Acknowledgement

My foremost thanks are due to my supervisor Dr. R.K. Misra and Co-supervisor Dr. Mahendra Singh but for whose benevolent and inspiring guidance this thesis would not have been completed. I am also indebted to Mrs. Shobha Misra and Dr. (Mrs.) Krishna Thakur for their encouragement. I express my gratitude to Dr. R.K. Tripathi as well for his help and inspiration.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Principal, Dr. N.D. Samadhia, the Librarian and the staff of D.V. College, Orai, my research centre and Mr. R. Misra, the Librarian of the Central Library, I.I.T. Kanpur and his staff for permitting me to use the library. At the same time I would like to record my obligations to Mr. P. Singh, Instrumentation Engineer, I.I.T. Kanpur for helping me in the collection of the required material. Thanks are also due to Mr. J.P. Sharma for the flawless typing the manuscript.

At this occasion I express my thankfulness to my parents, Sri Ravi Narayan Awasthi, and Smt. Bitani Devi, to my brother Shri Kamala Kant Awasthi, sister-in-law Smt. Reeta Awasthi, and to my father-in-law Shri Ram Dayal Tiwari and mother-in-law Smt. Uma Devi Tiwari. I’ll be failing in my duty if I do not thank my wife Mrs. Pritama Awasthi and my little ones Abha and Piyush who stood with me during these difficult years and did everything to remove the burden and tension which a research work invariably involves.

In the end I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to authors, whose ideas and language I have used consciously or unconsciously.

Krishna Kant Awasthi
Preface

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are manifestly two of the most luminous stars of the twentieth century poetic firmament. They illumine not only the aesthetic sky of their respective countries but also that of the whole world. Interestingly in their literary adventure both of them are inspired by a common ideal that bind them to a close kinship. From every angle, historical, social, and literary, they reflect a world of common experience with its peculiar beauty and ugliness, fascination and repulsion, and above all weal and woe. Differences of country, climate, historical and cultural legacies notwithstanding, they share a language of psychic maladies, social protest, and religious experience that voice their aims and aspirations. With their literary efforts, they go on to shock the whole human community by their unorthodox utterances and to champion the cause of women.

Obviously the poetic credo of Sexton and Das involves new thematic and formal patterns. Both of them participate in the modern movements in literature which rose against the lifeless and dull musing of the poetry of Modernism. Abandoning the objective poetry of indirection, they developed a new poetry of direct and personal experience. Thematically some poets like Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Theodore Roethke, Berryman, and Randall Jarrell, placed their literal self at the centre of their poems and revelled in expressing their own private humiliations, suffering, and psychological problems like complex manic depressions, madness, suicidal tendencies etc. For poetic themes they milked their own consciousness. At the same time some female poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia
Plath, and Judith Wright went a step further as they focussed on their naked female self, revealing not only the mysteries of the inner self but also details peculiar to the female experience of extremely erotic nature. In this way they became daring enough to give vent to the taboo subjects, risking their physical and mental health, social prestige, and disturbing social harmony. These poets, male as well as female, thus considerably enlarged the range of poetry with the inclusion of the ugly, the repulsive, the forbidden, the inhibited, and the taboo subjects.

For poetizing new themes, they had to develop a new poetics radically different from the one dominating the contemporary poetic scene. Eventually they drew inspiration from a tradition of confession popular in ancient poetry, religion, and psychiatry. They fell back on an old poetic form used by Sappho, Catullus, and Augustine and continued by Rousseau, Baudelaire Rilke and Whitman. However, with their tremendous skill these poets developed this method into a perfect literary medium, capable of digging the buried elements of obsession, guilt, and psychological complexes, expressing the rise and fall of human moods, cycles and climates of the human body, and transcendental longings. In their hands, especially in the hands of Sexton, this mode, which is designated as confessional mode, realized its immense promise. She perfected the mode, investing it with universality and transcendence with the introduction of literary techniques of highest order.

What Anne Sexton endeavoured to accomplish in America, Kamala Das did in India. Sexton poetic mission was shared by Kamala Das. She also opted for taboo subjects of her legitimate and illegitimate sex life, revealing the
innermost secrets of the female body, its convulsions, its hungers, and its waywardness and aberrations. Like Sexton she blends the confessions of her leaky self with a language of social protest which voices her concern for the female tribe and other suppressed sections of society. However, neither her confessional theme nor her confessional mode is simple. Both of them betray a complexity, which comes from the use of literary devices, in laying bare the life of the hidden self. Interestingly as a social and literary experience, Das’ poetry runs parallel to Sexton’s, in spite of differences in their outlook and cultural background.

The comparative study of Sexton and Das, who are unquestionably two of the best exponents of the modern female consciousness under psychic stress and female compulsions, is revealing as well as rewarding. However, like any other comparative study, it has its own problems, which invariably stem from the difference of their social and cultural backgrounds. Even though they exemplify a similar pattern of life, involved in similar types of humiliations, sex experiences, suicidal tendencies, attacks of mental diseases, they possessed a different mentality. Hence we are bound to find in their works similarities as well as differences of some or the other kind. In the following pages our effort would be to treat poetic affinities and differences in an objective and impartial manner.

Since our study is of a specific nature, dealing only with the confessional aspect of the poetry of Sexton and Das, we would focus our attention on the characteristic qualities only of their confessional poetry and present a comparative analysis, pinpointing their excellences and limitations. These focal points include the definition of confessional poetry as the poetry of the leaky or the buried self
and the poetry celebrating human body, especially female body with a mixture of reality and imagination. Considering the role of irony, understatement, paradoxes, metonymy, and many such devices, we are to evaluate the part played by symbolism and imagery to shape the confessional mode as an instrument of power. We have also to discuss the religious and the transcendental aspects of this mode. These are precisely the points of reference which would serve as our guiding principles. However, in view of its limited scope, the study is neither exhaustive nor complete. It has all the defects of a beginner. Nevertheless, it is a sincere effort to evaluate Sexton and Das as confessional poets.