CHAPTER 1

CONFESSIONAL LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW

Modern confessional poetry emerged in the early fifties and has continued till this day. P. Lal avers that "many young poets felt a strong urge at that time to turn away from the transcendental - mystical stream of poetry, to deal with the concrete experiences of men living in the modern world of their own time." The concrete experiences invariably carried the aroma of private life of the experiencing self, and a confessional poet tried to capture a moment of intensely personal experience in all its uniqueness and immediacy.

Poets in this modern trend are in danger of being swamped away by the social environment and feel that they can preserve their individuality only by remaining continuously aware of themselves as a distinct 'entity'. This kind of 'new poetry' is neither an attempt on the part of the poet to establish a communion with eternity nor a search for great ideals, but a venture into oneself. The hostile nature of the external reality, which can neither be pierced through nor wished out of existence, would supposedly produce a sufficient amount of tension and complexity in the poetry of modern writers. This complexity and self-revelation is an essential feature of all 'new poetry'. Some of these poets are self-revealing even to the point of being confessional, examining their own "past as well as the innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some sort of perception." These poets share an absurdist vision of the world through their personal experiences and are labelled by critics as 'confessional'.

'Confession' means a formal acknowledgement of one's sins. It is making known or acknowledging one's fault, wrongs, crime, weaknesses
and guilt. The practice of confession is prominent in Christianity, where a sinner is expected to confess to the priest in a confidential manner. The confessional urge, which is a part of the basic culture of Christianity, is the desire to fulfil oneself or seek pardon through self-expression.

The word "confessional" was first used to describe the kind of poetry that Robert Lowell wrote in his Life Studies. In an interview Anne Sexton remarked that "it's a difficult label, 'confessional'," and indeed it has become even more difficult, for the label is widely used and variously interpreted, and requires an extended discussion. M. L. Rosenthal explains that he "intended the term 'confessional' to signify the sort of poetry he saw in Lowell's Life Studies", is usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself... and because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough." It is the poet's private world which finds an adequate treatment in confessional poetry. A confessional poet lives in isolation and carries on an inner debate that consists in analysing his personal emotions while questioning the validity of every system of thought. This is why he breaks out of the world of rhetoric into the realm of the real and personal and resorts to confession in his attempt to identify himself. Confessional poetry thus "reveals the tension resulting from their acute self awareness and the restraint upon them by the hostile environment and becomes a private quest for values and an effort to peer into the dark abysmal contents of the poet's own mind."

The widespread appearance of this sort of poetry within a decade of Lowell's Life Studies (1954) certainly did seem to signal the arrival of a new movement but the reception of this 'new poetry' was mixed. In 1966 a critic wrote about confessional poetry that "these are not poems" and that "they are documents of modern psychiatry and their publication is a
result of the confusion of critical standards in the general mind." Ralph J. Mills, Jr., defined confessional poetry in 1965 as that which deals with "the more intimate aspects of life, areas of experience that most of us would instinctively keep from public sight." In the same year A. R. Jones defined confessional poetry as a "dramatic monologue in which the persona has naked ego, involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences." Moreover, M.L. Rosenthal pointed out in his The New Poets that "the confessional poetry is the poetic self's attempt to achieve a kind of victory over pain and defeat." He added that "these poems seemed to me one culmination of the romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self as more and more at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization."

Confessional poetry is a kind of poetic self's metaphysical quest which produces no consolation from the striking awareness of physical decay and destruction and mental dilemma and disillusionment. Robert Phillips has remarked that such poems are "revelations about the personal vexations and predicaments of the self." This kind of poetry is destined to bear the burden of sheer honesty of utterance and is committed to the tales of experiences of his poetic self. To this commitment of the poet, the confessional poetry comes to his aid in dealing with his humiliations and sufferings. It is thus "a struggle to relate the private experiences with the outer world as it is."

Confessional poetry goes against T.S. Eliot's definition of poetry as given in Tradition and the Individual Talent that "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." This definition so dominated in the early decades of the twentieth century that it became difficult to get along with the confessional mode of the mid-century
which is just the opposite of Eliot's symbolist mode. This kind of poetry represents not an escape from personality but an expression of it through biographical personae and speakers and also through its themes of sexual love, Oedipal hate, personal anguish, unbearable suffering and emotional breakdown. These very themes made critics to declare confessional poetry as mere documentary in nature and unfit for serious consideration. Yet the phenomenon of personal poetry is not new, it can be considered as a modern reapplication of a romantic mode - a contemporary relative of the works of Byron, Whitman and Dickinson.

In its literary application, confession is closely related to autobiography. The autobiographic literature of the nineteenth century cherished the personal novel with the description of scenes and adventures and details of events and experiences in the poet's life, while a confessional writer of the present century is concerned with his soul that compels him to confess about the haunting incidents of personal life. Northrop Frye defines confession as "autobiography regarded as a form of prose fiction or prose fiction cast in the form of an autobiography". The difference between an autobiography and confession can be deciphered by the tone of the poetry; which is consistently lyrical in an autobiography whereas in confessions there is a lavish use of the first person singular which transcribes the moods of the self in its minute forms. Henry Pyre writes in his book Literature and Sincerity:

Like lyrical poetry which dwells on sorrows more successfully than on joys, it [personal poetry] took for granted that a higher capacity for suffering is the hallmark of superior individuals and is rewarded by the intellectual pleasure of watching oneself suffer.
Confessional literature deals with a psychologically searching introvert, the poet delving deep into his own self to reveal himself as he is, whereas an autobiographical literature depicts only the incidents and experiences of the writer’s life as it is, without probing into the personal self completely.

The Romantic poetry of nineteenth century presents an affirmative voice of the poet’s involvement in society, while the confessional poetry of the twentieth century embodies an experience of rejecting the original situation for an alternative. Thus, the poetic self in confessional poetry concerns itself with capturing the moments of intense experience of private life with all its uniqueness and immediacy. For such a confessional self, the expansiveness of Romanticism looked too general and conventional. The modern poetry thus became a unique personal idiom for the poet’s acute self-awareness and the restraints imposed upon him by the hostile nature of the external reality. It is for this reason that the confessional poet has to reject the old conventional jargon of Romanticism.

The term ‘confession’ was first invented by Saint Augustine in the form of autobiography, and with Rousseau, it flowed into the novel. St. Augustine’s Confessions, which was written in fourteenth century in thirteen volumes, is an account of his mental crisis and consequent confessions. St. Augustine’s another confessional book called Spiritual Autobiography is, in fact, “a painstaking examination of the saint’s progress from juvenile sinfulness and youthful debauchery to conversion to Christianity.” About this book he himself wrote that “I pass over many things, hastening to thee, which more strongly compel me to confess to thee”. As for Thomas de Quincey, his autobiographical fantasy, Confessions of an English Opium Eater (1822), is another significant development in the field of confessional literature. It describes the writer’s alienation from the world and his deep rooted anxiety. His
sense of tormented existence had a lasting appeal for the romantic outsiders of the succeeding generations. With Rousseau's *The Confessions*, confession became a distinct genre of literature, proclaiming the writer's complex uniqueness by being true to the innermost nature of his self. The psychological drama of Rousseau's inner self fascinated him and the account of the evolution of his self brought him in the company of the great confessional writers. After Rousseau the tradition of confessional writing underwent significant transformation. As Northrop Frye says, "the confession flows into the novel and the mixture produces the fictional autobiography". The confessions in prose became a major form in the Romantic literature produced after Rousseau. The Romantic impulse and the autobiographical tradition merged to produce some excellent works of the period, including novels of Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte's fiction. In Roy Pascal's view, "Wordsworth is the first autobiographer to realise ... that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of life as a projection of real self ... on the world." In the novels of Dostoevsky, the personal element defines the very condition of human existence, while in works like Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Fall*, the sense of crisis and psychological violence - a creative passion which propels a poet to affirm his existence and declare his final disintegration in the form of either insanity or suicide - are recurrent themes. In these writers, self-dramatization is exposed but the self-consciousness is totally absent.

The modern poet, in contrast to the Romantic writers, unleashes violence of the inner self and creates a true confessional poetry. For example, Theodore Roethke's *Lost Son*, a long confessional sequence, is a quest for his authentic self, where he attempts to grip the traumatic experiences of mental illness and inner violence, describing it as 'confessional'. Similarly, Robert Lowell, in his *Life Studies*, explores his identity with the matrix of the family experience and his relationship with
America, and his own age becomes the crucial subject of confessional poetry in *For the Union Dead*. Rosenthal comments on the confessional themes and concerns of these poets in the following words:

Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally "unbearable" because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. Indeed the psychological condition of most of the confessional poets has long been the subject of common literary discussion — one cannot say gossip exactly, for their problems and confinements in hospitals are quite often the specific subjects of their poems.²²

Almost all the confessional poets did suffer from mental illness and spent time in mental hospitals, and some poets even committed suicide. Breakdowns and suicides were part of the "imaginative risk", and the poets who were "sensitive enough to the age and brave enough to face it directly", were obliged to take it.²³ These mid-twentieth-century poets have discussed such matters of paranoia and death more candidly than their romantic predecessors and "imaginative risk" has become a necessary feature of their poetry.

As the confessional literature acquires a modern trend, the personal voice gets deepened with the force of an oppressive personality. This can be observed in the poetry of Kamala Das, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Anne Sexton, where the outer world of nature is related with the inner psyche. The psychic perplexities of Sylvia Plath make her a difficult daughter, a tortured woman, a violated wife and a misfit mother — all these roles finally subdued, not to her necessities, but to her 'art' of suicide. The poetry of Kamala Das brings out the relationship of man and woman in blunt and bitter terms contributing in a way to the confessional
voice of Indian English women poets. In these poets the confessional
element is evident from their insistent psychologizing and constant
concern with the problems of guilt, sin and salvation. W. B. Yeats once
wrote that "we make out of the quarrels with others, rhetoric, but of
quarrels with ourselves, poetry". The confessional poetry may be
regarded as 'true poetry', for it is a kind of "quarrel with ourselves".

Neurosis is an important theme for psychologically disturbed
confessional poets. Karl Malkoff has suggested that, the work of Lowell,
Roethke, Plath, Sexton and others must be placed not only in the context
of the private confessional poetry but also of the poetry of madness. These
poets reject self-established norms of judgement and suffer from
depression and isolation. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* depicts his manic
depressions which he suffered in his later life, sometimes even needing
hospitalization. His poem "Skunk Hour", which concludes *Life Studies*,
has received wide critical attention. The emphasis in it is on season's
illness anticipating the poet's own sick soul or 'one dark night'. Sylvia
Plath's frequent mental breakdown resulted in a couple of suicide
attempts and the inner violence that occasions the poetry and the poetry
that sustains life becomes one in her poems. Kamala Das is also inspired
by a demonic passion to travel to death's kingdom — to travel beyond the
Styx, or to besimply 'writhed with vacant ecstasy'. Similarly, some other
confessional poets of the twentieth century such as Anne Sexton and John
Berryman would have nothing to offer if they were not mad or depressed.
In the case of these poets, insanity has come to symbolise the predicament
of the writers of the present century. Geoffrey Thurley observes in *The
American Moment* that the raison d'etre of their poetry is:

the nervous breakdown, and that the breakdown itself —
anticipated, endured, got over provided the structure not
only for the individual poems and sequences, but for the manoeuvre itself. 25

Roethke, much before Lowell and Plath, dealt with neurosis as a secular theme, without romanticising it. He does not, however, accept the sickness as other poets do, but his confessions are rather occasioned by a confrontation between the resources of self and the silence of a hostile universe.

Resorting to open self-criticism, peeling layers of pretense and adopting a clipped ironically-edged tone of objectivity while articulating subjective reality, the confessional poet attempts an aesthetic reconstruction and transcendence of the fragmented self. Emily Dickinson once called such publications as 'the auction of mind', but today the modern writers regard such psychological self-probings as soul's therapy. M. L. Rosenthal comments:

To build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of Lost Self, has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of our century ... The Self engaged in crucial introspection and analysis often manages to make therapeutic confessions which lead to a realisation of lost cultural values. 26

Further, as Marjorie Perloff points out, it is Lowell's "superb manipulation of the realistic convention, rather than the titillating confessional content, that is responsible for the so-called breakthrough of Life Studies." His "metonymic structure is far from artless." And "the style born of this fusion" of metonymic realism with the "romantic lyrical 'I' ... marks a turning point in the history of the twentieth-century
Robert Lowell also expressed a similar view about his book that although "there is a good deal of tinkering with fact, ... the reader was to believe he was getting the 'real' Robert Lowell." The confessional poetry is, then, a specific and legitimate movement in the twentieth-century literature. It is at once a modern manifestation of an ongoing tradition, a reaction against a previously dominant mode, and a unique development. The central experience of this poetry is psychological since the poet examines the psychic disintegration, in some cases frequent depressions, verging on insanity and death. All these poets share certain common characteristics; they try to grapple with the inner violence of the fragmented self, to produce a poetry of an immensely emotional nature.

The post-war poetical as well as political scene influenced the confessional poets, resulting in a total denial of the early tradition of diluted Romanticism and opposed Victorianism, and an urge to create a new poetry different from the old. The confessional poetry is characterised by an intense soul-searching and a desire to be honest to oneself rather than to a poetical convention or tradition. The prevailing political and social conditions and the general emotional crisis were highly conducive to the growth of a deep rooted nationalistic upsurge. The writers' was an attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse for self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding.

Poems were written dealing with dual nature of mid-fifties - the subjective side of the 'self' fragmented by the whole world, and the individual 'self' related to the external world. Robert Lowell, for example, in his confessional works creates a myth of an America (and a contemporary civilization generally) whose history and present predicament are embodied in those of his own family and epitomized in his own psychological experience.
The other post-war confessional poets also deal with similar social and psychological struggles. Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg project a true example of self's psychological vulnerability and shame as an embodiment of their civilization. Kamala Das extends the confessional mode to incorporate the political crisis after independence in India, and strikes a resonance between the personal anguish and general breakdown of order in society. Among American confessional poets, the post-war political scene seems to have contributed a great deal to their poetical resurgence. These poets deal with the betrayed and physically crippled generation of their country and the revolutionary social and political criticism on many other lines.

The use of the first person singular or the confessional 'I' is another characteristic of confessional poetry. S. P. Ranchan says of the use of the first person singular in Whitman's poetry that its becoming is but an expansion of its being. In a sense its end precedes its beginning. This is true of all romantic poetry. The confessional 'I', on the contrary, is, for these poets, in continuous process of becoming. Robert Lowell points out about his use of 'I'; The 'I' in confessional poetry has a special psychological relation with the material of the poem.

The balance of the poem, says Robert Lowell is achieved through the confessional 'I', which helps the confessional poet take the reader into confidence. He talks in 'Man and Wife' about his essential self: “I feel / my 'I' / is too small for me”, while John Berryman's 'I' in his 77 Dream Songs consists of the voice of a divided self. Anne Sexton openly discusses her frequent use of the first person singular in a letter to Louis Simpson saying that her poems are “a personal narration about my experiences...”. There can be found several refrains of “I am”, “I am”, “I am” in Plath's poetry, indicating perhaps the goading need to know that her “I” exists after all. Kamala Das, through a ruthless self analysis, “burst out the 'I' emphasised lyricism breaking the barrier between the
man who suffers and the mind which creates". Furthermore, Caroline King Bernard writes:

... the confessional poet employs admittedly biographical materials and then distorts these literal facts ... to present the emotional truth that lies under them.34

These “literal facts” are the outcome of the “emotional truth” associated with their personal experiences of fear, guilt and weaknesses. The writers speak in the voice that is unmistakably that of themselves, generating a certain resistance to their poetry. These poets try to build a great poem out of the predicament with ‘I’ as a self analytical sensibility. Thus ‘I’ becomes the medium that acts as a magnetic cohesive centre for all the emotional and subjective currents summing through the work.

Confessional writers, from St. Augustine to the modern poetry, have been engaged in defining their identity with respect to the reality of their personal experience. The outer world becomes the manifestation of the inner turbulent psyche, and the projection of inner desolation and emptiness thus becomes the characteristic attempt to heal the schism in their personality. In writers like Roethke, Lowell, Plath and Das, a pervasive sense of personal crisis and a deep sense of ontological insecurity is depicted, that informs all their confessional writings. These writers by the very nature of art, convert their personal experience into metaphors and images that refer to their own sense of vulnerability, resulting in their isolation from society. The search for existential identity, which is a dominant motif in confessional poetry, is also a search for a meaningful relationship where they can strive to relate the inner world with the outer, in order to end the war of passion and reason, flesh and spirit, body and soul. The essential characteristic of the confessional
poetry is therefore a quest for authentic self and the display of identity crisis.

For a confessional poet, psychologising affords a way of sublimating his suffering, thus giving way to the calmness of mind and the peace of death. The forces of terror and fear present in such poems trace the ‘self’ as a victim which has internalised psychological violence in its system, ultimately surrendering it to death. Almost all the modern confessional poets wrote about death and suicide attempts with ease, the most prominent among them being Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. These poets like Keats, Dickinson and others, interpret death and life in relation to each other. Such confessional poems dealing with death and rebirth are generally considered by many critics as ‘self elegies’.

Death pervades the ancestral home of Lowell, where his relatives are described as victims of self-consuming and dreadful incurable diseases. Anne Sexton’s obsession with death is also a part of confessional themes. Among other women confessional writers, preoccupation with death is shared by Plath and Das, and their suicidal tendency is also portrayed in a convincing and effective manner. For them, love and death form a part of the same reality. Their poems overshadow writings of modern poets for whom death is the mother of beauty. They both court death more practically, thus justifying the title of ‘death-driven’ poets. Some of their ‘self-elegies’ depict death in relation to art. Plath asserts that “Dying / Is an art”, and lyric after lyric she dies poetically. As Alverez comments, “The achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable.” kamala Das also narrates her attempts at committing suicide with a view to gaining victory over eternity.

Compared with other romantic poets of the modern era, who expressed their death-wish more profoundly, the confessional poets of the
twentieth century are distinct not only because of the suicide that seems to
fulfil their longings, but also because of their repeated recounts of poetic
deaths with exceptional self-consciousness and of the relation between art
and death, poetic profit and imagined loss, self destruction and self
renewal. The writings of Yeats and Stevens project a similar view of
death as an occasion for active self-creation or endings into new
beginnings, but still these writers do not describe the intense horrific
physical encounters with death as pacifically as the modern confessional
writers. Kamala Das situates her mortal musings within her body and
burns with ecstatic intensity at the thought of death, while Sylvia Plath
writes about death in a heroic and horrendous manner, preferring a
rhetoric of intense immediacy.

Confessional poets are, in reality, unable to identify themselves
with the main stream of their culture precisely because they feel the
presence of death, violence and guilt at its very centre. Their only way to
maintain the authenticity in the corrupt world of guilt and suffering is to
confess about the inner horrors of psyche, and with the absence of all the
forces that can sustain their existence, a vision of death pervades in them.
On the whole, the salient features of the confessional poetry reflect
nothing but a personal attitude of a modern poet - particularly a sense of
anxiety, desolation and alienation, exploration of a meaningful human
existence and the feeling that the man is helpless and adrift in an
indifferent universe.

The strength of the confessional poetry is found in the self-probing
of their tortured soul and a search for value in the world without value.
The sensitive awareness of their surrounding, its sordidness, boredom,
ugliness and horrors result in producing highly personal poetry which
concerns itself with the private quest for value on the one hand and a
quest for definition of self on the other. Such a quest leads a poetic self to
some intimate, inward experience which can be communicated only
through a personal idiom by developing fresh epithets and novel
metaphors. Though the works of such modern confessional poets have been challenged by many critics regarding their soul-searching and their striking vitality of self-exploration. An attempt has been made in the present work to examine some of the comparative aspects of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das as confessional poets. These poets emerged on the poetic scene after the World War II and endeavoured to make significance and beauty out of the terror of our modern condition. They are in line with primary writers of a tradition, marked by a retreat into privatism and a progressive alienation of the artist from society. Plath and Das, as confessional poets, aim at making explicit what was once implied by 'stripping off the persona or mask' and making the speaking voice unequivocally their own.

Though both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath share certain common features, attempting an aesthetic reconstruction and transcendence of the fragmented self, threatened and victimised, yet their candidness about their private humiliations and family life vary in certain degrees and kinds. They both explore and assert the validity of self-existence but their proliferating images of failure and frustration seem to differ. Kamala Das, in strictly feminist terms, explores the fiercely feminine sensibility, assuming special significance in an uninhibited articulation of the hurts she has received in an insensitive largely man-made society. A fundamental rejection of traditional Hindu women's virtues, modesty, reticence and deference, a search of an ideal sexual union and total resentment and disappointment of the relationship with her husband, forms a central argument in Das's poetry. The urgency and immediacy which mark the procrastination and incarcerations of Sylvia Plath, miraculously evade Das's psychological probings. In Sylvia Plath's poetry, features like maniac depression or a centrifugal spin towards madness, the increasing, propensity towards suicide, the precarious balancing on the razor's edge, the gritty determination to pull through
and the dangerously depressive and uncontrollably euphoric state — lend strength, incredibility and intensity to her poetry.

For these confessional poets, "true self" consists of the purest primary processes, uncompromised by interaction with reality and un"classified" and un"qualified" by others. Their fury is against everybody about everything. Their rage is a part of their original resistance to lost omnipotence and also a part of an uncontrollable, fictitious outside world. Kamala Das rages against men and man-made world, struggling to survive in it. She writes about the conditions of women in the Third World countries and also about the drawbacks of being a female. Her poetry provides a remarkably controlled account of her secret desires as well as frustrations, free from the pursuits of oriental mysticism as well as callow hysterics. Sylvia Plath's rage is against life, she craved for death and peace after death. Her poetry is a mixture of the normal, repellent and the morbid. Her preoccupation with death, loneliness and claustrophobia arouse anxieties reflected through disturbing images in her poems. Such kaleidoscopic images expressive of guilt, despair, despondence and disappointment pent up in women confessional poets, account for the realism of their poetry, and their personal frustration finds voice in a struggle between the inherited values and enduring existence. An attempt has been made here to examine the salient features of Das's and Plath's confessional poetry in the context of modern English poetry. There is no denying that the modern confessional poets have succeeded in personalising and articulating their awareness of the modern man's predicament to a considerable extent, but whether this achievement in itself can be regarded as the final goal, is debatable.
References


12. Ibid., p. 79.


28. Ibid., p. 80.
33. P. K. J. Kurup, *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*, p. 141.