Chapter II
Confessions

Confessional poetry is an expression of personality and never an escape from it. In this regard these poets follow the Romantics and break with the Eliotic aesthetic on the impersonal nature of poetry. The poets do not obliterate their personalities in their poems: their lives seldom remain invisible in their works. They break the Eliotic reticence about the poet’s biography and deliberately parade the details of their life in poetry. They reveal to the readers what a Christian reserves for the Father Confessor or a patient reserves for the analyst. In this process the aesthetic distance between the man who suffers and the mind that creates vanishes and the poet becomes the victim. Ultimately, poetry evolves out of victimization. That is the reason why Confessional poetry is often called “the poetry of suffering,” (130) reviewed by Rosenthal in his The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War-II. Psychological conditions like breakdown and paranoia make the suffering unbearable. A heightened sensitivity to the human predicament leads to a sharper sense of the pain of existence. A sense of eternal torture is a motive behind Confessional poetry. Kamala Das, for instance, expresses
a woman’s yearning for unadulterated love in “Morning at Apollo Pier”:

... But, hold me, hold me once again,
Kiss the words to death in my mouth, plunder memories. I hide my defeat in your
wearying blood, and all my fears and shame.
You are poem to end all poems
a poem, absolute as the tomb.
Your flawed beauty is my only refuge. (23-29)

Her moods alternate between frenzy and pain, the need for love and the thought of death. In a state of subjective reality the Poet equates love with death, compares a lover to a poem and finds in poetry an alternative to love-making. Anne Sexton expresses her love-hate relationship with her mother in “For the Year of the Insane”:

I have this fear of coughing
But I do not speak,
a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
who comes riding into my mouth.
The glass tilt in on its own.
And I am in tire.
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.
I see myself as one could see another.
I have been cut in two. (61-69)
Confessional poetry has a therapeutic value. In the preface to My Story Kamala Das describes how she began writing the book as a reprieve from the thought of imminent death. She finds fiction an alternative to reality and story an equivalent to life. The narrator of My Story gets an extension of life through story telling. This means that the analysis of a confessional poem will yield the same result as the analysis of a dream in the treatment of a patient. Anne Sexton’s poetic career begins as a therapeutic exercise. In her interview, No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose, she remarks:

Sometimes, 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 revealing it to the readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. (85)

Kamala Das’ “The Anamalai Poems” and most in Anne Sexton’s To Bedlam and part Way Back are examples of self-therapy exercises. They take to poetry to destroy dragonish dreams and experiences. Kamala Das describes her experience:
There were nights when I heard
my own voice call me out
of dreams, gifting such rude
awakenings, and then
expelling me from warm
human love, unaccustomed
fare for one such as I,
a misfit when awake. (5-12)

Anne Sexton recalls her experience at Martin Orne’s clinic in
“Music Swims Back to Me”:

   It was the strangled cold of November:
even the stars were strapped in the sky
and that moon too bright
forking through the bars to stick me
with a singing in the head

   I have forgotten all the rest. (19-24)

Confessional poetry is woven round the poetic self as the chief symbol. The personal mythology which the poet creates has the poet as the focal point. The truth expressed by the poem is not literal but poetic. Kamala Das speaks of imaginary lovers like Carlo and Gino in her poems and My Story. Anne Sexton tells us of an imaginary brother and an imaginary child abandoned by her in her poems. The mystified truth, nevertheless, has some significance for the poet’s life. Each poem declares
guilt, anguish and suffering. Each poem, as Robert Phillips observes, is “ego-centred,” though not “egocentric” and is aimed at “self-therapy” and “purgation” (8). Kamala Das declares in one of her “Anamalai Poems”:

If I had not learnt to write how would I have written away my loneliness or grief? Garnering them within my heart would have grown heavy as a vault, one that only death might open, a release then I would not be able to feel or sense. (12-17)

Anne Sexton also speaks of the chronic loneliness she feels as an artist in a patriarchal society. She confesses in “Flee on Your Donkey”:

Everyone has left me except my muse, that good nurse.

She stays in my hand, a mild white mouse. (20-24)

The poetic self is at the centre stage of the events that find expression in poetry. A Confessional poet finds no hurdles between his self and the direct expression of that self despite the pain, anguish and difficulty involved in that kind of expression. The adoption of a persona is not necessary for a Confessional poet to express his emotion. Even when there is a persona, the
poetic self explicitly identifies itself with the persona. The confessional poets do not accept any symbol or formula for an emotion and give direct, personal expression to emotions. As Confessional poetry is an expression of personality, one finds only subjective correlatives corresponding to subjective confessions.

The impulse behind Confessional poetry is the urge to see and know the truth about oneself, however painful and embarrassing it may be. The poet plunges into the unconscious, dives beneath the level of rational discourse, ransacks the darker side of the self with subliminal imagery and the logic of association. The poet dramatizes the personal, explores the discovery of the external truth by the self, portrays the self’s reaction to this discovery and incorporates personal history into poems. The poet’s frequent attention to the objective narration disguises an obsessive inwardness which is realized as a ferocious preoccupation with the subjective. Even poems that are apparently not about the poet turn out to be subjective. Kamala Das’ “Ghanashyam,” for example, though apparently about Radha and Krishna, is actually about herself and her lover. Anne Sexton similarly concludes “The Farmer’s Wife” by switching the focus from farmer and wife to the poet and her lover. When the narrative mask is dropped, the tone can be painfully raw and open. Kamala Das’ “A Requiem for My
Father” and Anne Sexton’s “All My Pretty Ones” are alike in that they are addressed to the poet’s father. The contrast between the passion and intimacy of the address and the rigidity of the measure exacerbates the situation and intensifies the feeling of the poem. The half-yielding, half-rebellious mood of the poets symbolizes their paternal inheritance as well as their love-hate relationships with their fathers. They are confronted with the pain of being daughters, wives, mothers and lovers. Long before it became fashionable, both Kamala Das and Anne Sexton wrote in praise of their distinctive identities as Indian and American female poets.

Confessional poetry is pre-occupied with the evolution and identity of the self. It is concerned with the frontiers of existence, and the ultimate, and inchoate sources of being. The need to confess springs from a strong belief that: her story must be told. The poet encounters a painful awareness of the self; her anxiety springs from a world corrupted by egotism. The poet’s story of life becomes true tale for humanity at large. The poet fabricates larger, historical meanings and imaginary myths out of the personal horror. The banal horrors of personal and general history are rendered in terms of fairy tales or folk songs. Kamala Das’ “Krishna poems” and Anne Sexton’s Transformations, for instance, describe personal horrors in terms of folk songs and
fairy tales. Kamala Das’ “Ghanashyam,” to take an example, speaks of the love between the poet and an aged lover in terms of the Radha-Krishna myth:

We played once a husk-game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need
[for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don’t you want me any longer,
[don’t you want me (25-30)

Anne Sexton similarly talks about assumed incest through the fairy tale of “Briar Rose”:

Each night I am nailed in to place
and I forget who I am.
Daddy?
That’s another kind of prison.
It’s not the prince a tall,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish. (149-158)

Private and taboo subjects are often explored in confessional poetry. The self discovers itself partly through the energy it acquires by its insights into
reality and partly through the sensuous excitement
created by the reality of experience. Confessional poetry
revolves round the individual as victim who fights
relentlessly for true self-realization. The poet accepts
the implicit role of an artist and liberates herself from
the domination of the literal. Poetry is often a
political and cultural criticism, a symbolic embodiment
of national and cultural crisis. The private life of the
poet under the stress of psychological crisis, sex,
family life, private humiliations, self-doubt and
confusion is an expression exposing the vulnerability
characteristic of the poetic statement. The confessional
poet is involved in a more radical act than to speak of
things that have been considered taboo. The self
participates in a world of flux from which it can no
longer separate itself. The confessional self appears
psychotic and flirts with a dangerously dark,
unrecognized encounter with experience. So, the
relationship between the psychological state of the poet
and her poetry is a major critical concern in this kind
of poetry. The expansion of the boundaries of self
involves the risk of sanity, if not the risk of life
itself. Sylvia Plath and John Berryman committed suicide.
Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke spent a period of
their lives in mental hospitals. Bedlam was a second home
for Anne Sexton, who finally committed suicide. Kamala
Das suffered mental breakdown several times as My Story and some poems reveal. Confessional poetry is a combination of the art of reconciliation and the art of resistance. While some confessionals find a therapeutic release in poetry, others find poetry pushing them towards the edge.

Madness as a theme and point of view shaping poetic technique is the hallmark of Confessional poetry. Confessional poetry reflects contemporary attitude towards the unconscious mind. Madness is not merely a destructive product of the corrupt values and heartlessness of society but is also a defense against these evils and a means to combat them. Madness is a means of self-realization. Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” begins with a shocking utterance: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” (1).

The increasing sense of aloneness in an indifferent society is symbolically transformed into visions of assault on the notion of an autonomous self in Confessional poetry. The conception of madness as a revelation of mind or an expansion of consciousness is a poetic technique for the Confessionals. Confessional poetry marks a continuous interest in the psychic experiences of the poet as part of the flux that is history. R.D. Laing, The Divided Self, considers madness as a struggle for liberation from false attitudes and
values, an encounter with primary feelings and impulses which help to evolve a true self. He believes that “authentic aspects of the self can be conveyed in madness” (281). The Freudian concept of madness as a malign and malevolent psychic disorder no longer holds true. The psychic disorder of: the author gets reflected in the narrative pattern or symbols or metaphors in the poem.

Neurosis, however, is something that artists share with other members of the society. A poet’s genius lies not in the intensity of his neurosis but in his skill to successfully objectify it. The nervous breakdowns Kamala Das claims she suffered might be just ordinary events by American standards. The narrator of My Story describes two instances of severe nervous bouts she suffered. Disillusioned by the homosexuality of her husband, then narrator went to the terrace of her home on a moon-lit night. She was tempted to fling herself down. She saw a mad beggar dancing under a street-lamp. The rhythm of his grotesque dance fascinated her. She felt like the last human being dancing on the most desolate pinnacle. Somehow she managed to return to her room. She transmuted her experience into a poem.

It is not entirely correct to say that nervous breakdown is cause to Anne Sexton’s poetry. Breakdown indeed is one of the impulses of her poetry. Breakdown
provides not only a structure for individual poems but also a pattern for sequences. For Anne Sexton neurosis forms a part of the conception of the poet’s existence. Quoted by McClatchy in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* that in one of her interviews she declares: “in the first book, I was giving the experiences of madness: in the second book, the causes of madness” (13). She accepts her status as a mad woman. In “Ringing the Bells” she writes:

we are the circle of the crazy ladies
who sit in the lounge of the mental house
and smile at the smiling woman (9-11)

Someone who experiences madness like this is not really mad. She is determined to play mad, and to accept her role of a mad woman as a kind of solution. This may sound a facile generalization. But poem after poem pushes one to the same conclusion. “You Doctor Martin” is an instance:

... We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. (8-11)

There is a tension between the sense of freedom and the sense of actual captivity in the poem. It appears that Anne Sexton nursed the feeling that she had nothing to offer by way of poetry if she were not mad or depressed.
Her world is confined to the mad house, to neurosis. She offers images of paranoia to play upon the uncertainties connected with sanity. Anne Sexton laments in “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn”:

The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.
in the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies.
The world is full of enemies
There is no safe place. (11-15)

She needs human company to reject them; she describes her return to the madhouse in “Flee on Your Donkey”:

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.
I have lost the trick of it! (191-193)

.................................
This is madness
but a kind of hunger. (214&215)

The utterances of the psychodrama may be effective or reductive. But the simple spoken prose suggests that Anne Sexton’s career submerged in the history of her past and her madness imposes upon her talent a commitment to survive at the expense of artifice.

Anne Sexton’s over-exposure to psychoanalysis yields the Book Transformations, which is a psychoanalytical interpretation of fairy tales. These tales, as Suzanne Juhas in her Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American
Poetry by Women, a New Tradition observes attempt “to create the truth by bridging the gap between the present of adult experience and the potential madness underlying the everyday” (127). In the concluding poem “Briar Rose,” Anne Sexton forgets the fairy tale and indulges in sick jokes:

She married the prince
and all went well
except for the fear-
the fear of sleep.
Briar Rose
was an insomniac . . .
She could not nap
or lie in sleep. (98-105)

Briar Rose woke up on being kissed by Daddy. The book ends with the description of the speaker’s Daddy:

It’s not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish. (153-158)

Anne Sexton’s world view seems to be formed by the exasperating doctrines of Freud. She regards herself as a victim who expects to be humoured as a victim without any responsibility. She persists in acknowledging that she
and the mad woman are one and grasps madness as an opportunity for rebirth.

Confessional poetry is a classic illustration of the fact that poetry balances the unconscious and the conscious. The source of poetry is the unconscious; the control is provided by the conscious. On the strength of the poetic ego the poet visualizes a point at which the two meet. The Confessional poets express an urge to court the disasters, to plumb for the dark mysteries of life and death. They long to feel the thrill and chill of death in their pulses in an irresistible temptation by death.

Confessional art is a direct outcome of the disintegration of the poetic psyche. A desire for psychic wholeness and integration counters the disintegration and strives for psychic stability. The poet takes the extreme step of self-sacrifice to find psychic reintegration and stability. In the very process of self-extinction the poet finds a new identity. Self-destructiveness is a way to normalize oneself in (certain cases. It helps one endure threatening crises and neutralize overwhelming forces. It is achieved through the twin processes of transposition of opposites and transmutation of objectives. Destruction promises both relief and fulfillment. The Confessional poets discover their affinity with death; they are driven by a desire to
create their own versions of death. They eroticize pain
anxiety or guilt and look to suicide as a form of
resolution of the conflict. This is affected by changing
an intolerable reality into an idealized state expected
in life or anticipated in death. Death and life are so
ambiguous for these poets that they libidinize reality
and turn death into an idealized existence. Alvarez says
in his *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* that the “act
of formal expression” of the poetic self makes the “dredged
up” self more “readily available” to the poet (38).

As Confessional poets, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das
are haunted by suicide. Kamala Das’s “Nani” is a popular
poem about suicide. Like Berryman, who was haunted by the
suicide of his father, Kamala Das is haunted by the
suicide of the pregnant maid who hanged herself in the
privy while the poet was a child. The children who see
the hanging body think “that Nani/was doing to delight
us, a comic/dance” (4&5) like a “clumsy puppet” (5). Time
passes and the abandoned privy becomes an altar: “a lonely
shrine / for a goddess who was dead.” Though her
grandmother makes light of the incident, the poet is
still haunted by the macabre death.

The form of self-destruction that seems to appeal to
Kamala Das most is by drowning in the sea. The narrator
confesses in *My Story*: “Often I have toyed with the idea
of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness . . . . I
have wanted to find rest in the sea . . .” (215). The contemplated suicide does not take place due to her inability to choose between physical death and spiritual death. This is a serious problem which artists confront in their life and art. Kafka committed artistic suicide when tuberculosis failed to provide him natural death. Samuel Beckett’s characters survive suicide and lead posthumous, immobile lives as seems to be unsure and uncertain as she says in “The Suicide”:

I have enough courage to die,
But not enough.
Not enough to disobey him
Who said: Do not die (28-31)

The thought of suicide takes her to life and the necessity of having to play happy roles. The vortex of the sea which refuses the body and accepts only the soul reflects the poet’s tortured psyche. The poet contemplates alternatives:

I want to be loved

And

If love is not to be had,

I want to be dead, just dead. (52-55)

What distinguishes life and death is love; bereft of love, life is death. The poet transforms her urge for drowning to a desire for swimming. She nostalgically
returns to her grandmother and her white lover in an assertion of life.

Kamala Das’ fascination for drowning reappears in “Composition.” The poem expresses very diverse moods as passionate attachment, agonizing guilt, repulsive disgust and inhuman bitterness. She describes her sufferings and tries to provide a social context to some of her experiences. The poem begins with the poet’s encounter with the sea: “Ultimately, / I have come face to face with the sea” (1&2). After talking about her sufferings, the poet expresses her urgent need to confess: “I also know that by confessing, / by peeling off my layers / I reach closer to the soul” (152-154). She confesses her failures and uselessness and finally desires to find rest at the depth of the sea:

All I want now
Is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting,
completely uninvolved. (223-227)

But she fails to carry out the plan and miserably hangs on to her existence:

I must linger on,
trapped in immortality
my only freedom being
the freedom to
decompose. (255-259)
The poem “The Invitation” is conceived as a form of dialogue between the speaker and the sea. The conflicting desires for life and death constitute the tension of the poem casting its tortuous spell on the speaker’s self. The speaker is torn between the haunting pains of despair and disillusionment and the fondling memories of the occasional visits of the lover:

. . . You are diseased

With remembering,

The man is gone for good. It would indeed

Be silly to wait for his returning. (14-17)

The sea serves as a kind of temper, inviting the speaker to end her troubles by submerging herself in the sea. The sea offers a kind of empathetic companionship to the self:

. . . Think of yourself

Lying on a funeral pyre

With a burning head. (11-13)

The “funeral pyre” and the “burning head” are contrasted with the comfortable death offered by the sea:

. . . Bathe cool

Stretch your limbs on cool

secret sands, . . . (9-11)

In his analysis of the poem Devindra Kohli in his Kamala Das observes that “while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she cannot
disobey offers another, metaphorical death” (90). Though
the image of heat describes the intensity and passion of
the speaker’s sexual encounter, there is, as Vrinda Nabar
in *The Endless Female Hungers: A Study of Kamala Das*
remarks, nothing that suggests that the “funeral pyre” is
metaphoric death (49). The two kinds of death the poet
conceives are total, one, physical offered by the sea and
the other, death-in-life offered by the lover. The sexual
ecstasy and subsequent agony caused by the desertion of
the lover is a death-in-life situation. Kamala Das’
preference for the latter, as Kohli also observes, is
emblematic of an “unconscious” desire (90). But it is
also, as Nabar remarks, a “modification of a perfectly
normal perception” (49). The speaker rejects all
temptation in the fond memories of the moments of sexual
love:

All through that summer’s afternoons we lay
On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing suns. The heat had
Blotted our thoughts (11-14)

This is an acceptance of life and love indicated
especially through the presence of organic images:

. . . . I am still young
And I need that man for construction and
Destruction. (15-17)
The consummated joy of existence gives way to temptation. “[H]ow long can one resist” (10) the temptation of the sea, the temptation to commit suicide.

Anne Sexton fights against her self-destructive urge and finally gives in to its fatal charm, having failed to resolve the confrontation between her selves and the conditions of her existence. God to Anne Sexton appears as the greatest obstacle to come to terms with. For her God does not signify a prevailing force, but an identifiable self. As she struggles to liberate herself, she has to confront God. She cannot believe in God’s benevolence or omnipotence. Anne Sexton’s “The Fury of Gods Goodbye” describes God in mock-heroic phrases:

One day He

tipped His top hat

and walked

out of the room,

ending the argument.

He stomped off

saying:

I don’t give guarantees. (1-8)

The speaker is ignorant of and deprived of God. She desperately seeks substitutes:

I rolled up

my sweater,

up into a ball,
and took it
to bed with me,
a kind of stand-in
for God. (12-18)
The speaker’s predicament is miserable. In spite of her victory she loses herself in the wilderness:

I’d won the world
but like a
forsaken explorer,
I’d lost
my map. (27-31)

God takes leave and Anne Sexton is left suspended with no trust in God, with no strength to call useless. Despite her disbelief she knows that she is lost without him like an explorer who has lost his map. Her demand for guarantees expresses her frustration. The self is tangled up with its contestant who refuses any kind of positive or negative resolution of the problem. So the self gets smothered in the entanglement it brought to itself. The self confronts God who remains elusive and unresponsive. She tries to set herself free from this oppressive humiliation by intentionally spurning life. In this, the self performs its final and most desperate assault against God. When the self defies God, she reveals that the self is the most trusted, central part of her existence; the self is the condition of her identity. The
poet’s motives for suicide are rooted in her desire to keep her identity intact. The agonies caused by self-doubts fragment the self, which in turn begins to threaten the poet’s identity. In order to overcome the inner struggle and retrieve the identity the poet regards suicide as the ultimate form of the defiance of God. As a willed act suicide has the power to unite all faculties together. By a strange paradox self-destruction liberates the self in its full strength. Suicide is an extreme solution to the self’s struggle to remain identifiable when liberated from conditions of existence. It is the self’s attempt to triumph over the forces of fragmentation.

Anne Sexton has written at least twenty poems on suicide. They were written during the interim period of seventeen years between her first suicide attempt and her final successful act. These poems are hymns to suicide or, in the phrase Lynne Salop, “suisongs.” They translate the language of suicide into understandable idiom. They are identically, but variously, successful in rendering understandable the suicidal impulse. They are excellent both poetically and polemically. The least successful of these poems is “Sylvia’s Death.” It is a pathetic “competition” between suicides, one accomplished and the other potential. The speaker at once expresses her regret at Sylvia Plath’s death and shows understanding of it.
Anne Sexton views Plath’s suicide as untimely. The speaker feels betrayed and deserted by a suicide which is a breach of an earlier pact:

Thief!
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so [long,
the death we said we both outgrew, (15-19)
The accusatory “Thief” magnifies the feeling of anger against the dead which is the element of grief expressed economically. This poem is essentially cast in the form of a love poem of jealousy and betrayal:

(And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia!
you again
with death again!
that ride home
with our boy.) (46-52)
The poem takes additional emotional power from the public knowledge of the death of both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The poem ends in regret and the poet seems reluctant to define the meaning of suicide.
The finest single poem on suicide is “Wanting to Die” in which the poet tries to evolve the ultimate meaning of
suicide. The poem begins like a dramatic monologue. The speaker answers a question outside the frame of the poem. Charles Newman quoted in his *The Art of Sylvia Plath* that introducing “Wanting to Die,” Anne Sexton wrote:

We talked death and this was life for us . . .
. I know that such fascination with death sounds strange . . . and that people cannot understand. They keep . . . asking me why, why?
So here is the why - poem, for both of us . . .
I do feel somehow that it’s the same answer that Sylvia would have given (175).

Anne Sexton explains the reasons for the suicide of Sylvia Plath in the poem. It begins in a detached tone. The first two lines are distant, detached, calm, open and frank. The third line shifts abruptly to the desire for death. The tone is detached and assertive:

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build. (7-9)

The speaker asserts her desire for death in a metaphorical language. Anne Sexton celebrates her own attempts at suicide and displays its form in her special language.

The poem “Flee on Your Donkey” is based on an actual experience at the mental hospital where she rode a donkey:
Anne, Anne,

flee on your donkey,

flee this sad hotel,

ride out on some hairy beast,

gallop backward pressing

your buttocks to his withers, (227-232)

She rides the same beast out of life into madness. The formal framework of the poem is artifice. It is a deliberate re-creation of a state of mind. The form is an artful ruse to check the poem’s intensely emotional content.

These poems represent a depersonalized excision of self. Anne Sexton revised these poems many times. The revisions of the poem point to a peculiar quality of her craftsmanship - a compulsive need to perfection. No wonder she commits a perfect suicide. Dressed in her favourite red, she went inside her red Limousine and embraced a very romantic death in a uniquely new way. She transformed everything about her into art, especially her madness and death. She modeled for her own death.

In the freezing moments of her life Anne Sexton is visited by hallucinating creativity. She is both the heroine and the author: when the curtain goes down one finds her dead body on the stage sacrificed to her plot. There is no schizophrenic vagueness about her life and her character. Death, in poetry, is an action, a
possibility, complete in itself, unmotivated, unexamined. There is a sensual distortion about her mind; she seeks pain as much as death, contemplates the mutilation of the soul and the flesh. Her self-destructive actions are the culmination of an unbearable depression: they bring with them a feeling of unworthiness and hopelessness; a despair that cannot imagine recovery. Her suicide is a performance. She describes her suicide as an exhilarating act of contempt. The oddity of celebrating suicide as the waiting denouement of life is inexhaustible. The sensuality and drama of self-destruction and the perversion of other’s attempts constitute a distortion of her psyche. The death wish is an instinctual complement to the vast and intricate efforts to survive. Anne Sexton appears a death monger, morbidly narrating suicide as if she is telling an anecdote in fear of interruption. Her literally irresistible poems on suicide shock as well as thrill the readers. The tension in these poems is a conflict between the claims of the feminine and of the work of art. To imagine one’s suicide as a way of completing, fulfilling, explaining the highest work of one’s life may appear impudent and insulting to death. Artists have been cruel to others for what they imagine to be advantageous to their work. Cruelty to oneself, as the completion of creation, is far from unimaginable,
especially to a spirit tempted throughout life to self-destruction.

Kamala Das’ search for Ghanashyam in the poem of that title symbolizes her eagerness to discover the self. The “I” here refers not only to the individual experiences of the speaker but to the general lack of courage to plumb beneath the surface level of reality. Kamala Das’ experiences only reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. In “The Freaks,” the self assumes the mask of a freak, flaunting “a grand, flamboyant lust” (20).

“Composition” is another poem that expresses the poet’s concern for the self. The poem is a confessional narrative which is built on the central metaphors of the sea and the house. Saturated with autobiographical material, the poem progresses from “the composite state of innocence and childhood to the state of self-consciousness and age,” (30) Ramachandran Nair pointed out in his The Poetry of Kamala Das. The poem may appear as unstructured and formless. It can be divided into seven sections. The first section is a recollection of the speaker’s childhood. The childhood memories are erased by growth which replaces love with guilt. The images of femaleness are predominant in this section which expresses the conflict between the child self and the woman self. The child’s growth into a woman is
visualized as evil: “The tragedy of life / is not death but growth” (36&37). The second section deals with the speaker’s loss of intimacy with the sea, though sea space survives in her dreams. The third section pictures the shadow of marriage that brings tragedy to the adult speaker’s life. The dance imagery conjures up freedom whereas the imagery of sexuality reveals the uncertainty and the sense of crisis that threatens her identity. The fourth section presents a mature woman who desires tenderness more than love. In order to find emotional security she passes from one sexual contest into another. As normal relationships do not endure, she wants to be abnormal: “I must let my mind striptease / I must extrude / autobiography” (94-96). The lines underline the confessional urge of the speaker. Her concern with the body’s hunger leads to a meditation on the body and the soul. The fifth section brings the reader back to the speaker’s grandmother. It recalls an event in the speaker’s life that happened thirteen years ago. She could not spend a night with her grandmother, though the old lady waited for her all night. The burden of guilt and loss makes her confess and “. . . by confessing / by peeling off layers / I reach closer to the soul” (152-154). The need to confess her guilt leads the speaker closer to her soul. The sixth section is a stoic acceptance of the trials of the speaker’s life. In the final section she
confesses her failure: “I feel my age and my /
uselessness” (221&222). The speaker wishes to attain the
tranquil state of detachment. What sustains her life is
the thought of the immortality of the soul.

The poet loses her grip over the materials. This
makes the lines transparent. Kamala Das, as Devindra
Kohli in his Kamala Das, points out, is concerned with
“the discrepancy between what one wishes to have and what
one has” (87). Her sense of discrepancy is personal and
is not supported by any clear vision of human destiny.
The title of the poem is deceptive: it evokes the
structured pattern of a musical composition. There is no
organized development of the poetic materials in the
poem. The poem begins with the dominant image of the sea
which, however, is subordinated at the end when the
speaker wishes to meet her final rest at the sea. Though
the tone of the poem is largely confessional, its
substance is a persistent theme in her poetry. Her
inability to laugh at herself makes her confession weary:

I asked my husband,

am I hetero

am I lesbian

Or am I just plain frigid?

He only laughed. (64–68)

The reader’s response is also the same. The confession
without the metaphoric or imagistic sharpness often
deteriorates into self-pity. The poem is a kind of self-
criticism, though Eunice de Souza considers it a "totally formless stream of unhappy consciousness" (46) viewed by Shahane and Sivaramakrishna in Indian Poetry in English. The speaker’s ultimate discovery is that the only freedom available to her is the freedom to "discompose" (259). This last word, as Vrinda Nabar also remarks, is an "intensely evocative word" that hints at the "sources of her disquiet" (53). The poem begins with the central burden and leads to a plunge into the essential crisis the poet faces.

"The Fear of the Year" is yet another poem that presents the anxiety of modern man under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust. Modern man lives from moment to moment under the urgency of this anxiety. He has, therefore, no time for "slow desires" (1) and "fond smiles" (3) Fear deprives man even of the freedom to dream. This anxiety about an all-destructive holocaust is a common characteristic of all Confessional poets. "Too Early the Autumn Sights" describes the fear of ageing. The speaker’s aloneness makes the confrontation with the terror inevitable. She cannot escape the panic created by the dance of dead leaves:

... the fallen
Leaves do not rest, but raise themselves
Like ghosts to perform
A blind and ugly dance. (5-8)
The ghostly dance of the fallen autumn leaves would
remind one of the “vacant ecstasy” (12) of “The Dance of
the Eunuchs.” The conflict in the poem is between the
youthful physical self and the aging, intellectual self.
A related poem is “The End of Spring” which describes the
speaker’s “fear of change” (14). It is a dialogue between
the physical self that responds emotionally to the
external world and the intellectual self that evaluates
situations rationally. The conversation centres round
“you,” identified as the speaker’s lover and “me,” the
speaker herself. She spurns the love that induces fear in
the lovers:

... What is the use

Of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, you the fear of storms asleep in you,
And me the fear of hurting you? (19-22)

Anne Sexton recognizes that the self/body dichotomy
symbolizes the psychic fragmentation of her cultural and
religious heritage. Her poems are as equivocal on the
unification of the self and body as on their alienation.
But her vision of unification is more projected than
achieved. The fragmentation of the self and the quest for
a self which is a psychic whole is, perhaps, best
reflected in “The Double Image”. Addressed to her
daughter, the poem describes the speaker’s desire to see
herself in the double of her mother and her daughter.
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me. (205-207)
Unable to establish her identity, the poet tries to judge
herself in the light of the twin images of mother and
daughter, achieving only partial success as the two rely
on her for their identity as much as she depends on them.
In the succession of similarities, the speaker resembles
her mother even as her daughter takes after her:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self’s self where it lives.

There is no special God to refer to; (32-34)
The speaker, as daughter and as mother, has a basic and
intrinsic identity. The double image she perceives is of
herself and her self’s self, the latter being her real
identity different from that of mother or of daughter.
Maternal bond, like mother’s cancer, results in the
speaker’s emotional breakdown and attempted suicide.

Many poems of Anne Sexton deal with the theme of the
alienation of the self expressed through the disturbing,
terrifying beauty of the female body. In “The Operation”
for instance, the disintegration of the self coincides
with the surgery of the body. The speaker identifies with
her mother through the female body, through cancer. Anne
Sexton organizes the incoherent images of meaningless
suffering into a coherent image of disintegration. The
poem presents fragmentation of self as a possibility of 
life. The operation is an experience of the speaker’s 
physical self-alienation.

Anne Sexton’s “father poems” develop potential 
selves, mostly feminine, which cultivate unconventional 
relationship with the male Other. In “The Moss of His 
Skin,” the girl who decays beside her father in a final 
embrace, which is familial as well as sexual, hides it 
from her mother, sisters, and God as she apprehends that 
the female Double is a potential rival in her 
relationship with the male Other. In “All My Pretty Ones” 
the speaker gives rebirth to her father by mothering him. 
Anne Sexton’s personae are infantilized by an 
 idolatrously loving father. This prevents them from being 
independent women and compels them to remain as daughters 
and children. Anne Sexton’s Briar Rose, for instance, 
wakes up crying “Daddy! Daddy!” (96). She closes “Briar 
Rose” substituting herself for Briar Rose and 
articulating the unpleasant truths usually confined to a 
nightmare. The sequence “The Death of Fathers” at once 
works on the fragmentation of the self of the daughter— 
speaker and unification of the self of the woman-poet. 
The initiation rite which is central to the meaning of 
the sequence symbolizes many events. In “Oysters,” it 
conveys the death of the father and the emergence of a 
lover after the rite while the speaker replaces her
mother and emerges as her rival: “the child was defeated.
/ The woman won” (22&23). This idea is further developed
in other poems of the sequence. In “How we Danced,” the
young speaker dances with her father as man and wife on
the occasion of a family wedding. The scene of action is
noted for the absence of the mother whose position is
usurped by the daughter. They danced “like two birds on
fire,” (6) in an obvious parody of the wedding. The poem
also signifies the figurative death of the father and his
rebirth as a lover. In “Santa” the speaker’s father plays
grandfather to her children. She recalls how he was
kissed and hugged by her mother when the speaker was a
child. Now the speaker replaces her mother; they become
“conspirators/secret actors” (43&44). In “Friends” the
speaker’s self undergoes fragmentation and alienation due
to the violation of her faith by her father’s improper
response to her.

The techniques of substitution and identification
recur in Anne Sexton’s poems on married life. The poem
“The Farmer’s Wife” begins with tire tale of a rural
house wife and her former husband. But as the poem closes
the setting changes to Boston where the speaker finds a
barren domestic life under the infections influence of
her husband.

The poem “The Break” reflects the explosive nature
of the destructive violence involved in romantic love.
The disintegration of the self is conveyed through the broken hip of the speaker whose lover broke away from her. In “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” the speaker places herself in the relatively unimportant position of the other woman with respect to the man in love. The complete and irreversible nature of the fragmentation of the self is expressed through the object like existence of the speaker who washes off like “a watercolor” (47). Woman experiences isolation as an existential condition and further isolation that is unique to the female gender which Beauvoir in The Second Sex calls “Otherness” (16). Besides the split between the Self and the Other due to alienation and marginality, woman poet experiences splitting of the self due to her personal predicament. Isolation in women’s poetry, according to Deborah Pope, A Separate Vision, manifested in four forms: victimization, personalization, split-self and validation. They are in the progressive order towards the healing of the selves into a unified whole.

Victimization is a mode of manifestation of comprehensive isolation in women’s poetry, especially feminist Confessional poetry. The speaker perceives her femaleness as a flaw and her existence as an unchangeable condition. As physical self is the most visible aspect of gender, the poems express the speaker’s feeling of alienation from the sexual body. The speakers of
“Victimization poems” are women who passively accept social role-models. Their inner lives appear too weak to change the course with confidence or purpose. They express the most negative sense of isolation. The embattled female inner self constantly struggles against the physical self. This aspect is sometimes, aesthetically embodied as alienation from nature or from vital human emotions. The poems represent a hopeless world cut off from nature, time others and the self.

Kamala Das’ poems like “The Stone Age,” “The Old Playhouse” and “Of Calcutta” present the speakers as victims of alienation and marginalization. She describes the victimized speaker and her hopeless world through barren images. Her “victimization poems” are peopled by selfless mothers, submissive wives/lovers or dutiful daughters. In “The Stone Age,” the speaker is “a bird of stone/a granite dove” (3&4). In “The Old Playhouse” the speaker is a tamed “swallow” (1) who “ate the magic loaf and / became a dwarf” (15&16). Her “mind is an old/ playhouse with all its lights put out” (24&25) and she is fed on “love in lethal doses” (27). In “Of Calcutta” the speaker stoops to canine status, becoming “a trained circus dog/jumping . . . routine hoops each day” (6&7). She lives like a “nodding/Doll,” (5&6) a “walkie talkie one to/Warm bed” (15&16). The speaker places herself as a
victim in the social and historical context of her
gender.

Anne Sexton’s poems like “The Farmer’s Wife,” “The
Wife-Beater,” “The Break” and “You All Know the Story of
the Other Woman” describe the inescapably miserable
predicament of the speakers. Their victimhood is
expressed through images of dreary landscape. The
speaker’s position is the all-important factor in these
poems; what makes her situation abrasive is her sense of
self in relation to the world. In “Farmer’s Wife,” the
rural housewife lives her life “country lust” (2) with
the farmer for whom “she has been his habit” (7) She
lives, “apart from him,” (20) “her own self in her own
words” (21). She feels that “there / must be more to
living /than . . . /the raucous bed” (10-13) or “the slow
braille touch of him” (14). In “Man and Wife” the couple
live like “strangers in a two-seater out-house” (18). In
“The Break” the speaker whose heart is broken at the
breaking away of her lover falls and breaks her hip. She
enacts the trauma of a broken hip which is emblematic of
the broken heart that will not heal. The poem “You All
Know the Story of the Other Woman” describes the object-
like existence of the speaker whom the man repudiates
after he had his enjoyment: “when it is over he places
her, /like a phone, back on the hook” (17&18). The idea of
the woman as victim looms large in many such poems.
The alienation and trauma associated with the role models and the inability to form a satisfactory relationship with male sexuality are the sources of isolation for “personalization poems.” The isolation in this case is localized. The speakers turn to nature as a solatium for broken human ties. They adopt the roles of muted survivors whose situations form a logically tested personal history. The female self shapes the contextual and personal aspects of gender. The poems are concerned with threatening forces of disintegration and omnipresence of death. The common heritage and the shared context of gender offer a sense of sisterhood. The disorder and pain of human existence punctuate the poems. The poems express a consciousness of human helplessness. Action becomes irrelevant in a world of fixed coordinates. The quest for identity need not necessarily lead to any meaningful impact on the speaker’s life or her world.

Kamala Das’ poems like “My Grandmother’s House,” “A Man is a Season,” “Cat in the Gutter,” “Gino,” “The Testing of the Sirens” are examples of “personalization poems.” The poem “My Grandmother’s House” exemplifies the speaker’s nostalgia for love and security. Her grandmother is a symbol of unalloyed love and uninhibited security. But the speaker has lost her grandmother and all the attendant support to her life. She has lost her way and
“beg now at stranger’s doors / to receive love, at least
in small change” (15&16). The speaker sings her lonely
solo in “A Man is a Season”. Her husband lets her toss
her youth “like coins / Into various hands” (3&4) and
“Seek ecstasy in other’s arms” (6). In “Cat in the
Gutter” the speaker feels like “a high bred
kitten/Rolling for fun in the gutter (5&6). In “The
Sunshine Cat,” the speaker slides “from the pegs of
sanity into / A bed made soft with her tears” (11&12).
In “Gino” the speaker fears that she will perish from the
kiss of her Indian lover. She compares the lover’s kiss
to a krait-bite “that fills / the blood stream with its
accursed essence” (14&15). In the poem “Testing of the
Sirens,” love comes to the speaker like a pain
repeatedly. Love as a stab and the act of love as a
murder are recurring images in both Anne Sexton and
Kamala Das.

Anne Sexton’s poem “Unknown Girl in the Maternity
Ward” describes the plight of an unwed mother forsaken by
the man she loved. “Double Image” also narrates the agony
of a mother separated from her child. The speaker here
can hardly preserve essential human bonds, no can
cultivate new ties. In “Praying on a 707,” the speaker,
Anne Sexton, is annoyed at her mother’s interference in
everything she does: “If I write a poem / you give a
treasurer’s report” (6&7). In “Hurry up Please It’s
Time," the speaker’s mother depends on her for her own identity:

    My kitchen is a heart.
    I must feed it oxygen once in a while
    and mother the mother. (114-116)

The speaker lives under the shadow of the cannibalistic love which her lover offers in “Loving the Killer.” She is tied to him with an “intricate/ lock” (79&80) she cannot open. Yet, she succumbs to the desperate need:

    I will eat you slowly with kisses
    even though the killer in you
    has gotten out. (82-84)

The woman who is eternally wedded to her daddy tries to divorce him in “Divorce, Thy Name is Woman”:

    Daddy and his whiskey breath
    made a long midnight visit
    in a dream that is not a dream (16-18)

This unusual relationship compels her to divorce her Daddy: “I have been divorcing him ever since, / going into court with Mother as my witness” (21&22). Anne Sexton’s poems work out emotional estrangement of varying degrees in different human relationships.

    In feminist poetry, especially of the confessional variety, isolation is also manifested in the split between the socially acceptable woman and the marginal female artist. Isolation emerges as symptom of, and as a
means to, the mystery and power associated with the artist’s realm. The persona has the awareness of the duality between the external, socially acceptable, integrated, feminine, woman and the internal, socially unacceptable, rebellious, unfeminine, isolated artist. The two selves are in varying degrees tension with each other. The woman and the artist seem to be necessarily estranged. It was Florence Howe, *No More Masks: An Anthology of Poems by Women*, who established the significance of the term “split-self” in women’s poetry (27). The term denotes the opposition between essential aspects of the self, between the social concept of gender, between the definitions of self and between being and becoming a woman. The speaker of the “Split-self poems” identifies the two selves with the domestic gender role and the role of the artist. The domestic self occupies a safe position, gets acceptance and approval of society in general and of males in particular. The artistic self occupies an unsafe world of independence and power at once stimulating and threatening. The artist makes uncertain choices and confronts unfamiliar experiences and environments. The masculine patriarchal world firmly supports the persuasive cultural power of gender roles enacted by the self. The dilemma of the two selves involves a conflict. The domestic self’s eagerness for cultural acceptance silences the powerful voice of
the artistic self. The central division of the self makes the choice limited: be true either to the self or to others: to be true to the self is to be potentially dangerous for others. A woman poet becomes a social outcast as her behaviour does not confirm to that of domestic woman. A woman poet is a single woman divided against herself. When the self is split into opposing factions, fragmentation begins leading to the creation of a set of dichotomies which ultimately result in the destruction of the self. The poet moves from split selves to a healed self through acceptance and integration. The success of the woman poet rests with her power to heal the diverging selves into a concept of wholeness that accepts a woman poet as both woman and poet with no unnatural polarization between them.

Kamala Das’ poem “The Loud Posters” is built on the central division between the domestic self and the artistic self:

... I have stretched my two dimensional nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I have put my private voice away, adopted the typewriter’s click as my one speech;(9-13) The display of nudity, which figuratively stands for the confession of intimate privacies, is a kind of sacrifice.
The speaker forsakes her private domestic voice and adopts the voice of the typewriter which metaphorically represents the artistic voice. “Morning at Apollo Pier” develops the conflict between the physical self and the spiritual self, life and death, domestic routine and poetic art. The flawed beauty and the diminishing love of the lover are the impulses of her poetry. Her lover is her masterpiece: “You are the poem to end all poems / a poem, absolute as the tomb” (27&28).

The poem “An Introduction” introduces the speaker as an Indian poet and an Indian woman. She chooses her own ways as a poet and as a woman. Kamala Das’ Indian English honestly “voices my longings, my hopes;” (16) it is “human speech” (19). She spurns the advice of the critics, friends and relatives. The speaker shocks her orthodox relatives and the conventional society in unfeminine ways: She “wore a shirt / and a black sarong;” she cut her “hair short and ignored all of / this womanliness” (33-35). In this case also she rejects the counsel of the categorizers. In this poem the artistic self asserts itself over the domestic one. In “Composition” the speaker expresses her desire to compose her autobiography, to confess and to reach close to the soul. But she finds that her power rests with her “freedom to / discompose” (258&259). The domestic self is kept in check by the artistic self.
The speakers of Anne Sexton’s “split-self poems” are fierce and ferocious females. The book *Transformations* begins with the introduction of the speaker as a middle-aged witch. In “Her Kind” and “The Black Art” Anne Sexton’s potential for poetic art manifests itself as witchery or black magic. In “Her Kind” the speaker deliberately asserts herself: “a possessed witch, / . . . braver at night; / dreaming evil” (1-3). Unfazed by an odd and evil environment, the speaker moves out in her ferocious form. She frequents the caves of the woods “rearranging the disaligned” (12) relationships of the sexes that check the dominance of the artistic self. A woman who has the magic of language can strive for a life of imagination. Even if her witchery fails, the speaker is “not ashamed to die” (20). She prefers death to the foolish state of being left in the lurch of domestic entanglements. In “The Black Art” the speaker, a woman-writer, thinks that she is “essentially a spy” (7). She revels in her world of artistic creation and surpasses the impediments of domesticity. The power of imagination makes woman a supernatural being.

The conflict between domestic duties and creative endeavours, between the limitations of body and the demands of the mind is expressed in Anne Sexton’s “The Ambition Bird.” The enigma of the speaker whose poetic power prevents her from submitting herself to mute
domesticity is neatly portrayed in the poem. The speaker, like a witch, keeps awake all the night engaging herself in poetic creation. She identifies her creative talent with the power of a magician who restrained her from taking rest. The speaker of “The Witch’s Life,” tortured by her male partner, becomes nervous and crazy. She feels uneasy at her home. Her uneasiness corresponds to her apathy to familial burdens. But she feels at home in the world of poetic creation. At times, she feels like a recluse for want of stimulus. Deprived of opportunities, she becomes a witch with nightmares and visions:

... It is the witch’s life,
climbing the primordial climb,
a dream within a dream,
then sitting here
holding a basket of fire. (31-35)

This is the only choice open to an adroit woman. In “Fierceness of Female” Anne Sexton glorifies the woman’s poetic talent which drives away her weakness and mildness”: “they invented a time table of tongues, / that take up all my attention” (5&6). The world of creation is mysterious. As a necromancer calls up spirits, the poet drives meanings into her expression and derives enjoyment in the process.

Women’s traditional isolation has a positive, liberating potential. A true feminist poet builds an
affirmative vision of validation by her political and sexual synthesis. The victory of woman in every conventional and unconventional way leads to a healing of selves. Validation is a psychic state where the speaker triumphs both as a woman and as an artist. The creative potential of validation is two-fold: it is an unexhaustive source of inspiration for the artist as well as a curative source that makes the selves coherent.

Woman can change her isolation and marginality into the foundation of a new world. The isolation from the male-centred culture itself is a means of freedom. Poetry bestows the personal benefit of release and recognition to the poet. Validation is the fully emergent aspect of isolation. The significance of validation as a form of isolation lies in its choice as a basis for an alternative world. The separateness of female gender brings forth a hope and a vision. Isolation is a choice that explores the possibilities of change. A woman poet transmutes isolation, which is an enforced condition for other women, into poetry charged with possibilities of change and power. The speaker of the “validation poems” tries to be successful in every conventional and unconventional role. The conflict is between successful femininity and successful artistry. The speaker is haunted by the feeling that she cannot be a successful woman and a successful poet at the same time. A woman
poet’s personal struggles for identity and her anger against the limitations of creativity merge as guilt associated with her artistic self. She has to find a synthesis between the two aspects of the self - the artistic and the feminine, not necessarily the domestic - to express isolation in her poems. She confronts the need to confess the painful truth of her everyday experience as woman. She turns away from the despair engendered by the traditional isolation enforced by andro-centric culture to prophesy and power associated with the isolation chosen by woman. Isolation is neither a marginality of self nor a separation from strength; isolation is a willed rejection of a destructive heritage. Woman’s isolation from patriarchal culture sustains poetry of new vision.

Kamala Das concludes her poem “Flotsam” with added emphasis on her loneliness:

... I wondered if
I should have fought at all to save this
[dubious]
Asset, myaloneness, my terriblealoneness.

(14-16)

The speaker feels this terrible loneliness immediately after the departure of her lover, a kindred soul. Together they create an oasis of lust which proves to be a “mirage.” This intense loneliness of the female persona
is a recurring theme in Kamala Das’ poetry. Loneliness is an emotional crisis evolved out of the speaker’s inability to establish meaningful and abiding relations with the world. Kamala Das resolves this crisis either through poetry or through lust. The persona’s lust is as much related to her loneliness as the poetry is to the loneliness of the poet.

The persona’s urge to withdraw from the world of experiences, the essentially male-centred world, is central to Kamala Das’ poetry. As the female persona engages herself in vigorous sexual conquests to make amends for her isolation, Kamala Das creates poems out of her isolation. The persona’s urge to escape from the trivialities of everyday experiences is best expressed in Kamala Das’ “love poems.” The poet gives an unromantic or ironic twist to her “love poems,” though they are cast in a mystical disguise or a deceptively mythical framework. In “Krishna” for instance, the speaker seems to be trapped in Krishna’s “body” (1) which is her “prison” (1) and her world: his darkness “blinds” (3) her and his “love words” (4) prevents her from growing worldly wise.

Poetry for Kamala Das is an alternative to love. Isolation is the motive behind the two experiences. The split between the feminine and artistic selves in Kamala Das enhances the power of isolation. The conflict between the two selves increases the range and intensity of her
poetry is an extension of body. The celebration of the body is the expression of a “deep-seated urge to socialize” (xv) claimed by Kamala Das in the Introduction of *Best of Kamala Das*. She expresses her anxiety about the decline of poetic faculties through images of old age and death. In “Words” the poet compares words to “a sea with paralyzing waves” (8). In “Without a Pause” the poet describes “darkened rooms” (13) where “the old sit thinking, filled with vaporous fear” (13). The speaker is tired of a plethora of words harassing her. In “Words are Birds,” the poet compares words to birds “gone to roost, / Wings, tired” (4&5). The dusk which hides the wings of words plays upon the speaker’s skin and hair revealing her old age. In “The Cart Horse,” Kamala Das acknowledges the inadequacy of words to carry the burden of her nightmarish experiences. The central image of the poem, the tired horse, suggests not only physical weakness, but poetic failure also.

It may be that the monotonous experiences of love in all its intensity make Kamala Das’ personae inarticulate. In “Ferns” the poet expresses the fear that “a time will come / When words, while uttered, will fall thudding down / Like dismembered heads” (3-6). In “The Blind Walk” the poet visualizes a tragic future when “the sea is full of writers’ carcasses” and the poets “lose their way inside their own minds” (7). That Kamala Das’ poetry bears an
objective correlative to the physical body is evident from the organic nature of the imagery she frequently employs in her poetry. Because poetry is an extension of the body and verse-writing an alternative to love-making, there seems to be no conflict between the feminine and artistic selves. The feminine self stands for the conventional feminine qualities. The conventionally successful feminine self is always at war with the unconventionally successful artistic self. The persona’s anxiety that she cannot at once be a successful, conventional woman and an equally successful unconventional poet is not misplaced. In “Ghanashyam” poetry alternates with love in the psyche of the persona:

With words I weave raiment for you
With songs a sky
With such music I liberate in the oceans their fervid dances. (21-24)

Poetry that the persona creates through her imagination is followed by the game of love she indulges in with her lover:

His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don’t you want me any longer,

(26-30)
The memory of the love that she enacted in the company of her lover brings with it feelings of intense loneliness, "like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun." The persona is awakened to the reality of domestic chores and the lack of love in her relation with her husband. The persona is the mutilated self of the poet which manifests itself in poetry. The poem "Vrindavan" establishes the song of flute that lures woman to Vrindavan, which symbolizes the world of poetry. The frolic at Vrindavan leaves a "brown aureola" (10) at the speaker’s breast. Though she tries to conceal it, she derives intense pleasure from the memories it brings.

Anne Sexton’s Love Poems and Transformations contain her “validation poems.” The power of these poems springs from the split between the speaker and the poet. The narrator’s voice changes from poem to poem. Anne Sexton creates varieties of persona like Snow White, Dame Anne Sexton, the Other woman and the loving wife/husband. The poet seems to join the reader in observing and understanding all. Anne Sexton establishes herself as a skillful artist through these poems. Her capacity to distance the speaker from the poet provides a powerful voice to her poems. Anne Sexton is concerned with myths, fiction and character development in these poems. The central concern in these poems, however, is isolation. The enchanted world created by the poet lifts the
character away from the society. The poems are impersonal rather than confessional. The relationships portrayed are observed outside the perceptions of the poet confessor. The image of the lover as a creator or a builder runs through Love Poems. In “The Touch” the lover is a “carpenter” (42). He is the “pure genius at works,” (19) “the composer” in “The Kiss.” In “The Breast,” the lover is an “architect” (12). In “Mr. Mine,” the lover “constructs” (9) the speaker, he has “built” (10) her up from “the glory of boards” (10). The poet equates love with creation, literary and otherwise, as does Kamala Das too. Love can be death as well as rebirth: the lovers are born again. “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” expresses the contrast between the rejected mistress and the wife. The poem compares physical love to a feast. Anne Sexton’s Love Poems anticipates the “catalyst” ideology of feminist literary criticism that helps, as Annette Kolodny in her “Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism” observes, to “bridge the gap between the world as we [women] found it and the world we [women] wanted it to be” (144). What characterizes these poems is an urge to reduce the aesthetic distance between being a woman and becoming a woman. The poet’s socialized self urges her to suppress her innate impulses and behave in a stereotypically
feminine way. But her artistic self inspires her to write powerfully and flamboyantly.

Anne Sexton’s *Love Poems* reveals the dilemma of a woman writer who is forced by male-centred culture to express her truth in slanted forms. The conflict, as Alicia Ostriker in her “That Story: Anne Sexton and Her *Transformations*” remarks, is between the true writer and the true woman. “The true writer signifies assertion while the true woman signifies submission” (315). *Love Poems* symbolizes Anne Sexton’s effort to harmonize the true writer and the true woman.

Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* also signifies the effort to heal the poetic and feminine selves into a whole. She has transformed Grimm’s tales which perpetuate patriarchal and sexist values with the stamp of her feminine identity and the artistry of her language. The themes of Oedipal conflicts, sexual initiation and sexual jealousy are magnified in the poems. But the fairy tale promise of an emotionally mature, psychologically integrated, happy life remains unfulfilled in the poems. The witch-poet, who portrays herself as different, as one who transforms ordinary domestic scenes into nightmarish episodes, bravely asserts her power. The witch-poet who shapes the *Transformation* poems declares in “Iron Hans”: “I am the mother of the insane. / Let me give you my children” (16&17). One of the children is “a woman
talking, / purging herself with rhymes” (28-29). The speaker of “The Frog Prince” states: “My guilts are what / we catalogue” (13&14). The tales, as Caroline King Bernard Hall in her Anne Sexton argues, are “the means of transforming subconscious materials into conscious ones” (105). Anne Sexton offers no positive didactic model for the readers. She wants to remind them of the fact that the fairy-tale promise of wealth and automatic happiness is a delusion. Even marriage is less than blissful in Anne Sexton’s Transformations. The post-marriage life of fairy tale bliss is a doll-like existence.

Anne Sexton uses the imagery of violence to connect love with torment. The witch-spinner of these modern fairy tales examines her own experience of the torment of love, personal anguish and suffering and emotional breakdown. She takes the position that the fairy tale characters are sometimes elevated to positions as important as the speaker’s own. As all characters and events are projections of the speaker’s psyche, all poetic materials point to the author-speaker herself. The speaker’s voice controls the poems by an intimacy of revelation. The characters of the Transformation poems fail to emerge whole, caught as they are in the nightmares of eternity; they are mutilated physically or psychologically. Unrelieved monotony or dehumanized captivity is the fate that awaits them. Anne Sexton
honestly attempts to unify the truly feminine and the truly artistic selves. She transforms what is not truly feminine in the tales and combines them with the truly poetic elements. The characters, in the process, emerge dehumanized, diminished, mutilated and fragmented. Anne Sexton transforms Grimm’s world of gyno-centric culture through her own world of gyno-centric thoughts. Her task involves the transformation of the patriarchal world of fixed coordinates by the female world of varying coordinates represented by femininity and artistry. She accomplishes the task through her language and diction which involve tortuous phrases and violent images. Anne Sexton transforms the fairy-tales into her own tales by her craft. This upholds the dominance of the artistic self over the domestic self. Transformation dissects the grotesque and the absurd in the roles of poet and woman and scrutinizes the Oedipal guilts in Anne Sexton’s adaptation of the tales.

The sacramental aesthetics of the confessional mode is crucial to a specific rhetorical process of self-disclosure. It establishes a universal and aesthetically appealing framework of meaning in the poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton. The structural patterns of their poetry concretize a well-defined process of repentance and reconciliation experienced by their personae. Their poetry is a rhetoric of rebirth and regeneration that
celebrates the human cycle of guilt-purification-redemption. The basic tension in their poetry is manifested in the conflict between the potential of self-awareness for regeneration and the normal impossibility of escaping physical and emotional bonds for its achievement. Their poetic process uncovers the perversities that operate at different levels – psychic, familial and artistic. Family life is the primary source of inspiration for regeneration that is specifically noted as religious redemption. The tentative achievement of regeneration and redemption dissolves the memories of pain, guilt and loss, the very traumas explored in their poetry.

A detailed analysis of the poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton helps to identify at least five penitential attitudes. They are mortification, “victimage” or scapegoating, contrition or apologia, mock lyric or self-parody, and edification. Kay Ellen Merriman Capo classifies the attitudes in the case of Anne Sexton. The same categories are identifiable in the case of Kamala Das also. Their poems maintain a rhetorical distance from emotionally charged experiences that get regular treatment in their poetry. The experiences include intimate family relations, romantic love, identity crisis, creativity, death and spiritual quest. The potentially guilty acts evolve as forms of mortification.
The guilt-conscious personae work to find out a means to re-establish their innocence. The misery and suffering the personae undergo due to surgery, insomnia, madness, grief, suicide attempts, breakdowns and fear of death can alienate them from the loved ones, from motherhood and even from womanhood. The personae’s attempts to strike reconciliation bridge the estranged relations. A successful attempt at reconciliation brings forth the possibilities of redemption. Kamala Das’ “Luminol,” for instance, expresses the speaker’s attempt to reconcile herself to surrender to her husband. “The Tom-Tom” reveals the speaker’s preparation to reconcile herself to continue physical relations with her partner. Anne Sexton’s “The Operation” works out the speaker’s sincere and honest efforts in the direction of reconciliation with her dead mother. “The Double Image” portrays the speaker’s attempts to reconcile herself to the position of a daughter and a mother by identifying herself with the images of her dead mother and her daughter.

The framework of victimage or scapegoating is explored to alleviate the natural guilt feelings associated with sexual development and to assimilate personal tensions. The scapegoat figure need not necessarily be a family member always, though this is the usual case in the early poems. The object of victimization becomes abstract or mythical especially in
the later poems. This tendency shows the rhetorical and psychological development of the speakers. In Kamala Das’ “Man is a Season,” “The Sunshine Cat” “Of Calcutta” and “Cat in the Gutter” the rude husband of the premature wife is the scapegoat figure. In “An Apology for Gautama,” the Gautama, who could win the speaker’s body and not her soul, is the scapegoat figure. My Story and “Of Calcutta” accuse the speaker’s father for her personal misery. The mythical Krishna or an unidentified “you” is the scapegoat figure in Kamala Das’ “Love poems.” Anne Sexton’s “Some Foreign Letters” and “Anna Who Was Mad” portray Nana as the scapegoat of the speaker’s sexual maturity. In “The Division of Parts” the speaker’s mother is the scapegoat of the speaker’s womanhood. The poetic sequence “The Death of the Fathers” describes the sexual initiation of the speaker and the metaphoric death of her father. The father is the scapegoat of the speaker’s womanhood as he dies as the father and is reborn as the lover. “Briar Rose” closes with the description of the princess’s nightmarish experiences with her father. In the poem “Baby” addressed to death the speaker states: “You have seen my father whip me. / You have seen me stroke my father’s whip” (22&23). These lines portray the father as a seducer. “The Break” is a fine example of the personal tension caused by the lover’s desertion. “The Legend of the One-
Eyed Man” presents Judas/Oedipus as scapegoat figures, while in the poetic sequence “The Jesus Papers” the possessive infant is portrayed as a scapegoat.

The term contrition or apologia refers to a rhetorical strategy that appeal to the compassionate forgiveness or rational approval which other persons can offer. The guilt ridden or wrongly accused persona gets a redemptive chance to assert her innocence at the end. This poetic technique helps to remove the divisive ramparts that separate the persona from her parents, lovers and other relations. Ultimately, the persona tries to establish meaningful and abiding relationships with authorities of God and Death. Kamala Das’ “My Father’s Death” and “A Requiem for My Father” describe the persona’s belated attempts to seek forgiveness from her dying father. “Composition” describes the speaker’s unfulfilled promise to spend a night with her grandmother at the ancestral home. This incident makes her replace love with guilt. The guilt-conscious speaker regrets her inability. In “The Testing of the Sirens,” the persona regrets her inability to continue her affair with the gentle lover. She is afflicted by the unfulfilled love with its burden of pain. In “Gino” the speaker portrays her Indian and foreign lovers and expresses her pain about the varying quality of the two. She is troubled at the prospective disaster of her love with Gino, the
foreign lover. She regrets at the non-fulfillment of this noble love. Anne Sexton’s “Elizabeth Gone” and “The Hex” describe the speaker’s repentance at Nana’s death. The speaker is confronted by the guilty feeling that she was the cause of Nana’s dementia and subsequent death. “The Truth the Dead Know” and “All My Pretty Ones” portray the speaker’s guilt and grief at the deaths of her parents. “The Moss of His Skin” describes the persona’s guilty feeling at her father’s death. She positions herself in a final embrace beside the grave of her father. “Christmas Eve” describes the speaker’s thoughts of her dead mother. She celebrates Christmas Eve over “the Christmas brandy” (23) recalling the memories of her dead mother and the Virgin. She concludes the poem as well as the celebration with the ritual enactment of the operation which her mother underwent for cancer before her death. “The Double Image” gives the picture of an indifferent mother separated from her daughter. The speaker regrets her inability to nurse the child and seeks forgiveness. The poem “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” also describes the anguish and guilt of a mother who is forced to forsake her babe. Kamala Das’ “Morning Tree” compares death to a flower. She likens death to life in “Life’s Obscure Parallel.” Her quest for the eternal lover, the mythical Krishna, is expressed in her “Krishna poems” like “Ghanashyam,” “A Phantom Lotus,”
“Krishna,” “A Paper Moon” and “In Love.” Anne Sexton’s “Baby” visualizes death as a child. She reminds the readers of the death wish which is present in all:

There is a death baby
for each of us.
We own him.
His smell is our smell.
Beware, Beware-
There is tenderness.
There is a love
for this dumb traveler
waiting in his pink covers. (37-45)

In “For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open,” death is personified as father/lover. It is a lover to whom Anne Sexton attributes her drunkeness.

Anne Sexton’s poems express a central conflict between life and death. She resolves this conflict in “Live”:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer. (45-48)

The above lines show a strong affirmation of life. The answer Anne Sexton finds is quite significant: I say Live, Live because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable
gift (114-115). This is the central conflict of Live or Die.

Mock-lyric or self-parody is another poetic device which helps to gain rhetorical distance from autobiographical material. This gives rise to a balanced tension between the positive and negative aspects of the persona. The poets treat the otherwise distasteful topics like suicide and madness with an air of comic diminution to emphasize their universal aspects. Kamala Das’ “The Suicide” and “The Invitation,” though expressing the speaker’s contemplations on suicide, lift the thoughts to universal dimensions. The poems “Bromide” and “Luminol” reveal the impersonal side of mental breakdowns along with the speaker’s personal experiences. Anne Sexton’s “Wanting to Die” and “Suicide Note” describe every suicide’s case rather than an intimately personal experience. Her “Ringing the Bells” and “Flee on Your Donkey,” narrate the universal experiences of every woman rather than Anne Sexton’s personal experiences at Bedlam.

The phrase edification suggests an overall perspective on the autobiographical approach pursued by Anne Sexton and Kamala Das. Instead of providing a format to simulate the condition of psychoanalysis, Confessional poetry illuminates the universal quest for a favourable resolution of human guilt. Connecting their individual problems with general experiences, their personae gain
aesthetic distance over their private anxieties and
tain redemptive insights about the general character of
all human experiences. The confessional label blurs the
distinction between the biographical details and personal
truth. Their poetry represents not a revelation of the
external or factual, but of the internal and imaginative.
The personal mythology they create shocks the readers
into psychic order. Anne Sexton concentrates on the
complexities of womanhood to depict woman as a passive
victim and martyr. A schizophrenic polarization permeates
the personal myth and makes the poetic consciousness out
of a series of fluctuations. In this context biography
becomes subservient to archetypical imagery and form is
subordinated to content.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das break superficial
identities to experience a larger identity as an
extension of other selves, both real and archetypal.
Their quest for self-understanding involves exploration
of multiple selves. The exploration of the self ranges
from a delineation of the thwarting of their native
spontaneity and affections to an imaginative and
expansive merger with the sea, which symbolizes
archetypal womanhood. The woman self is potentially
redemptive when she experiences the vitality of woman’s
body and escapes the limitations of gender to arrive at a
distinctive and complete self. Their poetic self, the
most promising and expansive self, is achieved through poetic language which helps them to find the truth underlying the roles and to celebrate many selves which are connected with their identities. Imagination transforms the selves to recognizable transcendent dimension.

Literary confession is concerned with the affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity. This attempted emancipation of the self exposes a self-defeating dialectic in which the history of confession returns to new forms. The self is a social product. Any attempt to assert its privileged autonomy underlines its dependence on the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constructed. The act of confession exacerbates rather than alleviates problems of identity, engendering dialectic in which writing as a means to define a centre of meaning serves to underscore the alienation of the subject which it seeks to overcome. In feminist confession, the interpretation of the subjective within the social and ideological framework can be done at a number of levels. The social constitution of the self manifests itself in the self image of women writers. This reveals the psychological systems by which gender ideologies are internalized.

Feminist confession is not a self-generating discourse to be judged in its abstraction from prevailing
social conditions. On the contrary, it exemplifies a "simultaneous interrogation and affirmation of gendered subjectivity," says Rita Felski in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change, in the context of the communal identity of the female created by social movements. Feminist literature creates an oppositional identity in terms of gender to unite all human beings. Confessional literature depicts the struggle to discover a female self, a struggle that is a necessary moment in the self-definition of an oppositional identity of the female as a community. New parameters of aesthetics have to be defined to express this struggle and new coordinates of ethics have to be determined to evaluate it.