Chapter I
Chapter – I

Introductory

The history of American Literature saw the emergence of confessional style of writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In confessional poetry the poet’s personal or private emotion takes a new course. These poems deal with private voices regarding trauma, despair, death, and intimate personal relationships almost in an autobiographical tone. A poet’s personal self has been projected through these poems either frankly or in a roundabout way. Especially as a post Second World War phenomenon this type of writing unfolds a new human consciousness arising out of the devastating aftermath of Hiroshima and Hitler’s brutal Nazi killing. Richard Gray clarifies:

In the period immediately following the Second World War, American writers looked back-in anger, in regret, in grief, in relief or in one or more of many other series of emotions—on a conflict that had threatened to engulf humankind. (564)

For this new generation of American writers the first person lyrics did not shut them up in the solitude of their own hearts but rather enabled them to embrace a larger social vision, achieving universal resonance over self-referential anecdotes:

The fifties also witnessed a new understanding of mass man and his futilities: now it was a “post-industrial” society that provided his background, and the sociologist identified his prototype with such terms as “alienation”, “the lonely crowd”, and “inner directed”. (Molesworth 163)
In confessional poetry the reader has a direct emotional access to the subject’s consciousness which consequently is a deviation from the New Critical approach of the 1940s that considered poetry as impersonal, indirect and intellectual. There is the voluntary shift from the established concept of impersonal ‘persona’ to the explicit identity of ‘I’ which is clearly inseparable from the poet. It arises out of the necessity to form an individuality amidst identity-crisis brought about by the two Great Wars. Confessional poets, by going against the New Critical mode, celebrate the expression of individuality which necessitated a spontaneous and frank exposure of self. The romantic subjectivism is denounced by Eliot and other New Critics because of its excessive use of ‘personal element’, celebration of the private self and outburst of uncontrolled emotion. The school of confessional poets, interestingly enough, brought back the element of personal self in poetry. As David Perkins points out:

. . . Confessional poetry renders personal experience or emotion as it actually is regardless of social conventions. Moreover, Confessional poetry expresses truth and experience so painful that most people would suppress them. If, therefore, a woman resents her children or feels victimized by a patriarchal society and revengeful toward it, the Confessional mode enables her to express such emotions directly, and, for readers, they have a documentary value. (588-589)

The spontaneous and frank expressions that one finds in the poetry of the confessional school are in direct opposition to the formal and impersonal style advocated by the New Critics. The features of confessional poetry make it resemble the ‘open form’ as
advocated by Charles Olson, himself a poet and pioneer of Black Mountain Poetry Movement of 1950s. Talking about ‘open form’ David Perkins observes:

Both historically and psychologically, “open” form in the poetry of the last thirty years began as a reaction against the New Critical “closure”, and in order to obtain a preliminary notion of what is meant by “open” form, we need only recall some of the formal qualities advocated and exemplified within the New Critical mode: correct grammar, logic, regular meter, rhyme, stanzas, coherence, condensation, polysemy, and control. “Open” form, then, implies qualities opposite to these, such as immediacy, spontaneity, and freedom. (490)

These words may appropriately reflect the style of confessional poetry. In confessional poetry the composition is often not different from the spontaneous act of living. The versification in such poetry is free and often no particular pattern of lineation is followed. This is not only found in the poetry of American confessional poets, but the poetry of Kamala Das also evinces the same features.

In romantic poetry one often comes across the confessional mode of writing. Wordsworth’s “The Prelude” or “Tintern Abbey” or Keats’s “Fall of Hyperion” bears some similar characteristics like those of ‘confessional poems’. Anne Hartman in her “Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O’Hara and Allen Ginsberg” discusses the critical history behind the origin of Romantic Poetry. She thinks that this history might be influential for confessional poetry of 1950s and 60s. While discussing this history she traces parallel relationship between romantic and confessional poetry. She finds “such poetry has a place where the solitary individual can express the truth of the self” (45).
She also contextualizes Rousseau in her article. According to Rousseau poetry can be the only medium through which man can reach to his true, inner self and unlike confessional prose, “Poetry is associated with the spoken voice and thus avoids the corruption of writing”(45). Rousseau said that the primitive men used poetry as their first language. They expressed their intimate emotion in the manner of poetic expressions. With the evolution of language, the essence of feeling was replaced by ideas based on reason. Rousseau mentions it as a loss. He emphasizes feeling as a source of writing poems. Reason comes to a secondary position. As ‘feeling’ has a direct access to the truer and purer human self, so poems must be personal. Hartman then quotes John Stuart Mill’s famous definition of poetry as “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” (46). Romantic poetry incorporates the dual elements of confession and solitude. Hartman finds Mill strengthening “Rousseau’s distinction between language that can express the truth of the self and language that is tainted by the society” (46). She finally concludes that romantic poetry can be the true predecessor of the ‘confessional poems’ written in 1950s and 1960s from the point of view of conveying the ‘true self’ in the poems.

Another critic Steve K. Hoffman, however, observes that “it would be a serious mistake” (689) to draw continuous relationship between attributes of romantic poetry and those of confessional poems. He explains:

Despite the radical personalism of Wordsworth’s “The Prelude” and virtually the entire Whitman canon, neither poet approaches the minute autobiographical particularity of the confessionals, the almost numbing rehearsal of family conflict, severe emotional imbalance, and the
difficulties in everyday living; neither so consistently or in such copious
detail affords us entry into the marriage bed, the asylum, or the
detoxification ward. (689-690)

There is a shift in the perspective of the persona in the poems. In confessional poems the
protagonist, who is grappling with various socio-psychological problems, comes very
close to the level of the reader. The reader who is rarely detached from his contemporary
time can spontaneously take part in the poems:

The age for Lowell ricochets through the verbal web of these poems
connecting a time of the century with a time of life, an editor and a
pacifist, a townhouse and a jail, all through imagistic and auditory echoes
decievably disguised by the low poetic profile of these pieces. (Barry 51)

But the persona in the Romantic poems possesses a heroic quality much above the reach
of the reader. In confessional poems the ‘speaking voice’ is the representative of his/her
time rather than an ideal character. The language and the elevated style in Romantic
poems are also different from the informal, conversational and frank expression in
confessional poems.

Rosenthal titled his article as “Poetry as Confession”. Here he very reasonably
differentiates ‘confessional poets’ from the ‘romantics’:

We are now far from the great Romantics who, it is true, spoke directly of
their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves. They
found, instead, cosmic equations and symbols, transcendental
reconciliations with “this limetree bower my prison”, titanic melancholia
in the course of which, merging his sense of tragic fatality with the evocations of the nightingale’s song, the poet lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness. (109)

Then Rosenthal comments on the masking of self in the writings of the poets following the Eliotian tradition:

More recently, under the influence of the Symbolists, Eliot and Pound brought us into the forbidden realm itself, yet even in their work a certain indirection masks the poet’s actual face and psyche from greedy eyes.

(emphasis added 109)

Rosenthal’s review may be regarded as the first critical document on confessional poetry. In other words, it acted as a spring board for subsequent critical discussions on confessional poetry. In this review of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies he gives credit to this school of poets who are responsible for the unmasking of the self that comes as a natural outcome of the contemporary socio-cultural dilemmas affecting the individuals of that age:

Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of Life Studies as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal. (109)

In confessional poetry it is often difficult to separate the poet from the speaker persona. Their use of ‘I’ displays the poet’s own conscious or subconscious mind. Rosenthal cites an example from Lowell which is an instance of the inclusion of very personal moments:

About half the book, the prose section called “91 Revere Street,” is essentially a public discrediting of his father’s manliness and character, as
well as of the family and social milieu of his childhood. Another section, the concluding sequence of poems grouped under the heading “Life Studies”, reinforces and even repeats these motifs, bringing them to bear on the poet’s psychological problems as an adult. The father, naval officer manqué and then businessman and speculator manqué, becomes a humiliating symbol of the failure of a class and of a kind of personality.

(109)

Though Rosenthal considers Life Studies as an “impure art” (110), he has very effectively judged its evocative value in relation to the expression of the contemporary “maggoty character” (110) that Lowell carries in his own person:

But he is not wrong in looking at the culture through the window of psychological breakdown. Too many other American poets, no matter what their social class and family history, have reached the same point in recent years. Lowell is foremost among them in the energy of his uncompromising honesty. (110)

This may be the reason Rosenthal titled this new genre of writing as “confessional” and the poets who followed Lowell adopted the same mode to exhibit their personal lives for universal understanding.

Robert S Philips in his influential and pioneering book on ‘confessional poetry’, The Confessional Poets (1973), does not want Lowell to be named as the progenitor of this school. Instead, he is more eager to link its ancestry to the earliest cavemen who used to draw pictures of hunting animals in order to give vent to the murderous instinct within
Philips narrates the tradition of this confessional art as a deliberate product of our disturbed mind:

> All confessional art, whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed. (2)

He then traces this tradition through the writings of St. Augustine and Rousseau which bear a relevant relationship to the modern school of confessional writings:

> This sense of eternal torture is one the motivating forces behind any confessional art. That is why St. Augustine, with his acute sensitivity to the conflicts and problems of the inner life, must be considered an important progenitor of confessional literature. . . . An Augustinian awareness of human nature and a sense of eternal torture also permeates that great “poem”, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* – one of the frankest self-revelations ever offered the public, and one written two hundreds years ago (1781-88). (3)

Apart from them, Philips deals with a set of writers belonging to different ages whose poetry bear the characteristics of confessional writings. It is his earnest attempt to show that this type of writing is not a sudden arrival in the backdrop of post World War scenario; on the contrary the writers like Plath, Lowell, Sexton and many like them are the descendants of a tradition:

> Sappho, Catullus, Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman, countless others through the ages have written the Self as primary subject,
the Self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint. It is well to remember that, at the least, confessional poetry can be traced as far back as Sir Thomas Wyatt, which is pretty far; and that Pope’s famous *Epistle to Arbuthnot* is a worthy example of the genre, as is Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Byron’s *Don Juan*. The Confessional mode, then, has always been with us. (4)

Philips also stresses on the subjective character of this style of writing which is in ‘direct opposition’ to the Eliotian school of poetry writing:

> It is that writing which is highly subjective, which is in direct opposition to that other school of which Auden and Eliot are modern members - writers who consciously strove all but to obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems. It is poetry written in opposition to, or reaction from, the Eliotic aesthetic which influenced several generations of poets, and which can best be summarized in Old Possum’s statement, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”. (4-5)

However, Philips corroborates Rosenthal’s assumption that Robert Lowell is one of those pioneering poets in this mode of writing in modern American Literature. Others are Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) and John Berryman (1914-72). This School of Confessional Poetry also includes Sylvia Plath (1932-63), Anne Sexton (1928-74), Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) and W.D. Snodgrass (1926-2009).

Contemporary American poetry of 1950s and 60s are very much naturalistic. That is why the poets also express their emotions and experiences in the same way as an
ordinary American does. Every detail of personal life like love making, rearing of children, drinking with friend, sickness etc are included in their writings. Subject matters like suicidal tendencies, feeling of humiliation, lust, relationship with families, complex attachment towards opposite or same sex, narration of Freudian complexities etc give these poems a different characteristic.

Generally reflections of personality in any artistic creation always try to reach the level of universality, as the general tendency of any work of art is to acquire perfection. Confessional poets primarily use personal details in his/her writing to project an individual suffering self detached from the surrounding world. There lies the impact and vitality of these poems. As if an imprisoned flow of ocean is waiting for an outburst, the suppressed, hidden, events of personal history waiting to be explored. Personal details of suffering and pain expressed in these poems narrow down the scope of objective detachment and make easy the pathological process of catharsis when expressed frankly through poems written in confessional mode.

Though Lowell has influence of Ginsberg upon him, still he creates such a style which proves influential on other poets. Irving Howe argues, “Poetry of Lowell is confessional because the ‘I’ in the poem really did mean his private self, not a persona created for the poem’s occasion” (227). In a different tone Patrick Cosgrove negates Lowell as a confessional poet, but still he admits that the label ‘confessional’, “revealed an essential part of the way in which Lowell, and the critics and commentators who admire him, thought about their – and man’s – place in the world of affairs” (111). Again Mark Rudman comments, “Browning, Eliot and Pound, impersonate in varying degrees, other voices, Lowell infuses the force of his own personality and style into every line he
writes” (47). And David Perkins in an analytical way points out, “. . . it indicates a poetry in which the expression is personal, or is conventionally accepted as personal, and reveals experiences or emotions that are more or less shocking – hatred of one’s parents, children, spouse or self, lust, voyeurism, suicidal fantasies, madness” (410). The above opinions lead us to conclude that Robert Lowell has already paved the way for the future confessional poets. Though not all, but major part of his poems are written in this mode. Lowell himself admits, “. . . there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn’t ordinarily have in poetry – reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell” (qtd. in Perkins 411).

Lowell’s poetry is in clear opposition to Eliot’s proclamation that the man that suffers is entirely separate from the mind that creates. Truly this contemporary mode of poetry of 1950s and 60s already wiped out the notion of impersonality woven into a poem. That is why Lowell never hesitates to include a prose memoir called “91 Revere Street”, which is the address of the house in Boston where he spent his childhood, into the American edition of Life Studies. Appropriately the name ‘Life Studies’ stands for the ‘study of personal life’; it does not refer to the process of painting where an artist is supposed to imitate any given object, either living or non-living.

Confessional poetry can be analyzed as an extension of the stream of consciousness technique developed and modified by modern writers. In these poems the rediscovery of fragmented selves are brought to the forefront; narration of these ramblings sometime can be incoherent. As Marjorie Perloff argues, “The danger of the Lowell mode . . . is that the poem too easily becomes self-indulgent confession on the one hand, or random description of objects on the other” (178). But somehow Lowell’s
genius is sufficient to avoid this incoherency in poems like “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” or “1922: The Stone Porch of my Grandfather’s Summer”. Though his later anthologies like For the Union Dead (1964) or Near the Ocean (1967) do not follow the mode used in Life Studies, many of the poems included in these books are confessional in nature.

If we turn to the post-war female poets it is found that poetry written by a number of women poets is confessional. Exploration of their personal events and their psychological perspective are different from those of men. Their very personal anguish, sufferings and humiliation are expressed through these poems. Confessional mode of writing helps a female poet in the expression of her suppressed self and to regain her lost identity. At the same time

... in all such confession there is an additional revolutionary impulse. The confessor is in effect including what she confesses within the realm of human nature. She is challenging moral or social assumption by widening our notion of the ‘normal’. (Perkins 589)

In the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich the fusion between ‘confessional mode of writing’ and ‘feminism’ is easily discernible. All of them celebrate the freedom from traditional bondage, from the bondage of suppression. They never oversimplify their self perception. One finds in their poems the necessary ambivalence between the suffered self and its projection in the poem. Sylvia Plath defines this mode of poetry:
I think that personal experience shouldn’t be kind of shut box and a
mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally
relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (Plath)

Two different complex and problematic relationships, with father and husband, in her
life acted as vital factors in making her a confessional poet and these were factors which
forced her to commit suicide. Plath’s anthology *The Colossus* was published in 1960 and
in 1963 came out her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*; but with the posthumous
publication of her second anthology *Ariel* in 1965, Plath came to be recognized as a
confessional poet. The introduction to this volume was written by Robert Lowell. In her
early works, she is rather controlled and her straitjacketed discipline is visible in the
themes of the poems. And may be that is why her use of alliteration and assonance turn
into mannerism. But her later works combine her self-conscious faculties with a more
dramatic and developed style of poetry written in the manner of Lowell, Berryman and
Snodgrass.

Anne Sexton was advised by her doctors to write poetry as a means to touch the
innermost part of her suppressed psyche. Her use of a sentence from Franz Kafka (1883-
1924) as an epigraph to her poetry collection displays her attitude: “a book should serve
as the ax for the frozen sea within us” (qtd. in Perkins 598). She also confessed in *The
Paris Review*:

> My doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven’t
> integrated into my life. In fact I may be concealing it from myself, while I
> was revealing it to my readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in
terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. (qtd. in Phillips 2)

Her first collection of poems *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) can be cited as a struggle against her madness and her attempts at recovery. The second volume entitled *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) earned her a position as a confessional poet. What is especially ‘confessional’ in her work is her exploration of taboo subjects which nobody before her dared to discuss. Very intimate details like bitter relationship with parents, suicide attempts, nervous breakdown, child bearing, and nursing become the subject matter in her poems. The intricate relationship between life and death continues to be a recurrent theme in her poems. Her “The Double Image”, a long autobiographical poem which is addressed to her daughter Joy, is about their separation due to Sexton’s nervous breakdowns. Both Plath and Sexton have portrayed traditional domestic lives in terms of feminine psychology.

Like Plath and Sexton, the poems of Kamala Das also exploit the traumatic and neurotic aspect of a woman’s life. In Poems like “Composition”, “The Old Playhouse”, “The Maggots”, “Summer in Calcutta”, “Loud Posters”, “The Sunshine Cat”, “Nani” and “An Introduction” Das discloses her personal life. Major portion of her writings often go back to her past in search of themes. She admits, “A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality” (*My Story* 124). Confessions of such women poets widen the area of feminist interpretation. The poem combines private life with public life and sexual life with social life. As David Perkins observes, “… at the present time the finest poetry by feminists is likely to be in the Confessional style, and, conversely, Confessional poetry by women is of absorbing interest to feminist readers” (588). As a
pioneering Indian feminist poet, Kamala Das projects her poems as a protest against the traditional male hegemony. When her feminine self is pushed to the utmost verge of non-existence, she hits back with the only medium left to her. Frank exposure of her body and the narration of personal moments are upsetting to the age-old concept of Indian society. Modern poets like Mamta Kalia and Eunice de Souza find Das significantly influential. But Das deviates from the European concept of “Feminism”. She, in an interview with P. P. Raveendran makes it clear, “Feminism as the westerns see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself” (159). She knows that sometime feminism can be just the flip side of patriarchy:

Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because I have loved my husband and still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them. (159)

In spite of being an out and out confessional poet and extremely critical of this male dominated society, Das earnestly searches for her ideal love in Krishna.

II

Kamala Das hit the scenario of Indian Writing in English during such a time when her predecessors like Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu had left their impressions with nationalist, colonialist and romantic themes in their poetry. Poetry written by female poets was generally laced with decorated beauty, romantic nostalgia and legends and glory of country. The colonial period was over and the concept of nationality took a definite shape. So it was not totally possible even in literature to avoid its impact. It was
Kamala Das who first gave a female her own voice. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger in his *Indian Writing In English* says, “There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglican Poetry – a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu” (680) and Bruce King explains:

Kamala Das’s *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) appeared at a time when English Poetry by Indian women had moved on from such colonial and nationalist themes as the rewriting of legends, praise of peasants and from general ethical statements to writing about personal experiences. (147)

Again K.Sachidanandanan in the “Preafce” of *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* describes Kamala Das as“. . . an Indian poet, writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic tradition” (11).

From these opinions it is clear that between Kamala Das and her woman predecessors in Indian English poetry there is a difference due to their different approaches to life. Being a post-colonial poet, Kamala Das was able to erase the shadow of “colonial characteristics” from her writing. She brought fresh shower of individuality and was unique among her contemporaries. She carved out her own niche in Indian writing in English. Her bold and innovative use of English language gave it the taste ‘Indianness’. She was aware of the politics of language and she writes about it in her poem “The Introduction”. She discarded the Queen’s English ignoring the criticism of people and adopted her personalized form of English language to write poems. As Bruce King reflects:

Kamala Das’s most remarkable achievement, however, is writing in an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some
syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English . . . Such a development . . . is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what the writer feels or is trying to say. . . (153)

Her appearance as a poet was a shock to the traditional Indian reader. Her frank outbursts of personal life, detailed description of bodily love, announcement of adulterous relationship and passionate affixation towards sexuality were decidedly postcolonial subjects and were very much uncommon to the Indian readers whose minds were still riveted to traditional moral ethos and spiritual dogmas. Her *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) subverted the patriarchal value system of traditional Indian society. Spontaneous expression of emotion and desire was her natural forte. The ‘Indianization’ of English was due to the ‘openness’ of her writing. Her struggle all through her writings was to unmask the crude reality of our day to day life. Her opinions arose out of her personal life story which she vividly narrated in *My Story*.

Although Kamala Das belonged to a culturally rich Nair family with her mother Balamani Amma herself a poet, she was married to an aged Mr. Madhava Das in her very early years. When she was just beginning to blossom she fell on the thorns of life. Instead of being greeted with a warm embrace, a cozy household, she was thrown into the torture–cell of life. The distinction between flesh and soul became oblivious to her. Her existence was relegated only to the sphere of carnal lust. As a result she lost her personality, her identity. In this connection the words of Simone de Beauvoir are worth noting. While discussing about marriage Beauvoir observes that “marriage normally subordinates wife to husband” (480). She then goes on to point out that husband is a
. . . demigod endued with virile prestige and destined to replace her father: protector, provider, teacher, guide; the wife’s existence is to unfold in his shadow; he is the custodian of values, the sponsor of truth, the ethical vindication of the couple. But he is also a male with whom she must share an experience that is often shameful, grotesque, objectionable, or upsetting, in any case incidental; he invites his wife to reveal with him in sensual indulgence while he leads her firmly towards the ideal. (480)

Das felt that her role within the home does not give her any autonomy. In the family she is an inessential presence. This identity-crisis became the motif in her writing. The dispassionate, dissatisfied and dislocated woman continued her quest for identity throughout her life. Deborah Pope rightly asserts: “For a woman to attain knowledge and self-realization is necessary to find herself outside a society that ritually and actually enacts loss of self for women” (6). The same thing happened to Kamala Das when she entered the world of creativity. Her ‘womanhood’ was criticized whenever she tried to be little bit “open” in her writing. Pope continues:

Similarly, in modern confessional poetry, as an extension of the Adamic tradition, the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of his time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience, he is simultaneously relaying the social fabric of his world. Yet for the female confessional poet, there is not the same extension. She is not Everyman, is hardly Everywoman. (6)
The distinction lies here between a male confessional poet and his female counterpart.

What could have been appreciated as a general utterance of a female self’s freedom was made to remain confined to the expression of a detached and alienated personal self by a society ruled by patriarchal value system. After her marriage her very own space was crippled and neglected to the extent of virtual negation, consequently leading to a psychological crisis in her married life. In My Story she narrates one episode immediately after her marriage:

Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Don’t you love me, he asked me, don’t you like my touching you? I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was “goodbye”. (67)

This episode was the beginning of a humiliating journey which one day would turn Das into a poet searching for her lost identity. For the first time when she was physically assaulted she lost her innocence and was thrown into the world of experience. She describes her first night of marriage as a horrible accident as she felt that her husband was about to rape her. But the attempt was not successful as he couldn’t satisfy his desire due to her ignorance, “The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress” (My Story 72).

Continuation of such kind of physical torture made her feel that love is illusory. Once she thought that “love was flowers in the hair, it was the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear.” (My Story 73) But this was just an illusion, “At the end of the month experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness I grew
old suddenly, my face changed from a child’s to a woman’s and my limbs were sore and fatigued” (My Story 73). The metamorphosis was complete. A disastrous experience destroyed her inner world. What were left were the ruins of crushed and crippled imaginary world. In My Story Das considers herself as a ‘misfit’ for family life and says,

I did not have the educational qualifications which would have got me a job either. I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew that I am frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards. I was a misfit everywhere. (82)

Such utterance exposes her inability to make herself capable of undertaking any kind of profession which can give her socio-economic independence. She judges herself as a misfit, a person who does not belong to the contemporary system. Even to her utter surprise she discovers her husband’s gay relationship:

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. (My Story 83)

After her marriage when she came to stay with her husband, she took it for granted that her whole life would be just another story of an ‘ordinary’ house wife, with the nourishing of baby and looking after the cleanliness of the house. She was eager to
perform the role of traditional ‘wife’. Though her husband was quite older than her, she was waiting with total submission of self to find out in exchange the utmost feeling of love from Mr. Das. And it seems that her whole life might have been different had her husband been sympathetic to her. She totally submitted her ego to the feet of her husband. She gave it up, but nobody was there to accept it and nourish it carefully. So actually it was suppressed and this suppression caused her outburst. On one moonlit night there was a moment of epiphany. She reminisces:

When I returned home climbing down the dirty stairs, I walked with the slow tread of a somnambulist. I lit the reading lamp in our sitting room and began to write about a new life, an unstained future.

Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay.

Let nothing remain of that yesterday...

I sent the poems to the journal of the Indian P.E.N. the next morning. (My Story 83)

Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) tries to solve “a problem that had no name” (Friedan). In 1960s and 1970s as a psychologist she faced some women with unexpected confession of mental condition. Mostly married women were going through a strange type of depression arising out of their ‘secure’ married lives. One of her patients told Friedan:

I've tried everything women are supposed to do--hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn't leave you anything to think about--any feeling of who you are. I never had
any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my home. There's no problem you can even put a name to. But I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and putter-on of pants and a bed maker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?

(Friedan)

If we replace this woman by Kamala Das, the experience would not be different. Friedan in her analysis termed it as a collective depression and recognized it as a case of identity-crisis. In the quoted lines the patient fears that she doesn’t possess any ‘personality’, she is losing herself into the piles of ordinariness. Das also was in search of that ‘personality’, her own identity which would give her womanhood a sense of freedom, a reason to live and desire for creativity.

On a contextual level the condition of Das’s marital life can be interpreted with Hegel’s ‘master-slave’ dialectic described in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. In his analysis of self-consciousness Hegel points out the characteristic of human consciousness as a distinguishing feature which differentiates human beings from other worldly things. As Hegel defines that self-consciousness cannot remain in isolation or as a detached entity, it needs another self-conscious being to differentiate itself. But when they meet, both are desperate to obtain acknowledgement from the other. But none of them is willing to accept the other. This refusal brings struggle. Hegel describes it as a metaphorical one. This struggle includes killing of one another. But any one self’s elimination brings the other’s self-consciousness on the verge of non-existence. So to exist they have to find out
another way out; in this connection it is worth mentioning what Travis observes about Hegel’s concept of master-slave dialectic:

This alternative is the Master-Slave relationship. One person can voluntarily (the voluntary component is significant) subordinate herself to the other person. This person will become the slave. The benefit to the slave is that the slave doesn’t have to die, and the benefit to the master is the master has a slave who can provide conscious mediation for the master. The master can also get the slave to make the world comfort with the master’s will. The slave does work for the master, so anything the master envisions in the world can be brought to fruition for the master.

(Travis)

This struggle or conflict is due to existential fear and need for identification. One of them has to negate his/her identity to enhance the importance of the other by providing him/her ‘freedom’. That’s why ‘master-slave’ relationship continues in this process to keep the difference between the self and the other. Hegel’s concept can be applicable in social relationships. To some extent this ‘self and other’ theory can be related to husband-wife relationship in Indian social-system. Existence of one of them can not be established without any reference to the other. Das’s married life may be analogically compared to the ‘master-slave’ dialectic.

This Hegelian concept is relevant here in the sense that the conflictual interpersonal relationship between Das and her husband was a strong motivation for Das to write poems as a means to establish her own conscious identity. The confessional tone in Das’ poetry is introduced not just as a skilled deviation from the traditional way of
Indian writing in English, but a lot more than that – for the quest of identity, the search for personality and to free the beaten soul of womanhood within her. It is to show that without the disclosure of the incidents happened in her life it was impossible for Das to set off her journey towards the “resurrection of lost-self”. The mode of confession is not an end in itself; it is just a medium, a strategy for her to accomplish the mission.

III

In my dissertation it will be my endeavour to establish the frequent use of confessions in Kamala Das’s poems as a strategy. She is confessional in her mode and yet her poems are often miles away from being self-revelatory. In her attempt to challenge the notion of women as ‘the idealized custodian of tradition’ her rebellion at times turns into ostentatious gestures. She uses the device of manipulation and says in *The Rediff Interview*, “. . . an author can manipulate the thoughts of her readers, her devoted readers at any rate. Manipulation is not a bad word all the time” (Das, “Manipulation is not a bad word all the time”). If an author’s manifesto includes ‘manipulation’ as a conscious means of motivating his/her readers, it is quite natural that the term ‘confession’ in her poems may be a facade. Kamala Das in her poem “Composition” says, “I also know that by confessing, /by peeling off my layers/ I reach closer to the soul” (152-154). But such confessions are at times a mask to hide her actual experience. She herself says, “One must begin the habit of wearing masks to reveal the true feelings or to conceal them, whichever seems best” (“A considerate man”). While in her poetry she talks about ‘stripteasing her mind’ she at times indulges in fantasy and what the reader comes across in her poetry is often far from being autobiographical. Many of her experiences that she
describes in her poetry did not happen to her nor are they true at times. Even in her autobiography *My Story* Kamala Das describes her marital life in a sensational manner as if it had been nothing more than a saga of sex but she did not always say the truth; or to put it in other way, she talked about her married life by mixing fact and fancy where the latter element at times dominated. That may be enough to sensationalize the reader but such accounts are far from being ‘confessional’. What she recorded as her experience in *My Story* is contradicted by her confessions afterwards. This dichotomy between what she wrote and what she said makes the reader feel puzzled and confused and he/she doubts how far the ‘confession’ is a manipulative device in her poetry.

Kamala Das speaks uninhibitedly about her sex experiences; she highlights the male’s lust for the female flesh in her poems. But what surprises the reader is that knowing full well about this attitude of the male world she continued to flaunt her flamboyant lust, as she points out in “The Freaks”. May be that she adopted this ostentatious show of lust as a strategy to subordinate the male and ultimately to make him love her. The language she uses is bold in its frankness. She often portrays women in sexual stereotypes equating women with passivity and weakness while the male is represented as strong and active. Some readers feel that there is a note of irony in such portrayals as the male domination of patriarchal society is revealed through them. Her frankly sensual language shocks the reader to a new consciousness. She is more interested in creating a sensational effect through her poems than upholding the feminist cause. And how far she believed in being a feminist can be best judged from her own words:
Feminists are a strident lot. They act as if they dislike men. In disliking men, they tend to lose the gentle bliss of being loved by a man. Even as a young wife, I wanted my man to be strong enough to protect me. Being protected physically and economically was a desirable stare in my opinion. Perhaps such requirements vary with the hormone level found in each woman. (Miscellanea)

She always talks about the hiatus between the body and the soul or the spirit. She talks about this spiritual indiscipline in her poems but how far it was her own experience may well be questioned because she says that in her poetry she often role-plays, “Sometimes consciously, deliberately. I would even adapt a kind of role because I wanted to write about such a person” (“Poetry Died within Me”). She rebelled against the traditional Indian social system which was under the “purposeful control of men” (Beauvoir 9).

Primarily the poems of Das aim at the search for true love. Some time they relate the agony of not getting the perfect lover in her husband and sometime ecstasy overwhelms her when she ultimately finds Krishna as her ideal lover. Agony draws out the intimate moments to take revenge and consequently leaves her with a satiated self. Her candid confessions pose a threat to the male dominated culture which in the guise of her aged husband always maintained the division between her desire for true love and the reality of her conjugal life. She has brought nudity in the forefront to drive away the hypocrisy inherent in the traditional social system. She had said that she wanted to disturb the society. Her poems challenge the gender-inequality. As a post-colonial poet she resists the colonization of self. Confession for her becomes a strategy to perceive the self. When she was on the verge of loosing her identity under the tremendous pressure of
an unhappy married life she started writing poems. I will try to show that in her poems, Das uses the mode of ‘confession’ as a means to regain her lost self by exposing intimate details of personal life. On the other hand, uninhibited disclosure of body and soul perform an act of purgation. It’s like a therapeutic process cleansing the suppressed memory, the source of disorientated and traumatic self out of the subconscious. Poetry has a long tradition of healing people through the candid exposure of self. Intentionally or unintentionally, Das sees her poems as a means of unburdening the self which ultimately prevents her from committing suicide. It will also be my endeavour to establish the poems of Das in line with the tradition of “Therapeutic poetry” where the poet uses his/her ‘confessions’ as a medium to clean his/her inner self.

Though in postcolonial India Das is supposed to be a unique figure in respect of frank disclosure of female body; such type of poetry is not new in Indian Literature. Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his “The Pink Pulsating Words: The Woman’s Voice in Kamala Das’ Poetry” tries to trace the tradition of Indian Women poets, “India has a long tradition of women poets and Sanskrit and Tamil, the two most ancient languages of the country, have a considerable body of women’s poetry” (33). It is supposed that the earliest extant piece of poetry by women can be linked with the Pali language. This language was popular in the time of Buddha which was almost 2500 years ago. First body of women’s writing came with the advent of Buddhism. May be the space offered to women by Buddhist religion and philosophy of life helped the women for the first time to write about their own thoughts. This collection of poems, Therigatha, depicts those women who got the opportunity to break away from the bondage of family restrictions:
The earliest known anthology of women’s literature – in India certainly, but possibly anywhere in the world – took shape when the songs composed by the Buddhist theris, or senior nuns, which date back to the sixth century B.C., were collected into the Therigatha. (Tharu and Lalita 65)

These poems are ascetic in tone. Sometimes they renounce the traditional marital relationship and enjoy the freedom of soul. They avoid the attraction of flesh and want to reach beyond it. These are highly influenced by the teachings of Buddha which transform their lives. Often these are the celebration of a release or freedom from the hardship or monotony of day to day life. Religion helped to find a way out for those women who became frustrated with their life inside the home; Tharu and Lalita observes, “We can focus instead on the way women used the spaces Buddhism opened up, individually and collectively to contest the powers that determined their lives” (67). These lyrics present a historical detail of women’s lives, their sufferings and aspirations to the world. A sense of personal freedom set its tone almost 2500 years ago. From both religious and social perspectives, these poems are of seminal value. The following ‘Therigathas’ speak of the freedom women enjoyed in ancient India. Mutta, one of the Theris, says:

So free am I, so gloriously free,

Free from three petty things–

From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord.

(“So free am I, so gloriously free” 1-3)

Another Theri, Sumangalmata declares in the ecstasy of freedom:

A woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man . . .

(“A woman well set free! How free I am” 1-5)

In their earnest tone of setting their soul free “Vasitthi wanders light-headed, crazed with
grief, “naked, unheeding, streaming hair unkempt”, until she meets the “banisher of pain”
and her errant mind comes back to her” (Tharu and Lalita 65). Our discussion regarding
the exposure of female sexuality in Indian women poetry may not be contextually
referred to Therigatha, but the tradition of women’s protest in opposition to their
traditional family disciplines can be validated from these poems. The poetry of women
which follows this age celebrates women body and sexuality. The Sangam poets
dominate the era between 100BC-AD250. A considerable number of women poets can be
found in this age. Mainly under the patronage of the ruling kings poetry writing became a
serious art and was considered an important part of contemporary culture. These poems
were primarily secular in tone encompassing everyday themes in their Tamil context.
Though they sang the glory of the rulers, simultaneously they also dealt with each and
everything they experienced in their daily life. Thematically these poems are divided into
two categories – ‘akam’ which deals with the inner or personal moments and ‘puram’
 focusing on the external life or social stages. Especially the poems by women wove some
extra dimensions into their experiences:

The commentaries that accompany these poems mentions songs women
used to sing while transplanting seedlings, drawing water, and husking
paddy. Women apparently sang as they kept vigil on the ripening grain—to keep the birds away—but also to charm the spirit of the growing plant and coax it along as it reached fruition . . . (Tharu and Lalita 71)

It is believed that these poems were written before the Aryan culture set its foot on Indian soil. Side by side of being a symbol of fertility, women were also considered inauspicious power if they were uncontrolled. In this connection one may consider what Tharu and Lalita observe in their book *Women Writing in India*:

> Yet the remarkable sense of equality, of freedom to move round, to make relationships, and take on responsibilities that women obviously had would suggest that this society’s concept of women as sacred, and therefore both powerful and dangerous, cannot simply be translated into a form familiar to us today. (72)

According to them the freedom of women is also reflected in the poetry of women writers of ancient India:

> The women’s body is sensuously evoked; her skin like young mango leaf, her dark hair musk with the scent of jasmine, her eyes shot with red, her loins glistening with ornaments. (71)

As in Venmanipputi’s Kuruntokai² 299 (“What she said to her girlfriend”) there is the beautiful expression of women’s pleasure in sex which is a pointer to the fact that the women of the period enjoyed some sort of sexual freedom:

> . . . on the banks shaded by a punnai clustered with flowers,

> when we made love
my eyes saw him
and my ears heard him;
my arms grow beautiful
in the coupling
and grow lean
as they come away. (Tharu and Lalita 1-9)

Bhakti movement had its root in South India in the 6th century AD. The term expresses “devotion” or passionate love for the Divine. Mainly poet-saints, many of whom were female, wrote in their poems passionate devotional love for the Divine. In the 12th century it accelerated in the central western region of India. In 17th century it was popular in north India. Along with the male poet-saints, female poet saints also played an important part in the movement. They had to struggle to establish their identity as the movement was generally male dominated.

Akkamahadevi, the Kannada mystic poet-seer of 12th century, represents this movement with a significant feminine consciousness. As a poet saint she dedicated her life to the worship of Shiva, whom she addressed in her poems or ‘Vacanas’ as “Chennamallikarjuna”. A. K. Ramanujan translates it as “lord white in jasmine”. Literally it means “Mallika’s beautiful Arjuna”. According to some popular legends, “She wandered naked, across most of what is now Karnataka in search of her divine lover” (Tharu and Lalita 78). She renounced her human relationships in search of the divine, “Each time she rejects the human lover, who would turn her body into an object of his desire, in favour of her Chennamallikarjuna, who gives form to her self” (Tharu and Lalita 78). In her poems she writes about her close physical relationship with Shiva. But
the expression is frank. In her “the growth of carnal love becomes a symbol of mystic progression” (Tharu and Lalita 79). As in the following ‘vacanas’, entitled “Brother, You’ve Come”, she says

    Brother, you’ve come
    drawn by the beauty
    of these billowing breasts,
    this brimming youth.
    I’m no woman, brother, no whore. (1-5)

Or in “Not One, Not Two, Not Three or Four”,

    Not one, not two, not three or four
    but through eighty-four hundred thousand vaginas
    have I come. (1-3)

Through the detailed uninhibited description of her nudity, she challenges contemporary male dominated society and raises a protest quite unanticipated during that time. She:

    . . . struggles against the pettiness of roles she is forced into as a woman,
    struggles against a man who is a prince and a jain, and against the social expectation that restrain her. (Tharu and Lalita 79)

Another woman poet, Sule Sankawa, a contemporary of Akkamahadevi, startled the sensibility of that time with its perfect blending of the sacrosanct and the sacrilegious. Being a prostitute by profession, her poems exhibited an ironical perspective of the society. Her devotion towards God Shiva had a considerable influence upon her poem:

    In my harlot’s trade
    having taken one man’s money
I daren’t accept a second man’s, Sir.

And if I do,
they’ll stand me and naked and
kill me, Sir. (“In my harlot’s trade” 1-6)

In the early 16th century a Telegu poet Atukuri Molla composed a new version of *Ramayana* in just five days. Being a low born woman, it was really a ground breaking achievement on her part. This established her as a poet. Through her own version of the great epic she deconstructed the patriarchal social tradition. In the following extract while describing Sita’s beauty in the “Swayamvara” section, she spontaneously unravelled the grace and grandeur of her (Sita’s) whole body:

Are they golden pots
Or a pair of chakravaka birds?
Difficult to say
Of her breasts

………………

Is it a sand dune
Or a dais for Love God’s wedding?
Difficult to say
Of her thighs. (“Are they lotuses” 13-16 & 21-24)

Muddupalini, a courtesan of the Nayaka King of Tanjavur in the South India, gave a shock to the traditional lifestyle in the 18th century with her erotic epic *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika). It includes five hundred and eighty four poems divided into four sections. These poems tell the story of “Radha, Krishna’s aunt, a woman in her
prime who brings up Ila Devi from childhood and then gives her in marriage to Krishna” (Tharu and Lalita 117). Radha instructs Ila Devi, the young bride, how to respond to Krishna’s lovemaking and at the same time the poet instructs Krishna not to spoil the tender moments while they make love. Side by side the poem explores the painful moments of a woman who sacrifices her own desire and yearning. But the most unusual and unprecedented concept in Telegu poetry consists of Krishna’s complaints about Radha’s insistence for making love although he doesn’t feel the passion, “No other Telegu poet— man or woman— has written about a woman taking the initiative in a sexual relationship” (Tharu and Lalita 117). However her epic became highly controversial at that time. It may be because it was written by a woman. Following extracts may be sufficient to prove this genre:

Place on her cheeks
a gentle kiss;
donot scratch her
with your sharp nails.
Hold her nipple
with your fingertips;
donot scare her
by squeezing it tight.
Make love
gradually; (“Move on her Lips” 5-14).

and

If I ask her not to kiss me,
stroking on my cheeks
she presses my lips hard against hers.
If I ask her not to touch me,
Stabbing me with her firm breasts
She hugs me. (“If I Ask Her Not to Kiss Me” 1-6)

Eunice de Souza’s Nine *Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* published by Oxford University Press in 1997 deals with modern women poets of India. In her introduction to the book De Souza, while tracing the tradition of poetry written by Indian women poets, observes that such poetry has a long history. She has shown that India bears a rich legacy of women poets in whose poetry through the exploration of female body they have tried to give vent to their intimate feelings.

De Souza tells about a Sanskrit poet, Silabbattarika, who “regrets the fact that she married the man who was her lover, because their love-making has become so much less interesting than it was before”(2). Again there is another woman poet, Bhavadevi, who expresses the same theme:

At first our bodies knew a perfect oneness,
but then grew two;
the lover, you,
and I, unhappy I, the loved.
now you are the husband, I the wife.
What else should come of this my life,
a tree too hard to break,
if not such bitter fruit. (qtd. in De Souza 2)
These poems, though written long time ago, surprisingly prove a perfect counterpart to the modern feminine consciousness. Even poems written in Prakit language explicitly refer to sexuality:

Woman wanting
more
not having come
seeing a cart in the middle
of the village
Oh blessed indeed
says the hub of the wheel
with the axle in it
all the time. (qtd. in De Souza 2)

Such daring frankness is rare even in poems written by modern women poets of India. A female body becomes the blank space waiting for the text produced from the deconstructive study of ‘feminine writing’. Prabhat Kumar Pandeya in his “The Pink Pulsating Words: The Woman’s Voice in Kamala Das’s Poetry”, while establishing Kamala Das in the tradition of Indian Women Poets writing about ‘female body’, mentions a Sanskrit poet Vikatanitamba who describes how to enjoy a young girl:

Thinking her to be a slender ‘bala’, a young girl below sixteen years, don’t doubt that she is desiccate. Is not a bud enjoyed by a bhramar, a black bee or a libertine? Hence she should be enjoyed ruthlessly. Slender waisted girl, like thin sugarcane, should be enjoyed by squeezing. (38)
The brief discussion about ancient Indian women poets with citations from their works helps one to conclude that the bold voice of protest that one finds in the post-colonial Indian women poets may be traced back to the poetry written by women poets of ancient India. From earliest times the female body has been used as a tool to protest against the contemporary patriarchal society. It poses like a watch tower upon the horizontal feminine submissiveness. In this regard Kamala Das’s poems can be seen as a continuation of this tradition. The search for feminine identity, the humiliation arising out of gender discrimination and the challenge against it and the feminine protest against the patriarchal moral policing somehow brings Das very close to her predecessors. As (from the time of ‘Therigatha’ to present day) the social condition of women has more or less remained the same, so whenever there is the urge for denouncing their submissive state, their own body has been used as the medium of revolt. The detailed narration of female body and its parts excavate the hidden agonies of their suppressed memories. These memories belong to their much abused past. Body becomes the key to unlock their subconscious. By laying it bare, by transforming into public what is private the women poets protest against the male tendency of voyeurism. It counters the patriarchal concept which termed women as a ‘second’ sex. This exhibition of flesh is only a means of ‘peeling off’, a means of ‘unburdening’ self. The female body ceases to be the object of carnal pleasure. It achieves wholeness, an existence paralleling the male universe.

Notes

1 For a detailed study of “Master-slave dialectic” see Pinkard 46-78.

2 Kuruntokai’ means ‘anthology of short poems’. For a detailed analysis see Tharu & Lalita 73.
Works Cited


