CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century has been a period of global relations in literature. Many literary critics and writers all over the world were attracted to the democratic ideals of American writers and American intellectual circles were getting aware of the Commonwealth literature and that of Third World countries. Modern Indian poetry tried to do away with romantic British models of English Verse. Some experimentalists such as Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes and P. Lal of the 1960's tried to craft a better poetry in English, more precise in imagery and diction, writing formal poems with more logical themes, arguments and moral conclusions. The second wave of modernism in the mid-60's involved a more radical set of cultural attitudes and poetic ideas. Even poets who were not experimentalists, were influenced by the counter-cultural relations and international modernisms. The result of such poetry was to engage and integrate the vastness of the outer world with the constraints of the inner one. Several Indian intellectuals in the process developed a close relationship with American poetry, literature and culture. In one of has articles Bruce King refers to this relationship and comments:

The discovery of American literature has a part of process of modernisation, the creation of a post colonial culture in which America has opened horizons and provided alternative models.
It in therefore in the fitness of things to undertake a comparative study of the two leading poets of America and India, i.e. Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das.

The present study aims at analysing the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, who represent not only the product of the era of modernisation but also follow a trend of typical modernist writing, adopting the most recent terms of colloquial, confessional, immediate and vigorous mode of expression. To shape their verse, they bring out the surrealist and sensuous experiences relating their personal world with the outer one. Robert Lowell termed their kind of literature as 'confessional'.

Confessional literature is an act of self-experience, evaluating and defining the relationship between the self and outside world. It projects an inner urge of the writer to unburden his psychic trauma and to express anguish and depression at the ruthlessness of the world. Confessional poets continue a tradition that attempts to make significance and beauty out of the terror of our modern condition, which is marked by a retreat into privatism and a progressive alienation of the similar writer from society. While the romantic poets lose their personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness, the confessional poets aim at stripping off the mask or persona and making the speaking voice unequivocally their own. As M. L. Rosenthal suggests:

"To build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the Lost Self, has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of our century".2
Plath and Das, as modern confessional poets tried to write great poems with their consistent efforts of marked frankness about their family life, sexual candour, self exposure and sense of proliferating personal failure. We also find in their poetry interactions between the social and personal realms, resulting in an emphasis on the confessional aspect.

Until the twentieth century, there has been no substantial body of poetry by women who could speak in their own voice as women. Poetry was generally identified with men and those woman poets like Marianne Moore, who were accepted into the fraternity of poets, were forced to speak in a pseudo-male or neuter voice. Sacrificing their womanliness, in order to survive in the face of the male aesthetic creed caused in them frustration, madness and even death. A group of woman poets then emerged to rebel against such social disapproval and established their position among men as a ‘poet’. When these poets started writing, it was a personal need, a compulsion from within, and an inner urge to bring out the woman’s experience to define herself in the male-dominated world.

As woman poets, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das projected the existing social power structures and created a place for themselves, in the world of masculine hierarchies. ‘Self’ being at the centre, these woman poets challenged the accepted notion of the female and redrafted the general opinion on the feminine mystique. This exaggerated role of woman writers has been emphasised by another feminist writer, Rosalind Brachkenbury:

Nobody writes in a vacuum, away from the political and social structures in which we live...
It's a role of a woman today; to create present and consider a new world.  

The social bias in reconstructing the gendered society gave women writers courage and confidence. As true feminist, Plath and Das have brought out the clash between their own self and the monopolising masculine world. In their poems, they not only explore their personal identities, but also create a newer and better perception on certain feminine issues.

As confessional literature, Kamala Das's poetry has a special force and appeal because of the honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual. Her poems are an encounter with pain in relation to love, sex and family. Everywhere keeping 'woman' in focus, she imaginatively identifies herself with the same 'woman'. K. R. Ramachandran Nair comments on the style of her poems:

... it is the first person narrative style she employs in her more subjective poems that fortifies the critics against any possibility of separateness between the private personality of the poet and the tormented woman persona of her poems. But then, this style is an essential part of the confessional mode the poet adopts.

Das's poetry is throughout about a search for the unknown lover and touches on the theme of love, lust and frustration. She emphatically confesses:

I am every woman who seeks love,
and reaches several phases of torments in her love life until she finds an eternal peace in her devotion to Lord Krishna.

Kamala Das's poetic language and her choice of medium was attacked by many critics who believed that she could not be claimed to be a perfect creative writer because of the adoption of a foreign language. She did not possess either the artistic quality of Nissim Ezekiel or the balanced craftsmanship of A. K. Ramanujan, but the one quality of her poetry which other critics have failed to recognise, is her honesty of expression and sincerity of feelings. She writes Indian poetry in English to produce a highly personal and sensitively intimate poetry. While Ezekiel and Ramanujan prefer a celebral, ironic and objective portrayal of life, Kamala Das tends to accord a greater significance to the life of feeling which has contributed to the psychological and quasi-romantic dimensions in modern Indian poetry in English.

Modern American woman poets also explore the inner emotions and regulate their sentiments and psychological oppressions. Sylvia Plath's context for self definition is her pessimistic attitude towards her psychological background. The sense of doom, disintegration, decay and death prevails in her writings and the persona is exposed to the realities of the external world, full of pain, suffering, tension and isolation. In her early poetry, she was mainly interested in women's creativity and feminism. At this time, her poetry was sensitive to the changing literary trends. But later, she defined her self acutely, to her satisfaction, "providing a fuel to feed the flames of imagination".5

In her final poems, her accomplishment resides not in her subject matter but in her style, prosody, imagery and tone. Peter Davison remarks about these poems:
It would be a lie to suggest that experience alone could have written these poems, that they could have been written by anyone but a true poet. They are a triumph for poetry, in fact, at the moment that they are a defeat for their author.\(^6\)

Her rage is against man and also to the whole matrix of society. In “Lady Lazarus”, she rises against the patriarchal society, in the form of phoenix and “eats men like air”. She has an ability to deal with the most difficult subjects like death and spiritualism. In “Years” she states her preference for such stasis of experience:

What I love is
The piston in motion -
My soul dies before it.
And the hoofs of the horses,
Their merciless churn.

Other poems of Sylvia Plath also show her desperate urge to become an Electra. Her father becomes the Colossus Agamemnon and her mother, the vengeful Clytemnestra. She conjures the tenuous relationship between the victim and the victimizer, tampering with the cycle of death and rebirth. As Judith Kroll points out Plath’s poems written later in her life “convey the sense that future is foreclosed, that no substantial change can be occasioned by experience, and that only rebirth or transcendence of self could be a resolution”.\(^7\)

Plath uses personal myths and history as the context of her poetic creation which lends itself to the metaphor of birth. She writes: “I am too pure for you or anyone”.
To transmute their personal emotions, disordered pains and frustrations, confessional poets take the help of symbols, metaphors and images. Such external devices are used by these poets in their writings to highlight their relations with the outside world. The modern poets of the twentieth century may be regarded as more creative than their predecessors in employing private experiences, ideas and agonies in poetry along with fresh images and symbols which make their poems more explicit. W. H. Auden, writes that "A poem does not compose itself in the poet's mind . . . some element of craft is always present". In Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das, the element of craft is essentially present making their poems truly symbolic and metaphor-based.

A voluntary rejection of life by the female psyche is represented both by Plath and Das through their images. These images become fascinating and functional as they slowly acquire a sense of horrifying engulfment, rejection of life, isolation, non being and extinction. Feminist critics have pointed out that female psyche related to domestic affairs and rejecting the public sphere, cultural value and social authority is the main concern with woman poets like Plath and Das.

This study has highlighted the poetic achievements of Plath and Das, their differences, eccentricities and similarities as confessional poets and their struggles and strivings to sustain in their patriarchal world. It has traced the pattern of confrontation, gestation and affirmation of their oppressed selves within the fluid boundaries of poetry. Sylvia Plath, suffocated by negative forces within society and incited by the superiority of man, sought release in aesthetic experience, while Kamala Das, a radical feminist, experimented for a secured relationship and finally identified herself with spiritual fantasies. Both of them tried to reach beyond their claustrophobic world to gain peace and contentment. This would account for the struggle and limitations of these poets.