Chapter V

Conclusion

India and America have passed through vastly different phases of feminism. Feminism has assumed an aggressive and militant dimension in the West while India still holds an ambivalent attitude to the movement. The emergence of women as an organized group is a new phenomenon in the Indian situation. Indians have a skeptical approach to feminism.

In spite of this difference, the writers of the two countries are seen responding identically, when it comes to the question of the literary expression of female consciousness. A woman writes consciously out of her gender as a representative of the internally colonized and marginalized half of the human race. As members of the second sex, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das share the collective experiences and collective oppression of women which they represent uniquely in their poetry. An unconscious feminist ideology remains latent in their poetry which portrays women’s untiring battle against the forces of male domination and tyranny. Irrespective of the social, racial and cultural differences the two women poets think and write alike. The identity that underlies the apparent dissimilarities between the two women poets is the unifying factor of women’s poetry. This study
brings out the homogenizing elements of women’s poetry in Anne Sexton and Kamala Das.

Female sensibility and literary creations are positive elements that disprove the theories of feminine fulfillment currently in circulation in all societies. Though torn between domestic duties and artistic aspirations, Kamala Das and Anne Sexton emerge successfully from the confusion and contradiction that confront a woman’s life. It is natural for women writers to expose themselves consciously to their female-predecessors in their anxiety of poetic influence. But Anne Sexton and Kamala Das appear not to be influenced by any female poet in their repudiation of the mystique of feminine fulfillment. The drive for self-knowledge which their speakers express is a search for identity.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are unequivocal in their view that the phallocentric organization of society exerts its vicious influence on women. Patriarchy is all pervasive phenomena in the present-day world. The most dominant spheres of its influence are the family and the domestic life and the institutions of love and marriage.

Male cruelty and female subordination are direct consequences of patriarchy. The consideration of motherhood as a redeeming transition from womanhood is a significant aspect of patriarchal thought. The two poets
highlight the miserable predicament of woman who struggles to reconcile herself between the society’s expectations of womanhood and her own expectation of feminine fulfillment.

Marriage is a social construct which comes handy for men to exploit women. Once the sexual exploitation is over, man spurns woman. She protests against the inferior and insignificant social role assigned to her. Marriage turns cut to be a fleeting bondage, a dream that vanishes as naturally as darkness at dawn. Living in a swamp of sexual and marital commitments emaciates woman’s individuality. A man, who fails to sustain a woman by genuine love and marital happiness, attempts to make up for his failure with adulation and flattery. Often man passes of as an unbeaten romantic hero who lifts woman into a world of make-believe.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das portray in wonderfully identical ways the failure of love and marriage in sustaining man woman relationship. Man and woman cannot keep any abiding companionship by sex without self in marriage or outside its legal orbit. Many poems of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das point to the disintegration of the social institutions of love and marriage in exactly similar phrases. Love, in their view, is a deceptive passion that shackles a woman into an unsure and
uncertain conjugal connection. They believe that women have the potential for the collective effort to overcome their limitations and accomplish and enjoy a just and impartial society. In unambiguous terms they mock at women who express tender feelings and suggest that a literary woman should rise spontaneously above the rigours of beauty and courtesy if she is to satisfy her inner urge of self-expression.

The family is a socially entrenched institution that keeps a woman as a domestic drudge. Tradition imposes unnatural restrictions on a woman’s life and deprives her of free movement and choice. What family and domestic life offer a woman is an uncertain and unsure existence.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das portray the manifold aspects of domestic violence in many of their poems. They give expression to their feminine fury and feminine anguish with equal emphasis. Physical assault that they express in their poetry is often a symbolic outrage. They underline the psychological aspect of domestic violence and its impact on woman’s life. The history of womanhood has only the scenario of nunnery, nursery, hospital, graveyard and death to offer woman. It is a record of women’s elusive moments of self-sacrifice and resultant doom. What Anne Sexton and Kamala Das consistently convey
is that a woman’s virtue doesn’t lie in burying her self to satisfy others.

The maternal mystique handed down by tradition is the strongest impediment to women’s battle for equality and dignity in life. Little wonder that rational women of today want to be purged of the enslaving bondage of motherhood.

The mother in a woman is a symbol of the victim in her that transforms her into a martyr whose submission is in perpetual conflict with her urge for autonomy. This conflict is also evident in the clash between generations of women: mothers as supporters and consumers of patriarchy and the daughters as the protagonists of feminist awakening. Many of Anne Sexton’s poems reveal the identity of the mother as a virile supporter of the patriarchal ideology constantly in conflict with the freedom-loving daughter. Unfortunately, this significant aspect of the relationship between mothers and daughters is almost absent in Kamala Das’ poetry. The psychic dimension of domestic violence denigrates a woman in the public and downgrades her in matters of literary creation.

Patriarchy as an obtrusive ideology attempts to foil woman’s creative efforts. However, the speakers of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das do not allow patriarchy to
stifle their voices. They declare themselves to be revolutionaries for the establishment of woman’s equality and respect. Life to Anne Sexton and Kamala Das means life as a woman. They write consciously as women, as housewives and as mothers. The two women poets define themselves in terms of their relationships with others - as daughter, wife, mother or lover. Their poetry celebrates womanhood in almost identical phrases. The euphoria related to the glorification of femininity is not a consistent emotion in their poetry. What they express often is the limitations of the body and the demands of the soul. They express with regret and scorn their unsatisfactory relationships with others. The destiny of a woman is to play simultaneously several roles. Each role contributes to the overall experience of woman in a patriarchy. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das indicate that a woman’s identity is centred round her self which is ignored by the lopsided tradition of patriarchy.

As women poets, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das refract their experiences through Others who are related to them in their primary role as women. Kamala Das’ grandmother and Anne Sexton’s Nana are mother-substitutes or mother’s Doubles. In the case of both the poets the elderly relative is an antithetical Double of the mother and is a
source of emotional security. In both poems, with the
death of the old woman, nervous breakdown and emotional
insecurity begin to threaten the speakers. For the Kamala
Das speaker the past is a tranquil period of love to
which she nostalgically longs to return. The sense of
loss and grief at the death of the grandmother is a cause
of psychic disintegration for the adult speaker in Kamala
Das. But for the Anne Sexton speaker the past is a period
of turbulent emotions and childhood afflictions the very
memories of which she wants to escape from. The persona’s
relationship with Nana has the warmth of a physical
intimacy bordering on a lesbian affair. Anne Sexton’s
persona has a sense of guilt at the thought that it was
her hetero-sexual relations that eventually led to Nana’s
breakdown and subsequent death. The persona undergoes
psychic disintegration under the burden of the guilt and
grief resulting from Nana’s death.

Anne Sexton explores the relationship between her
mother and herself in some of her finest poems. Anne
Sexton’s relationship with her mother is poetically
productive, but emotionally disturbing. Something is,
however, missing in this vital relationship. The speakers
of Anne Sexton’s “mother poems” are alienated from their
mothers by the guilt associated with attempted suicide.
This is again manifested by the alienation of the speaker
from the female body which is mutilated by cancer or by surgical operation. Some of her speakers are physically separated from their mothers or daughters by their temporary madness. The pain of separation and yearning for closeness are poignantly brought out in these poems. But Kamala Das’ relationship with her mother is not poetically very productive. She disapproves of her mother’s role as a meek and obedient housewife, a silent approver of patriarchal discriminations and an easy prey to male domination. Her poems never dwell upon the strength or complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. They rather deal with her anxiety over the advancing age of the mother and her own yearning to return to childhood which was lost with her the premature marriage. The psychological dimension is totally absent in Kamala Das’ “mother poems” whereas it is the hallmark of Anne Sexton’s poems on her mother.

Father-daughter relationship is the most poignant, most complex and poetically most productive of Anne Sexton’s relations with Others. Kamala Das’ relationship with her father is also poetically fruitful and emotionally disturbing. But it is not as complex and poignant as Anne Sexton’s. Kamala Das’ “father poems” are characterized by the speaker’s yearning to reconcile herself with her father. Stirred by her sense of being a
bad daughter, the speaker seeks the father’s forgiveness. While this is so, Oedipal conflicts are the central feelings in Anne Sexton’s poems on her father. The poet, in many of her “father poems,” appears as a female version of Oedipus who kills her mother and marries her father. The absence or death of the mother and the metaphoric death of the father followed by his rebirth as lover are recurring images in these poems. The ritualistic aspect of sexual initiation is a common element of these poems the dominant mood of which is elegiac. Anne Sexton has sexualized her relationship with her father as is also revealed by the audio tapes of her therapy sessions. In some “father poems,” the speaker is haunted by the nightmarish scenes of the midnight visit made by the father who is also a chronic drunkard. The father, in some other poems, is highly possessive of the daughter. The Anne Sexton speaker has a sadomasochistic approach to her father who is described as cruel, but is adored as well. Anne Sexton’s “father poems” are stylistically, thematically and structurally very complex: they are saturated with literary and psychological allusions, legends and myths, historical truths and biblical heresy. Part of the complexity of these poems is attributed to the poet’s over-exposure to psycho-analysis. The poems deserve interpretation at various levels.
The love poems of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are unconventional. They underline the physicality of the experience of love. The love affairs in the speakers of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton involved are poor substitutes for their disharmonious marriage. Their speakers are alienated even in marriage: they are relegated to the position of the "Other" in matrimony. In love they are further alienated by the presence of the lover’s wife whose position is relatively solid. The lovers portrayed by Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are men without integrity and conscience. They reject the women after sexual exploitation. Both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das masterly picture the pathetic and miserable state of the abandoned women who still hold on to the fond memories of the old lovers. What Anne Sexton and Kamala Das consistently want to convey is that the male behaviour is fundamentally the same both within matrimony and outside it: man considers woman an object of sexual enjoyment, whether she is wife or lover. Their speakers engage in sex without self within and outside marriage: their experience remains fundamentally the same. The lack of any spiritual attachment makes the union arid and tiresome. However, the female protagonists of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are rather thrilled by the very physical aspect of the experience. The unbridled physical energy associated with
the experience is faithfully embodied by the vigorous movement of the lines.

Kamala Das’ “son poems” and Anne Sexton’s “daughter poems” are magniloquent expressions of the anxiety and fulfillment associated with womanhood. They link biological creation with the creative process of nature and both again with literary creation. The two poets see some similarity between the growth of a foetus into a baby and the evolution of a poem. These identical processes of creation, in their view, find some parallels in the spontaneous creativity of Nature. Kamala Das looks upon the birth of a son as the fulfillment of womanhood. In a few poems the speaker expresses the maternal anxiety about her son’s safety.

Anne Sexton’s “daughter poems” are not mere celebrations of the birth of daughters. They express mother-daughter relationship in which the speaker is the mother. Her “daughter poems” also reveal the experienced mother’s anxiety about her daughter’s sexual awakening in a society founded on patriarchal vices. In some of her poems the speaker develops a fortified woman-to-woman relationship with her daughter. Her sense of being an indifferent mother adds to the gloomy mood of the poems. Some of the poems also indicate the speaker’s temporary separation from the daughter due to mental illness. In
the “mother poems” as well as in the “daughter poems,” the speaker identifies herself with her mother or her daughter through the female body. In this context, Anne Sexton’s poems on daughters can be treated as expressions of the potentials and limitations of the female body.

Besides the dominant characteristics of feminism, the poems of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das reveal the prominent traits of Confessional poetry. It follows, therefore, that Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are feminist Confessionals as defined by modern critical standards. The “poetry of breakdown” which they often practice can be traced back to their neurosis. Neurosis as the unmistakable source of some of their poems is a critically established fact. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das also take to the poetry of suicide. Kamala Das’ poems on suicide are often loose in structure and form.

Anne Sexton’s suicide poems are a class apart: they have a well-balanced structure and rigour of form. The symbolic, imagistic and verbal structures are masterly assimilated into the fabric of these poems. From the angles of texture and structure they are excellent specimens of magnificent poetic craft. Some of her suicide poems are verbal enactment of the act of suicide: the word-pictures and the movements of the lines or stanzas hold a mirror to the actions involved in suicide.
The quest for the self and the fragmentation of the self are central to the poetry of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das. Their speakers often reveal a psycho-pathological obsession with the self. Most of their personae undergo disintegration of the self: each self splits into the child, the woman and the artist. The conflict between split-selves is a common motif in their poetry. The speakers of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das experience isolation at two different levels. They experience isolation as a general, existential condition which they share with the male order of society. In addition to this general isolation, their speakers experience further isolation that is unique to the female gender. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das depict the isolation of their speakers to comparable lengths in four different forms: victimization, personalization, split-self and validation.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das depict their hospital experiences in their poems. They also portray their sexual conquests with economy and artistry. Poems on sexual escapades cast the shadow of a Cleopatra-like image to Kamala Das whereas the poetry of madness earns Anne Sexton the image of a legendary mad woman. The poems of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das can be classified on the basis of five penitential attitudes: mortification,
“victimage” or scapegoating, contrition or apologia, self-parody or mock-lyric and edification.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are more impulsive and confessional but less assertive and optimistic. At times their poetry nauseates when it verge on the extremes on confession, giving the minutest details of their private lives. The unflinching courage they evince in condemning the feminine delusion and the absorbing metaphors they employ in their poetry give them significant places among the confessional poets. Like the “con man” of Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das make a living not only out of their death-wish, but out of their grief, guilt, neurosis and womanhood. The traumas that they experience and their obsessive fascination for death are transmuted into excellent poetry that speaks out the strange truths from the angle of a victimized woman in a patriarchy. These aspects of their poetry testify to the fact that Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are Confessionals who are also conscious of their gender and the limitations and perils associated with it.

The range and variety of the poetic technique Anne Sexton and Kamala Das employ in their poetry are comparable. They widely use images of femaleness in their poetry. The poetic techniques they adopt have a direct bearing on their primary position as women. In the light
of the contemporary critical findings the dichotomy between content and form vanishes. The poetic art of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das arises out of their urge to write the female with remarkable force.

One of the dominant poetic techniques explored by Anne Sexton and Kamala Das: is the split-self motive which works at three different levels in their poetry: the child versus the woman, the woman versus the woman and the woman versus the artist. The conflict between split-selves in one of these forms is evident in most of the poems. Another poetic device Anne Sexton and Kamala Das employ is the multiplicity of narrator’s voice: a device both the poets clearly exploited in long poems and Anne Sexton, especially, in poetic sequences. The “I” of their poetry only rarely refers to the poet. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das use as speakers the persona, the confessional or autobiographical “I,” the lyric “I,” the ideational “I” and the prophetic “I,” besides the Whitmanesque self. The existence of several speakers is the most significant aspect of their poetic craft.

The images, symbols and metaphors Anne Sexton and Kamala Das use have the stamp of femaleness about them. The symbolic structure of their poetry revolves round three simple the equals body, woman equals house and body equals (surrogate) mother. Both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das
construct an identity for themselves through the female body or the mother or the house. In the poetic art of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das woman, house and body are interchangeable images. Anne Sexton and Kamala Das copiously use body imagery, house imagery and kitchen imagery in their poems. The imagery they adopt is in perfect harmony with their concern with writing the female. There is, thus, absolute homogenization of the matter and manner in their poetry.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das use revisionist mythmaking in poems based on legends and folk tales. Kamala Das’ “Krishna poems” and Anne Sexton’s Transformations adopt reinterpretation of the myths and tales as a poetic technique. The revisionist myth-making is not merely an outcome of the poets’ exposure to psychology. Their growing awareness of the socio-cultural reality from the point of view of a woman in a patriarchy has also contributed to the reinterpretation of legends and folktales. The technique involves not only a mystification of facts but also the manipulation of the structure of the poems.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das use unpunctuated prose to represent the tortured psyche of the speaker. The tortuous language and the violently split line they often employ reveal the anger and violence that they experience
internally as women writers. Both poets explore variations in rhythm in order to represent the changing moods of the speakers. The continuously alternating long and short lines they adopt for their autobiographical poems carry the restlessness of the speakers. Both the poets create a sense of spontaneity and freshness in their poems on legends and folktales through short lines or measured stanzas. The difference in length of the stanzas denotes the discrepancy between ambition and achievement of the female characters. Their poetic art is expressly feminine; it is the skillfully varied craft of writing the female that they are.

Anne Sexton as well as Kamala Das like most modern women poets, is a combination of two poets—one feminist and the other Confessional. The achievement of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das lies in the fact that their feminist and confessional aspects are equally powerful and good.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das reveal the two-fold power of poetry: the reality of the self and the insistence on life. Their poetry breathes life with an ardour of the self and owes its success to the discovery and fusion of the elements that constitute great poetry. Without losing their national identity, they transcend all limits to sing the anthem of the new woman.