CHAPTER-VIII
CONCLUSION

“A woman like that is not a woman, quite. A woman like that is misunderstood. A woman like that is not ashamed to die, I have been her kind”.

These lines appeared in Anne Sexton’s poetry ‘Her Kind’. It is also called the signature poem of Anne Sexton. In another poem ‘The Abortion’ she says,

“Someone who should have been born is gone”. In “In Celebration of My Uterus” Sexton addresses her feminine spirit saying “in celebration of the woman I am and of the soul of the woman I am”.

Anne Sexton is an autobiographical poet, who wrote about female concerns and translated her own life into verse. In her early poems, she wrote more about people around her and the places and events as occurred in reality, but in her later poems her voice became the voice of the women of the world.

For Anne Sexton, writing poetry was a cathartic process. She derived immense solace, from the expression of mental turbulence she underwent, caused by the sequence of events in her life. Through poetry, her feelings found an expression and her disturbed mind found calmness and solace. Her journey of putting her feelings into verse form, started during Anne Sexton’s visit to Dr. Orne’s institution and it continued till she was alive. Her poetry brought a cathartic effect on her readers too. ‘Catharsis’ refers to experiencing of deep emotions often associated with an individual’s past events and experiences, which have not been adequately addressed.

The attendents make you go and because
we mind by instincts, like bees caught in the wrong hive,
we are the circle of crazy ladies
who sit in the lounge of the mental house.

(Ringing the Bells)

Sexton’s audience had exactly the same cathartic feeling and they were able to connect well with her poetry. It was as if, Anne Sexton told their tale in her poetry. In one of her letters, compiled later on by her daughter Linda Sexton in the form of a book- Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters, Anne Sexton wrote:
“If I should die before I wake, before these words appear in print, let it be known that I have instructed my daughter, my husband and all my various and sundry shrinks to publish any and all papers, transcripts, letters that they consider relevant to my life as a writer. I do not mean thereby to subvert anyone else’s privacy, and I do not mean for my personal instructions to become public policy. I am a poet, not a lawyer or a lawmaker.”

It seemed that Anne Sexton was dedicated to serve people in her own way. Anne Sexton’s intention by making the above statement was to share her personal pain with others. She believed, that pain was only redeemed by sharing it and that her life was valuable only if she could help others by writing about it. With her terrific sense of reality running in her poetry, she used her knowledge of the human condition which is often painful, as the themes in her poetry. She had the caliber to spin the episodes from her life into words together. She could not only speak about the untouched issues but she could make her language sing too.

Sexton’s use of unusual imagery in her poetry and her distinctly female quality maintained the spontaneity of her inner most responses. It was she, who brought out the woman’s intimate agonies and insights in context to the psychic experiences, most of which were repressed and hidden amongst women all over the world. Deep analysis of her own psyche and subconscious mental state to discover self, is clearly reflected in her poetry. Psychoanalysis has brought in the subjectivity and realism in the work of Anne Sexton. Loss of mental balance was a prominent feature in the twentieth century confessional writers. With the impact of Sigmund Freud, Sexton did not hesitate to delve deep into the psyche and analyze her subconscious mental state. In her poetry she wears no mask and bares her soul completely and without any hesitation. In this process she discovers her real self which is reflected clearly in her later work- The Death Notebooks and The Jesus’ Papers. Psychoanalysis, the predominant concern of the confessional poets, has colored their subjectivity and their realism. Without any transformation, Sexton provides the facts of her life, in her poetry. Those themes which were generally considered taboo and not fit for poetry were freely included in its realm. Anne Sexton’s feet are firmly planted on the solid ground of actuality. Sexton finds no escape from her reality and every poem reflects her tormented psyche. The lack of parental attention engrossed Sexton in psychological crisis, during her childhood. She developed insecurity and desperation.
born out of her mother’s and father’s behavior towards her. She believed that she should have been born as a son and not a daughter and that she was unwanted. Sense of displacement emerged due to this, can be seen in her poems too. Anne Sexton’s aunt, whom she affectionately called Nana, was her mother-substitute. At the time when she needed her mother the most it was Anne Sexton’s Nana who took care of her, narrated stories and cajoled her. Her Nana was the source of love and emotional security and with her death, nervous breakdown and emotional insecurity took over Sexton.

When mother left the room
And left me in the big black
And sent away my kitty
To be fried in the camps
And took away my blanket
To wash the me out of it
I lay in the soiled cold and prayed
It was a little jail in which
I was never slapped with kisses.
I was the engine that couldn’t.
Cold wigs blew on the trees outside
and car lights flew like roosters
on the ceiling. Cradle, you are a grave place.

(Hurry Up Please It’s Time)

Anne Sexton has explored the love-hate relationship with her mother, in many of her poems. Sometimes, as a speaker of her poems, she alienated from the mother by the guilt associated with her attempted suicide.

I came to my mother’s house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts, and this is how I came to catch at her,
and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said
And she never could. She had my portrait done instead.
I lived like an angry guest, like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother’s, the artist said.
I didn’t seem to care. I had my portrait done instead.

(The Double Image)
The poems depicting the mother-daughter relationships never highlighted the strength or complexity of the mother-daughter relationship.

Sexton’s relationship with her father Ralph Harper brought out the Oedipal conflicts in the poems and she spoke about her father candidly. Anne Sexton, sexualized her relationship with her father. She established this aspect during one of the therapy sessions.

You let me touch them, fondle the green faces
lick at their numbers and it lets you be my “Daddy”, “Daddy”!
and though I fought all alone with molesters
and crooks, I knew your money would save me.

(‘Daddy’ Warbucks)

Anne Sexton was considered an extraordinary voice of her generation and of the next. Her poetry had unflinching honest explorations of the self, of female sexuality and of women’s roles in the traditional society. She always hoped that her poetry would endure to offer comfort and insight to those who like her, suffered relentless pain of mental illness and addictions. Her work emerged as the literary expression of the female consciousness. An unconscious feminist ideology remains latent in her poetry which portrays women’s untiring battle against the forces of male domination and tyranny. The homogenizing factor in Anne Sexton’s poetry successfully connected the women of the globe in one single strand despite of social, racial and cultural differences. Apart from the personal appeal Sexton’s universal appeal is quite evident where the “I” appears in the social and historical context. Her poetry in spite of being intensely personal, is socially, politically and historically relevant. Torn between domestic responsibilities, poetic aspirations and her mental imbalance, Anne Sexton, emerged successfully from the confusion and contradiction that a woman confronts in her life. Her poetry combines artistic fusion of subjectivity, realism and psychoanalysis. The drive for self-knowledge which her speakers in her collection of the poems express, is a search for identity. In a patriarchal set up of society, the poet has highlighted the miserable predicament of woman who struggles to reconcile herself between society’s expectations of womanhood and her own expectations of feminine fulfillment, despite the treatment she receives from everyone around him.

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.

Sexton’s work convinces that difference in nationality, caste, creed, religion or ethnicity does not matter, what matters is the feeling of connectedness, feeling of oneness which binds her readers throughout the world. She could successfully unmask the poet and the woman within herself. It was this quality of unmasking of the poet which appeals to the masses and the entire women community. Sexton has portrayed failure in love and marriage in sustaining man-woman relationships. Many poems such as ‘For My Lover Returning to his Wife’, ‘Love Letters Written in a Burning Building’ for instance, pointed out the disintegration of the social institutions of love and marriage.

Let’s face it, I have been momentary.
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbour.
My hair rising like smoke from the car window.
She is more than that. She is your have to have,
has grown you your practical, your tropical growth.

*(For My Lover, Returning To His Wife)*

Sexton has given expression to her feminine fury and feminine anguish with equal emphasis. Physical assault that she has expressed in her poetry is often a symbolic outrage. Sexton has brought out the psychological aspect of domestic violence and its impact on woman’s life. The history of women in the past ages has told the story of nunnery, nursery, hospitals, graveyard, death, sexual exploitation, suppression to offer women. It speaks about the endless number of women’s elusive moments of self-sacrifice and resultant doom. Sexton has consistently conveyed that woman’s virtue doesn’t lie in burying herself to satisfy others. The maternal mystique passed down the ages as a tradition to all women comes as a greatest impediment in the women’s battle for equality.

I have ridden in your cart driver,
Waved my nude arms at villages going by,
Learning the last bright routes, survivor
Where your flame still bite my thigh
And my ribs crack where your wheels wind
A woman like that is not ashamed to die
I have been her kind

*(Her Kind)*

197
The themes which were autobiographical, confessional and personal became of the universe when this feministic aspect was touched sensitively in her poetry. In “In Celebration of My Uterus” the poet unites the women universally and calls them unique and one, as they all possess an organ the ‘uterus’. Uterus is not just an organ but it gives an identity to a woman. It makes a woman a woman. The womb in a woman becomes her identity. It makes her all powerful and it makes her a true and an outstanding creation of the Lord. The womb or the uterus makes them not only unique but it brings the women of the world together and it unites them. Women worldwide may be different in many attributes for instance in their looks, nature, capabilities, strengths, their weaknesses but they all have a common feature which men do not have and that is the ‘power to procreate’. This power unites them and the way the poet has addressed the feminine issues in her poetry, she has taken her poetry from the individual to the universal appeal to all women. She connected the women of the world in one string which is not possible simply by writing in autobiographical style. The way the poet links biological creation with the creative process of nature, with literary creation, is outstanding.

Sexton has written consciously as a woman, a housewife and a mother in her poetry. She has defined herself through her relationship with others-as daughter, wife, mother and a lover. Her poetic journey begins with the body and ends with the spiritual liberation of the soul.

And if I tried
To give you something else
Something outside of myself
You would not know
That the worst of anyone
Can be, finally,
An accident of hope.

(For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further)

Sexton addresses death as her interest, at many places in her poetry. The sensitivity of the issues dealt by the poet is amazing and one is able to correlate the contents of the poem with one’s own life. At some point of life, almost everybody in the world has experienced the similar feelings and emotions. This quality of making autobiographical elements universal makes Sexton’s work unique in itself. She started writing poetry for herself, on the insistence of her doctor and her poetry became the
The unsung saga of many. Surge of emotions and feelings together made Sexton develop suicidal tendencies. For her, dying was something positive and it stood for life. It was an escape from a bad prison. Some of her suicide poems are verbal enactment of the act of suicide. The 300 therapy tapes of Sexton, recorded by Dr. Orne during her sessions have mention of events and incidents which finds a place in her poetry. Sexton’s obsession with death could be seen in many poems.

Death’s a sad bone; bruised, you’d say,  
And yet she waits for me, year after year,  
To so delicately undo an old wound,  
To empty my breath from its bad prison.  

(Wanting to Die)

Anne Sexton, through her poetry has provided a window to the hearts and souls of many. The poet’s attempt to get solace through confessional way of writing verse lifted the veil from the autobiography and fiction and gave an insight into the truth and reality of common man. Sexton’s reflections of her personal experiences were universalized in her verse. She combined the occurrence of real events and happenings with the poetic technique in her work. She would spin it all together in her verse. This was one way of saving herself from the bipolar syndrome she was suffering from.

What Sexton has expressed in her poetry is not just the limitation of the body but the demands of the soul.

Unlike the Romantics, to whom the themes such as nature, truth and beauty were fascinating themes; Anne Sexton’s poems portray love, underlining the physicality of the experience of love. In ‘For My Lover, Returning To His Wife’, the speaker employed by the poet to express her inner most feelings in the poem, seems to be a substitute for her disharmonious marriage. The speakers in her poetry alienate themselves in marriage. They are relegated to the position of the ‘other’ in matrimony. In love the poet or the speaker is further alienated by the presence of the lover’s wife whose position is stronger than hers. The men portrayed in her poetry are men without integrity who were interested only in sexual pursuits. Sexton drew the picture of abandoned women who still holds on to the fond memories of their lover. Absence of any spiritual attachment makes the union arid and tiresome.
I give you back your heart.
I give you permission -

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

(For My Lover, Returning To His Wife)

The other most important aspect which is quite noticeable in Anne Sexton’s poetry was the revival of her faith in God. In her later poems it becomes quite clear that Sexton has undergone a revival, restoration and renewal of her faith in Christianity and Christ. This realization makes her similar to other great poets like T.S Eliot, William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, and John Milton. This thought in her poetry connected her with many great realized souls. Her poetry became her source of spiritual liberation. She realized that a human being can attain peace and happiness only by surrendering completely unto God’s will. Sexton’s acceptance of her fate leads her to surrender towards God. In a letter to Erica Jong Sexton wrote: “I keep feeling that there isn’t one poem being written by any one of us…The whole life of us writers, the whole product…is one long poem- a community effort if you will…It doesn’t belong to any one writer- its God’s poem perhaps” (Sexton & Ames 414). In an interview for The American Poetry Review she remarked: “Poetry is for us poets the handwriting on the tablet of the soul. It is the most private, deepest, most precious part of us,” (Colburn 35).

Sexton relied on her subconscious to write her poetry, “Poetry milks the unconscious,” and that “The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of,” (Kevles 85)

This makes me conclude that Sexton’s poetry was autobiographical in nature and it was also a result of her subconscious. The poetry came into existence from the depths of her heart and expanded to express the secrets of her soul. The truthfulness and the universal appeal of the contents of her poetry made her the poet of the masses and she
represented people from all classes. She reflected the image of the people from young to the middle aged, from men to the women, from all sections of the society. Her poetry is a synthesis of realism, psychoanalysis and subjectivity. The Eastern as well as the Western world were touched by the genuine appeal of her poetry. Anne Sexton’s poetry voiced unsung songs of many women throughout the world.