CHAPTER VII

OTHER CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETS

The new literary movement in America that termed as ‘Confessional Poetry’ was first called so by M.L Rosenthal who used the term ‘confession’ for Robert Lowell’s work in 1950s. The confessional poets gathered their concerns from two cultural moments: the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor. This mode of poetry arose from the experience of the fifties in America, when the country first used its mass media to probe and lament the lack of cultural continuity. The fifties also witnessed a new understanding of mass man and his futilities: now it was a society ‘beyond ideology’ that provided his background, and the sociologist identified his prototype with such terms as alienation, the lonely crowd, and the inner-directed.

In a sense, confessional poetry can be seen as a branch of romanticism, placing the sensitivity of the poet at the center of concern. But in other terms, confessional poetry mockingly inverts the nineteenth-century ideal of ‘conversion’ and ‘self-improvement.’ Confessional poetry offers a personal vindication barely more sustaining than the social structure it implicitly scorns.

The confessional poets exposed the subliminal pain buried deep in their disturbed psyche with such touching sincerity, that the reader was unwillingly drawn towards their world and even found themselves identifying with their usual state of mind. They had a personal charisma which was quite unique and which was reflected in their poetry. “Indebted to both Romantic poets and the French Symbolists for their introspective ponderings on the darker realms, the movement dramatized everyday human angst with unsparing technical mastery.”(Sharma XIII)

The presence of the somnambulistic strain which existed from the opening of the confessional mode was reflected first in Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle (1959). This volume caused a considerable sensation when it appeared; though it was his first book, it won its author the Pulitzer Prize. This sudden fame demonstrated how eager the audience of the poetry had become and they needed a change from argumentative ironies of post-Eliotic poetry. The long sequence that gives the book its title speaks about the period of adjustments after the poet’s divorce. How during this time, Snodgrass and his daughter tried to hold on to a familial relationship. The implicit metaphors often turned mawkish as Snodgrass talked indirectly to his daughter and,
glancingly aware of us as audience. On one hand, he wants his reveries to be childlike
and simple and on the other, touching and controlled. The syllabic verse with its tight
rhyme schemes helps in this cause but cannot overcome the limitations of the given
situation. The poet looks around from object to object to fix the emotions he can’t
express directly, but this in turn induces his observations to take on a pathos that ends
by courting the pathetic.

Assuredly your father's crimes
are visited
on you. You visit me sometimes.
The time’s up. Now our pumpkin sees
me bringing your suitcase.
He holds his grin;
the forehead shrivels, sinking in.
You break this year's first crust of snow
off the runningboard to eat.
We manage, though for days
I crave sweets when you leave and know
they rot my teeth. Indeed our sweet
foods leave us cavities.

(Heart's Needle)

The strengths of this passage rest in its ability to focus the almost-neurotic concern
with time. Argumentatively, the poem has an imagistic reminiscent of a metaphysical
lyric, though it leaps from image to image in a way that suggests a more modern
aesthetic of re-creating psychological force fields. The speaker here, however, lacks
the theatrical self-display of Donne; indeed, there is an almost waning of the Pre-
Raphaelite. The modern sense of fragmentation and alienation showed signs of deep
seeping. In the words of Irving Howe, confessional poem would seem to be one in
which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without the meditating presence of
imagined event or persona, something about his life. The confessional poems
removed the mask that the poets had been hiding behind and provided an insight into
the private lives of the poets. The label ‘confessional poetry’ in the view of many
critics over-simplified or undervalued the nature of the poetry of Lowell, Sexton,
Plath and other confessional poets. These poems were frequently engaged in what was
repressed, hidden and falsified, describing them as psychological case histories of
mentally disturbed poets undermined the creative ability of the writer to construct a persona or imaginary scenario that was separate from their lives.

In four major confessional poets—Berryman, Plath, Snodgrass, and Sexton, one common denominator is a split between revealing intimate details in an unvarnished context and capturing the occult curve of their own dissociated, self-concealing emotional lives. This split produces the particular ironic texture associated with confessional poetry. The poems bring out the irony which arises because of self-pity and self-display. Whether it is the twisted syntax of Berryman with its half-pathetic, half-comic evasions and stabs of honesty, or Plath wringing the neck of a compacted figure of speech, for example, ‘Cut,’ where a bleeding thumb exfoliates into several bizarre figures, the confessional poets were always stylish in their misery.

In Berryman’s poetry, from the alexandrism of his Sonnets, to the heroics of his Dream Songs, the major subject is literature itself, or more precisely, the insufficiency of life to literature in terms of our ability to control the outcome of things. In Berryman's work we have a kind of anthology, a gathering together of the figures, motifs, icons, and legends of the great writers of the past. The last half of Dream Songs, for example, becomes increasingly obsessed with the act of writing, in fact, with the act of writing the Dream Songs. It is almost as if after the exhaustion of the first hundred and fifty or so, the Dream Songs revealed their true subject: their author’s attempt to establish his literary talent for the sake of posterity. Also worth noting is the tendency of the later Songs, when dealing with the trip to Ireland and the various accoutrements of the author’s fame, which include a feature in Life magazine. These later poems often lack the strict irony of the earlier efforts; as Berryman’s syntax simplifies itself, the use of puns and dialects and crazy rhymes is ceased. John Berryman was an intellectual poet with a burdensome sensitivity further encumbered by vast learning.

Part of the tension that makes Berryman’s career interesting springs from the fact he surely must have known that the public who reads Life magazine was much less likely to maintain his poetry for posterity than was the audience of ‘younger’ poets in the college writing classes. Many critics have pointed out that Berryman wrote an extremely literary anti-literature, fitfully trying to outwit culture at its own game of truth-making by using a number of aspects in language such as: puns, dialects, allusions inspired from current events. Some portions in his literature appears as if they were part of a media mix and part of the news items at six. Berryman’s audience
is comprised of would-be litterateurs, people who have at hand a ready recall of
thousands of ‘savory’ cultural tidbits, but who haven’t spent so much time in libraries
that they’ve forgotten to visit newsstands. The exhaustion of the culture and the
exhaustion of the cultured individual are given their final lament in Berryman’s poetry.
But to insure his salvation, Berryman was willing to risk all for art, willing indeed to
risk his life to complete the last stroke in his self-portrait of the tormented artist in the
half-willed grip of a crass age.
In an interview by John Plotz published in the Harvard Advocate (1968) Berryman
was asked why he bothered to write poetry, especially since he himself had said that
you must sacrifice everything to be a poet, yet your reward is never money and only
very limited prestige.
He answered this way:
“That’s a tough question. I’ll tell you a real answer. I’m taking your question
seriously. This comes from Hamann, quoted by Kierkegaard. There are two voices,
and the first voice says, “Write!” and the second voice say, “For whom?” I think
that’s marvellous; he doesn’t question the imperative, you see that. And the first voice
says, “For the dead whom thou didst love;” again the second voice doesn’t question it;
instead it says, “Will they read me?” And the first voice says, “Aye, for they return as
posterity.” Isn’t that good?”(Thomas 10)
Berryman’s answer is hinting at many points, illuminating the Dream Songs as well as
other confessional poetry. The use of irony, concealment and defensiveness to
express their artistic capabilities qualifies the status of their work. Along with this
quoting another author is another feature that the confessional poets often trap
themselves in the context of another’s saying. The confessional poet wants in some
sense to be his own muse, to do for himself what Rodin did for Balzac, to make of the
individual artist a type of genius, the grand culmination of an epoch, an artistic style,
and a vision of life. Only then can the poet take his place with the immortals, only
then will the rules of discourse be recast; thus, the poet’s audience will always be
made up of the dead and the not yet born. The word ‘confessional’ refers to poetry
that is autobiographical in nature, yet is not associated with the work of a particular
group. The terminology is fluid, and there is little critical consensus as to what
constitutes Confessional poetry. A poet’s work may then be viewed as confessional.
Whenever the members of the Confessional group are named the principal names
which are figured out are - John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne
Sexton. In addition to the four principal figures, W.D. Snodgrass must be included whose *Heart’s Needle* published in 1959 influenced both Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. These five poets simultaneously produced work that is remarkably similar in subject matter and technique. They were also linked by geographical proximity, association, and influence. They worked with and knew each other, and expressed their opinion to each other in their work. There is very little historical or biographical material available that offers a sense of the Confessional school’s inception or existence. There are various biographies of the individual poets which mention how these poets intersected in their work and lives. There are also a number of clear references in the poetry and enough scattered biographical materials to confirm that these poets did form a school of writing and did acknowledge each other’s roles in the formation of this school which transcends the confines of genre. Conjecture and informed guess-work is required to gauge the extent to which these poets influenced each other. Although, Sexton did not know Berryman personally, but she was aware of his work and refers to it in her poetry: “The high ones, Berryman said, die, die, die”. “The relationship between John Berryman and Robert Lowell, however, is well documented in biographies including Eileen Simpson’s biography of Berryman, *Poets in Their Youth* (1982) and Ian Hamilton’s *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (1982). In his biography, Hamilton also discusses the link between Lowell and Snodgrass, and suggests that the ‘almost sentimental’ *Life Studies* is indebted to ‘Heart’s Needle’ which Snodgrass composed, in part, under Lowell’s tutelage” (Hamilton 254). The Berryman and Lowell biographies, however, scarcely discuss Plath or Sexton. “Further, Wagner Martin writes that they do not evoke a sense of the Confessional group that Plath praised for its ‘vitality’ and ‘immediacy’ to the BBC, in 1962” (Wagner 224). The Confessional poets make explicit their connection to each other in their public and private writing. In interviews, Sexton always mentioned how profoundly influenced she was by Snodgrass’s poem *Heart’s Needle*. In her letters to Snodgrass, Sexton is ardent in both her praise of his work and in her acknowledgement of how instrumental this work was for her: “How many times I read your poem, crying,” she writes. “and not knowing what or why” (Lois & Sexton 134). Sexton’s relationship with Lowell is better documented in Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell* which gives a good account of the two poets’ working relationship, as well as their simultaneous adoption of a poetic voice ‘based on self-
examination’. Middlebrook also discusses Sexton’s poem about Lowell, ‘Elegy in the Classroom’ in her collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, and observes that “Today, Sexton’s work is rarely paired with Lowell’s in discussions of contemporary poetry” (Middlebrook 120) Other aspects of their influence on each other’s work remain open to speculation. For example, Lowell is very likely the source of Sexton’s *To Bedlam*. epigraph. It is virtually the subject of Hume George’s Oedipus Anne which is a quotation from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe. ‘To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage’ also begins with a different quotation from Schopenhauer, and it seems reasonable to assume that Sexton, who, in her late twenties had yet to begin reading in earnest, was referred to the letters of Schopenhauer by Lowell. In addition to Lowell, Berryman refers to Plath in *Dream Songs*. In one of a series of poems about Delmore Schwartz. He writes that “the god who has wrecked this generation... gorged on Sylvia Plath” (Berryman 172). Plath and Sexton’s association, which is immortalized in George Starbuck’s *Bone Thoughts* – “I weave with two sweet ladies out of the Ritz” - has not been examined by biographers in any detail” (Startruck 40). Middlebrook’s biography does provide an account of Lowell’s Boston University poetry seminar, which Plath and Sexton both audited from 1958-1959. Middlebrook also mentions on several occasions, the sense of rivalry and ‘warm admiration’ the two poets felt for each other. Plath’s journals convey the same ambivalence toward Sexton. On March 20,1959, Plath wrote: “Lowell.. sets me up with Anne Sexton, an honor, I suppose”. Plath and Sexton corresponded with each other after meeting in Boston, but this correspondence has never been published. Sexton refers to these ‘happy, gossipy-letters’ in ‘The Bar Fly Ought to Sing’ as a part of her memoir for Plath, she also refers to the letters in ‘Sylvia’s death’ a poem from *Live or Die* collection.

*Sylvia, Sylvia*

where did you go
after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about raising potatoes
and keeping bees?

(Sylvia’s Death)

“Plath and Sexton’s influence on each other lasted far beyond their brief association in Boston, where they often drank cocktails after class and talked about death with
‘burned-up Intensity” (Loius & Sexton 7) In 1963, Plath told a BBC interviewer how much she admired ‘the poetess Anne Sexton’ whose work she thought contained ‘emotional and psychological depth’ and was ‘new and exciting’. “Sexton’s final poems are particularly derivative; ‘The Wedlock’ contains verses which are so awful, they almost appear to be parodies of Plath’s ‘Daddy’, ‘Panzer man’ ‘With a bag full of God’ appears, in ‘The Wedlock’ as ‘Mr. Panzer-man’(Middlebrook 106).

with your pogo stick
... with your bag full of jokes

(The Wedlock)

It is ironic that Sexton borrowed from ‘Daddy’ in many of her last poems, as this poem was, as Heather Cam has revealed, ‘deeply indebted to an early, virtually unknown Sexton’s poem entitled ‘My Friend, My Friend’. Sexton published this poem in the Antioch Review in 1959, and very likely read it in Lowell’s seminar. The extent of the personal and professional relationship between Plath and Sexton has never been fully examined. Many critics have observed that both poets firmly grounded the confessional movement by using more direct and intense personal references and experiences. It is also said that these two poets broke ground for women writers and also expanded experiential territory for all writers by making female experience and sensibility not only visible but powerful subjects for poetry. “Sexton appears to have been aware of the significance of her association with Plath. In, ‘The Bar Fly Ought to Sing’, she discusses herself and Plath and refers to their ‘breakthrough in poetry’. She comments that “poets not only hide influences. They.. .bury them!” It is, ultimately, the task of future biographers and critics to uncover these buried influences, and to assess the dimension and importance of Plath and Sexton’s artistic affiliation.”(Colburn 10)

I am learning more than you could imagine from Lowell. I am learning what I am not. ..also a fear of writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man - I would rather write the way a man writes.

(Letter to W.D. Snodgrass, October 6, 1958)

In class and in the office hours to which Lowell invited a few privileged younger students every week, he spent a good deal of time mulling over whether this or that poet was “major” or "minor," and women were almost inevitably categorized as "minor, definitely minor "...

(Anne Sexton: A Biography)
When the Confessional poets are discussed as a group, gender distinctions are rarely drawn among them; they are more commonly categorized by virtue of their shared treatments of the themes of despair, self-injury and mental illness, and their employment of the autobiographical voice. To understand this better, major poets with their signature work are being discussed.

Sylvia Plath has depicted far more images of men’s betrayal in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. ‘Daddy’ is an excellent example of a poem which can be read as a representation of different images of a controlling man. Rather than an elegy or an angry conversation of a girl with her deceased father, ‘Daddy’ can be seen as a manifestation of the different aspects of a woman’s oppression by patriarchy. As Ramezani indicates “more than all the other ‘dead dears’ Plath’s father grips her through poem after poem” (326) He connotes in his article ‘Daddy I have had to kill you’ that “In the early elegies, Plath blames her father’s death on her excessive love for him” Plath’s poetry has been read to reveal its autobiographical precision, domestic roles, psychological conflicts, and masculine entrapment. ‘Daddy’ has been scrutinised through different angles. Axelrod connotes in his book The Wound and the Cure of Words that Plath in ‘Daddy’ as a young Jewish woman likes to express her anger about male mastery and searches for her identity. Although Alvarez concedes that ‘Daddy’ deals more with the element of pity, critics regard this poem as Plath’s forum to express her hatred toward men, particularly her father and her husband.

A brief look at the previous studies on Plath’s poems shows that none of them especially those which referred to ‘Daddy’ focused on linguistic perspective. Hence, the lexicogrammatical exploration of her work using the linguistic method would be insightful because it can render the negative images of men more vividly.

I have always been scared of you
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer man, panzer man, O you

(Daddy)

Sexton’s poems exhibits an appealing irony, wit and consistency in its recurring leitmotifs and colloquial symbols, particularly involving bees, wombs, infants, flowers, mirrors, corpses, the moon and the sea. While Plath is commonly associated
with Sexton and Lowell, the influence of Theodre Roethke is also apparent in her use of intuitive word associations near, rhymes and Freudian childhood memories. Plath’s poetry is typically criticized for its histrionic display of emotion, excessive self-absorption, inaccessible personal allusions and nihilistic obsession with death. In addition some critics object to references to holocaust in her poetry, which in context of Plath’s private anguish, are viewed as gratuitous and appropriate. Plath’s best poetry converts personal experience and ordinary affairs into the mythopoetic. Plath’s persistent efforts to deconstruct and recreate her self-identity in the transcendent language of metaphor and archetype remain among her greatest achievement. A gifted and much admired literary figure who has assumed cult-like celebrity since her death, Plath is considered among the most influential and important American poets of the 20 century. Born on October 27, 1932 in Boston Sylvia Plath grew up near the sea in Wintrop, Massachusetts.

Plath’s Daddy tells in a sing song rhythm the story of a daughter’s fury at the ‘fascist brute’, her father. The personal tone of the poem as this and their apparent derivation from her own life have led some critics to classify Plath as one of the ‘confessional poets’ along with Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. ‘Daddy’ is about fear and love, the hatred and the longing, that Sylvia has felt for twenty two years for the stranger and about her terrible final rejection of him in her heart.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through

(Daddy)

In recent years, cultists have enshrines Sylvia Plath as a martyr while critics have denounced her as a shrew. Plath’s devotees called her a victim of a sexist society, her suicide a response to the oppression of women, and her poetry choreography of female wounds. Conversely critics such as Elizabeth Hardwick and Irwing Howe complain of her “fascination with hurt and damage and fury”. Hardwick can’t understand how Plath could persist in her bitterness toward her father years after his death and implies that it was sadistic or at best, self-indulgent, to publish The Bell Jar.
During the formative years Plath was in search of a medium that was best suited for her self-expression. She was searching a style in which the form and matter could blend to produce a complete unity. Just like, Lowell Plath too felt that the poetic form restricted the writer and the prose offered much more scope for self-expression. Prose in many ways is better off than poetry … yet prose tends to be very diffuse. The novel is really much more difficult from than it seems; few people have the mind to write anything that long. Even a short story demands almost poetic perfection. Yet on the whole prose is less cut off from life than poetry is.

Sylvia Plath turned to the novel, a form which she described without apparent irony as appropriate for female concerns:

Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you’ve got to go so far in such a small space that you’ve just got to run away all the peripherals. And I miss them! I’m a woman, I like my little lares and penates, and I like trivia, and I find that in a novel I can get more of life, perhaps not such intense life, but certainly more of life…

However, it is wrong to assume that Plath wrote The Bell Jar just to give vent to feminine considerations or ‘trivia’. In her novel as in her later poetry, she fused private themes with culturally symbolic events. Her novel opens with these lines:

It was a queer sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I did not know what I was doing in New York. I am stupid about executions. The idea being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers-goggle-eyed headlines stating up at me on every corner… It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it be like, being burnt alive all along your nerves. I think it must be the worst thing in the world. The last sentence of the extract is ironical. By the end of the novel, the protagonist, Esther, too has been administered her own electroconvulsive shocks.

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath’s only novel, which was originally published under a pseudonym “Victoria Lucas” in 1963. The book has feminist connotations; for example, when Esther discovers that her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, had sex with a waitress over the summer, she sees hypocrisy of the moral code of her generation, in the promiscuity in a man is acceptable, but in a woman it is not. The Bell Jar is a young girl’s claustrophobia and her rebellion against hypocritical social mores and restrictions that society seems to impose only on women.
Plath at that time had become a kind of a lesbian icon in some circles for her honest look at what was then believed to be as a serious mental illness whose victims were inclined to violent and criminal behaviour. The book is full of irony, especially in comparison to Plath’s life. *The Bell Jar* offers a brilliant evocation of “the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath. Her works give a vision of life as enhanced by death. Her poetry seems to reveal a concern with making the feminine role compatible with the demands of the art. Plath is refreshing in her insistence in the subjectivity of her female protagonists.

Robert Lowell, whose poetry is directly connected with the events of his life, was born in 1917. His father was a naval officer. His family was one of the most reputed families of New England. Lowell’s ancestors include two poets- the 19th century American poet James Russell Lowell and the experimental poet of the 1910s and 20s Amy Lowell. Robert Lowell himself, by the time he was thirty, he won a Pulitzer Prize and was acclaimed as one of the most prominent young poets of America. Yet a sensitive reader of his poems would obviously suspect that all was not well with Robert Lowell. His poems collectively express disinheritance and anxiety in Lowell’s poetry. The poet’s childhood, adolescence and his formative years affected his work quite possibly. Lowell’s disturbed childhood and his relation with his parents influenced his confessional poetry. Lowell’s parents’ endless disputes and his father’s inability to stand up for himself, his mother’s obsessive personality, and the child Lowell’s search for a father figure, all produced in Lowell a disgusted anxiety which is expressed in his poems.

One dark night,
My Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;
I watched for love-cars
Lights turned down,
They lay together, hull to hull,
Where the graveyard shelves on the town…
My mind’s not right.
A car radio bleats,
“Love, O careless Love....” I hear
My ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,

*(Skunk Hour)*
Lowell periodically experienced bouts of mental illness, which led to spells in hospital. In 1970, Lowell left America and came to England with his wife. Here he started liaison with the novelist, Caroline Blackwood. Lowell continued writing original poetic works perhaps because of his mental illness. Lowell’s political and social awareness was bound to find expression in his poetry. His last volume *Day by Day* is primarily Robert Lowell’s autobiographical work. It started a new phase in his literary career, with its down to earth style and autobiographical or rather confessional themes. *Life Studies* another crucial work an example of confessional work was published in 1959. His confessional writing is overshadowed by the poet’s political and social concerns. In this volume, he tries to strike a balance between the personal anguish and the general break down of order in society. In ‘Children of Light’ Lowell secured a weapon to strike his ancestors by converting himself to Catholicism. It was a severe attack on the puritan whom Lowell considered responsible for the commercial exploitation in New England;

Our Fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones
And fenced their gardens with the Redman’s bones.

*Life Studies* is a volume, in which the poet at last “finds himself”. His confessional mode of *Life Studies* serves to distinguish the new work from the earlier volumes. In *Life Studies* it seems that the poet had undergone a transformation. Though it is true that the first few poems, retain a few strains of his early style; on the whole Lowell has evolved a totally new style for his original subject matter. The book is confessional and the total change of style and matter was not just a whim or an impulsive outcry. It was rather a result of gradual poetic maturity and changes in his personal life. Lowell’s mental illness got him interested in psychoanalysis, particularly Freud. Lowell once admitted that, now Freud seemed the only religious teacher to him.

The *Life Studies* is divided into four sections. The second and the fourth sections are directly confessional. Lowell’s ‘I’ is an extension of the Romantic ‘I’ but instead of soaring high it is chained by the modern malaise. His *Life Studies* therefore is an outgrowth of the modern emphasis on the ‘I’ as the crucial poetic symbol. It becomes the self analytical monologue of his highly sensitive sensibility. It is also an outgrowth of the social criticism in which the ‘I’ is again at the centre. Life Studies on the whole; intermingles events from two thematic levels-that of the personal and that of the historical and social. Thus this epic saga converges a wide range of
experiences. Walt Whitman has famously said, “Lowell was simmering, simmering, simmering; Life Studies brought him to boil”.

The first eight poems of the sub-section *Life Studies* are associated with his grandparents, aunts and uncles. The first poem of this section is ‘My Last Afternoon with uncle Devreux Winslow’. The poem, an elegy on the death of Lowell’s uncle Winslow, is the longest and the most suggestive poem about his uncle. The elegy begins with an outcry by young Robert at the age of five:

I won’t go with you. I want to stay with grandpa!

It is a very natural and commonplace outcry by five year olds, but Lowell’s poetic brilliance has compressed a lot of suggestive meanings in this single line. On the stylistic level, it makes the poem’s diction conversational and natural from the very beginning. On the thematic level, this one line suggests that, Robert, the child is more attached to his grand-father than to his parents. The opening speech also suggests the child’s rebellious nature. The elegy is an epitome of the other themes taken up in the *Life Studies* section. The description of Aunt Sarah’s life shows psychoneurotic tendencies in the family. Later in this section Lowell writes about his own mental illness.

Wasn’t a child at all-
Unseen and all seeing, I was Agrippina

In the Golden House of Nero...

“The unseen and all seeing” child characteristically records all the family disgraces, failures, neurosis and quarrels. The failure of this family is the symbol of the degradation of a culture. Lowell’s poems about his own marriage his arguments and discords with his wives remind us of his parents’ married life. It seems that he has inherited the maladjustments of his married life from his parents.

In his famous poem ‘Man and Wife’ Lowell says:

Now twelve years later, you turn your back
Sleepless, you hold
Your pillow to your hollows like a child;
Your old fashioned tirade-
Loving, rapid, merciless
Breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.
These lines remind us of an account of his parents’ violent arguments:
All day I used to look forward to the nights when my bedroom walls would once again vibrate, when I would awake with ruptures to the rhythm of my parents arguing, arguing one other to exhaustion.
These lines reflect that the child Robert Lowell is so much accustomed to the discords that they have become part of his existence. Lowell grows up, and continues to relish marital discord, now in his own marriage. He describes his wife’s ‘old fashioned tirade’ as ‘loving, rapid and merciless’.

‘91 Revere Street’ is the confession of an isolated and lonely child, growing up amidst the doubts and detachments of his old parents and other grown-ups. The manner of ‘91 Revere Street’ comes close to the mode of psychoanalysis. Lowell said to A. Alvarez in an interview that he recognized psychoanalysis as a dominant mode for the American interpretation of reality. “And it strikes me; Freud seems the only religious teacher”. (Alvarez 45)

George McFadden points out in an article that “Lowell’s use of Freud in Life Studies often goes unnoticed because Freudian myths have been so widely internalized by now that we take them for granted”. (Fadden 97)

J.F Crick points out that Lowell’s autobiographical piece “is a disturbing, bizarre comedy of a house and its inheritance, a house which is both microcosm of a certain strata of the Boston upper-class world and with its class and racial stresses, the story of United States”. (Ramakrishnan 110)

The central home of the work is failure-of a family, a city and a culture.
Internalized oppression speak with a certain voice and it definitely had an enormous effect on him. His Life Studies is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious. Everything in his unconscious seeks outward manifestation and his personality longs to evolve out of its unconscious states and makes an effort to experience itself as a whole.

From among the authors of Asian continents Kamala Das, the daughter of a Malayalam poet Balamani Amma, is the most popular among modern women confessional poets. The credit of making modern Indo-Anglian poetry a world famous phenomenon goes to her. Kamala Das, became a recognized feminist poet, who wrote ‘autobiographical poems’ to ‘mythologize’ her personal life. She expressed her strong feeling of love and admitted her inability to realise it in the world of self-centered men. Obviously, her poetry is suffused in emotion. This emotion seems to be a
subjective emotion, but it is not so. It is really the psychological consequences of poetic experience and knowledge. Her poetry, therefore, is not merely the confession of “the facts” of her life; it is also the expression of universal truths experienced by an individual soul that longs to be one with men and with the world. Kamala Das touched upon mainly Man-Woman relationship, the quest of love and crisis of women’s identity in Indian perspective. The proper understanding of these three topics leads to the depth of the confessional theme man-women relationship, childhood experiences, identity crisis and social consciousness. Das’ later volumes have become exclusively concerned with man-women relationship and its complexities. Her distinction is her daring portrayal of sex attempted for the first time by any women poet in India, which has earned her the title of ‘queen of Erotica’. Her autobiography My Story published in 1970 and “Novel Alphabets of Lust” published in 1976 captured the interest of readers. Her strong point is her modernization of Indian poetic psyche. Her poetry deals with the fusion of the Romanticism and of Realism. There are quite a number of similarities between her and the other confessional poets especially in the treatment and themes she has dealt with.

You called me wife,
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.

(The Old Playhouse)

Like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das expresses her essentially feminine sensibility, honestly and sincerely without any reservation or inhibitions. The concentration on one theme gives her poetry the power, the intensity and the urgency that has cast its spell on all her readers. Her poetry reveals an unforced pathos of a woman, who seems to snatch at odd moments of happiness.

Ultimately,
I have come face to face with the sea.
In the beginning
the sea was only the wind's
Ceaseless whisper in a shell,
But, lying beside my grandmother,
quite often I thought
that I could hear at night
the surf breaking on the shore,
The sea was only two miles away.
That was long ago.
Before the skin,
intent on survivals
learnt lessons of self-betrayal.

(Composition)

Certainly the use of “I” suggests the Romantic mode. This ‘I’ is none but Kamala Das herself who undergoes a highly personal experience. She is set against the sea, The setting of the sea is suitable to the subject of the poem which in brief, pertains to certain ‘facts’ of the speaker’s life that are responsible for the loss of her innocence. The decay of the ‘red house’ and the death of the old woman help us understand this theme of the loss of innocence. The speaker clearly says that her ‘growth’ is tragic because it forces her to replace ‘love with guilt’.

Eunice De Souza analyzing her poetry critically says “In her best poems, it is impossible not to be moved by and involved in the passionate curve of the rhythm, the haunting and telling images of sterility in ‘Dance of the Eunuchs’, the ultimate resilience in the face of any relationship that threatens to devastate her vital and potential self”. “What is overpowering about her poems is their sense of urgency. They literally boil over. With a slender corpus of poetry, she has secured prominent place among the immortals of literature”. (Kohli 23) Kohli points out that “courage and honesty are the strength of Kamala Das’ character and her poetry; and the courage lies in not being able to admit that one has aged, when one is able to assert in the face of it that in the final analysis one has no regrets and that one has lived beautifully in this beautiful world” and that one can, …look at my maker if at all that is possible with no apology for may past exuberances, no extenuations, for deep inside I know well that I have lived beautifully in this beautiful world…”(31)

Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said-be embroidered, be cook
Be a quareller with servants, fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.

(An Introduction)

There is a thematic similarity in the poetry of Kamala Das as themes such as issues concerning women, social deprivation of respect and career, sexual desire and frustration, suffocation of a caged loveless marriage, numerous affairs, the futility of
lust, the shame and sorrow of not finding love after repeated attempts, the loneliness and neurosis that stalks women especially and such other things which were not spoken of candidly were powerfully dealt for the first time in her poetry. Those who say that Das’ poetry deals only with love and lust themes miss out the seriousness of purpose in her poetry.

It will be all right if I put up my hair,
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair
And to the bleakly realistic:
I am the type that endures...

(Only the Soul Knows How to Sing)

“The interest of Kamala Das’ poetry is not the story of sex outside marriage, but of new postures, new attitudes of defence, attack or celebration. Das opens an area in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions can be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feelings; She has shown how an Indian woman can create a space for herself in the public world” (King 12)

There is a striking similarity in the rebellious voice of Anne Sexton and that of Kamala Das in many of her poems. She breaks the Patriarchal stronghold and tells loudly and boldly what woman suffers silently. She attacked the institution of marriage which gives a man a legal right to commit marital rape on his teenage bride. She repels impulsively and defies the gender code. She dresses herself in a shirt and trousers, cuts hair short and sits on the walls. She refuses to fit in the constructed role of a ‘wife’, ‘girl’. The same emotion has been expressed in ‘Her Kind’ by Anne Sexton. Kamala Das’ poems end with a strong sense of self-assertion. She refuses to be weak and self-less, passive, self-denying, sacrificing and complain angel under a masculine value system. She speaks against all forms of dominance and asserts the need of sanity in human relations which is the only mode of preservation of human existence on this planet.

I am sinner,
I am a saint, I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours,
No aches which are not yours. I too call myself I

(An Introduction)

She remains the eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential feminity lest she should be thoroughly anchorless. Like Eve she is opposed to the ‘forbidden fruits’ and the
idea of the woman led by man. Like Adam and Eve in Milton’s Paradise lost, she wishes to walk hand in hand with her man because woman is not made from man’s head to be above him nor from his foot to be stamped by him but from his side to be equal to him and from near his heart to be loved by him. Her voice is the voice of self-assertion of womanhood sagging under the pressure of patriarchy. Her poetry evinces an articulate brave, confessional mode of writing; she does this with self-confidence and deliberation. She proclaims her total outrage against meaningless social norms and bindings for the Indian woman.

Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is. Such a struggle is in evidence in the poem of all the poets who have enriched this genre with their writings. Poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Roethke, Berryman, Judith Wright, Nizzim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and others dealt in their poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. They all dealt with ruthless self-analysis and a tone of utter sincerity in their poetry. Although, the facts are not always true but there is no deviation at all from emotional truth. What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalent for his or her mental state. All the confessional poets at some point of their life have dealt with private humiliation and sufferings which are the stock themes of their poetry. The crucial factor in the poetry of all confessional poets is the matter of tone. The free verse of poets, careful avoid of all clichés of expression, provided a perfect way of treating the most intimate experiences free of sentiments or having any trace of pathos. In case of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, confessional poetry was the voice of new liberated women but actually they never spoke on behalf of other women, class or any section of society but their own self. Poets’ frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly in keeping with the nature and themes of confessional poetry.

The conflict between the world as it is and the personal experiences of the confessional poets in terms of the symbols of body and soul finds place in the works of most of them. Most of the poets found ‘death’ charming and mysteriously desirable as they felt that their life could not be redeemed or renewed. Confessional poets courted death and disintegration, so that a higher level of perception may be possible. They longed for death and disintegration as well as for psychic wholeness and insights. This tension between two opposites is reflected, in the constantly shifting
moods of the confessional poetry. The poetry in this genre embraces such diverse moods such as passionate attachment, agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust and inhuman bitterness. While celebrating their most sublime experiences the poets become aware of the most mundane as their counterpart. None of the poets ever attempted to idealize or glorify any part of their self. Self-questionings and self-assertions intermingle to form the dominant confessional tone in the work of most of them. Critics claim that the poets who expresses themselves in this way has nothing to learn either at level of craftsmanship or in terms of ideas from others. Such poetry overflows from a bursting experience and the poet’s main concern is to achieve a new objective correlation which is not possible theme-wise or through a sensibility that engages traditional rhetoric for its expression.

T.S Eliot stressed the impersonality of poetry but confessional poetry is intensely personal and autobiographical most of the times. However, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and also Plath achieve impersonality in other way. From the personal and the particular, they rose to the general and the universal. Anne Sexton in ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’, ‘Wanting to Die’, Rowing Toward God, Robert Lowell in his Life Studies, Sylvia Plath in her The Bell Jar and Kamala Das in ‘The Looking Glass’. Their own predicament and their own suffering became symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. This quality made the confessional poets both intensely personal and universal at the same time.