury of the domestic, social, and even literary ghosts infesting her female consciousness. Poetry for her became just another branch of pathology.

Furthermore, both Sexton and Das provide at least a semblance of objectivity to this purely subjective mood. Indeed confessional mode suffers from suffocating solipsistic tendencies, mirroring all forms of reality in the self of the poetic persona. The world vision which it offers is only narcissistic, sans a legitimate sense of the other side or the reality. Such a vision is hopelessly one-sided and incomplete. But in the hands of Sexton and Das, this mode
develops a technique to accommodate the external world in 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.

Anne Sexton in one of her most confessional or personal poems, “You Doctor Mortin” uses objective imagery to clothe her experience of her psychic maladies. She describes her mental asylum as her summer hotel and herself as its queen. She speaks of standing in broken lines waiting for the door to be unlocked, and being ready for counting at the frozen gates of dinner. She also tells us of making moccasins and of loving her doctor who leans above the plastic sky and who is the prince of all foxes. With these images this subjective poem is invested with an objective aroma. In another poem of purely personal nature titled, “Dreaming the Breast,” the poet evokes the images of freckled arms, woolly hat, shoes, breasts hanging like two bats, midnight sea, bees, milk, surgeon, etc. to portray a state of guilt-consciousness.

Interestingly, for painting abstract mental states, she employs objective correlatives of the concrete type. Like Emily Dickinson, she treats death as a person, to be precise, as a middle aged lover, belonging to the middle class. In “For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open,” she writes of his belly as hanging out like Fatso. She paints him as her comical bean, popping his buttons, and expelling gas. Sexton goes on to describe life as well in concrete terms. In her famous poem “Live,” she visualizes life inside her opening like an egg. Thus with the use of objective imagery, Sexton takes confessional poetry to the heights of an unprecedented greatness and transcendence.
Likewise, Das fortifies the confessional mode with physical, animal, and natural imagery which externalizes her mental states of internal suffering. In the poems of *Summer in Calcutta*, she objectifies her strangled desire caused by her failure in love. In “The Freaks,” she describes this desire in form of skin’s lazy hungers and heart as an empty cistern. However, the best example of this objectification comes in “The Dance of the Eunuchs,” in which Das expresses her distress and disappointment through frenzied dance of the flat-chested eunuchs which produces only a vacant ecstasy. She speaks of jasmines, flashing eyes, the urine of lizards and mice, all objective correlatives of the state of mental vacancy.

Das frequently objectifies her inner restlessness with the image of the sea and its immeasurable world inside. She captures even such an elusive and complicated mental state as suicide with the image of vortex of the sea. In “The Suicide,” she tells us of the dead body drifting like wood and striking against coral reefs. Establishing her identity with the sea as two big flops, because of their feeling of too much sentimentality for their own good. Das goes on to objectify life as akin to lights moving on the sea shore. Love is another abstract state which she tries to define in objective terms, images, and symbols. She describes love, caught in a fluid state and involving frequent change of lovers, as a swivel door. Treating love in physical terms, she uses other physical images like womb’s blinded hunger, and the muted whisper. But when Das comes to describe spiritual love, she uses most concrete images.
In a remarkable poem “Ghanashyam,” she objectifies love as a nest in the arbour of her heart in the sleeping jungle of life.

However, the greatest contribution of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das 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. They mould the so-called sensational mode into a mode that can ventilate the full gamut of the varieties of religious experience. Sexton’s tremendous effort to spiritualize confessional form surfaces in poems dealing with Christ and in such collections as The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing towards God. Likewise, Das comes good with poems dealing with the legend of Radha-Krishna.

In the ten “Psalms,” of “O Ye Tongues,” incorporated in The Death Notebooks, Sexton admires God, the creator of this world. With the praise of God she experiences enlightenment, as she comes to realize the true nature of death which opens the door of God’s abode. However, Sexton’s best effort to raise confessional mode to mystic heights is exemplified in The Awful Rowing towards God. The poem expresses her literal sailing towards the island of God. She graphs her journey, which passes through physical, mental, and spiritual stages, in purely confessional terms. Her longings, her yearnings, her prayers, and her admirations all are rendered in strains of genuine confessions. Recreating the quirks of mystical experience, Sexton goes on to make confessional mode an instrument of cosmic experience.
Das also enlarges the scope of confessionalism with the inclusion of poems dealing with the love of Radha and Krishna. These poems are scattered throughout her poetry. She envisions Krishna in many forms, including in the form of her son as well as her lover who, like Koel, has built his nest in her heart. In poems like "Radha-Krishna," "Radha," "Ghanshyam," etc. she elevates confessionalism to transcendental heights for voicing her spiritual love longings, her intense desire to be one with divine her lover. Thus in her hand, the confessional mode, which was a mode of confessions and social protest, becomes a mode of ventilating spiritual experience.

Indeed, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are confessional poets par-excellence. Through their path-breaking poetry, they reveal the unrevealed, i.e. the truths 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. Sexton and Das write not merely their biographies but rather create mythologies of their self. With an imaginative mixture of fact and fiction, they develop and perfect the confessional mode, elevating it from a mere instrument of unfolding psychic history, to a literary mode capable of using all tricks of the poetic trade, assuming objective undertones, and ultimately flowering into a vehicle of cosmic and mystic experience.