Chapter I

Introduction

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das have often been hailed as poet-laureates of housewives. But they have not received the critical scrutiny they deserve as is evident from the limited number of books published on their poetry. This is partly due to their outspokenness and partly due to the kind of themes that they choose to write about.

Women’s writing now constitutes a powerful articulation of the gender-specific concerns of women, whose explicit self-identification as an oppressed group qualifies this branch of writing for analysis as a separate category. The conceptual framework of women’s writing uses the historical experience of women in the patriarchy wherein gender relations assume a political dimension. Everything, including the seemingly apolitical, in this conceptual framework, is political. Even the personal, in this view, is political, and it is this view that inspires Wilhelm Reich to term gender relations “sexual politics.” Women’s literature is deeply inscribed with this politics, and it will be profitable to analyze the nature of such inscriptions by examining the work of two important women poets of our period. Women’s literature, which has evolved out of women’s identity struggles, creates a new awareness in men and
women. This has to be distinguished from feminist literature which expresses the shared experiences of women’s oppression. Feminist literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women, the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender. As it aims at improving the situation of women, feminist literature is invariably aligned with political interests. By exhorting women to political action and by helping in consciousness-raising, feminist literature seeks to influence public opinion in order to change women’s situation. Feminist literature is gynocentric: its emphasis is on the ideology rather than on the literariness of the text. Women’s literature need not be overtly ideological: its stress can be on the literary merit of the text.

Feminist literature assists women’s political movement for liberation. An ideal feminist work, as Mary Eagleton observes in her *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* serves a five-fold function. Firstly, literature serves as a medium for honest self-expression for women: women find literature the most expressive form of art which is true to women’s experiences. Secondly, literature emerging out of female impulses helps to achieve cultural androgyny. It attempts to create a new social order founded on humanistic values. Thirdly, it provides role-models which instill a positive sense of
feminine identity. Literature that depicts female
characters involved in activities which are traditionally
not feminine hastens the dissolution of rigid sex roles.
Fourthly, it provides a new sense of community, a
sisterhood, fostered on female-female relationships.
Lastly, it helps in consciousness-raising. Literature
achieves this by providing realistic insights into the
female world and into the psychological and physical
consequences of sexual politics. Feminist literature,
which appeals to the common feelings of insignificance
and alienation of women, offers solutions to women’s
problems.

The literary text created by female writer has a
distinct tension: The conflict between an unconventional
content and the persistent need for the rigour and
control of form. This tension is the externalization of
conflict the protagonist undergoes: the conflict between
psychic disintegration and the desperate need for psychic
wholeness. This, then, is a tension that is latent in the
writer’s psyche. The atmosphere or locale, the imagery,
the rhythm or rhyme, the mode of narration and
characterization, all have a peculiarly female touch. A
woman writer is unique both in the selection of theme and
in its formal rendering. This uniqueness is the outcome
the conflicting processes to which she is subjected; the
processes of being and becoming a woman.
Women’s voices go unheard in the literary world. Women writers are symbolically represented in a patriarchy by a blank page and by silence, by absence and by negation. The feminine has been constructed as absence, silence, incoherence, even madness.

As a woman is defined by her gender, a female writer has a sense of marginality. A woman writer finds it difficult to exert any meaningful impact on the world, a situation which is emblematic of all women. She is, as Deborah Pope in his A Separate Vision remarks, “plagued by the problems of language and style, questions of power and survival, and the task of contact with herself” (2-3). Women writers do not find any models among women to follow on the questions of language and style.

Early women writers blindly followed male writers on this. One can hardly distinguish between their language and style from that of the male writers of the period. This is because writers, irrespective of their genders, employ the male-centred language for literary creation. This can prove fatal for women writers. Women writers’ choice of the phallocentric language finds a parallel in the colonial situation where the colonized uses the language of the colonizer. The expression the “fourth world” used with reference to women points to this reality of sexual colonialism. Terms like “visceral colonialism,” “phallic imperialism” and “penile
tyranny” (30) are used by Ruthven in his *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* also point to the same situation. Women’s silent approval of the male-oriented language is construed as a sign of their meek submission to the dominant sex, as a mark of their acceptance of their subordination and marginalization. Feminist writers are, therefore, confronted by the immediate necessity of evolving a language that is different from the male-centred language and which can truly represent their thoughts and emotions.

The construction of such a language is related to the question of the writer’s quest for identity. Woman’s quest for identity is complicated by her sense of loneliness and isolation. A woman writer remains anxious to reveal the truth about her womanly experiences and writes about her deepest responses. What women writers share in general is the female sensibility. Patricia Meyer Spacks in her *The Female Imagination* stresses this identity when she observes that “the experience of women has long been the same, that female likenesses are more fundamental than female differences” (5). The female writers think and feel alike the world over. They depict and offer solutions to the problems of life from a female point of view. There is, as Mary Eagleton in her *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* observes, an “imaginative continuum” in women’s literature like “the recurrence of
certain patterns, themes, problems and images”(12). The belief that woman’s life is different, separate and divided unifies the styles and concerns of women’s literature.

The Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell and Christina Rossetti withdrew to cloistered life. Virginia Woolf found that a talented woman would be tortured and pulled as under by her contrary instincts. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton committed suicide as they could not withstand the schizophrenic split of the self. Many female writers, who are victims of neurosis and psychosis, save themselves from madness and suicide through literary accomplishments.

The mystique of a feminine fulfillment emanating from wifehood and womanhood remains a threat to the female writer who strives to express her true self. A woman writer has to fulfill the cultural expectations of womanhood as well as her own aspirations to become a writer.

The dominant conflict in the writer’s psyche is between the domestic woman and the creative artist. This conflict is the most productive source of disturbance which inspires her writing. The value system created by the patriarchal culture recognizes male sovereignty on the basis of physical strength. Kate Millet in her Sexual Politics observes: “Male supremacy, like other political
creeds does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological” (27). Talents cannot be determined on the basis of sex or gender. No man is totally masculine and no woman fully feminine. This awareness prompts Simone de Beauvoir to remark that every female human being need not necessarily be a woman. This is also relevant to literary creation. Mary Eagleton quoted in her Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader that John Fowles voices his concern about the ambiguity of an author’s gender in a literary text. He asserts that the feminine elements in the personality of a male writer contribute to his greatness as a writer: “There is Adam-women and Eve-men: singularly few of the world’s great progressive artists and thinkers have not belonged to the latter category” (83). However, he is silent about the influence of the masculine aspects of a female writer on her literary creation. The historical significance of women’s literature is great. At the microcosmic level, as many feminists have pointed out “history” is a disguised version of “his story.” This is due to the influence of patriarchy in all fields of learning including history and literature.

Women’s literature, which is mostly autobiographical and confessional, is an alternate history. Women writers rewrite “history” into “her story.” This is necessitated by woman’s contradictory position vis-a-vis history. She
is symbolically significant, yet materially invisible in history. Her predicament is best expressed by Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One’s Own*:

> Imaginatively she is of the highest importance: practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover. She is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction: in fact she was the slave of anybody whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband. (45-46)

Patriarchy stifles woman’s voice and censors her words. And woman, in turn, creates a fantasy to subvert patriarchy.

The art of a woman writer arises from romance, real or imaginary. She becomes her own heroine. She acts the diabolical role of a witch and risks a figurative death. Her personality undergoes a metaphoric extinction in her construction of an artful mask. She is conscious of herself as a subject, a speaker, assertive and authoritative, and radiant with powerful feelings. In women’s literature there is an identification of the writer as the protagonist and as the oppressed female. In
the case of many women writers their writings have the status of an autobiography in which the female speaker is the authoritative subject and usually the author in disguise. This rule out the possibility of much displacement of emotions. The woman writer compensates for the lack of displacement by mystifying the poetic process. The mystification can be achieved through the construction of a persona or other categories of speakers on the one hand and through revisionist myth-making on the other. A woman writer often exploits a mystical framework as a deceptive cover or a disguise to portray emotional alliances. The various processes of mystification indicate how the meanings of a text are constructed, altered or even manipulated to suit the needs of the female artist. Writers like Anne Sexton and Kamala Das successfully explore all the processes of mystification. The female writer portrays specific problems inherent in the history of women as writers. There is, as Mary Eagleton observes in her *Feminist Literary Theory*, a “celebration of retrieved sexuality” in women’s literature (127). The woman writer underlines the rejection of woman as an object of desire and her transformation into a subject of sexuality.

Most existing myths tend to disregard the female experience. Women writers reimage the female characters of folktales, legends and myths to envision prototypes
rather than to revitalize archetypes and stereotypes. They try to rewrite and reinterpret these figures. The narrative of women’s literature revolves round the protagonist’s experience of isolation in life. Women’s literature as imaginative writing is far from conscious, coherent and controllable. Its independent female characters provide role-models; individual women find their identity in them.

Women’s literature, vital and experimental, is bristling with optimism for the potential and fulfillment of human life. Roy Harvey Pearce in her The Continuity of American Poetry observed:

A poet is ours to the degree that he is gifted with that kind of sensibility which will let him push to their farthest implications such possibilities (and impossibilities) for the life of the spirit as are latent in the culture of his and our community, past and present. (10)

In their new visions of human experiences and new meanings for humanity, women writers exemplify a commitment to the ideal Pearce proposes. Women’s literature marches toward new ways of understanding and realizing human dignity.

Women’s literature heralds a new sense of community. It is the female imagination which makes the inevitable difference between the male and the female ways of
perception. There is always an intrinsic element in the female experience, an element that stands in contrast with the experience of man. Certain symbols, metaphors, images, styles or tones may recur in women’s literature. This repetition of distinctive elements is a standard by which the social and historical position of women can be judged. There is a marked sexual difference in writing which operates at the levels of stylistic unity, thematic selection and construction of plots and events. A tremendous unity exists in women’s literature among different styles, periods and concerns. The belief that woman’s life is distinctively unique unifies women’s literature. The anxiety that woman’s creative potential is underdeveloped and her necessary fulfillment is unrealized pervades women’s literature. This frustration itself acts as a creative impulse in women’s literature.

Feminists point out that language has been formed to suit the needs of men which include the necessity to dominate women. They observe that it is a disservice for women to use the male-oriented language for feminist discourse. The cognitive experiences differ between the sexes and this is reflected in literature. Discourse of men, which is linear, always ends with a definite conclusion while feminine discourse, wide-ranging as it is, ends on a diffused note. Julia Kristeva believes that there is much opposition between masculine and feminine
writings. Male writing is based on reason, logic, linearity and chronology while female writing is based on associative, anti-logical, non-chronological and non-linear forms. The masculine and feminine styles can be differentiated from each other. The masculine style is bold, forceful, clear, vigorous, objective, universal, and accurate while the feminine style is vague, weak, tremulous, pasted, personal, confessional, narcissistic and neurotic. A woman-writer is often segregated with the implicit anticipation that she has to find a definition, or an identity against the wider context of man.

There are three thinkers of great historic significance whose writings have influenced women’s literature and feminist criticism. They are Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet. These seminal thinkers refute and disprove the theories of Freud and throw fresh light on the question of woman’s sexuality. The subservient position of woman is best reflected in, The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir’s words:

She [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to tier, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - She is Other. (10)

The classic conception of bisexuality, the fantasy of a total being, is designed to allay the male fear of the
Other. Beauvoir views Otherness as a fundamental human thought originating from the primordial duality of the Self and the Other (16). The Self and the Other make a pair in which the Other is always subordinated. Beauvoir starts from the assumption, that man is the Self and woman the Other; the Self treats the Other as a supplement.

Beauvoir’s binary analysis provides an excellent basis for the view that woman is constituted negatively in a patriarchy. This fact is abundantly expressed in the writing of men of diversified talents and views. Women writers have to erase the negative images the male writers have etched in the social psyche. They have to be innovative in their craftsmanship to reimage themselves anew. In this context women’s literature is a re-vision and a re-thinking. The mission and responsibility of women writers rest with their eagerness to create a new literature that suits the new world they have envisioned.

Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique’s notions of the feminine mystique calls attention to the maddening confusion inherent in women who limit themselves ultimately to the role-models imposed on them by the patriarchal society. Women forsake career ambitions and intellectual achievements to become mere wives and mother. The word “mystique” in this context connotes the mysterious dilemma or the anomalous condition of modern
women who, in spite of their potential, gravitate towards age-old sexual myths and perverted patriarchal traditions. The feminine mystique is a retarding element in the growth of a woman who drains her of her talents in the barren atmosphere of domesticity. The mystique considers the fulfillment of femininity the only commitment for women and this can be achieved through sexual passivity, male domination and maternal love. The mystique sees woman only in her sexual role and degrades woman to the twin roles of: her husband’s wife and children’s mother. Her Feminine Mystique encourages woman to ignore the question of her identity and misinterprets women’s problem as a “role crisis” (68). Friedan underlines that the crisis central to woman is not sexual; it is the crisis of identity. Woman finds is difficult to fulfill her potential as this need is not defined by her sexual role. The identity crisis in a woman’s life is the crisis of growing up; a woman progresses from immaturity, which euphemistically phrased as femininity to full human identity. Women continue to suffer this crisis of identity in their perennial struggle to become fully human.

The expression of female consciousness has undergone a sea change in the West since the 60’s. This transformation has later spread to other parts of the world. The perception of the female now progresses from
the feminine mystique and reaches what Friedan calls a “second stage” (67). Equality becomes a reality and personhood an experience. Extremist feminist rhetoric denies the profound human reality of relationships between men and women and shakes the basic, structure of family. Denial of woman’s sexuality leads to a conflict over motherhood which is dubbed as a hangover from the past. But the conflict is partly real as motherhood is still dear to women: the choice of motherhood is fundamental to the identity of woman. Personal choices arid political strategies are often twisted in the case of women. Women’s needs for power, identity and security through work are denied by the advocates of the feminine mystique, while their needs for love, identity and security through marriage are discouraged by the supporters of the feminist mystique. A new image of woman emerges: the image of woman as a person, as a heroine. The traditional image of woman, woman as wife and mother, woman as a dependent sexual object, must merge with the new image of woman. The need of the hour is to harmonize the traditional roles of marriage, motherhood and home-making with the emerging roles of professional women with individuality and decision-making power. It will make woman fully free and confident and help her to move forward to break the mystique in the minds of her less adventurous neighbours. This enables women to achieve
identity as fully human in order to create a new image of woman. Women writers must prevent ordinary women from being carried away by the deceptive fascinations of mystique. They must also protect family familial values front the onslaught of extremist feminism. The ideal woman writer has to accomplish the task of achieving the golden mean between the feminine mystique and feminist mystique. Contemporary women’s literature, therefore, portrays the intricate and arduous task of attaining this harmony in the art and literature of a society with threatened by the conflicting forces of patriarchy and feminism.

Woman does not display a virile myth and project herself as subject. Having no literature of her own she, dreams through the fantasy created by men. Her personality is evolved along the stereotyped lines of sex categories constructed to suit the needs of men. This is due to socialization of the sexes in a patriarchy. The limited sex roles of woman degrade her life to the animal level. All activities distinctly human are, as Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, observes, labeled as “masculine” (26). The categorization of gender is first made manifest in the sexual myth unilaterally imposed on the social psyche. To be a woman is a unique and strange experience which can be fully expressed only by a woman. The interiorization of patriarchal ideology continually
places woman under surveillance. This leads to
infantilization of women even in intellectual matters.
Man takes pride in his sexuality which he employs as a
means to appropriate woman, the Other. Women’s image
created by man suits his needs springing from the fear of
her Otherness. So, the artistic image of woman is always
distorted and manipulated.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory has been an obstacle
to an honest understanding of the representation of women
in literature. The reactionary forces against the
emancipation of women have perpetuated the not ions of
“penis-envy” and “castration-complex” to denigrate woman.
Freud argues that a woman has the feeling of being an
hommemanque, a man with something missing. Her feeling
that she is a “mutilated man” lowers her image in her own
eyes and leads her to wish for the male organ. This wish
is psychologically expressed through her eagerness to be
like a man. As it is physically impossible to attain the
status of a man, she strives to achieve his intellectual
status. She is, thus, led to seek an intellectual career
which can be recognized as a sublimated modification of
her repressed wish. Freud’s theories are based on the
assumption that woman is inferior to man. Freud saw woman
exclusively in terms of sexuality, though the sexual is
only one dimension of human potential (Friedan, Mystique
105). Helene Deutsch, Female Sexuality: The Psychology of
Women, equates, “femininity” with passivity and “masculinity” with activity. Woman’s fascination for action-oriented life called “masculinity-complex” stems from female “castration-complex.” The deficient female anatomy and the society work together to create femininity (Friedan, Mystique 108). Beauvoir, The Second Sex, condemns the theory of “penis-envy” as an anomaly which fails to distinguish emotion from sexuality (304-07). Ashley Montagu refutes Freud’s charge and holds that it is men who feel jealous of women’s ability to menstruate and procreate (33). Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, observes that to be born a female in a masculine dominated culture is a tragic experience (179-80). New literary standards and norms have to be evolved on the basis of the new psychology framed on the equality of women and perception of woman as an autonomous human being capable of versatile activities. Only a new aesthetic and a modified ethic can pave the way for honest representation of the female in literature.

The new aesthetic or the new ethic cannot evolve by itself. The mystique perpetuated by patriarchy is indelible in the social psyche. Every mystique depends on sophisticated means to propagate its hold. The new aesthetic or the new ethic will not find easy acceptance in society not only because they are opposed by the patriarchal forces but also because they are viewed with
suspicion. It is, therefore, the responsibility of women to postulate and popularize new critical theories and new psychology on the one hand and to represent women on the basis of the new psychology and new critical theories on the other. For the unhindered development of women’s literature women have to create a congenial atmosphere in every branch of learning so that it will not smother the progress of women’s literature as a distinct genre.

Confessional literature emerges from a tradition associated with Christianity. Robert Lowell remarks that his poetry stems from a tradition rather than an innovation. Confessional literature is often identified with autobiography. Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography, observes that autobiography, "a creation of European civilization," indeed "begins with Augustine’s Confessions" (21). Though the confessional mode is a comparatively recent phenomenon, some of its salient features can be seen in ancient literature. Some Old Testament Psalms, Song of Songs and many books of the Apocrypha are confessional in tone. Sappho and Catullus in the pre-Christian era wrote poems which are explicitly confessional. Rousseau’s Confessions, Wordsworth’s The Prelude, Byron’s Don Juan, Lamb’s Essays of Elia and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass are strikingly confessional.

Confessional literature thus has been in circulation ever since man began to give expression to his subjective
feelings, though Confessional poetry as it is understood today partakes of other important qualities too. Confessional poetry is highly subjective. It is a poetic technique adopted to reveal and even dramatize the poet’s life. The autobiographical impulses and elements in poetry are the result of a selective accommodation of poetic materials. Northrop Frye considers confession a form of autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography. Poetry takes over the traditional functions and tones of fiction. The term “confessional” overstresses the notion of the poem as instant communication. The poem itself is an act, a part of the life it describes. It creates an environment where the poet leads a life of struggle, improvisation and resistance. Personal experience includes the fantasies of the poet’s inner life. Poetry absorbs the data of private events, fears and desires as well as materials of intimate confession and historical imagination. Confessional poetry thus translates autobiographical facts into epic narratives.

Autobiographical writing by women as the oppressed gender is prone to conflicts and tensions. The depiction of the life and experiences of women, on the one hand, is a liberating process in so far as it expresses a public self-acceptance and a celebration of difference. On the
other hand, the internalized cultural values which define specific Identities as marginal come to the surface in the feelings of anxiety and guilt. This strongly negative self-image is a problem for women whose socialization endows them with feelings of inadequacy. The negative pattern in which attempted self-affirmation reverts to anxiety and self-castigation is a recurring example in feminist confession. In this context, feminism, as Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, observes ironically accentuates the guilt rather than resolve it “by providing an ideal of autonomy which the author is unable to emulate” (105). If the insights gained through the act of confession are not translated into action, they generate increased feelings of guilt in the author at the extent of her own failings. The very objective of feminist confession is to confront unpalatable aspects of female experience as general problems and not to present idealized images of women as positive models. A feminist confessional writer is engaged in a tight-rope walking between critical insight and obsessive self-castigation. The act of confession can expose a female subjectivity only within the symbolic order. The female self is marked by contradictions and tensions related to a problematic subjectivity and conditions of marginalization and powerlessness.
Feminist confession caters to the specific needs arising from its social functions in the context of women’s cultural and political struggles and articulates the specific problems experienced by women in the process of identity formation and cultural critique. The tension between a focus on objectivity and the construction of an identity that is communal rather than individualistic is a feature of feminist confession. The production and reception of feminist literature has acquired a political dimension recently. Feminism links the personal and psychological dimensions of experiences to the institutionalized nature of sexual oppression. The basic principle of feminist confession, as Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, remarks, is “the recognition that women’s problems are not private but communal” (115). The politicization of feminist confession is a significant issue. Confession is less concerned with any explicit political questions than with the cathartic release associated with self-disclosure. The strength of confession as a genre lies in the ability to communicate the conflicting and contradictory aspects of subjectivity and the tensions between personal feelings and ideological convictions.

The existence of a feminist readership provides a context for a politicized interpretation of feminist
confession. Contemporary responses to feminist confession indicate the existence of a significant readership which contextualizes its Social meanings. The political value of self-disclosure is explicitly asserted by feminist writers.

Feminist confession indicates that the process of self-examination is a necessary, politically significant act in relation to the community of female readers. The division between a repressive stereotype and a symbolic cultural identity is a narrow one. The creation and affirmation of symbolic identities constitute a recurring need for the female sex. This fulfills a desire for self-validation in the face of the hostility of the dominant patriarchal culture. The focus on sexuality as a determinant of cultural identity is a recent historical phenomenon. Feminism denotes a range of cultural and political affiliations rather than a preference for a form of sexuality. It relies on a critique of patriarchal culture for its construction of an oppositional female identity, which is not a destiny but a choice. This oppositional identity articulates experiences of the alienation, exclusion and suffering of women. The socially constructed identity does not undermine its political functions.

The present study is an attempt to compare Anne Sexton and Kamala Das as feminists and confessionals that
react almost identically to virtually dissimilar native contexts. The many points of intersection between their poetic trajectories are examined here by placing them critically parallel to each other on conspicuous planes of similarities. They are seen as writing amazingly identical poems using common poetic materials and almost similar poetic techniques. The study shows how the two poets, even as they express themselves creatively in the traditional sense, also “write” the culture and history of their own gender in ways that are specific to their respective national communities. This concern with writing the history and culture of their gender places them in the large and distinctive body of women’s writing, which is one of the important areas of contemporary scholarship.