Chapter IV

Craftsmanship

Confession, especially of the feminist variety, can be a source of strength - both ideological and poetic. But it can prove to be a burden for the poet if it remains uncontrolled. The poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton is characterized not merely by a fidelity to experience but by the absolute control that the two poet exercise over their material. The language of their poetry generally is colloquial, and the verse is blank or free, rhymed or unrhymed. At times they even employ unpunctuated prose. The openness of language leads to an uninterrupted flow of emotions. What redeems their poetry from wild, unchecked emotional outbursts is the control of form they keep in their poetry. The tension between the control and organization of poetry and the wild surges of the heart is the focal point of critical interest.

As writers of feminist confession, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das undergo a sort of psychic fission. The poet is under the perpetual threat of a psychic quake. There is a perpetual movement between the disintegration of the self and its reintegration to the normal state. It is precisely out of this conflict between the movements toward psychic stability and a yearning for
disintegration that the basic tension of their poetry originates. This conflict is the holocaust within the poetic mind. It is a conflict between the tendency toward structure and form and the urge for unconventional content. The craftsmanship of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das is ultimately related to this conflict. The poet has a centripetal urge for complete freedom in the choice of subjects, especially in her craving for unconventional content. This is opposed by a centrifugal necessity to have control and form in poetry. The success of the poet’s technique depends on her skill to poetically transmute the psychic conflict through harmonization of the matter and manner of poetry.

Theories of art make much of the dichotomy between content and form. But there is an organic inseparability of form and content. As form is an extension of content, the nature of content determines the form of poetry. According to Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War-II, the “shaping motivation” of a work of art is “objective artistry” (140). A Confessional like Lowell, as Rosenthal observes, seeks “self-transcendence” as a means to objective artistry. This objective artistry is the “impersonal motivation” (140) of a work of art. This means that even when the content is intimately private or subjective an objective form can make a poetic work impersonal.
Confessional poetry is the best example of impersonal poetry on intimately personal subject matter. It exemplifies the second type of impersonality that T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, speaks of which allows the poet with intense personal experiences to express "a general truth retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol" (255). The poetic self voices the concern of modern man. An emphasis on form helps to manage the material of Confessional poetry which is the bare psyche of a suffering man in a hostile world. The sequence of images, symbols and metaphors effects the externalization of the speaking psyche through selective distortion of language. The true objective of poetry thus becomes the discovery of an external equivalent of the speaking self which is its own victim.

The recurrence of certain images, symbols, metaphors, styles or forms in women’s poetry indicates not only the personal history of the poet as a woman but also the social and historical position of women in general. In feminist confession the narrator’s voice assumes different masks or personae leading to multiple voices. In both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das the poetic self splits into three recognizable entities: the child, the woman and the poet. Tension between these different
selves is an important aspect of the poetry of both these writers.

In some of their poems the personae undergo an infantile regression to a turbulent past. These personae seem to be torn between the desire to remain a child and the fear of growing into an adult. Kamala Das expresses the agonizing experience of growing up in the long poem, “Composition”. The onset of adulthood marks the inevitable tragedy of a woman: “The tragedy of life / is . . . / the child growing into adult” (8&9). Kamala Das’ speakers seem to have an irresistible desire to remain a child throughout their lives. This is a recurring feature of her short stories most of which she published in Malayalam under the pseudonym Madhavikutty. She strategically brings in a grandmother or an old woman relative or an old lover to underline the childhood of the protagonists in her stories. Her retreat to her ancestral home and grandmother is, as Anisur Rahman also, Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das, remarks, a “symbolic retreat to the realms of innocence, simplicity and purity” of the childhood (31). In “My Grandmother’s House,” the speaker identifies the house with her grandmother who binds her to the past. Kamala Das’ fascination with the images of the house beside the sea can also be interpreted in terms of certain childhood associations. Her ancestral home is a symbol of the
spontaneity of love. In Anne Sexton and Kamala Das house and woman are closely related; a house is easily identified with a woman and vice-versa. In Kamala Das’ poetry intensity of passion is synonymous with silence. “The woman died, / the house withdrew into silence,” (2&3) says the poet. With her grandmother’s death the intensity of her love for her increases.

Images of femaleness like blood, moon, snake, house and sea recur in “Blood.” The speaker’s love for the grandmother and the ancestral home is expressed through references to the purity of the ancient blood she shares with her grandmother. The agony of the speaker’s identification with the house is brought out perceptively in the poem. A wistful longing for the past characterizes the poem. “The Suicide” is another poem which deploys images of femaleness in order to evoke the past. It contrasts the final rest offered by the sea with the speaker’s present death-in-life, the miserable predicament of her life. The sea brings to mind the pond where she used to swim as a child. The childhood memory of swimming has a new significance in the context of the adult’s love affair and the adult-poet’s verse-writing. Swimming, which was natural to the child self of the speaker, readily recalls to her vision the woman self’s death-in-life caused by her unfulfilled love of “the white man” (85). The speaker returns to her grandmother
and her ancestral house as an alternative to the “sea’s hostile cold” (58) which is “skin deep” (59). This sojourn to the childhood experience brings her back to the woman self’s tragic experience with the white man:

Yes, the only movement I really know
Is swimming,
It comes naturally to me. (82-85)

As swimming comes naturally to the child, love comes naturally to the woman:

The white man who offers
Himself as a stiff drink,
Is for me,
To tell the truth,
Only water.

only a pale green pond (87-92)

This passage also shows the difference in the perceptions of the lovers and the consequent collapse of love. The image of love as drink or food occurs in both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das. The world of love is the world to eat or to be eaten. The speaker’s lover hurts her with his love. The traditional association between love and pain is pursued with a new meaning in the poem.

The images of nature and femaleness recur in “Composition.” As the child self grows into adult, love is replaced with guilt. The speaker returns to the grandmother and the ancestral house in an apparent bid to
circumvent her arid domestic life. She feels that her growing into adulthood is a tragic turning point in her life. She juxtaposes her childhood days with the barren life of a modern family. The contrast magnifies the alienation of the woman self from the child self. Surreal images like “the wind’s / ceaseless whisper in a shell,” (4&5) “the surf breaking on the shore,” (9) “thieving ants,” (21) “a skin yellowed / like antique paper,” (87&88) and “a skin older than Jesus Christ” (89) blend with Eliotian images like “dancing shoe,” (59) “lesbians hiss their love,” (76) “ladies sun . . . on the lawn,” (166) “toys / fit for the roaring nights?” (72&73) “merry / Dog-house,” (85&86) “humorous heaven” (190) and “Cages of involvement” (254) to produce new meanings. The child self is engrossed with the memory of the grandmother’s house. The split-self characteristics of her poems become dominant when the woman self is alienated from childhood memories and experiences.

Many of Anne Sexton’s reinterpretations of fairy tales as they appear in Transformations ends in marriage, which is a consummation of selfishness. The poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” describes the perils of adulthood. The conflict between the child self and the adult self is the central point in the poem. Anne Sexton suggests that an innocent girl’s unconscious sense of
beauty makes of her a doll while an adult woman’s
conscious knowledge of beauty makes her cruel:

Beauty is a simple passion
but, . . . in the end
you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.

(21&23)

The cruel step mother is tortured to death. Snow White
behaves exactly like the queen when she herself becomes
the queen: “sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do”
(162&163). The poem “Rapunzel” is the tale of a lesbian
witch in love with an imprisoned girl protected from male
eyes. “Briar Rose” is a shocking piece of revelation. The
poet eliminates the heroine’s mother and makes the father
the possessive maintainer of his daughter’s prepubescent
purity. Wakened after her hundred year’s sleep, Briar
Rose cries out: “Daddy! Daddy!” (138) The rest of her
life is plagued by the nightmarish experience of midnight
visits by the father:

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)

Awakening womanhood is hazardously nightmarish. The child
self-overprotected by the security of the family
confronts seduction and betrayal as she grows into womanhood.

Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* poems which depict the conflict between the child and woman selves project universal and primitive human desires and fears. Her imagery in these poems, as Ostriker, “That Story: Anne Sexton and Her *Transformations*,” observes, consists of “food and feeding sexuality, greed and death” fused in a “synesthesia of appetites” (13). Anne Sexton retells the old tales in the modern American context. The tales are phrased with consumerist epithets evoking the sensation of an advertisement. The description of Snow White, in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” for instance, is a classic illustration of consumerist influence:

the virgin is a lovely number
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhône,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes
open and shut. (2-7)

... ... ...
She is unsoiled.
She is as white as a bonefish. (12&13)

Snow White’s step mother is “eaten, of course, by age” (19). The compassionate hunter brought her a boar’s heart which “The queen chewed it up like a cube steak” (47).
Snow White eats “seven chicken livers” (66) on entering the strange cottage of “the dwarfs, those little hot dogs” (68). Revived from the first coma, Snow White is “as full of life as soda pop” (99). When she bites the poison apple, the dwarfs “washed her with wine / and rubbed her with butter,” (124&125) but to no avail.

The poem “Those Times. . .” is built on the sharp conflict between the child and woman selves. Anne Sexton describes the humiliations inflicted by her mother on her child-self. In this autobiographical poem the child self is passive. It continues to be passive even after attaining adulthood and motherhood:

I did not know the woman I would be
nor that blood would bloom in me
each month like an exotic flower,
nor that children,
two monuments,
would break from between my legs
two cramped girls breathing carelessly,
each asleep in her tiny beauty.
I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother’s like a truck (99–108)

The woman self’s repugnance of the flesh and rejection of the mother indicate an attempt to gain power that has been denied to her. Besides the conflict between the child and woman selves, there is another conflict in this
poem: the conflict between the passive and active natures of the self. "Those Times..." is full of prison images like the "graveyard full of dolls," (2) the "grotesque house," (5) the "prison cell," (7) and the "closet" (48) where she "rehearsed" (48) her life, "the shoe box" (76) and the "small hole in heart" (111). The images of cloistered life stand for the limited power and restricted life of the child self. "The Double Image," "The Division of Parts" and "The Operation" are other poems that contain passages which portray the child self in conflict with the woman self.

In some poems on Nana the Anne Sexton speaker who merges with the "Elizabeth persona" undergoes the conflict between the child and woman selves. The alienation of the child and the woman under the gravity of loss and guilt is evidently expressed in the poem. Sorting out the relics of the past to find a meaningful present is a common image in these poems, which include "some Foreign Letters" and "Walking in Paris." In "Walking in Paris," the speaker reenacts the youthful past of the old woman as if she were Nana's twin:

Come, my sister,
We are two virgins,
our lives once more perfected
and unused. (48-51)
The alienation of the selves is dramatically portrayed through a contrast of images: the vital past is juxtaposed with a decayed present. Unlike in the case of Kamala Das, in Anne Sexton’s poems depicting the conflict between the child and woman selves the speakers have no nostalgic longing to return to the past. In Kamala Das the past is a symbol of purity, security and innocence. But in Anne Sexton the past symbolizes sin, insecurity and betrayal. The Sexton personae try to escape the past in shaking remembrance of it as a period of cruelty in life.

The conflict between different aspects of the woman self is an extension of the conflict between the child self and the woman self and both poets provide examples of this second kind of conflict. Kamala Das’ “An Introduction” and “An Apology to Goutama” are examples of poems that bring this conflict forcefully into play. Anne Sexton’s “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” and “The Farmer’s Wife,” similarly, are poems in which the basic tension arises from a conflict between contending woman selves. Some poems also reveal a split between the woman self/selves and the poetic self. These several conflicts in the poetry of both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das work in conjunction with the pattern of multiple voices in their poetry. The narrator’s voice in their poetry assumes the role of the child, the woman and the poet. It is this
pattern that contributes to the basic tension in their poetry.

Kamala Das’ “Loud Posters” is designed on the central tension between the housewife and the poet. The body imagery is contrasted with inorganic imagery to poetically embody the conflict. Images like “eyes,” (6) “skin,” (6) “flesh,” (7) and “bone” (8) describe the housewife-speaker. Her creativity is represented by a second set of images like “loud poster,” (3) “typewriter,” (13) “weeklies” (10) and “monthlies” (10). Literary creativity of the female attracts the attention of the “stranger” (15) as do the charms of the female body. The artist asserts herself and defies her domestic ties as evident from the conspicuous nature of the inorganic imagery in the poem. The body images and the inorganic images are well arranged in the texture of the poem which is finely balanced. The image of “nudity” (10) in conjunction with other images evokes a series of responses including the confession of intimate privacies. The image of “sacrifice” (11) in combination with the rest of imagistic structure indicates the sacramental nature of confessional literature.

Anne Sexton’s poem “The Ambition Bird” portrays the conflict between the domestic and artistic selves. The persona, like a witch, keeps awake all night engaged in poetic creation, her “business of words” (7). The
speaker identifies her creative power with a sweeping and overpowering male-magician who restrains her from taking rest. All night the “ambition bird” (18) flops his “dark wings” (16) in her heart. The ambition bird symbolizes her poetry which contains impulses of self-destruction as well as stimulus for life. The bird attempts self-immolation at one instant and tries to follow a life of carpe diem at another. The bird keeps himself busy in activities of amazing variety. Each action of the bird constitutes a word-picture that rises to the level of a self-revealing metaphor:

He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo and come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet’s nest and come out with a long godhead. (23-26)

The measured stanzas provide a structural symmetry to the poem. The bird’s actions are described in two-line stanzas whereas the speaker’s responses are expressed in three-line stanzas. The discrepancy between ambition and achievement is indicated by the difference in the length and number of lines. The concluding stanza is an ironic understatement and a self-mocking evaluation of her work:

I must get a new bird and a new immortality box.

There is folly enough inside this one. (38-40)
The images “immortality box,” (39) “lay away plan” (14) and “coffin” (15) convey the three attributes of poetry: poetry is immortality, life and death to the poet. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das demonstrate the case of a woman poet whose first person narratives reveal the identity or continuity of the speaker. Their adept use of traditional persona in autobiographical poems is characterized by the persona’s closeness to interior events which leads some critics to identify the speaker with the poet. Even the most autobiographical poetry requires a structuring process which is fictional in sense. The tight metrical, vigorous stanza form itself is a “formal fiction” (94) says Diana Hume George in Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton. Kamala Das’ “Composition” and Anne Sexton’s “The Double Image” constitute at once an elaborate fiction and an artful truth with tight formalities which involve complex rhythmic structures, intricate constellations juxtaposition of imagery and ideas, and irony, both gentle and sharp. As fiction is an alternative to truth, the voices that the woman poet wants to speak include, among others, her own. Kamala Das’ “The Suicide” and Anne Sexton’s “Suicide Note” are poems in which the poets recreate themselves as characters. The “I” of these poems at once self-reflective and self-reflexive is like the formally constructed persona of Kamala Das’ “The
Invitation” or Anne Sexton’s “Wanting to Die.” These poems are deliberate re-creations of the states of mind of the speakers. They are half-truth and half-artifice.

Maxine Kumin, “Four Kinds of I,” identifies four kinds of “I” in the first-person poems: the persona, the autobiographical or confessional “I,” the lyric “I” and the ideational “I” (51). The categories are only reference points: they may not be comprehensive or mutually exclusive. The persona “I” is a first person narrator, distinct from the poet. The self-revelation the persona makes is understood better by the readers than the persona herself. This ironic gap between self-knowledge and other’s perceptions is a salient feature of the persona poems. The creation of a persona as a “conscious strategy or an unconscious accident,” (96) said by Diana Hume George in Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton, constitutes an element of fiction to the first person poetry. Kamala Das’ “Gino” and “The Suicide” are examples of the persona poems. The “I” of both the poems is a constructed character who tells her story in a rhythmic but ironic narrative. This device keeps considerable formal distance between the poet and the speaker. The character Gino, the foreign lover, himself is a figment of fiction. The white lover referred to in “The suicide” is also a fictional character. Kamala Das presents him as Carlo in My Story where the narrator
fancies that she was Carlo’s Sita. In the poem “Daughter of the Century,” the speaker wonders whether the white lover is only a symbol:

White man with a whiter limb
Luminous in the blue,
Have I met you in real life too,
Or are you just a symbol? (4-7)

Anne Sexton’s “The Exorcists” and “The Abortion” are classic illustrations of the persona poems. They portray the pregnant speaker as submitting to an abortion and disowning love.

The autobiographical “I’ dissolves the distinction between the speaker and the poet. The best autobiographical poem requires the best artistry especially in its form and control to transcend the personal. The confessional poems arouse the reader’s sympathy and identification as they embody a national crisis, a psychological dilemma shared by a significant part of the nation. Kamala Das’ “My Grandmother’s House” and “Of Calcutta” are highly autobiographical poems in which the narrator’s mask is too transparent to be identified with the poet’s. In Anne Sexton’s “The Double Image” and “The Division of Parts,” the speaker’s autobiographical details find some parallels in the biographical facts of the poet. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das manage to achieve impersonality in their best
autobiographical poems through the merit of their poetic
craft. The tone and imagery of the poems help them to
transcend the personal.

The use of the lyric “I” belongs to a venerable and
ancient poetic tradition. It communicates personal
emotion in a voice, rhythmic and melodious. Kamala Das’
“Ode to a Lynx” and “Ghanashyam” are lyrical expressions
of disgust and pure love respectively. The poem “Ode to a
Lynx” eulogizes the animal grace of the male and condemns
his deceitful love whereas “Ghanashyam” expresses the
speaker’s unalloyed love for Krishna who has built a
“nest in the arbour” (3) of her heart. Both the poems
illustrate skillful use of the lyric “I.” Anne Sexton’s
“Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree”
is a lyric sung by Daphne to Apollo. The refrain “my wooden
legs and 0 / my green hands” (1&2) enhances the lyrical
quality of the poem. “The Starry Night” is a balanced
combination of lyric and dirge. The refrain “Oh starry
starry night! This is how / I want to die.” (5&6)
provides an uneasy atmosphere for the poem. “From the
Garden” is a celebration of the present life on a simple
carpe diem philosophy. The poem concludes with the tone
of a pastoral: “Come here! Come here! / Come eat my
pleasant fruits” (17&18). The poem “Us” has the
overtones of a harvest song:
. . . we rose up like wheat,
acre after acre of gold,
and we harvested,
we harvested. (30-33)
Anne Sexton makes a masterly exploration of the lyric “I” in these poems.

The ideational “I” is a first person voice which is subordinated to establish the intent of the poem, which consists of making a statement. The statement made by the speaker is more important than the identity of the speaker. The introduction of the “I” is crucial to the thematic statement of the poem. Kamala Das’ “The Millionaires at Marine Drive” uses the ideational “I” effectively. The autobiographical “I” of the beginning is subordinated at the end of the poem.

... I have turned old, frigid, grey haired, but
Surely somewhere lovers still cling with wet
Limbs, wet eyes, near doorways at parting hour? (12-14)

The final statement of the poem makes the identity of the speaker irrelevant. The poem “Glass” is another instance where Kalama Das uses the ideational “I” effectively. The concluding statement of the poem subordinates the speaker. It matters little whether the speaker is Kamala Das or her persona. “The First Meeting” also explores the
transforming power of ideational “I.” The final statement of the poem is remarkable:

   In sudden unease I wondered who would
   Protect me which obscure God with wise and
   Lenient ways, from this new love and its
   [vast commitments. (7-9)

The speaker can be Kamala Das or her persona or any constructed character. The “I” of these poems may have the characteristics of her guilt or anxiety or disgust. But the poems are essentially ideational as the speaker can be replaced with a persona or a constructed character.

Anne Sexton’s “Lament” presents a neurotic speaker identifiable with Anne Sexton. The speaker hesitates to take on the secret guilt at her lamenting the death of “someone”:

   I think I could . . .
   if I’d been different, or wise, or calm,
   I think I could have charmed the table,
   the stained dish or the hand of the dealer.
   (12-15)

Anne Sexton speaks of the human tendency to take on magical guilt. The poem “Old” is another instance of Anne Sexton’s effective use of the ideational “I.” The speaker is an old woman on a sick bed. This constructed character is her persona or any woman. The identity of the speaker
does not alter the meaning of the poem. The poem “The Road Back” makes skillful use of the ideational first-person voice “we” (6). The poem is constructed on an ideational pattern employing “we.” The children’s sense of timelessness is contrasted with the adult’s consciousness of time. The adults “ignore our regular loss / of time” (7&8) represented by the car trip:

Today, all cars,
all fathers, all mothers, all
children and lovers will
have to forget
about that thing in the sky,
going round
like a persistent rumor
that will get us yet. (16-23)

The ideational “we” is radically subordinated to the idea presented by the poem.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das wrote a number of poems with the persona as constructed poetic self who may be differentiated from the poet. Kamala Das’ “Sunset, Blue Bird” has as the speaker a girl seduced and abandoned by her lover. In “An Introduction” the speaker is a nonconformist Indian woman poet. In “Nani” the girl who witnessed the macabre sight of Nani hanging from the privy of the outhouse is the speaker. An anxious mother expressing her agony and anguish at the war is the
speaker in “Afterwards”. Anne Sexton’s “For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach” is spoken by a soldier’s sister. In “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” a young unwed mother speaks to her illegitimate child. “The Moss of His Skin” is rendered in a semi-mythic voice of a young girl buried alive with her father. Christ is the speaking voice of “In the Deep Museum.” “The Hangman” speaks of the tragedy of retarded children from the point of view of a child’s father. Anne Sexton is at once traditional and radical in her approach and assumption in her persona poems.

Diana Hume George identifies a fifth kind of “I,” frequently used by Blake and Americanized by Whitman. She calls it the “prophetic I” and it denotes the poet’s voice which “transcends the personal by becoming mythic or collective or archetypal” (103). This voice can be heard in the poems where Kamala Das explores the Krishna legends and in Anne Sexton’s poems on Christian myths. In such poems the poets use inappropriate style and off-the-wall imagery because of their insistence on a vocabulary that includes terms appropriate to the kitchen.

Kamala Das’ “The Descendants” makes an attempt toward a mythic and collective voice:

... None will step off his cross
or show his wounds to us, no God lost in silence shall begin to speak, no lost love
claim us, no, we are not going to be
ever redeemed or made new. (17-21)

The prophetic voice is usually hedonistic, it reverses
normative values. “The Snobs” is another poem which
speaks in a prophetic “we”:

. . . We

Are paltry creatures, utter snobs
who disowned our mothers only because
their hands, we noticed, were
work worn and so to seek richer
mothers and better addresses
we must move on and on until
we too, someday, by our children
may be disowned. (11-19)

In “Death is So Mediocre” the speaker’s statement
acquires a prophetic dimension:

I shall go too in silence leaving not
Even a finger prim on this crowded earth,
Carrying away my bird-in-flight voices and
The hundred misunderstandings that destroyed
My alliances with you and you and you. (15-19)

In “Ghanashyam,” Kamala Das tries out a mythic and intra-
cultural female voice:

The ones in saffron robes told me of you
And when they left
I thought only of what they left unsaid
Wisdom must come in silence
when the guests have gone
The plates are washed
And the lights put out
Wisdom must steal in like, a breeze
From beneath the shuttered door (66-75)
The prophetic voice emancipates the poet from all
restrictions, including the restrictions of the craft of
poetic composition.

Anne Sexton’s “In the Deep Museum” is a major
achievement in the prophetic mode. The speaker of the poem
is Christ himself. Anne Sexton’s Christ is a man-god, a
ragged human brother, trapped in his tomb after
crucifixion; he is, probably buried alive and knows that he
is no god: “Surely my body is done? Surely I died?” (5) His
weak and plaintive voice discloses: “I lied. / Yes, I lied”
(7&8). He is joined by a rat in the tomb. He is compassion
are to his companion’s need: “His teeth test me; he waits
like a good cook” (22). The completely human Christ is
sorry for his incomplete death and the betrayal of his
disciples. He invites the fellow rats to eat his body:

... Unto the bellies and jaws
of rats I commit my prophesy and fear.
Far below The Cross, I correct its flaws.
We have kept the miracle. I will not be here.

(33-35)
Anne Sexton gives an irrelevant biological explanation for the disappearance of Christ’s body. But she gives a religious framework to that explanation. The poem tests the relationship between humanity and its god, created in its own image. Anne Sexton suggests how humanity has come to preserve the sanctity of a miracle.

In “Water” Anne Sexton speaks in a collective or archetypal voice:

Water is worse than woman. 
It calls to a man to empty him. 
Under us

twelve princesses dance all night, 

exhausting their lovers, then giving them up. 
I have known water. 
I have sung all night

for the last cargo of boys. (21-28)

“Somewhere in Africa” is testimony to Anne Sexton’s power to preside over a prophesy with confidence and clarity. It is a powerful elegy on John Holmes, Anne Sexton’s teacher. “Dead of a dark thing,” (6) he was “mourned as father and teacher” (7) with “piety and grace” (8) and blessed with prayers. The voice becomes ironic when he is “praised by the mild God” (3) who leave him “timid, with no real age” (4). He is “whitewashed by belief, as dull as the windy preacher” (5). The world which he has worked to protect robs him of all powers. The readers are led to
the exotic world of the poet as the nurses carry him into a “strange land” (17) where the God is “some tribal female who is known but forbidden” (20). The prophetic poet places the spirit of John Holmes in a place where the rituals of power will resurrect it into a dream or mystery. The presiding god, a “woman of some virtue / and wild breasts,” (23&24) resurrects him whom the “funeral cannot kill” (28). The prophetic voice reserves him for eternity in health as well as in sickness. The poem begins as an elegy, moves toward a parable of the realm of poetry and ends as a prayer of incantation.

The “prophetic I,” which Anne Sexton and Kamala Das employ in their poetry, also resorts to a sort of Whitmanesque celebration of the Self. Kamala Das’ “Someone Else’s Song,” for example, presents the speaker, who is a constructed persona, as a universalized self: “I am a million, million people / Talking all at once” (1&2). She is also a “million, million deaths / pox-clustered” (5&6) or a “million, million births / flushed with triumphant blood” (9&10) or a “million, million silences / strung like crystal beads” (13&14). The narrator’s voice changes from an Indian woman poet to “every / woman who seeks love” (47&48) in “An Introduction.” The speaking voice is a constructed persona who dissolves all dichotomies on behalf of the female gender: “I am sinner, I am saint. / I am the
beloved and the Betrayed” (58&59). She partakes of the same joys and pains as that of the community. The unidentified “you” stands for the female gender and by extension for humanity.

Anne Sexton also celebrates the universalized woman self in “In Celebration of My Uterus”: In celebration of the woman I am / and of the soul of the woman I am (12&13).

The poetry of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das combines a concern for identity and for authentic being within a literary pattern. The concern with the self is a means to reach beyond personal life and to achieve a mythic dimension: it places the self in a paradoxical situation with potential for regeneration. The poetic output of their concern with the self follows a graphic development. Their early poetry begins with a limited self manifested through tight structures and subdued images. These poems concentrate on familial themes. The concern for the self changes to a conflict between the desire for and fear of selfhood. The themes change to love and death. The concern with self gradually gives into religious questions. The themes move to materials beyond family. The forms of narration become looser and more associative, the rhythms become increasingly vernacular. At the centre of their poetic evolution they confront themes of identity in the context of individual psyche. The quest for identity is symbolically and
structurally expressed in myths and dreams. The poems develop a tension between the potential of self-awareness for regeneration and the near impossibility of escaping physical and emotional bonds to achieve the same. The poems are classic self-exposures of family life and artistic achievement. The tension continues to develop further but, soon subsides. Religion overwhelms family as the prime impulse behind poetry. The poems are structurally loose, meditative narratives abundant in surreal imagery and punctuated with drearily monotonous repetition of rhythms. The potential regeneration is a specifically religious redemption, though its usefulness is often doubtful. During the last phase of their poetic development the tentative regeneration and achievable redemption dissolve in the memory of loss and pain. The traumas lead them to the same themes explored in their early poetry. From the angle of themes or structures or obsession with self, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das undergo a cyclic poetic evolution: the poetic craft develops to a peak and then disintegrates and merges with the poetic art at the beginning.

The images and metaphors used by Anne Sexton and Kamala Das will reveal a lot about the specific ways in which the two poets articulate their experience. Bio-feminist critics stress the importance of the female body as a source of imagery. Contemporary women poets use
pervasive anatomical imagery in their poetry. This body language rejects the flesh-loathing of the early feminist poets. Many woman poets of today associate physical nudity with the objectified or sexually exploited female. They avoid explicit sexuality through protective images of armoured self. Motherhood as a “social institution” and “biological power” is a lived experience that unifies the body and the mind. The biological imagery in women’s poetry is useful to understand women’s situation in society from a female angle.

Kamala Das identifies herself with her body: she is painfully conscious of its complexities and limitations. She places the body at the centre of her quest for identity. This makes her poetic craft intricate as it creates a situation where the themes of Otherness and Body merge. Her feminine sensibility is manifested not only in the body imagery but also in her attitude to the experience of love.

Kamala Das is the flesh-loathing woman poet who finds the female body a destiny. She looks upon the body as a source of her weakness. Her speakers reject the body in an obvious attempt to circumvent subordination and marginality. The narrator of My Story laments:

... my broken down doll of a body was attractive ... Impartially I scrutinized its flaws and its virtues. It was like a cloth doll
that had lost a few stitches here and there. The scars of operations decorated my abdomen like a map of the world painted crudely by a child... I was no longer bed-worthy, no longer a charmer of lecherous men. (191)

The macabre description of the maid’s body hanging in the privy like a “clumsy puppet” engaging in a “comic/dance” is also a rejection of the female body. The mutilated female body represents the mutilated self of the speaker in poems like “The Tom-Tom.” The state of the female body after a surgical operation is graphically described thus: “They have left behind two big breasts and a hole” (9). The speaker apprehends that man will cease to have interest in the disfigured body after the operation: “Which man would want to rest his head on these hillocks of breasts/Only to hear the dying hearts ominous tom-tom” (6&7). She also fears that sexual love may not be possible to her hereafter:

Which man would dive into this hole
An emptied coffin of a hole where the last
[stiff lying in state
Left a stale blood smell? (11-13)

The speaker even doubts whether her voice has changed: “with half your / Ovaries out, even the soft voice that you had is now / A sexless groan” (8-11). The post-operatives cars also produce indelible marks on her mind.
In “After the Illness” the speaker wails over the disastrous effects the disease caused to her body.

... There was

Not much flesh left for the flesh to hunger,

[the blood had

Weakened too much to lust, and the skin,

[without health’s

Anointments, was numb and unyearning. (5-8)

The poem “Gino” expresses the speaker’s disgust and weariness with her “burdened” body:

This body that I wear without joy, this body

burdened with lenience, slender toy owned

by man of substance shall wither, battling with

[his

impersonal lust. (11-14)

The speaker refers to herself as a “dark fruit on silver platter” (15) served in “bedroom-mirrors” (10). The image recalls to memory the tale of Cleopatra who was offered to Julius Ceaser wrapped in a mattress. The images of “dark fruit,” (10) “another’s / country” (14&15) and “toy” (8) reveal the relatively unimportant position of woman in love. The image of the body as a burden recurs in “An Introduction”: “sad woman-body felt so beaten. / The weight of my breasts and / womb crushed me” (30-32).

The womb is the most significant of the images of the body Kamala Das uses. It represents the visual
sensation of darkness. In “The Bangles,” the womb is a metaphor of darkness:

Drapes her windows darkly to make

The lonely noons lightless like

Wombs . . . and sob[s] piteously in

Afternoon sleep. (4-7)

In “Afterwards” the womb works as a neutral image:

Son of my womb,

Ugly in loneliness,

You walk the world’s bleary eye

Like a grit. (1-4)

The poem “Jaisurya” also presents the womb as dark:

my son, separated from a darkness

t hat was mine

and in me.

The darkness of rooms

where the old sit,

sharpening words for future use

the darkness of sterile wombs

and that of the miser’s pot

with the mildew on his coins. (5-13)

The womb as a store-house of memories occurs in “The Descendants”:

. . . It is

not for us to scrape the walls of wombs for memories, not for us even to
question death, but as child to mother’s arms
we shall give ourselves to the fire(11-15)
Though Kamala Das rarely uses the womb as a sex image, in
“Captive” it appears as the source of sexual love:

. . . What have
we had, after all, between us but the
womb’s blinded hunger, the muted whisper
at the core. (4-7)
But the womb is not a dramatic force in the thought
pattern of this poem. It arouses the reader’s imagination
rather than sensation. The image creates a visual
sensation of the intended object and forms an integral
part of the poetic structure.

Images from the male anatomy are used to represent
the corruption of love and the corrosion of feminine
virtues. The lovers Kamala Das portrays are often
physically deformed. The physical deformity of the lovers
symbolizes the unsatisfactory nature of their emotional
relationships. “The Freaks,” for example, presents a
lover who is ugly by any standards:

He talks, turning a sun-stained cheek to me,
his mouth a dark cavern where stalactites
of uneven teeth gleam, his right hand on
my knee while our minds, . . . (1-4)
The poem “Gino” likens the kiss of a lover to the bite of
a krait. It produces unsavoury memories in her mind. The
image conveys scorn and disgust for the male posture and 
habits. “The Stranger and I” portrays male gestures in 
metaphors of distaste: “I’ve seen your bitten nails, / Your 
sickly smile, heard your brittle / Broken talk” (22-24).

Though Anne Sexton too, like Kamala Das, identifies 
herself with the body, her quest for identity is not 
confined to the body. Unlike Kamala Das, Anne Sexton does 
not loath flesh: she never considers the body a burden 
and a destiny. Anne Sexton always celebrates the body. 
Anne Sexton’s quest for the self manifests in her poems 
as an obsession with the body. She is equally conscious 
of the potentials and the limitations of the body. She is 
a prolific user of body imagery.

Anne Sexton responds equally to the pleasures and 
pains, the beauty and ugliness of the body. “The 
Operation” describes in detail the operation the speaker 
undergoes for the cancer of the womb. The body taken to 
pre-operative preparations is equated with meat:

    Clean of the body’s hair,

    I lie smooth from breast to leg.

    All that was special, all that was rare

    is common here. Fact: death too is in the egg.

    Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat. (40-44)
The casual description of the recovered body is ironic: “my 
stomach laced up like a football / for the game” (121&122). 
Anne Sexton describes the anatomy of the “beautiful
Jesus” (15) on the Cross that one “Ruth” (25) sends to the speaker in “With Mercy for the Greedy”:

   I detest my sins and I try to believe
   in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark [jawed face,
   its solid neck its brown sleep. (11-13)

The “beautiful Jesus” is “frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef” (16). Anne Sexton’s poetic insight is at its best in the next line: “How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!” (17) Anne Sexton uses a series of body images in “Woman with Girdle”: She compares the statue of a woman with that of a new-born:

   Your midriff sags toward your knees;
   your breasts lie down in air,
   their nipples as uninvolved
   as warm starfish(1-4)

The woman’s belly is “soft as pudding” (10). Her hips are “head cushions,” (13) thighs are like “thick . . . young pigs,” (19) knees are like “saucers” (20) and calves like “polished . . . leather” (21). She pauses for a moment, “tying . . . ankles into knots” (24). What matters most is her “redeeming skin” (29). Meticulous details of the female anatomy appear in “Love Song”. The speaker, “the girl of the chain letter” (2) is

   the one
   with her eyes half under her coat,
with her large gun-metal blue eyes,
with the thin vein at the bend of her neck
that hummed like a tuning fork,
with her shoulders as bare as a building,
with her thin foot and her thin toes,
with an old red hook in her mouth,
the mouth that kept bleeding
into the terrible fields of her soul. (10-19)
The female anatomy is graphically described to create a visual sensation. In “Somewhere in Africa,” the exotic land is presided over by a woman “naked to the waist,” (22) a woman of “some virtue / and wild breasts” (23&24). The images at once create strangeness and femininity.

Anne Sexton identifies the female body with illness, sin and guilt. In “The Operation,” the speaker recalls details of her mother’s cancer (CPS 56-59):

It grew in her
as simply as a child would grow
as simply as she housed me once, fat and
[female. (10-12)
The “embryo/of evil” (13&14) spreads in her and she grows frail. In “Somewhere in Africa” Anne Sexton speaks of John Holmes who died of cancer (CPS 106-07):

abandoned by science, cancer blossomed in your [throat,
rooted like bougainvillea into your gray
[backbone
ruptured your pores until you wore it like a
[coat. (10-12)]

In “Those Times...” the speaker sees her body as
grotesque, repulsive and ridden with sin and guilt:

At six
I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,
avoiding myself,
my body, the suspect
in its grotesque house. (1-5)

The poem “Christmas Eve” is an important pronouncement by
Anne Sexton on the nature of the female legacy. What one
generation of the female bequeaths to the succeeding
generation is the vitality and decay of the female world.
The last section of the poem is a verbal equivalent of a
ritual:

I saw you as you were.
Then I thought of your body
as one thinks of murder. (45-47)

The speaker is haunted by the guilt and sorrow at the
death of her mother represented by the body. The
remembrance of the mother automatically brings in the
image of her body and her cancer that severs off one of
her breasts:

... I touched a present for the child,
he last I bred before your death:
and then I touched my breast
and then I touched the floor
and then my breast again as if,
somehow, it were one of yours. (50-55)
The speaker remembers her mother through her own
motherhood, through her body and through her breasts.
Anne Sexton believes that child-bearing and child-rearing
are experiences fundamental to the process of becoming a
woman. The experiences provide her images that form the
integral part of her poetic world. The development of the
foetus within the woman is parallel to the development of
the poetic self. Anne Sexton gives a detailed description
of the growth of the foetus within the speaker in “Little
Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman.” The speaker
identifies with the female body and its creative power
and ultimately identifies with the foetus.

Anne Sexton’s Love Poems breaks a new ground in
poetry by creating a series of new body images, almost
all of them attaining the status of metaphors. The poem
“The Touch” compares the speaker’s hand to an
“unconscious woman” (9). Its “five knuckles” (7) and
“thin underground veins” (8) tell time “like a clock” (7).
The miraculous touch of the lover arouses the hand-woman:

Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot. (41)

..........................

the fingers are rebuilt.

They dance with yours. (43&44)

..........................

My hand is alive all over America. (46)
The magic of a touch enlivens the hand-woman and leads her to the “kingdom,” (49) the world of sexual love. “The Kiss” likens the speaker’s mouth to a bleeding wound: “My mouth blooms like a cut” (1). The kiss can work wonders. The speaker’s “body was useless” (6). The kiss leads to its “resurrection” (10). “But you hoisted her, rigged her. / She’s been elected” (14&15). The speaker’s nerves beat like “musical instruments” (17). The speaker is led to the aroused realm of sexual love. “The Breast” begins with the outspoken statement that the breast is the precious “key to everything” (2). The speaker is thrilled at her bodily development: she measured her “size against movie stars” (19). Her excitement increases: “I am alive when your fingers are” (30). The speaker excitedly tells her lover:

... track me like a climber

for here is the eye, here is the jewel,

here is the excitement the nipple learns. (34-36)

She burns with excitement: “mad / with an offering, an offering” (38&39)

Anne Sexton rarely describes male anatomy in her poems. “That Day” is a delightful piece of poetic art in which the images drawn from male body form the symbolic structure of the poem. The speaker refers to “that day” (9) when she made love to her male partner who is referred to as “you” in the poem. The lover’s shoulders “gathered in
like a Greek chorus” (5). His tongue is like a “king making up rules” (6). His lips are “two openers, half animals, half birds” (12). Her hands pass down his “backbone, down quick like a fire pole” (16). His phallus is compared to a “tower,” (20) an “edifice,” (21) a “miracle” (22) that “throws confetti” (22) and is a fit case for “headlines” (23). The last section of the poem is a wonderful portrayal of the post-coital scene:

Your face after love, close to the pillow,
[a lullaby.

Half asleep beside me letting the old fashioned [rocker stop,
our breath became one, became a child-breath [together,
while my fingers drew little 0’s on your shut [eyes
while my fingers drew little smiles on your [shut mouth,
while I drew I LOVE YOU on your chest . . .

(31-36)

The speaker wants her to be “pierced” (41) and her lover to “take root” (41) in her. The three sections correspond to the three phases of the sexual act. The images make the symbolic structure a coherent whole.

Though Anne Sexton’s elaborate sexual imagery in many of her poems can be treated as an extension of her
interest in her body, nowhere is that interest better reflected than in her poems in lesbian love. In “Song for a Lady” the speaker expresses tenderness for her own body, as it is reflected upon by another woman. “On the day of breasts and small hips,” (1) “we coupled, so sane and insane” (4). Anne Sexton uses kitchen images to indicate the exclusive feminine nature of the union:

    We lay like spoons while the sinister
    rain dropped like flies on our lips
    and our glad eyes and our small hips. (5-7)

The speaker appears to perform the masculine role of the pair: “you, feminine you, with your flower/said novenas to my ankles and elbows” (9&10). The apparent ecstasy is revealed in the last line: “as you knead me and I rise like bread” (14).

    In Anne Sexton’s poetry womb is a symbol of womanhood and fertility as well as cancer and death. In “The Operation,” the speaker compares the growth of cancer with the development of an embryo: the cancer grew as a “child would grow,” (11) as her mother “housed” (12) her “fat and female” (12) and the “embryo / of evil spread in her shelter” (13&14) The speaker refers to the blood of the womb in “For the Year of the Insane”:

    There is blood here
    and I have eaten it.
    O mother of the womb,
did I come for blood alone
O little mother,
I am in my own mind.
I am locked in the wrong house. (73-79)

The speaker consumes the blood of fertility which
leaves her mother dead. Anne Sexton considers the womb as
the life and the mystery of the female body. “Menstruation
at Forty” describes the uniqueness of the womb:
The womb is not a clock
nor a bell tolling,
but in the eleventh month of its life
I feel the November
of the body as well as of the calendar. (2-6)

The speaker thinks of the prospects of having a son
in her forties when the life of the womb is about to end.
The identification of the womb as the life and spirit of
womanhood is a vision Anne Sexton shares with Kamala Das.
But Anne Sexton never considers the womb as a symbol of
darkness as Kamala Das often does.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das identify woman with house
in their poetry. Images of constriction like roam, grave,
closet, cloister, bower, tomb, and cave are prolifically
used to describe woman’s life and growth in their poetry.
The images truly represent woman’s marginalization and
oppression and limit the influence of gender roles. A
woman’s world of retreat or action is the little space
leaves out by the dominant masculine world. The expansion of the female world is poetically embodied by the expansion of the potentials of the female body. The poem “A Half-Day’s Bewitchment” equates the house with the speaker: “Ultimately the house and I became one” (10). This plain statement is the characteristic of feminist poetry. The “I” stands for both the physical and feminine selves of the speaker. Kamala Das couples the images of woman and body and compares this complex image with the house. The speaker’s “heart’s door” (4) is compared to the “wrought iron gate” (5) of the house. The images of “rusted hinges and “creaking” (7) gate reveal the problems of communications she encounters.

The alienation of the speaker from the world, the alienation between body and soul and the isolated nature of the house are indicated by the image of “bats with human faces” (11) hanging in the house. The oldness of the house is expressed through the exotic image of the “African warriors /Killed and trophied by their Massai enemies” (5&6). Her soul “remote controls” (19) her poor body. A woman is acted upon as a house is used or as a body is controlled. Isolation works at three different levels in the poem: through the realms of house, woman and body. The image of the sea conveys the restlessness of the speaker. The metaphor of “compass with needles / Missing” (210) expresses the directionless life of the
speaker. The poet attributes strangeness to beauty: “The beautiful ones are reverted to stranger rank” (15). This statement enhances the isolation of the primary images: house, woman and body which are ultimately interchangeable.

Anne Sexton also identifies woman with house. Her poetry is full of images of enclosures of amazing range from airplane to shoe-box. These images represent the constricted life of woman in society. Anne Sexton thinks that woman’s life is restricted by the doctrines of patriarchy and the female body is restrained by male domination.

Anne Sexton’s “Housewife” identifies “some women” (1) with “houses” (1). The poetic statement is developed on Anne Sexton’s apparently simple theses: woman equals house and woman equals body. Like Kamala Das, Anne Sexton also thinks that woman, house and body are interchangeable:

Some women marry houses.
It’s another kind of skin; it has a heart,a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day, Faithfully washing herself down. (1-6)
As woman is identified with house on the one hand and with body on the other, rooms or divisions of the house
are identified with limbs or organs of the body. The poem recalls to memory Sylvia Plath’s “Applicant.”

Another remarkable feature of the poetry of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das is the kitchen imagery they skillfully employ in their poems. The kitchen images not only show the speakers’ identification with hearth and home but also expose their revulsion, nausea and repulsiveness to the drudgery of domestic duties. The narrator of My Story describes the predicament of every housewife with irony and distaste:

I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would bear my thin children when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband’s cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride. (85)

The passage reflects the disappointment of a premature housewife in the Indian context. There are several poems such as “Gino,” “The Swamp,” and “The Old Playhouse” in which Das gives poetic expression to the idea contained in this passage, using, in the process, a good number of kitchen images to drive home her point. For example, the poet compares the baby-girl’s skin to the rolled gold
bangles. In “The Old Playhouse” the pet describes her wifely duties with sarcasm:

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea

[and

to offer at the right moment the vitamins.

[Cowering

beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf

[and

became a dwarf. (13-16)

The images “saccharine,” (13) “vitamins” (14) and “magic loaf” (15) enhance the metaphor-status of “dwarf” (16). In “Glass” the speaker is compared to a “fragile glass” (3) and again to a “broken glass,” (13) an image which brings out the vulnerability of the speaker as a woman. In “Ghanashyam,” the poet refers to the way how a woman gains insights into the ineffable experiences of life:

When the guests have gone

The plates are washed

And the lights put out

Wisdom must steal in like a breeze

From beneath the shuttered door (70-74)

A woman gains ray of insights only after the domestic chores are finished. When the wifely duties are taken care of, her thoughts “race like enchanted fish” (79) to “Ghanashyam,” the Self beyond herself.
Anne Sexton too masterly exploits the semantic potentials of kitchen imagery in her poems. Spoon is a recurring image in these poems. Anne Sexton associates spoon with the female speaker’s physical, sexual and mental qualities and attributes. In “Horse,” the speaker’s identification with a “silver spoon” (9) suggests her fineness, paleness and passivity in contrast to the dynamic nature of a horse:

Horse, you flame thrower,
you shark-mouthed man,
you laughter at the end of poems,
you brown furry locomotive
whipping the snow, I am
a pale shadow beside you.
Your nostrils open like field glasses
and can smell all my fear. I am
a silver spoon. (1-9)

In “Barefoot,” the speaker stresses the physicality of her body, with a special emphasis on her feet and legs. She presents herself as a man’s “barefoot wench for a / whole week” (19&20). Anne Sexton concludes the poem with a sexual fantasy: “Now you work your way up the legs / and come to pierce me at my hunger mark” (32&33). The comparison of legs to spoons in the opening lines suggests the symmetrical shapes that make them sexually attractive to men: “my long brown legs, / sweet dears, as
good as spoons” (2&3). In “Song for a Lady” too, spoons are connected with sexual love. In the first stanza, the two lovers are presented as lying still after lovemaking, like two spoons placed side by side: “We lay like spoons while the sinister / rain dropped like flies on our lips” (5&6). Spoon is an image of physical symmetry and sexual attractiveness.

Kitchen itself appears as an image in Anne Sexton’s poetry: the poem “For John Who begs Me Not to Enquire Further” presents kitchen as a symbol of intimate privacy, the source of autobiographical and confessional poetry:

... sometimes in private
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face. (42-44)

The speaker’s “kitchen” is her “face” and her private life. In this poem the speaker likens her head to a “glass, an inverted bowl” (18). The “awkward bowl” (27) is a symbol of her insecurity. In “Water,” Anne Sexton compares the colour of the fish with that of spoons. The fish here is a symbol for womanhood:

The fish are naked.
The fish are always awake.
They are the color of old spoons
and caramels. (3-6)
Anne Sexton and Kamala Das seriously engage in revisionist myth-making in *Transformations* and the “Krishna poems” respectively. The poems combine popular tales with psychological revelation. The immortal love between Radha and Krishna is the central metaphor of bridal mysticism in Indian poetry. Kamala Das modernizes this theme in the light of her own experience. Mythologically Radha is only Krishna’s lover: their love is adulterous by modern standards. In “Radha,” Radha’s experience is the opposite of what is normally expected from such an alliance. The “long waiting” (1) makes their “bond so chaste” (2) that in his “first true embrace, she was girl / And virgin” (4&5). Krishna’s embrace restores to her chastity and virginity. Her hardened heart melts until nothing remains except Krishna. As Krishna’s love makes Radha vibrant in all respects, her husband’s love reduces her to a “corpse” (7) that “the maggots nip” (7). “The Maggots” expresses an experience emotionally opposite to what is expressed in “Radha”:

> At sunset on the river bank Krishna
> Loved her for the last time and left.
> That night in her husband’s arms
> Radha felt so dead that he asked
> what is wrong, do you mind my kisses,
> love and, she said, no, not at all
> cut thought, what is it to the corpse
> if the maggots nip? (1-8)
She must wait for the return of Krishna to become alive again. “An Apology to Goutama” describes an experience which is normally unexpected. Goutama, the ascetic and gentle lover holds the speaker’s “woman form” (14) while her lover’s “hurting arms” (14) hold her “very soul” (15). These poems based on popular legends are given new interpretations by Kamala Das in the context of woman’s experience in a patriarchy.

Anne Sexton’s Transformations is a brilliant synthesis of popular tales and psycho- analytical revelations. Her revisionist myth-making is subversive both in its structure and meaning. What comes out of the Transformations poems is the portrait of a woman as creator. Anne Sexton desentimentalizes the tales and demolishes many social conventions. Her “Rapunzel” is the tale of love between an old woman and a young girl. “Rumpelstiltskin” is about the vulnerability of a dwarf manipulated by a shrewd girl. In “Hansel and Gretel,” Anne Sexton hints that the witch is a mother-goddess sacrificed by a female in alliance with patriarchy.

Transformations has the framing element of the persona of the narrator as a “middle-aged witch, me.” This ambiguously suggests that the narrator can be the poet as well. The narrator’s personality changes from tale to tale: in “Snow White” she is cynical, in “The White Snake” idealistic. Anne Sexton, as narrator, is at
times distant from the reader, at times intimate. The tales are fixed. Anne Sexton accepts their changelessness. She displays an air of mental and emotional liberty in the tales. The psycho-social reinterpretation of the tales is a brilliant attack on the literary and social conventions regarding women. “The middle aged witch, me” who distances herself from the materials she penetratingly understands is the agent who carries out this attack.

Kamala Das’ stylistic devices reinforce the predominantly emotional quality of her poetry. Her poetry is characterized by a control of form and a disciplined expression of painful emotions. Her works would have gained considerably in strength had she been a more ruthless editor of her own work. As already pointed out, obsessive confessional writing is a source of power. It can be a burden, if it gets out of control. No amount of fidelity to experience can save the poem. Poems like “The Testing of the Sirens” is flabby, self-indulgent and maudlin. There is hardly any grit of resilience to shape and control emotions. The last lines of the poem could have been cut off without any sense of loss in structure and meaning as they express in a weaker way emotions already strongly expressed. A rigorous consciousness of form could have made a better piece of poetic art of “Loud Posters.” The poem “Composition” is a formless
stream of unhappy consciousness of real and fancied experiences of life. “The Stone Age” begins with concrete, telling images, but ends with romantic clichés. The concluding lines which are over-sentimentalized to generate empathy produce the opposite results: the readers are irritated by the poet’s unwillingness to escape the psychological trap. When the poet loses control, the work ceases to be poetry and becomes automatic neurotic writing. Kamala Das uses unpunctuated prose to denote the speaker’s tortured psyche. The torturous language she uses in poems like “The Swamp,” “Sunset, Blue Bird,” or “The Blind Walk” exposes the internal tumult she undergoes. The violently split lines also express the anger and violence that she experiences internally as a woman writer. The continuously alternating long and short lines in some of her poems indicate the restlessness of the speaker while short measured lines convey the spontaneity of the psyche. What she sings is the story that a million Indian housewives wish to tell, but cannot. Her poetic art is expressly feminine: it is the skillfully varied craft of writing the female that she is.

Anne Sexton’s poetry is about death, rage, hatred, blood, wounds, cuts, deformities, suicide-attempts, stings, fevers, operations—there is devil’s plenty with which she hardly reconciles. Her poetry reveals a
hurting, grinding, grating joy which comes from the perfection of the descriptive language that overcomes a hesitating spirit. Death, in her poetry, is an action, a possibility, a gesture complete in itself. There is a sensual distortion about her mind: she contemplates the mutilation of the soul as well as the flesh. The expressive violence of the language comes from a mind speeding along madly, yet commands an uncanny control of language, sound, rhythm and imagery that is the opposite of mental disorder. Her suicide poems are verbal equivalents of the gruesome performance expressed with raging, confident pride, but without apology or fear. The action moves threateningly and dangerously as an asserted value and a definition. Torture, mutilation and destruction are interesting alternatives which she describes with exhilarating act of contempt.

Anne Sexton moves from tight forms to free verse. She has a developing sense of precise imagery. Her images recreate the experience for the readers. Anne Sexton tames form to her advantage. She is a versatile storyteller and masterly tells a tale in poem after poem. Her strengths outweigh her weaknesses as an artist. The obscurity that is attributed to her develops out of her constant search for fresh images and symbols. The apparent disunity of her work results from her quickness to see relationships. As a skilled artist she enhances
power of her poetry through her use of literary and nonliterary allusions. Clear syntax, strong closures and use of powerful alterations are the hallmarks of her craftsmanship. Her aptitude for story-telling contributes greatly to the success of many individual poems and many sequences in her canon. The accurate image, par excellence is Anne Sexton’s trade mark. Whether it is kinesthetic, visual, synesthetic, metaphorical, symbolic or literal, it clearly communicates a sensuous reality to the reader. Anne Sexton’s poetry is memorable for its startling images and comparisons. Her greatest achievement is her lyrical quality. Anne Sexton was a sensitive poet who experienced much pain and little joy: her recreation of both is her gift to the world.

Anne Sexton’s poetry is a revelation of the internal and imaginative life. She shocks the readers into the complexities of womanhood and madness, psychic awareness and order. She portrays the female honestly in her poetry through diverse personae as well as through both personal and archetypal imagery. Her stylistic pattern reveals the emotionally surcharged quality of her poetry. Her forceful alliterations provide an emphasized closure to many poems. The continuously alternating long and short lines of her autobiographical poems honestly convey the restlessness of the speaker. She strains through appropriate rhythms, off rhymes and inner cadences to the
desired end. The short lines she explores in her story poems, as in Transformations, create freshness and spontaneity. Unlike in the case of Kamala Das, Anne Sexton’s early poetry is characterized by a vigorous control of form. Her early poetry carries the weight of explicit feminist statements.

The tortuous language Anne Sexton uses conveys the violent conflict her psyche undergoes. The violently split lines or phrases expressly portray the internal tumult of the speaker. As a manifestation of interior events, her poetry is a truthful assimilation of her primary experiences as a woman. Her poetic craft emerges out of her experiences, lived and imagined as an American housewife. As with Kamala Das, what she narrates is the feelings of a million middleclass American housewives which they fail to express, though they wish to do.