In her book, *Discourse*, Sara Mills discusses how Foucault looks upon the act of confession as an invention of the “Christian west”, which eventually helped the individual to unburden her personal fears and feelings (73). This spiritual act, consciously or unconsciously, has a therapeutic property too. But when modern rationalist philosophy proclaimed the death of God, it also foreclosed the possibility of this unconscious act of cleansing, without providing an alternative. These words of Stephen Spender capture this predicament: “The antidote was once the Church. Today it is the vast machinery of psychological analysis and explanation… Ours is an age where many people feel a need to confess the tensions of their inner lives” (72). And this is exactly what most of Mamta Kalia’s poems do. And for Kalia, writing is an antidote to suffering or even to helplessness. She declares “I write/Because I cannot bite”. Thus a detailed thematic analysis of Mamta Kalia’s poetry would reveal how confessional poetry “went through a natural change [with Kalia] as it tried to cope with a multitude of complexities of modern life” (A.K.Singh 86).

Mamta Kalia was born in 1940 in Mathura. Both her father and her uncle, who studied at St. John’s College, Agra, had a passion for literature and both specialized in English and Hindi Literatures. Mamta Kalia completed her M.A., in English Literature at Delhi University in 1963. Later she married Ravindra Kalia, whom she had met at a seminar in Chandigarh and the couple have two sons. As revealed in an interview with Eunice De
Souza, it was her father who impelled her to read a medley of writers, ranging from the
British, American and Russian to the Indian. Her literary acquaintance includes the
confessionals such as Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das.

A bilingual writer, Mamta Kalia writes in both English and Hindi. She has published
two volumes of poetry in English: *Tribute to Papa and other Poems* (1970) and *Poems ’78*
(1978). In Hindi she has written five novels, seven short story collections, two one-act play
collections, four novelettes for children, and has edited three works. She has won six awards
for her writing in Hindi. She also served as a Professor of English and as a Principal of a
College in Allahabad. The first book in English, *Tribute to Papa* “is an ironical collection”
where she tries to “parody most of the relationships”. In her own words, “the poems were
against established values, established relationships which are taken for granted” (*Talking
Poems* 60). Her second volume, *Poems ’78*, records her anger against the society, which,
according to her, is hugely responsible for her own unhappiness and misery. In his essay
entitled “Roshen Alkazi and Mamta Kalia” Suresh Chandra Dubey writes that “Mamta is a
subjective poet distilling into the pages of her poetry the experiences of a woman in different
roles – as a girl, as a beloved, as a wife, as a mother, as a house wife, as a worker, etc. Her
poetic output is impregnated by her wit and irony and feminine sensibility” (215) and a
reading of the two volumes confirms this observation of the critic Dubey.

“‘Confessionalism’, as M.L.Rosenthal points out in his inaugural essay on that
movement, should be considered not as a prescriptive formula held by any one group but as a
general permission felt by most poets of the period to treat personal experience, even in its
most intimate and painful aspects” (Preminger 61). This description of confessional poetry shows how each writer conceives the confessional mode differently from the other and also how each confessional poet manages to translate her confessions into art. Mamta Kalia is one such poet, who has used the “confessional” differently from other celebrated confessional poets to suit her psychological and poetic needs. Just as in any other confessional poet the “I” is a predominant pre-occupation in almost all her poems. But there are no adequate autobiographical or biographical details of the poet to substantiate the idea that the “I” always referred to the poet, Mamta Kalia. At the same time she rouses the curiosity of the reader to probe into her life for such is the power of her poetry which has given a new dimension to confessionalism. She has taken confessional poetry to new heights by using it ingeniously to expose the shams of patriarchal society. Though poetry serves as a medium for her to vent out her private anguish and frustration, she also believes that creativity “besides self-expression is also a responsibility” (Talking Poems 63).

Relationships happen to be central to Mamta Kalia’s poetry, since the self is very often defined with reference to relationships. This is especially so for a woman in the Indian society whose roles as a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and mother determine, to a large extent, who she is. Though it is obvious that she speaks from her private experiences, she is not as open as Kamala Das, the noted Indian confessional poet. The reason for this is while Kamala Das concentrates on proclaiming her injuries to the world, Mamta Kalia attempts to heal her personal hurt and anger through the power of poetry.
It is also important at this juncture to stress the cultural and other differences that exist between India and the Western world. In India, even as late as the seventies, writing was not considered to be a decent occupation for a woman and the woman writer had to fight many social, personal and cultural battles to restore the dignity attributed to writing, if she took writing as her profession. Kamala Das puts the problem in proper perspective when she said, “How can I write poetry while staying in the midst of an Orthodox Society that does not permit me to be myself? All torches are turned towards a woman writer to see whether she throws off her clothes. How can one write poetry living among those who do not know how to love and understand?” (qtd in The Poetry of Kamala Das 137). Hence, one has to deliberate on the consequences of being a confessional woman poet in India where the rigidity of the social structure prevents a woman from expressing herself freely. During the 60’s and the 70’s social and cultural norms were much more shackling than they are today.

Confessional poetry is marked by its unique display of feelings and emotions. However, in Mamta Kalia’s poetry, there is no superfluous display of emotions even when she deals with themes like love, or marriage, or motherhood. A tone of controlled irony – which is deceptively casual while hiding beneath its veneer a bitter opposition to and indictment of all the forces of repression – governs her poetry and the conversational tone of her poems helps her take the reader into confidence. Whatever may be the themes, whether it is an emotion such as love, or an institution such as education, Mamta Kalia attempts to take away the mask to reveal the truth behind the apparent complexities of life. Thus, she has adapted the confessional mode to facilitate her role as an iconoclast who would like create a “brand new world” (Poems ’78 19) free from inconsistency and hypocrisy.
The first poem in her first anthology entitled *Tribute to Papa and Other Poems* is a unique tribute to the father, the cardinal representative of patriarchy. Actually this piece of poem prompted Nissim Ezekiel, the then established Indian poet, to recommend her work for publication at the Writer’s workshop. Though Mamta Kalia had assured her critic, Sunanda P. Chavan in a letter dated 22.07.78, that “it is not a personal poem”, “the vehement tone of the intensely felt experience and the method of the first person narration encourage the temptation of interpreting the poem in the autobiographical context” (75). The personal element in the poem is further validated when seen in the light of her confessions to Eunice De Souza: “My father wanted me to be different and superb” (*Talking Poems* 61). The poem “Tribute to Papa” opens in a dramatic conversational tone:

Who cares for you, Papa?
Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean words, clean teeth?
Who wants to be an angel like you?
Who wants it?
You are an unsuccessful man, Papa.
Couldn’t wangle a cosy place in the world.
You’ve always lived a life of limited dreams.
I wish you had guts, Papa,
To smuggle eighty thousand watches at a stroke,
And I’d proudly say, “My father’s in import –
export business, you know”
I would be proud of you then. (1-11)
Mamta Kalia poses a series of rhetorical questions right at the beginning of the poem which unsettles the reader instantly. The father occupies a pivotal position in Indian families and Mamta Kalia dethrones him by confessing that nobody actually cares for him or for his so-called “clean thoughts”, “clean words” and “clean teeth”. The repeated use of the adjective “clean” brings out the scorn of the poet for the father. She also makes it clear that she does not want to be an “angel” like her father wants her to be and, therefore, she registers a strong protest against the conventional attribution of the image of an angel to women.

Having refused to be an “angel in the house,” Mamta Kalia calls her father an “unsuccessful man” for his lack of imagination and aspiration, for his smugness and complacence. The expression “limited dreams” brings out the idea of her father as a conventional man who does not want to forego the sense of security and certainty provided by the beaten track. This is one of the reasons why her father never ventured into business. She calls her father a coward who spends “useless hours at the temple”.

But you’ve always wanted to be a model man,
A sort of an ideal.
When you can’t think of doing anything,
You start praying,
Spending useless hours at the temple.

You want me to be like you, Papa,
Or like Rani Lakshmibai.
You’re not sure what greatness is,

But you want me to be great.

I give two donkey-claps for your greatness.

And three for Rani Lakshmibai. (12-22)

A.N.Dwivedi writes, “one can now understand what sort of tribute Mamta proposes to pay to her Papa, - one of scorn for his sacredness and noble ideas in life” (266). The dripping sarcasm of the observation that the father, who is not sure what greatness is, actually wanted to be an “ideal” or “model” man, and the tongue-in-cheek humor that comes through when she comments that such a father wants his daughter to be like him lend the poem an acerbic quality.

There is supreme irony when Mamta juxtaposes her father and Rani Lakshmibai for there is hardly any commonality between these two. According to Mamta Kalia, her father is a common place, ordinary, middle-class man, who clings on to conventions. On the other hand, Rani Lakshmibai, has been hailed as a brave woman who fought against the British in the Indian freedom struggle movement breaking the conventional barriers of a traditional Indian womanhood. But then she says that she does not want to be like her father or like Rani Lakshmibai. Kalia finds this practice of holding Rani Lakshmibai as an ideal stale and clichéd. She also points out the incongruity between setting up such an ideal while repressing women in real life. To her, this reeks of middle-class ambitions and morality as defined by
Veena Nare in the following words, ““Tribute to Papa” appears to be a kind of mask Mamta wore to portray the social life” (177).

The last two stanzas further record her anger and disapproval of her father:

These days I am seriously thinking of  

disowning you, Papa,  

You and your sacredness.  

What if I start calling you Mr. Kapur, Lower Division Clerk, Accounts Section?  

Everything about you clashes with nearly everything about me.  

You suspect I am having a love-affair these days,  

But you’re too shy to have it confirmed.  

What if my tummy starts showing gradually  

And I refuse to have it curetted?  

But I’ll be careful, Papa,  

Or I know you’ll at once think of suicide. (23-32)

The solemn tone she adopts when she talks about “disowning” him is interesting, as it is actually the father who owns his daughter and not vice-versa. Mamta Kalia, here, represents the attitude of the modern woman who is even ready to sever the emotional and social tie that binds a father. The clash between the old school of thought and the new school is well-brought out by Mamta Kalia. But then, the last two lines exhibits Mamta Kalia’s ironic concern for her father as she assures him that she would not indulge in any clandestine
act which would bring disgrace to her father. Yet, more than a revelation of love, the assurance once again highlights her father’s stupidity and cowardice.

Commenting on the poem R.S. Pathak says that “the persona stays short of calling her father ‘bastard’ as in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”, but the consideration of the last lines is just devastating” (“Indian Women Poets: Mapping out Terrains” 46). Mamta Kalia, thus reveals a defiant attitude towards her father which is not common in the Indian social set-up. The poet portrays a simple, middle class father who assumes piety and cleanliness in both his thoughts and words. But the irony is that he wants his daughter to be great, or at least, to be like him. A conflict arises, therefore, between the father and the daughter, and the daughter has decided to walk out of the relationship and, in doing so, she has fulfilled twin objectives: (i) she has shattered his illusion that he is somebody great and that at least his offspring must look up to him for inspiration, and (ii) a father in the Indian context is omnipotent but Mamta Kalia by repeatedly asking him “who cares” simply thwarts the significant role he plays. Thus, Mamta Kalia quietly moves from the personal to the social as perceived in the words of Sunanda P. Chavan, “‘Tribute to Papa’ is the only poem in which Mamta Kalia tries to explore the social theme of the communication gap between the old and the young in terms of values” (74). According to the critic K. Radha “The ultramodern daughter and the tradition bound father are very well contrasted through the direct, swift-moving and ironic language of Mamta Kalia in ‘Tribute to Papa’” (82).

Mamta Kalia’s poetic sensibility is almost exclusively subjective in its response to experience of woman as a beloved and to the image of a woman who serves her family
patiently and devotedly. Her poems seem to consider “the woman’s view of the world and her position within it” (Ember 71). It is through the eyes of a frustrated woman that she scans her relationship with the world outside. A large number of poems from the first volume concentrate on the romantic passion of early love, while a majority of poems from the second volume project the tension of adjusting with the routine of many years of marriage. According to Mamta Kalia, the oppressive social structure has asphyxiated women and, the institution of marriage, which is supposed to make two individuals grow with each other, helps man in this regard while deliberately stunting the growth of the woman.

In the poem “Made for each other (Tribute to Papa and other poems 15), Mamta Kalia expresses her desire to get married to her lover, ironically not because they had common likes, but because they shared “dislikes” and “hatreds”. Thus, the relationship begins on a negative note that does not augur well:

How close we felt

discussing our dislikes,

sharing a few hatreds,

Comparing notes about enemies,

I was elated to find

You couldn’t stand the Faery Queen,

Dahi vadas and arranged marriages.

And you were delighted to see me

in an ill-fitting kurta,
a fag and minus four glasses,

…

You said, “Let’s get married

and damn the world.”

(1-16)

The words Mamta Kalia uses in the poem such as ‘dislikes’, ‘hatreds’, ‘enemies’ are usually not employed in the context of a love poem. But here, she seems to be glad of the differences probably because she no longer believes in the myth that ‘love is one soul in two bodies’. Thus, ideal love is rejected by the poet deliberately for, according to, her it does not exist.

The poem “Made for Each Other” further tells us that her marriage which is expected to be an ideal one, a marriage of true minds, turns out to be mundane and insipid. In an ideal marriage, the individuals retain their individual identities, but at the same time transcend the narrow confines of an individual identity and achieve a union, which sublimes the physical and transforms the physical into the spiritual or the transcendental. In that state, the couple is believed to experience an inseparable oneness. But in real life, one realizes that an ideal marriage is but a vacuous dream, dreamt initially with the fond hope of realizing it and in the end only to understand the pathetic schism that exists between the ideal and the real. Mamta Kalia’s presentation of this painful schism is a piece of pungent social criticism because she makes an effective statement about marriage as an institution operating within the narrow confines of androcentrism. The last lines “Let’s get married/and damn the world” in her poem “Made for Each Other” offer a subtext which says let there be a marriage and let us damn the woman.
The conflict between the ideal and the real love is further developed in the poem “Dubious Lovers” (Tribute to Papa and other Poems 19):

I’d live you as a Saturday night memory
or a voice over the telephone;
I’d feel close to you then.
But you insist on your presence,
and I am conscious of it
as I am of a burning in my rectum
Or of a hair on my chin.
After the first few moments
it gets so gawky,
We look at each other sheepishly
badly needing something to talk about. (1-11)

Lovers are supposed to be ridden by the desire to be together. But Mamta Kalia believes that the memory of their being together is more desirable than the physical proximity of the lover. The lover’s presence to her is as irritable and undesirable as a burning in her rectum or an unwanted hair on her chin. There is no depth in their relationship and, therefore, they do not know what to do with themselves after the initial exchange of common courtesies.

The societal pressures on a married woman are more because of the demands made on her by the pro-male society. Nobody thinks about the expectations of a woman in the
context of marriage. Her aspirations, feelings, dreams and quests are looked down upon by man.

Now when I want you to write verses on me
you only compose limericks,
and when you suggest we dine out,
I quickly get busy with its finances.
Every time I open my mouth
you feel let down,
and everytime you discuss your pay scale,
I try hard not to frown
If this goes on where will we end?
Or have we ended before we have begun? (12-21)

“Between conception and creation there falls a shadow” exclaims T.S. Eliot in his poem “The Hollow Men”. Similarly, Mamta Kalia also says that dreams and realities operate, more often than not, on completely divergent trajectories. Expecting her man to wax eloquent about her in poetry, the woman is disillusioned to receive limericks from him because the content of her life is so meager to him that he cannot write a poem, but only compose a limerick. Man often wants his wife to share the financial burden with him, but does not wish to minimize her work at home. He wants to have the cake and eat it too. A woman’s so called financial independence soon becomes dependence because when he suggests that they dine out she gets busy with the finances. The beloved takes the back seat and the serving woman
is in the “driver’s seat”. The conflict arising out of financial squabbles at home is suggested here. After the period of honeymooning is over, the relationship between man and wife becomes unbearable. When Mamta Kalia says, “Every time I open my mouth / you feel let down”, she suggests that there is not even a least common denominator in their life.

The poem, “New Deal” *(Tribute to Papa and Other Poems* 18), pleads for starting a new life afresh after burying the hatchet once and for all and for evolving “new contexts and new references” (2). Mamta Kalia intends to strike a compromise by following the policy of ‘let bygones by bygones’:

Let’s together forget our horrors-in-laws,
your “never-enough” salary -
my “never-enough” needs.
Let’s forget the doctor’s bills
and the grocer’s and the launderer’s.
In short, let’s forget
the proverbial thorn
and smell the proverbial rose. (9-16)

The poem is charged with irony for though she talks about her decision to rejuvenating their relationship, she lists out the number of things they need to forget before the reconciliation could really take place. For example, he needs to forget the more beautiful women whom he has developed a liking for recently and she needs to forget the man with whom she walked ‘many miles on that lonely beach’ (8). They also have to forget their
‘horrors-in law’, his ‘never-enough salary’, her ‘never-enough needs’ as well as the unpaid bills of the doctor, grocer and the launderers. The concluding lines have a philosophical echo as she pledges to smell the fragrance of the rose and to ignore the thorns. The imagery from garden is dexterously used by Mamta Kalia to drive home the idea of life as a medley of joy and unhappiness. But this optimism leaves the reader baffled, as the reader knows all along that it is not easy to close one’s eyes to these primal things of life. Mamta Kalia is sure that more than the sweetness of the rose, it is the pain caused by the pricking thorns of reality that does not allow her to share a congenial relationship with her lover. Therefore, the invitation she extends to her lover to ‘live all over again’ (line 1) needs consideration and it is not easy for both of them to forego the inefficiency of the man to fulfill their basic needs as also their mutual human weakness as man and woman.

The plight of a typical lover who experiences boredom and loneliness is depicted in the poem “Sunday Song” (Tribute to Papa and Other Poems 12).

The calendar has just dropped a Sunday in my room.
I’m puzzled how to hold on to this long vacant day.
There’s a lot of dirty linen and many pending phone calls.
On the table, there’s a shaky mountain
of books,

and I have to wash my hair too.

I know I won’t attend to any of these.

Every now and then

I’ll ask my room-mate the time,

and pretend to be sleepy.

I know that in other rooms

the girls are dressing up devotedly.

Looking at them you can easily tell

With whom they plan to go out. (1-19)

Mamta Kalia’s revulsion of Sundays is revealed by the description of the way the calendar has “dropped” a Sunday in her room, may be like an unwanted visitor.

When Mamta Kalia was working at SNDT as a Professor, staying in a hostel, “the absurdity of life was descending on” her (Talking Poems 57-58). This poem can be seen as a record of her stint in the hostel which was not a pleasant one. As revealed in the poem, she is in a puzzled state of mind “how to hold on to this long, vacant day”, because things were different when she had her lover around.

I wonder at the emptiness

of this Sunday and of all Sundays

It was never like this
When you were here
We’d rise late,
Sip each other’s tea,
Bathe together,
Quarrel,
all in a few hours.
We’d go places, visit friends, eat bhel puri,
We’d come back, make love again, call it a day. (22-32)

The contrast between the past and the present is well brought out by Mamta Kalia and it facilitates the reader’s understanding of her present predicament. Though there is a list of things to be done for the day, she wonders as to how she would spend the ‘long vacant day’ simply because she is troubled by the absence of her lover.

I don’t know how it has happened
but the road seems narrower without you,
and the sea less dignified.
I can’t talk to a soul
without mentioning you.
You know how it bores them.
No one wants a moping matron around.
In reality
all our ideas your ideas
all our projects your projects.
I followed you like a corollary.
Now I am away from you,
missing my handcuffs,
feeling stupid
on this long unpromising Sunday. (33-48)

Having described her intimacy and longing for him, Mamta Kalia gives a twist in the poem when she manages to identify the reason for the vacuum in her life. She logically reasons out that it is not the ‘love’ of the man that has created the void in her life but it is the fact that she has not managed to do anything on her own in the entire course of her so-called love or marital life. She is not surprised that there is nothing which she can claim as her own including her friends, ideas and projects. Now she is left with no option but to feel stupid missing her handcuffs.

Mamta Kalia equates marital love with imprisonment, especially in the case of a woman, as a result of which she is unable to do anything on her own and ends up performing only the roles allotted to her by man. The word ‘corollary’ is an indictment of society, which in spite of the theoretical glorification of woman, regards woman as a mere outcome. She has never enjoyed the subject position in the sentence called life; she has only been sentenced to subjection in life. Owing to oppressive social conditioning, which takes away the uniqueness of an individual, the speaker in the poem states the opposite when she says she is ‘missing my handcuffs’. Every woman she says, at some point in time, feels stupid after marriage.
"The feminists also attacked love as an ‘institution’ that promotes vulnerability, dependence, possessiveness, susceptibility to pain, and prevents the full development of woman’s human potential" (Downvar 143).

Marital discord is further developed in the poem “Positive Thinking” (Tribute to Papa and other poems 26).

Let us forget your death and mine.
We have so much to remember:
A comfortable home
Your air-conditioned office
Our quarter-dozen children
Your bank balance
The Race Course nearby
Your Yoga exercises
My fortnightly manicure
And all those social engagements.
Who cares for primal disappointments? (1-11)

The opening line of the poem “Let us forget your death and mine” can be the most devastating comment on marriage. And the casual manner in which she proceeds further saying that “we have so much to remember” only further damages the sacred institution as she lists out the outcome of their union: A comfortable home, air-conditioned office, our quarter-dozen children, bank balance, so on and so forth. Marriage, no doubt, has provided
her with material comforts and a social status; but the price she has had to pay in return has been her individual personality. Finally, Mamta Kalia asks a rhetorical question, ‘Who cares for primal disappointments?’ Actually no one in the society is bothered about the love-life of an individual in the context of marriage, not even the man and the woman involved in it and it is the materialistic comforts that ensure marital success. Thus, Mamta Kalia through her personal confession has actually exposed the death of the identity of the lovers and has also criticized the social compulsion to continue to remain within the ambit of marriage.

Mamta Kalia deliberately brings ‘matrimony’ and ‘bliss’ together to talk about the destructive nature of love in the poem ‘Matrimonial Bliss’ (Tribute to Papa and other Poems 30). While the woman keeps “hanging on to you (him) like an appendix” (13) the man goes ahead doing his daily chores which ultimately makes the woman wonder whether there is any room for bliss in the relationship:

I feel all disjointed inside,
But the moment I hear your footsteps,
I pull all of me together
And give you my best smile
That’s eternally saying cheese,
I want to develop a hobby
Like doll-making or fabric-painting,
But I feel so old on my hands.
Just sitting I am so tired
I can’t even sit pretty. (13-22)

Mamta Kalia hints at the paradoxical nature of her relationship with her husband as there is no frankness or honesty about it. By throwing light on the hypocrisy involved in man-woman relationship in the marital context, Mamta Kalia shows how a married woman wears the mask of happiness in order to hide her ‘disappointed inside’ which goes unnoticed even by her soul mate.

Of late
I’ve started yawning too much,
And watching my nails not grow.
I’ve also developed gas trouble and amenorrhea,
But I don’t want to tell you
Or you’ll send for a doctor
And rob me even of these. (23-29)

The above lines clearly bring out the boredom and lifelessness experienced by Mamta Kalia as a consequence of pretensions. She is also tired of playing the ridiculous game for there is nothing genuine about the relationship which brings out only yawns. Hence she concludes by saying that the real ailments which trouble her are the ones which describe her presently, and probably give her the feeling that she exists. “Putting ‘all of me together’, even if taken as a scheme, is a typically Indian woman’s concern for domestic bliss which must of necessity ignore bruises and scuffles” (Pandey 49). Marriage, at the same time, is supposed to be a profound relationship in which the partners are expected to be perfectly frank, open, and
trusting. But Mamta Kalia, by confessing her personal feelings, has portrayed how her marital life is devoid of features such as love, sincerity, honesty and openness.

The poem “Love Cure” (Tribute to Papa and other poems 29) talks about how “nothing changed nothing”. Mamta Kalia reveals her frustration and despair as the various steps taken by her as a woman to alter the quality of her love life has failed and the sense of dissatisfaction at home prevails: ‘Nothing broke the prison-gates within which I stood’ (line 7). Blake in “The Schoolboy” asks, “How can a bird that is born for joy / sit in a cage and sing”. Kalia, here, asks how can a woman, who is imprisoned by ideologies, systems and worldviews, enjoy life in its entirety. So she concludes:

I am a great fool
To think that marriage is bliss,
Was it last month or last year
That we exchanged a kiss. (1 - 4)

These lines from the poem “I am a Great Fool” (Poems ’78 8) are the confessions of the poet, Mamta Kalia, which discloses the emotional distance experienced with the husband. The time gap in exchanging a kiss – more importantly, the fact that they are not even aware of how long it has been since they shared a moment of intimacy – points to the stagnation and sterility of her marital existence which finally leaves her with a stupid feeling.

Mamta Kalia further confesses in the poem “It was faith” (Poems ’79 9),
It was faith
that I had in you
It is faith
that I have in no one now (1-4)

This four-lined poem adequately describes the psyche of the poet who has stopped having faith in anyone as her faith in the closest person, her husband, has turned out to be a mockery. Hence, Mamta Kalia, now, is fear ridden that she openly confesses that she is not afraid of a “naked truth”, or “a naked knife”, or “a naked drain” but she is afraid of a “naked man”.

I’m not afraid of a naked truth
Or a naked knife or a naked drain.
That doesn’t mean
I’m not afraid of a naked man.
In fact I am very much afraid of a naked man. (1-5)

The poem “I’m not afraid of a naked truth” (Poems ’78 9) from which the above lines are quoted, is significant as it poignantly brings out the real feelings of Mamta Kalia, who claims to have thoroughly understood the man, her husband. Since she has seen through him, with her penetrating eyes she knows the dangers he is capable of. She further adds that he is more dangerous than a plain truth, or a knife, or a drain. This realization of Mamta Kalia is similar to that of Ibsen’s Nora who manages to see through the husband’s endearing terms which had kept her in a web of illusionary assurance that “marriage is bliss”. Also, the poem reveals that
she has now become afraid of sharing moments of physical intimacy with him as the idea has become distasteful. The emotional disjoint that has crept into their relationship is signified by the physical distancing.

The next poem, “They Made Love” (*Poems ’78* 16), once again highlights the futility of a relationship shared between the lovers:

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They made love
and ate sandwiches
and looked at each other’s face–
two empty cans.       (1-4)
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The coming together of the lovers is described in plain words and the pleasure each of them derives from the sexual act is akin to the pleasure derived out of eating sandwiches. Just as sandwiches keep them alive, sex sustains their relationship – sex, in other words, is merely the satisfaction of a physical need rather than an expression of love. A deadening numbness characterizes what should have been an act of mutual surrender and communion. Through the juxtaposition of sandwiches and sex, Mamta Kalia debunks the sanctity of marital love, which according to her, is neither platonic nor poetic. Hence, the result is that they both look like two empty cans. The emptiness of the relationship is brought out by Mamta Kalia through the analogy of the empty cans.

“Love Made a Housewife Out of Me” (*Poems ’78* 20) is another poem which records the frustration and disappointment of the wife:
Love made a housewife out of me.
I came with a degree in Textile Designing,
Skill in debates, dramatics and games
(You can see my certificates).
I measured thirty four–twenty–thirty four.
Once I even modeled for a leading firm.
You too had admired my costly skin then.
That was in courtship years ago.
I now have a house
Full of you and your world.
Unmade beds, dirty linen.
Papers wrong folded, slippers thrown,
Bulging ashtrays,
Lidless tubes of toothpaste, hair crème,
Unwashed brushes,
Buttonless shirts, laceless shoes,
A sinkful of plates,
And a head full of ache.
The daily doesn’t turn up
Exactly on such days (1-20).
The poem brings out the fact that the woman leads a demented life, as she is called a housewife. The term “housewife” is a term of denigration as it fixes a woman in a restricted space. Her education, her aspirations, her future goals, her wonderful dreams come to naught after marriage. She is asked to get a degree, to learn music or dance, to train herself in a few skills only to make her a saleable commodity. Mamta Kalia bemoans the fact that her husband neither recognizes nor sympathizes with her, who has been reduced to a mere housewife. Even the recent term ‘home maker’, one might say, is not complementary. It is merely an ‘euphemism’ coined to make the idea less disagreeable, while not dealing with the core issue of devaluing a woman’s contribution in any way.

That she is transformed utterly and that a terrible ugliness is born is revealed in the latter part where she talks about the endless chores that she has to perform at home. They have actually undermined her potential as an individual and rendered her into an automaton. She sees no connection between the past and the present. The present life revolves around the man whom she is married to and, therefore, ‘the house is full of you and your world.” When she further describes the man’s world one understands how chaotic it is and Mamta Kalia, in a casual way, gives a disorderly picture of his world only to convey the amount of energy these ordinary things consume for the woman who finally gets a head-ache, not only due to exhaustion but also because she is agonized by the thought that all her calibre, and talents, and skills are of no use to her presently.

The change does not end with her lifestyle alone but it has affected her physique too. No more does she look like a model:
I’ve expanded on the waist
And broadened on my thighs,
And the little paunch in front
Is due to your enterprise.
But you criticize
Telling me to stop rice. (21-26)

To be fair to her husband, Mamta Kalia tries to look at marital life from the husband’s perspective too. The husband complains how his wife does not any more bother to look as she used to before marriage and he also says how he is unnerved by her reactions to each of his actions:

You never looked that way ever again
You glare when I come
And growl when I talk
And sulk when I’m mum,
And frown when I laugh.
You nag when I near
And swear when I cheer
You wear that grey duster coat
All through the year.
You get mad if I read
You get mad if I don’t.
You get mad if I teach Anu,
You get mad if I won’t.
You speak at a pitch that the neighbours can hear
You let loose temper that a grocer will fear.
You doubt me and my typist.
At the same time
You’ve changed so much
I can hardly recognize! (44-62)

In the last section of the poem, Mamta Kalia has attempted to record her husband’s grudges too only to highlight his indifference for when he wonders that his wife has changed beyond recognitions after marriage, he has not realized that it is all because of his neglect. It is actually his inability to cater to her needs which is responsible for the marital discord. And the husband continues to wonder like Ibsen’s Helmer about the cause of the woman’s despair.

Mamta Kalia protests against the social role assigned to women in the poem “I feel like crying all the time” (Poems ’78 19).

I feel like crying all the time
Or running on the roads with an unwashed face.
I want to smash a glass early in the morning
And wake up everybody with a start.
I hate these people around,
Related to me
Just because they were born
To my husband’s mother’s brother’s daughter.
I don’t know who she was
I don’t know who anybody is.
I don’t know nothing.
I don’t want to know either.
I want to throw away all my books
And pretend ill when they ask me to work.
While hosting meals
I want to poison everybody. (1-16)

Mamta Kalia analyses the institution of marriage in the Indian society. In India, marriage, for a woman, means not just building up a relationship with a husband but involves marrying, as it were, a whole family. The married woman is confined to “the triple role of daughter-in-law, wife and mother” (Nabar 178). The emotional adjustments a bride is obliged to make in a joint family are demanding. Mamta Kalia protests against these practices in the Indian tradition which forces woman to be a hypocrite. Even when she does not feel any emotional bond with her husband’s relatives, she is expected to display affection, concern and respect to people even remotely related to him. This constant role-playing drives her to such desperation that she wants to poison their meals. Anger and resentment pent-up for too long can be dangerous and destructive. Here, she expresses this resentment hoping to be liberated
from these roles forced upon her, so that she could at least dream of a new world where she would be free from performing the daily chores as a woman:

I want them to give me up as a hopeless case,
Then I can hear that song
Which goes on inside me endlessly,
I can share that dialogue within me
In which usually I’m the winner.
I can go running on those woolly clouds
And meet my prince debonair.
(Not this man who scowls at every word I speak
And snores in his sleep)
I can close my eyes and build
Oh, A Brand New World. (17-27)

The inner harmony which she hears endlessly is contrasted with the outer pandemonium. Mamta Kalia creates an imaginary world for herself which is neither peopled by her husband nor by her husband’s relatives. This dream world, for Mamta Kalia, acts as an alternative universe which she terms “A Brand New World”. The poet being a professor of English, the literary connections are obvious – one cannot miss the echo of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

The poem “After Eight Years of Marriage” (*Poems ’78* 26) vividly captures the woman’s unhappiness and dissatisfaction within the context of marriage. A married woman
is expected to adapt to so many changes within so short a period of time that goes on a
veritable emotional roller-coaster ride:

After eight years of marriage
The first time I visited my parents,
They asked, “Are you happy, tell us”.
It was an absurd question
And I should have laughed at it.
Instead, I cried,
And in between sobs, nodded yes.
I wanted to tell them
That I was happy on Tuesday.
I was unhappy on Wednesday.
I was happy one day at 8 O’ clock.
I was most unhappy by 8.15.
I wanted to tell them how one day.
We all ate a watermelon and laughed.
I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once.
And struggled hard from hurting myself.
That it wasn’t easy to be happy in a family of twelve. (1-17)

Mamta Kalia recalls in the poem how her parents inquired of her marital life in her
husband’s home when she visited them for the first time after eight years. The mere fact that
she could not manage to meet her parents for eight years clearly brings out the restrictions to even meet her parents at her husband’s place. And the question ‘Are you happy, tell us’, which is an ironical echo of W.H. Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen”, actually brings out all the repressed feelings and she wants to pour out all her agonies, which would be cathartic. But soon she checks herself as this emotional outburst would only cause anxiety to her parents.

But they were looking at my two sons,
Hoping around like young goats.
Their wrinkled hands, beaten faces and grey eyelashes
Were all too much too real.
So I swallowed everything.
And smiled a smile of great content. (18-23)

“Women learn to swallow all things and yet smile like contented beings.” (Saxena 82). Thus, Mamta Kalia never says a word for she knows that it would upset her old parents and, moreover, the proof her happy marital existence – her sons – were hopping around like young goats. This is a carping criticism of the perception of marriage in India, where the sign of a successful marriage is the birth of children and not emotional companionship between the partners. Therefore, she camouflages her real feelings. Mamta Kalia, in the poem, shows how her entire life has turned out to be one based on pretension – pretending to be caring and affectionate to her husband’s relatives, pretending to be enjoying a satisfying relationship with her husband, pretending to be leading a happy, contended married life to her parents and
pretending that all this did not matter to herself. Thereby, she becomes the sacrificial goat in the bargain of marriage.

“My Hair held a Fragrance Once” (Poems ’78 25) is another poem which provides the conflict between the past and the present in the context of marriage:

My hair held a fragrance once –
A fragrance you associated with so many flowers
But then you got used to it
And stopped associating
Now when I lower my head
You only see dandruff and grey hair. (1-6)

Mamta Kalia talks about the disillusionment that sets in between the spouses as years go by. She expresses her “deep sadness” as she explores “the present love relationship” (Gupta 138). The marriage has become stale and uninteresting and her husband hardly finds anything to appreciate in her. The poet wonders whether it is the same man who managed to find fragrance in her hair once, but then “custom has staled” their relationship, and the husband no longer finds her alluring. Shakespeare’s conception of true love as a fixed star which does not alter remains a myth in the context of their relationship. Commenting on the tone of irony that governs Mamta Kalia’s poetry, Kanwar Dinesh Singh observes that “the strokes of irony make her poetry stirring” (Singh 49-50).
The monotonous stereotypical roles performed by the married woman do not just tire her but also lead to a loss of identity. In the poem “Anonymous” (Nine Indian Women Poets 26) Mamta Kalia confesses that,

I no longer feel I’m Mamta Kalia
I’m Kamla
Or Vimla
Or Kanta or Shanta
I cook, I wash,
I bear, I rear,
I nag, I wag,
I sulk, I say.
I see worthless movies at reduced rates
and feel happy at reduced rates.
I get a free plastic bucket
With a large packet of super-surf,
and feel happy.
I put on weight every month
like Kamla or Vimla
or Kanta or Shanta
and feel happy.
I am no longer Mamta Kalia (1-18)
“What’s in a name?” said Shakespeare. Mamta Kalia says the same thing but with a difference. In her society, woman is so typecast that no individual woman exists. A woman’s name distinguishes her from another woman physically. But psychologically and emotionally, she is no different from any other woman, for most women share the same plight of living a mundane, self-negating, unexciting life. When she says, “I cook, I wash, / I bear, I rear, / I nag, I wag, / I sulk, I say,” Mamta Kalia brings out the dreadful monotony in the life of a woman. Mamta Kalia becomes everywoman who is finally reduced to a zombie, performing the benumbing activities of a housewife.

“An ‘I’ without a self; a life without an identity. The madman, assumes one,” (Malraux 84) and, therefore, Mamta Kalia’s poem “Anonymous” is an attempt to discover the “self” and an exploration into the psyche of the frustrated self. The repetition of “I’m no longer Mamta Kalia” seems to be a deliberate device used by the poet to communicate the sense of agony. Each repetition is a substitute for each aspect of the poignant emotional stance the poet assumes – a sense of loss, contempt for society, anger, self-pity, defiance, disdain and so on. According to Srinivasa Iyengar, the repetition “has a telling effect” (Indian Writing in English 680). They are not a “quick solution to the problem of filling up a line” (Hess 40). They actually help to create an ironic effect essential to the structure of the poem. This “I” which looms large in the poem, occupying the foreground frequently, is juxtaposed against the “I” that has been pushed to the back ground, and in fact, does not make itself felt in her real life any more.
Motherhood is one of the noble experiences glorified universally by the androcentric world. Commitment, responsibility, sacrifice, fulfillment and, of course, love are the tropes by which it is characterized. And twentieth century women writers, particularly confessional poets, have frankly and openly recorded their struggle to cope with the numerous demands of the role of the mother. In fact, the confessional women poets seem to experience a “feeling of insufficiency with regard to the great demands of motherland” (Deutsch 292). Mamta Kalia, the mother of two sons, is no exception as she reveals her attitude towards her children in the poem “No, I’m No Pelican to My Sons” (Poems ’78 8).

No,
I’m no pelican to my sons
Nor a dove to my love.
I am an antibiotic against all infections,
I am a shot in the arm of the family
Hated though awaited.
I am their insurance against stupidity. (1-7)

In the words of Rashmi Bajaj, Mamta Kalia “is not an all-sacrificing mother like the Pelican who feeds her children on her blood, nor is she a ‘dove’ to her love” (66). The bird imagery employed by the poet evokes the tender, gentle role played by the mother. The refusal of the poet to be like a pelican to her sons or a dove to her love emphasizes the idea that she does not want to play the conventional roles expected of a mother or a wife in a family. The metaphors chosen by the poet need consideration. The word ‘antibiotic’ chosen from the field
of medicine shows how she operates as an antidote to cure and cleanse the various illnesses of her family members. And the expression “shot in the arm” is an allusion to hypodermic injections or morphine etc, that is, something that puts new life into someone. Mamta Kalia, in the course of establishing her detached-attachment with her two sons, also drives home the idea that she is the panacea of the family. But then she also dwells upon the paradoxical nature of this relationship, where necessity alone makes it tolerable. It is a necessary evil like an antibiotic or a hypodermic injection, not welcome but inevitable.

As Mamta Kalia has already torn the mask of the home-maker gloriing in being the primary care-giver and nourisher of the family – whose duties include being a wife and a mother – she goes on to talk about herself in the poem “Inside Out” (Poems ’78 13).

Inside out full of fury and query
I am a living lava.
Though I still know
How to laugh and dress my hair
And walk about with a graceful air.
It is hard to hold back anymore
All those things that make me sore.
No, these questions don’t relate to my future.
I had snubbed it long ago,
That future of 400- 40-800.
These queries come from my innermost
Mamta Kalia’s confession that she is a living lava brings out her anger, frustration and disappointment with the world around her. It talks of the volcanic rage that has a destructive potential, seething within her. Generally “the woman is known by her passivity and obedience and if she rebels against her situation, it automatically renders her abnormal or crazy or neurotic” (Tandon 81-82). Mamta Kalia claims that like lava which spurts out after a long period of confinement within the bowels of the earth, she too has reached a point in life when she believes that she cannot contain herself but should let out her ‘fury and query’ regarding the absurdities of life, at least in the form of a poem. This volcanic outburst on the part of Mamta Kalia goes against the conventional conception of a woman who is supposed to be an angel in the house. Society may even term it as neurosis which is “an intense experience of female biology, sexual and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency” (Chesler 31). In Kalia’s case, the volcanic eruption that is the poetry she writes sears through the facades of social norms.

Adrienne Rich, too, talks about the anger of women in terms of birth throes and says it is difficult to get rid of it as it haunts her even in her sleep: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters” (“Snapshots of a daughter-in-law” 26). Similarly, Mamta Kalia is also troubled by ‘fury and query’ whose sources are her innermost being and they haunt her like her own ghost. She further adds:

I feel

Some parts of me are gathering fire
And some parts, ice.
A part of me is a jackal,
A part of me is an ass.
A part of me is a swan,
A part of me is a fawn
My hands that often itch to beat
I fold perforce and make them greet.
Then I sit home sulking at my own stupidity.
When I talk
I take offence at my own words,
Because within me
There are no words left now
Only a growl.
And I often feel
That a whole culture
Within me, lies foul. (13-24)

Mamta Kalia is unable to resolve her conflict for, though she is aware of the root cause of her so-called ‘fury and query,’ she is helpless since it involves ‘a whole culture’. She is obviously referring to the fate of a woman who has to adhere to the patriarchal norms designed to contain a woman. Supriya Shukla in her essay on “Exploring Neurosis in the Feminine Psyche” states that,
Indian women having to bear the brunt of rigid and conservative social
norms and moral codes suffer from psychic disorders like Neurosis.
Neurosis is the most natural consequence of friction between the
individual and the society. In the quest of upholding ideals and
expectations which are usually oppressive and anti-human, society
compels individuals to repress instinctual urges and the desire of
exercising one’s free will. If the individual is not geared to oppose societal
norms he or she takes recourse to neurosis which is indirectly a form of
protest (72).

A woman has been trained to hide her real feelings and to always bear a smile. She is
expected to take care of her appearance and look well turned out all the time. All the
conflicting feelings and emotions within her tear her apart. All the resentment smoldering
within her turns her into raging fire and frozen ice alternatively. Also, she realizes that she is
slowly losing her voice, her ability to express herself. Mamta Kalia says that she has been
fulfilling these expectations so far but her endurance has reached its breaking point, and
hence she breaks the silence and registers her protest in the form of poetry.

Mamta Kalia confesses that she is full of contradictions. It is this conflict with the
contradictions which has resulted in her becoming ‘a living lava’. She seems to oscillate
between her thoughts and actions, because there is no correlation between the two. She
wonders at her own stupidity as her hands want to actually beat but she forces them to greet.
The heart-hand divide is highlighted in order to reinstate the idea that the ‘whole culture’ has
ruined her ‘self’ as she sees herself as a representative of the ‘foul’ state of affairs. When words falsify truth, thoughts become a burden, a torture. Therefore, there are no more words but only a growl. She almost pictures herself as a tortured, caged animal whose normal course of behavior is perverted by the limitations and expectations of the androcentric world.

The “confessional mode” is “devoted to capturing the unique timbre and feel of an individual life, with all its vices and imperfections” (Altieri 160). In keeping with this, Mamta Kalia declares in the poem “I Write” (Poems ’78 15) that her poems are an aftermath of her myriad experiences as an individual in the androcentric world. In other words, her poems are an attempt to give form to whatever it is that is seething inside her. “Poetry”, therefore, for Mamta Kalia “is not an end in itself but a means, a substitute psychic therapy” (Sivaramakirshna 20).

I write
Because I cannot bite.
It’s the way
The weak ones fight. (1-4)

These lines remind one of what Octavio Paz once said about poetry: “The poem must provoke its readers; force them to hear – to hear themselves”. The verb, “bite” almost transforms the context into a metaphor. It recalls to one's mind T. E. Hulme's idea of intuitive language. The word “bite” carries a whole history of the suffering, woman wherever she may be. Adrienne Rich says in “Planetarium” (The Will to Change 14): “I am an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations / into images” (43-45).
“Bite” also brings in the image of an animal that is angry and ferocious and very deftly Mamta Kalia equates “bite” with “write” and transforms the urge for physical violence into verbal expression. This is an example of seeing something feelingly. Art helps in sublimating primitive impulses by transforming them into acceptable social behavior.

As a true confessional poet, Mamta Kalia records her unhappiness, misgivings, grudges, failures and disasters with regard to the varied experiences of her personal life. Her proximity to people and life forms the raw material of her poetry. She fights through her poetry and her anger is leveled against the “foul” world which has formulated unfair laws which encourage man and stifle woman. Mamta Kalia is conscious of her inability escape the enmeshing cultural web and that is the reason why she has declared a war on society through poetry. She looks upon poetry as a weapon with which she confronts the socially and culturally powerful gender – the male gender – as she looks upon herself as a weakling. At the same time, she confesses that her so-called weakness is the outcome of the rigid values that govern her life as a woman.

According to Swati Guleria, “Writing… performs the function of catharsis giving vent to… suppressed feelings” (271) and in the poem “In My Hour of Discontent” (Poems ’78 17), Mamta Kalia, once again, talks about the connection between personal fury and creative frenzy. She states that the content of her poem is nothing but her discontent.

In my hour of discontent
I neither shout nor rant.
I simply fill ink in my pen
And spill it with intent
But now I’m fed up
Using my pen like sword.
Creating at best only verbal discord.
I want neither paper nor board.     (1-8)

Mamta Kalia once confessed that “Much needs to be done with the pen. But change is slow this way… Writing takes a hundred years to create a little ripple” (Talking Poems 60). Anger and dissatisfaction describe Mamta Kalia’s poetry. In fact, anger goads he externalize her inner frustrations and desires as poetry. Instead of a mere display of emotions, Mamta Kalia believes that she will be able to make a difference by translating whatever is seething inside her into poetry. She has resorted to poetry where words would substitute actions. Moreover, in her creative world she need not wear the mask of an angel’ on her ‘inner ‘self’ which, to her, is a relief from the tedious role-playing of the real world. There is nothing put on and she is confident that her hands, for a change, would be in rhythm with her thoughts and that she can be at last her ‘self’. Yet this relief is proves to be temporary – she is unable to put up this brave front of confrontation too for too long and is tired of using her pen as a sword. The fatigue of Mamta Kalia is the result of the futility of her confession.

At this juncture, one needs to consider the way Anne Sexton, for example, looked upon poetry as a means of bringing order into her otherwise disorderly life. Her eventual suicide only reveals that poetry could not sustain her for long. Mamta Kalia also believes that her confession has not resulted in any kind of change whatsoever. It may prove to be a safety
valve for a while, but ultimately it does not bring about any changes in the external circumstances which she finds claustrophobic. One can even assume that it could be one of the reasons why she stopped writing, at least in English.

Even the momentary relief that writing brings is not complete, because she has to constantly censor her own writing, so as not to hurt others’ sentiments. Mamta Kalia talks about the compulsion to sanitize her own writing. In the poem “I must Write Nicely Now” (Poems ’78 18), she says there is no point talking about her ‘nightmares’:

I must write nicely now
Not about my nightmares
But about my dreams.
Do you dream at thirty-seven
Or scream?
Neither.
Life suddenly turns turtle.
You seem to say, “It’s fine and I’m okay”.
But the sense of burning is always there
Down your what you call it.
You mind everything that happens or doesn’t happen to you.
Rejection, Dejection, Erection.
You can’t adjust even with your own children.
You feel the world is full of whores.
Knocking hard at your bedroom doors.
You sleep with a headache
And wake up with a backache.
Except yourself
You feel everything is fake. (1-19)

Dreams symbolize hope while screams symbolize rage and protest. When Mamta Kalia says that she neither dreams nor screams, the situation has utterly irredeemable because, she can neither hope nor protest. In fact, there is a dull acceptance of the state of affairs and she has become insensitive to the frustrations and disappointments of life. Hope, rage and protest are all valid material for poetry while indifference and inertia are not. There can be no creativity when a writer only “sees not feels.” Therefore, the resigned acceptance the poet ahs arrived at is the death-knell of poetry within her.

Fortunately, the poet is able to arouse herself from this deadening stupor. Though she tries to reconcile herself to things around her she is tormented by a “sense of burning” which results in voicing out her urges and desires. Hence, every time she comforts herself saying everything is fine and that she is alright, her poetic eye does not spare anything. Her poetic sensibilities are so alert that nothing can miss her attention even when she is not involved in it. So she confesses that “you mind everything that happens or doesn’t happen to you”. This predicament of the poet reminds one of the restlessness associated with the daughter-in-law portrayed by Adrienne Rich in her “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law”: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters” or the popular Keatsian line: “where to think is to be full of sorrow”.
As a true poet, she is unable to be blind to the ugly reality she faces every day. She is thoroughly disturbed to the extent that she imagines the world to be full of people who sell themselves. She almost pictures the world as a kind of wasteland similar to that of Eliot’s wasteland. Thus, though the poet began on a decisive note with the resolution to write nicely henceforth, she has finally ended up confessing her inability to do so since the real life experience is so overwhelming as to deny her the power to dream.

In “Compulsions” (Tribute to Papa and other Poems 12) she again describes her desire to be herself. She feels constrained by the list of dos and don’ts prescribed by the society.

I want to pick my nose
In a public place
I want to sit in my office chair
With my feet up
I want to slap the boy
Who makes love in a cafe
While I wait alone for the waiter
To bring me coffee and sandwiches
I want to pay Sunday visits
Totally undressed
I want to throw away
All my cosmetics
I want to reveal

My real age   (1-14)

Mamta Kalia’s pre-occupation with her real ‘self’ is unveiled in the poem. Her confession that she “was breaking down things” (*Talking Poems* 60) is perceived in these lines. Mamta Kalia talks about her inner urges as she enlists the number of things that she would like to do, left to herself. But then she realizes that she will not be able to perform these tasks as she would go against the social decorum. Thus, she portrays the conflict between the real self of the poet and the norms of the world. Probably, Mamta Kalia wants to expose the dilemma of an individual who is caught in the societal web of rigid rules and regulations which eventually prevent the woman from being herself.

Having talked about her ‘wants’ in “‘Compulsions’” Mamta Kalia reveals herself as an iconoclast who would like to “smash all structures” in the poem “Come” (*Poems ’78* 11).

**Come**

Let’s smash all structures.

Let’s link each thing

With another queer thing.

Let’s not come close during intercourse

But mark a distance,

Touch each other like dead-wire

And react like fools

Let’s damn all dimensions of words,
Let’s chop every pledge
Let’s slash open the sea with the razor’s edge.  (1-11)

The poem, “Come” is an invitation to wreck and to bring down the so-called pillars of society. Mamta Kalia’s attitude echoes the typical postmodernist clarion call to deconstruct every thing around us, though this act of deconstruction does not lead to any alternative world view which could be a source of creating other positive, egalitarian structures. This seems to be merely an expression of destructive but impotent rage. Then, she moves on to talk about the need to put an end to the nuances of meanings a word can convey, thus rendering it complex and ambiguous as this world has no place for richness and complexity. Language, which ought to configure reality, is reduced to mere verbal gymnastics. She also further foregrounds the shallow nature of every pledge and how these vows remain unfulfilled. As a consequence there is no transformation and hence Mamta Kalia expresses her desire to break these vows for they have no significance. She is dismissive of the preoccupations of the Indian philosophical tradition which uses the metaphor of the sea for life and the discriminative intellect as the razor’s edge.

“Mamta Kalia’s art is… symbiosis of the personal and the social” says Mina Surjit Singh (176). Her wish to smash structures is the result of the disparity which she has perceived in the operation of the societal norms. The harsh reality of a ruthless, unequal society has managed to drag Mamta Kalia away from talking about personal problems to concentrating on society. She confesses that “there was a time when I wanted to disown everything and everybody… I’ve sobered down, and moved from individual to social
concerns” (*Talking Poem* 60). In fact, this has been a fortunate move as the social consciousness of the writer has actually extended the limited range of themes the confessional mode could possibly accommodate.

Having described the world as a kind of wasteland she actually talks about various factors that have contributed to making it so in several of her poems. It is the never appeased greed of the rich that has paved way for the ever prevalent social evil called poverty. Poverty, Mamta Kalia says, is the outcome of the negligence of the society in which we live. The poem “Self-Pity” (*Tribute to Papa and other poems* 31) is an attempt to expose the self-centered, hostile nature of the urban populace who turns a deaf ear to the cry of the needy:

Who will buy me a banana in this large unfriendly town

Who will come and ask,

“Are you tired? Are you hungry?

‘Does no one love you? Where do you live?’”

Perhaps no one.

They are all busy in their business.

They’ve no time for a girl, dark and skinny,

Who is twelve but looks much younger.

I want to shout in the middle of the road,

“‘I have a name: I’m Sheela,

I’ve studied four classes in a Prathamik Shala.

Once I went to a picnic and drank Coca-cola,
I can roll excellent chapattis,
I recognize chacha Nehru in all photographs,
I have two younger brothers who call me tayee,
I am my mother’s pet,
I am I am.
But who will hear if I say all this?
In this large unfriendly town
Who will say, Don’t cry”. (1-20)

The poem can be divided into two parts. The first part poses a list of rhetorical questions which brings out the despair of the poor girl who needs help. Having solicited a banana to appease her hunger, she immediately voices her doubts about her need being fulfilled as she finds herself in the middle of a large unfriendly town. By means of questions the persona has stated her problems. She is hungry and tired. She has neither shelter nor love. She is also convinced that no one would come to her rescue as “they are all busy in their business”.

The second part gives the reader details about the persona – thus giving her “a local habitation and a name”. The faceless, nameless young girl has now taken on definite contours and becomes a clearly-etched person with tangible dimensions. Detail upon biographical detail is piled upon the readers who can then recreate this persona in their mind’s eye. The persona introduces herself as Sheela, who is dark and skinny. She is actually twelve years old but owing to malnutrition she looks much younger. She has also studied in the local school till class four and she still harbors lovely memories of going to a picnic and drinking Coca-
Cola. She also talks about her accomplishments. She says she can roll excellent chapattis, and is good at recognizing Nehru in all photographs. She also has two younger brothers who are fond of her and look up to her. She is proud of the fact that she is her mother’s pet. But she is disturbed by the fact that there is nobody to comfort her presently.

Mamta Kalia has attempted successfully to depict the problems of the neglected section of society, that is, the poor in this poem. The strategy she has employed is noteworthy as she has allowed the poor girl to give voice to her problems and, in doing so, she has got the subaltern to speak for herself. Once the girl finishes speaking, the reader is filled with information about the girl, who would have gone unnoticed by the society as a vagabond or a destitute. By flooding the reader with details about the girl, Mamta Kalia has driven home the point that the girl, though poor, has an identity, a home, a family and attributes too. Instead of the poet Mamta Kalia, we find her persona confessing this time.

“A pretty Girl Crosses the Road” (Poems ’78 14) is another poem which talks about the helplessness of the poor. Mamta Kalia, here, contrasts the troubles of the weaker section of society with the privileges enjoyed by the rich.

Your capital earns you multi-profits.
And you don’t understand
Why Champabai’s baby cries in her arms.
You victoriously vegetate.
You do not know
Why people agitate. (24-29)
Mamta Kalia comes down heavily upon the rich who can’t even understand he needs of the baby of the poor woman Champabai, who cries out of hunger. The very fact that these rich continue to get, “hard and strong like a hippopotamus” (lines 15-16) not only shows their tough physique but also their insensitivity which is suggested by the tough hide of the hippopotamus. The rich “victoriously vegetate,” since it is empathy, compassion and the urge to reach out to the poor and the needy – completely missing in the poor – that distinguish human existence from mere vegetation of the natural world. Mamta Kalia’s anger is revealed when she states that the rich man is so blind to the needs of the poor that he is not able to identify the cause of the restlessness of the poor.

Mamta Kalia, the former professor of English, and an ardent admirer of Robert Frost rejects his legacy, in the poem “Against Robert Frost” (Tribute to Papa and other poems 21).

I can’t bear to read Robert Frost.

Why should he talk of apple-picking

When most of us can’t afford to eat one?

I haven’t even seen an apple for many months-

Whatever we save we keep for beer

And contraceptives. (1-6)

The opening confession that she can’t bear to read Frost arouses the curiosity of the reader instantly. But then one finds that Mamta Kalia uses Frost and his use of apples in the poem “After Apple-picking” just to highlight the poor economic condition of Indians, who can
hardly afford to enjoy the pleasure of eating an apple. Even as a middle-class woman Mamta Kalia says that she has not seen an apple for many months for whatever extra money she has, she spends on beer and contraceptives, as they are most important than apples, practically speaking. The charm of the poem lies in the way Mamta Kalia dexterously uses the American poet Robert Frost and his “apple-picking” in order to establish the poor economic condition of most of the Indians, which prevents them from appreciating poetry of the West.

Having been a part of the academia, Mamta Kalia proceeds further to attack the most important institution of society which is supposed to promote enlightenment, that is, education. Mamta Kalia exposes the drawbacks and poor standard that prevail in the field of education through the teacher, who is universally looked upon as the giver of knowledge. In the poem “Dedicated Teacher” (Tribute to Papa and other poems 22) she has this to say:

It seems funny at times –
I’ve rarely seen a mountain,
a forest or a river,
yet I teach geography.
I’m working for a Ph.D., these days.
Even if I know
I’ll never complete the thesis,
Never mind,
That I’m registered is enough.
I talk my lungs about it.

It’s all to wangle a Readership, you see.

The University needs me. (1-12)

Mamta Kalia de-idealizes education in the poem. The teacher, who is conventionally looked upon as a repository of all knowledge and as a dedicated pursuer of wisdom, is debunked by the poet. According to Mamta Kalia it is ironical that the teacher has to fake enthusiasm and passion when she teaches Geography, though she may not have seen “a mountain, a forest or a river”. She also says that she has registered for Ph.D., but that does not mean that she will complete the thesis, for mere registration would be an eligibility to talk about it endlessly, giving oneself an air of academic credibility. This is a telling critique of the existing situation in higher education. The last line sums it all.

In contrast, the predicament of a dedicated individual who suffers at his workplace – a government office – is well-brought out in the poem, “Hell” (Tribute to Papa and other poems 23). “Life for an educated, outspoken individual who happens to be a woman is not easy. You may equip yourself academically, professionally but you cannot hope others will move at the same pace” (Talking Poems 61). Mamta Kalia's personal experience as a working woman was not pleasant in the initial stages. The poem "Hell" captures the conflict between an earnest individual and the ruthless, impersonal, but nevertheless manipulative bureaucracy.

With a sour taste in the mouth

you go on working,
with a lurking fear
they'll throw you out
if they detect you going wrong somewhere,
or right everywhere.
If they find you unpopular
or a bit too popular.
If there is something against you
or nothing at all against you.
Very soon,
they'll put you there where the ventilation is poor
where the only objects that shine are shoes.
There, a pigeon-hole awaits you:
"Give up all hope
Ye that enter the kingdom of Government Service". (1-18)

The poem records the suffocating, painful existence that a government employee has to bear with. The completely unrewarding state of Government service where the worker is paranoid about her future is a miniature hell in the words of the poet. It is a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation,” as both inefficiency and perfect efficiency are dangerous. In the former case, you will be considered unfit for the job, while in the latter you will be seen as a threat to the higher-ups who do not want to have a subordinate smarter than themselves. It is a no-win situation since no matter what an individual does, except for vegetating, he/she is doomed.
This analysis of the themes embedded in the poetry of Mamta Kalia and of her poetic stance with reference to these themes, thus, reveals the representation of both the personal and the social self. "The autobiographical impulse," according to Frye, "is a creative one and therefore, it is fictional. Writers, while writing about their lives, write about only those experiences that go to build up an integrated pattern" (Kang 26-27). In the case of Mamta Kalia’s poems, the integrated pattern is one that foregrounds disintegration and destabilization. Therefore, Mamta Kalia’s poetry can be looked upon as an Indian mode of confessionalism wherein the artist has not only revealed her personal experiences colored by frustrations, disappointment and vexations, but has also attempted a critique of repressive and exploitative social structures.

As a rule, autobiographies are utterly conventional and commonplace. They are of interest only those readers who are immediately concerned with the author. But some others appeal because the personal element in them has universal application and the reader can easily identify himself with the writer, feel his pain, rejoice in his pleasure and share with him the hope that lies indomitable in the human heart (Jaidka 2).

“Confessional poetry springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of dependence. Or of guilt. Or of anguish and suffering” (Phillips 8). A reading of Mamta Kalia’s poetry will at once show that she is a confessional poet in this sense. Her primary poetic material is her personal life, though there is no reason to believe that her poetry has its source in mental illness. There is a positive energy in Kalia’s poems. She has used the confessional mode as a brilliant artistic strategy to undertake a rigorous examination
of her own psyche as well as an exposé of society and its maladies. Society, informed by the ideologies of androcentrism, may attempt to crush her down. But by writing intensely personal poems, Mamta Kalia will rise in the firmament of art and probe both her own life and society through her poems so that she stands a testimony to the definition of Keki N. Daruwalla as what confessional poetry is all about: “The primary meaning, should not be lost sight of, that it confesses the feeling and experience, guilt and hate, love and lust and those fleeting moments of sometime obscure and private detail” (Contemporary Indian English Poetry 10).