CHAPTER IV

Angels Beyond the House: Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia

“A good poem transcends its author’s intention and understanding, while a bad poem is under its overconfident author’s control, alas, at every point” (Young 133). The statement does not hold good with regard to confessional poetry. As it is generally believed by many critics, the confessional poet uses writing as a kind of therapy and, therefore, their writing does not go beyond their own personal experiences and seek to give expression to the deep-seated insecurities and anger. There is no effort to look for concrete solutions, but rather mere externalization is therapy. Charles Gullans comment that Sexton’s poems “are not poems. They are documents of modern psychiatry and their publication is a result of the confusion of critical standards in the general mind” (Gullans 132), is indeed valid, though not as a negative criticism of their art. The confessional poets transmuted documentation into poetry, as Marianne Moore observes in her poem “Poetry” (The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women 1450): “nor is it valid/to discriminate against ‘business documents and/school-books’; all these phenomena are important” (22-24). In the late 1950s, Anne Sexton herself reports that her friend-critic, John Holmes, advised her against writing such personal poems as she had written about madness and also, it seems, that “that isn’t a fit subject for poetry” (Kelves 89). Themes such as madness, oedipal hate, personal anguish, emotional breakdown are viewed apparently from a personal point of view and the source of study for these poets happens to be their own private lives.
In his discussion of the confessional poets M.L. Rosenthal talks about how breakdown and suicides are an outcome of “the imaginative risk” (The Art of Sylvia Plath 74). Sexton makes a similar point saying “there are so many people who are mentally disturbed who are not writers, or artists, …. that I don’t think genius and insanity grow in the same bed. I think the artist must have a heightened awareness. It is only seldom this sprouts from mental illness alone” (“Marx Interview” 71). This argues in favour of the contention that there is artistic method in the so-called madness induced confessional poetry. Caroline Barnard Hall, too, argues in her noteworthy critical text, entitled Anne Sexton, that “these mid-twentieth century poets simply discuss such matters more openly and frankly than their romantic forebears and that the “imaginative risk” has always been a necessary feature of personal poetry” (35).

In other words, when the English Romantic poet Shelley cries, “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed, ” there is universalization of personal suffering, since the poet uses the West Wind as a transforming power that effects a transformation of the personal self into the universal self. One might, therefore, see a sense of confession in Romantic poetry which is also subjective but a Romantic poet is not interested in clinically analyzing the reason for his suffering while the confessionals are particularly interested in doing so. Sexton has an answer when she says that she chooses situations that are dramatic and henceforth congenial to her poetic preoccupation. This is the reason why her poetry is not a mere documentation of the “self”.
According to James Merrill “Confessional Poetry… is a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it sound as if it were true” (1-2). It is true that these labels were created by critics and like the term “Romantic” coined by critics, the term “confessional” also is the creation of M.L. Rosenthal. Very rightly Anne Sexton argues herself out of this bracketing when she says that “It is said that I am part of the so-called confessional school. I prefer to think of myself as an imagist who deals with reality and its hard facts. I write stories about life as I see it… My themes deal with life and death, insanity, daughterhood, motherhood, and love. My poems are intensely physical” (Maxine Kumin, 165). Robert Lowell in his Life Studies talks about how “there was a good deal of tinkering with fact, …. the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell” (Writers at Work 349). This only proves the previous argument. Sexton too seems to agree with Robert Lowell when she says that it “is necessary to distort the literal facts of life to present the emotional truth that lies under them”. The poet does not “have to include everything to tell the truth. You can even lie… It’s something that an artist must do to … have the effect of the axe” (“Marx Interview” 75). Several poets, confessional or not, have been certainly conscious of one thing which is their art.

On the other hand, in the case of the Indian confessional poet, Mamta Kalia, the intention is to cry aloud the suppressed emotions, especially anger, in the form of poetry. In 1971 Adrienne Rich said,

Today much poetry by women and prose for that matter is charged with anger. I think we need to go through that anger… Both the victimization and anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into
society. They must go on being explored by poets, among others. We can neither deny them, nor can we rest there. They are our birth-pains, and we are bearing ourselves (qtd in Gould 228).

When the patriarchal world has found its ideological underpinning in established social and cultural institutions, the women confessional poet’s poetic muse seems probably to reside elsewhere: in madness, or in an abdominal surgery, or in fury, or at least in the “self”. The critic Ralph J. Mills saw confessional poetry as that which deals with “the most intimate aspects of life, areas of experience that most of us instinctively keep from public sight” (Contemporary American Poetry 156). He argued that the unique mode of poetry actually explored the rather unexplored aspects of life which was thought to be a subject only a psychologist could study.

In her essay on “On Confession” Rita Felski states that “the confessional text makes public that which has been private, typically claiming to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience” (Beyond Feminist Aesthetics 88). In her quest for “the truth” of a highly personal experience the confessional poet ignores the conventional norms and her sole objective is “to present the emotional truth that lies” behind the “literal facts” (“Marx Interview” 75). A close reading of confessional poetry reveals that they are not a mere record of the facts of the life of the poet and, in fact, the confessional poet discusses what even an autobiographer dare not as validated by Jelinek who says that “neither women nor men are likely to explore or to reveal painful and intimate memories in their autobiographies” (Jelinek 10). At the same time the
confessional poet is quite clear about her contribution as a writer for in the words of Anne Sexton “… if you can feel you are in touch with experience, if you’ve stuck your finger into experience and got it right and can put it down so that others (even experience tellers) can comprehend their own lives better, … then you must get on with it! … the listener awaits (Letters 414-415).

One seems to agree with Diana Hume George, when she says, “When Lowell confessed at first we slapped his patrician hard and told him to shape up and put back the stiff in his upper lip. When Sexton confessed, we sharpened the knife and heated the pot” (Oedipus Anne 91). The difference in treatment meted out to Anne, according to George, is a matter of gender. Caroline Barnard too agrees with George in this aspect as revealed in her analysis of the poetry of Anne Sexton. The refined patriarchal world could not accept a woman poet talking about her physicality and other bodily experiences so openly and, in a way, Sexton’s confessional poetry can be seen as poetry wherein she writes back to the man’s world for “Day after day since my birth, I have been made up: my gestures, my attitudes, my vocabulary. My needs were repressed, my desires, my impetus, they had been dammed up, painted over, disguised and imprisoned” (Cardinal 164). Therefore, a woman confessional poet’s poetry is nothing but a natural consequence of the neglect of feminine experience through ages. As Elizabeth Janeway writes:

If there is a women’s literature, it will desire from an area of experience, worthy of exploration, which is known pretty exclusively to women and largely overlooked by men or, at the best, described in terms of alien standards. Female patterns of living
and dealing with the world have produced in women a point of view different from that of their brothers. This point of view will not be easily accessible to men… (342).

The poetry of Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia could be seen as efforts taken by women to map out their problems and sufferings so that they gain better clarity regarding their lives: “Writing… puts things back in place… things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible and real. I’m more in touch with things” (Anne Sexton 72-73).

In her letter to W.D. Snodgrass, Sexton reveals her anxiety to defend her poetry as she is doing “something out of the norm” (Letters 62). She is rest assured that “the stuff” she writes is “so controversial” and that “no one will like it” (Letters 68). This thorough understanding of the literary scene which hardly allowed a poet to express her personal anxieties does not prevent her from continuing to write intimate poems dealing with “taboo” subjects as she felt the need to explore those areas of life too as a woman, since a man can never have access to such experiences as menstruation or motherhood. This is the reason one realizes why she commented that “neither tradition nor rebellion motivated her art” (Hall 36). Hence, women’s confessional poetry can be seen as a breach of tradition as it goes against the concepts of universality and objectivity.

Anne Sexton, at the same time, assures that her poems are not the result of a “rebellion” as many have seen feminist notions embedded in her poetry. In an interview Sexton confirms that she is no feminist and that she would rather appreciate if readers view her as a mere” story teller”. As Elizabeth N. Kurian writes: “Feminists have argued that a
book written by a woman about a woman does not make it a feminist work. Female assertion, subversion of the patriarchal system and exploration of the female consciousness form significant components of a recognizable feminist work” (36). One does find glimpses of the said features in both Sexton’s and Kalia’s poetry though they never proclaimed to the world that they are feminists. Hence, it should be assumed that if these two writers have shown feminists inclinations in their poetry, it is a matter of accident and not because they opted to do so. Simultaneously, their poetry reveals that they cannot escape or forget the fact that they are women for expression is, after all, the result of the individual artists’ experiences and responses to the world at large.

To begin with, the very choice of themes such as madness, abortion, menstruation, abdominal surgery, electra complex reveals the assertion of the poet’s identity as a woman who cannot obviously obliterate her unique feminine experiences to jump into the bandwagon of the patriarchal literary world claiming to be androgynous. Sexton seems to underscore her femininity, from which source her inspiration springs. Thus there is tension in her poetry between gendered and transcended beings as a poet. As K. Meera Bai writes: “The refusal to be crushed, the attempt to fight and voice protest is the core of feminism” (135). Many critics with their carping tongue tried to hinder her from dealing with such unconventional themes, yet Sexton continued to write and thereby refused to fall in line with the existing poetic conventions. Yet, one does not see Sexton fighting or protesting against the patriarchal world openly, and her chief intention seems to be a clinical examination of events and situation of her life subjectively.
Annamma Joseph writes:

A woman’s self exploration leads to the discovery that she is the product of a culture in the making of which or in its making of her she has had no part. Her true identity is smothered by the patriarchal culture through assigning her experience to the margins of existence. To salvage the self, to find out who she is and what she has lost, it becomes imperative that she should redeem and reinstate her experience as a woman, within which alone she can acquire autonomy over her being (Feminism and the Modern American Poetry 11).

To write about the innermost feelings and experiences, therefore, becomes the forte of women confessional poets such as Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia. “The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface” (Foucault 6). In other words, the woman confessional poet uses the craft of poetry to unfold the facts of her life and in the process attempts to revitalize the self.

Any literary composition is a fusion of thought and craft and a confessional poem is no exception. In one of her letters, Anne Sexton states that “the difference between confession and poetry, is after all, art” (Letters 44). While there are several letters, interviews and biography of the American confessional poet, Anne Sexton, which bring forth her views about poetry and details about her life, unfortunately there is hardly any detailed account of life or views about art in case of the Indian confessional poet, Mamta Kalia. This proves how the publishing industry in India is culturally different from that in America. In
the Western tradition, publication of memoirs, letters and other intensely personal documents is a tradition in itself. In India, though there is a tradition of autobiographical writing, this is confined to personalities who have been politically and socially active. This is because Indian culture has been a culture of self-effacement, which pushes the individual to the background. The most significant exception to this statement is Kamala Das, whose memoir has been published foregrounding deeply personal experiences. But this tradition has not been continued. Therefore, it is impossible to undertake a study of Mamta Kalia on the basis of biographical details.

Though Sexton’s poetry was subjected to severe scrutiny by the patriarchal literary world, still she had the cultural space to at least voice out what she truly believed in as an individual and as a poet. On the contrary, the Indian literary scene hardly encouraged a woman writer to have her own way at least in the 1960s and 1970s and the scenario has not changed much as Joel Kuorrti remarks in his bibliography of *Indian Women’s Writing in English* published in 2002: “As my data shows it is however undeniable that women writers have for too long been neglected and kept out of the publishing world, the academia and the market” (xiii). As it has been discussed in the fourth section of the opening chapter of the dissertation which deals with the Indian confessional poetry, the rigid patriarchal society always views a woman writer with suspicion. And the woman writer invites more challenges, if she is going to be a confessional poet who talks about her “inner mind”. Kamala Das has been viewed as a thorough confessional poet and one who has been compared with the American Confessional Sylvia Plath, whose poems are read, in Kamala Das’ view, to merely know what she is doing with her life. This hateful nosiness is admonished by Kamala Das in
an interview to *Vanitha*, the well-known women’s magazine in Malayalam, “I would have continued to write poetry if I were to live in New York… Each poem is like a love-letter” (qtd in *The Poetry of Kamala Das* 137). This confession of Kamala Das’ reiterates the fact that a woman poet in India can hardly write anything openly. This may be the primary reason why Mamta Kalia has not revealed details of her private life as openly as Kamala Das or Anne Sexton have, and this is again the reason why she has not shared much of her thoughts about poetry too. Had she expressed herself blatantly she would have jeopardized her position both as a writer and as a wife.

The two confessional writers Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia share a lot of similarities. Though there are obvious commonalities in themes such as fatherhood, motherhood, love, marriage, and the self, in their handling of these themes the two writers differ critically. Diana Hume George writes, “The ‘normal’ woman in Western Society whether or not she is a poet, and whether or not she is fully aware of the psychic dynamics, falls in love with the father, who delights her, despises her seduces her, betrays her and dies” (*Oedipus Anne* 25). In the case of Mamta Kalia, there is no obvious exploration of the Electra Complex, though she too problematizes her relationship with her father. While Anne Sexton is driven by psycho-sexual concerns, Mamta Kalia is driven by social concerns, such as androcentrism and middle class morality.

In the series called “The Death of the Father” Anne Sexton talks about her ambivalent relationship with her father. In the poem “The Moss of his Skin” both the father and the daughter share a single grave.
It was only important

to smile and hold still

to lie down beside him

to rest awhile

to be folded up together

as if we were silk,

to sink from the eyes of mother

and not to talk \( \text{(1-8)} \)

Sexton here presents the reader with a girl willingly buried alive with her father, as a final
ebrace, which she wants to hide from mother, sisters and even her God, “that Allah will not
see / how I hold my daddy / like an old stone tree”. Sexton shows the dependence of the
daughters upon their fathers in these lines. Even the death of childhood and the emergence of
womanhood occur in the presence of the father as revealed in the poem “Oysters”:

Oysters we ate,

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

Then I laughed and then we laughed

and let me take note-

there was a death,

the death of childhood,

there at the Union Oyster House

for I was fifteen
and eating oysters
and the child was defeated.
The woman won

The poem “How We Danced” also continues with the same theme of incestuous relation:

You danced with me never saying a word
Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.
The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me.
Like a great god and we bent together
Like two lonely swan.

While Sexton is obsessed with a strange love and passion for her father, she realizes at one point that his relationship is prison-like, for he prevents her from looking beyond him. For instance in “Briar Rose” she gives vent to her fear:

Each night I am nailed into place
and I forget who I am.
Daddy?
That’s another kind of prison.
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 jelly fish.
What voyage this little girl?
This coming out of prison?
God help -
this life after death? (149-163)

In the poem “Cripples and other stories” she compares her father’s love to a crib:

Father I’m thirty-six,
Yet I lie here in your crib.
I’m getting born again, Adam,
as you prod me with you rib. (77-80)

Sexton acknowledges her father’s death in the title poem “All My Pretty Ones” of her second volume of poems *All My Pretty Ones*:

Father, this year’s jinx rides us apart
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;
a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,
leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber (1-4)
The unique love-hate relationship that exists between the father and the daughter is explored not only by Anne Sexton, but also by her fellow confessional poet Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath, who lost her father at the young age of nine, could hardly come to terms with her life without her father. In her poem “Daddy”, written in October 1962, Plath openly acknowledges her obsession with the dead father. The poem could be viewed as a tale of exorcism of the demon-father. Thus, these poems of the American women confessional poets present that the daughter-father relationship as a source of conflict because of the poet’s ambivalent sexual attitudes. “We could almost feel” says Phillips, “that a Father complex and the willingness to write openly about it is a necessary criterion for becoming a confessional poet” (xii).

While Sexton’s relationship with her father is one which is a medley of love, incest and hate, Kalia’s is a mixture of love and hate. In her poem “Tribute to Papa” Kalia confesses her dislike for her father. His simplicity, rigidity, piety and contented nature irk her as she finds these qualities of her father actually camouflaging his stupidity and cowardice. This comment about her father actually unsettles the reader for one views this as a bold attempt to tear away the mask of not just Kalia’s father but of many Indian fathers too.

The opening lines, “Who cares for you, Papa?/who cares for your clean thought, clean words and clean teeth?” clearly bring out the contempt of the poet for her father. It also jolts the Indian reader for, as per Indian tradition, the father plays a pivotal, lead role in the family. He is not only the primary bread winner but also the decision maker with regard to every single happening in the family. Thus, he is a symbol of authority and one dares not provoke him at all. But here is Mamta Kalia, the daughter who dares to challenge his sovereignty.
After giving “two donkey-claps” for his greatness, she expresses her desire to “disown” him as her father as there is no commonality between the two. The twist in the poem happens towards the end when she says,

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? (30-35)

However, she ends up tamely succumbing to sociological pressures when she confesses,

But I’ll be careful, Papa,

Or I know you’ll at once think of suicide. (36-37)

Mamta Kalia, here, paints the behavioural pattern of an Indian father who would rather commit suicide than see his daughter conceive unconventionally. Of course, Mamta Kalia, at the same time, does not want to bring about the death of the father, not because of any feelings of tenderness but because of the fear of social ostracism. The word “tribute” in the title of the poem “Tribute to Papa” is, therefore, ironic, since the seeming tribute is really a tirade, which ends in a tame acceptance of the status quo. The poem, then, begins with a bang and ends in a whimper, because the Indian confessional poet ultimately surrenders to the forces of the society.
Among familial relationships the one relationship that a woman cherishes is her bond with the father. “It is a love-hate relationship as father is symbol of both protection and security on one hand, and male dominance on the other” (Bajaj 68-69). The father figure has haunted many Indian women writers such as Kamala Das, Sunita Jain, Gauri Deshpande and Lakshmi Kannan. For example, Kamala Das’ “A Requiem for My Father” is a monument of filial affection. She declares:

I loved you father, I loved you all my life. (74)

The poem combines inconsolable grief with elegiac sobriety. The poet believes that he is a strong man as he has withstood medical tortures and several cruelties that precede death:

They bled you to test your blood
When you lay insensate and stiff
They did the lumbar puncture
Folding you like a canvas chair
Yet you did not once protest (58-62)

The death of the father emboldens the poet to defy death and in “I shall not Forget”, the poet recalls how she watched her father die. Since then, the “long-clawed birds of death” have stayed with her: “I have seen death / And I shall not forget” (qtd in The Poetry of Kamala Das 62).

Thus, while the American women confessional poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath show a leaning towards Electra Complex with regard to father-daughter relationship,
the Indian confessional poets hardly reveal any traces of such a psychological condition. When Anne Sexton talks about her father there is not just love and hate, but also a veiled reference to incest whereas Mamta Kalia’s ties with her father is free from such incest and she only touches upon love-hate relationship with her father. Yet, beyond all these differences between these poets, there prevails a sort of love chord which binds them with their fathers and it only shows the nature of the strong influence that fathers generally have over their daughters.

The confessional woman poets’ relationship with her mother is ambiguous as it is interplay of love and fear. These writers, generally, love their respective mothers, but at the same time they are haunted by the fear of becoming like their mothers. An unending chain from generation to generation shows the same story of women, who find themselves playing the same kind of roles as their mothers did. In “Double Image” of Anne Sexton, the pictures of mother and daughter face each other which allow the daughter to see in her mother her own image:

…. my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image …
And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself as if she were petrified
in time…. (167-180)

Diana Hume George observes that
...when she calls her mother her mocking mirror... she speaks for all of us woman born and ... when she says to her daughter, “Everything in your body that is new is telling the truth”, she may be transcribing what she said to her daughter; she is also expressing for the collective mothers of her readership what we all want to be saying to our daughters, what we sometimes have not the courage or the attentiveness to say (xii).

The conflict between the mother and the daughter is foregrounded in many of her poems, and at the same time she also highlights the futile attempt to get away from the clutches of the mother.

In “Christmas Eve”, Anne Sexton speaks of her mother as follows:

I saw you as you were.

Then I thought of your body

as one thinks of murder…

Then I said Mary -

Mary, Mary, forgive me. (45-49)

Here, Sexton moves beyond matrophobia as she goes to the extent of contemplating matricide. But then she soon realizes the sinful nature of her thought and there is reconciliation between the mother and daughter, at least apparently.

Sexton’s mother’s cancer fills her with fear and guilt. She feels that she is the cause for her mother’s cancer. The mother’s cancer is “evil”, and by implication, the daughter who
also “grew” in her mother is evil as well. The fetus-daughter shares a common origin with the evil, cancer, thereby sharing responsibility for the mother’s death:

It grew in her
as simply as a child would grow,
as simply as she housed me once, fat and female.
Always my most gentle house before that embryo
of evil spread in her shelter and she grew frail.

(“The Operation” 10-14)

The poem “Rapunzel”, from her memorable collection *Transformations*, actually deals with a very different story of mother-daughter relationship as she proclaims that, “A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young” (1-3). As young girls are exploited by old men, here the old witch hides her young beautiful daughter in a tower, and the love relationship between the two women is described as follows:

We are two birds
Washing in the same mirror
We were fair game
but we kept out of the cesspool
We are the strong.
We are the good ones. …
…
They play mother-me-do
In her display of love that exists between the mother and the daughter, Anne Sexton resembles Adrienne Rich who, in her “Sibling Mysteries” says, “the daughters were to begin with / brides of the mother” (The Dream of Common Language 52).

The initial liking for the mother soon develops into a strong dislike for her, as in “Red Shoes”, where Anne Sexton brings the image of shoes to tell the story of generation after generation of getting entrapped.

I tie on the red shoes
They are not mine
They are my mothers’
Her mother’s before.
Handed like an heirloom
but hidden like shameful letters. (10-15)

An unending chain from generation to generation shows the same story of women, who find themselves playing the same kind of role as their mothers’ and grandmothers’. Sylvia Plath too talks about her mother in the poem “The Disquieting Muses” (The Colossus and Other Poems 58-59) wherein she records “the familiar you-don’t-understand-me theme of nearly every child to a parent, of nearly every daughter to a mother” (Anne Sexton 53).

Mother, who made to order stories
of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always
Get backed into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head. (9-16)

Thus the mother plays a crucial role in Sexton’s life to the extent that the poet’s relationship with her mother is one of the themes of her poetry. An added dimension to this theme is the concern that it has affected her relationship with her children as a mother. The anxiety to be a perfect mother results in a guilt which stayed with her till the end of her life.

Mamta Kalia, too, in her reference to her mother in the poem “Brat”, shows how when she was born, the mother hardly felt any delight or pride in her creativity. Mamta Kalia, the daughter, assumes that her mother’s only relief must have been that she looked like her father and not like the neighbour.

You, perhaps, were hardly proud
Of your creativity –
Except for the comfort
That I looked like Papa
And not like the neighbour
Who shared our bathroom (7-12)
Here, Mamta Kalia debunks the concept of motherhood. The poet subtly reveals that Indian mothers rarely find happiness at the birth of a female baby and from the biography we understand that Mamta Kalia happens to be the second girl child of her parents. Therefore, the mother is definitely not thrilled about her baby girl. Kalia records the tensions associated with the birth of a girl child in the family.

Several Indian women poets have also talked about their mothers. Kamala Das’ “My Mother at Sixty Six” is a poem of fourteen lines, which describes the poets’ awareness of her mother’s debilitating old age.

….. her face ashen like that
Of a corpse and realized with pain
That she was old as she looked… (4-6)

The agony that she experiences is a token of love for her mother and yet one suspects her true affections when she says,

… you have lived
In a dream world all your life, it’s time to
wake up, Mother
You are no longer so young, you know. (8-11)
The relationship with the mother is not a pleasant one in the case of de Souza who cries in the poem “Forgive Me, Mother” (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets* 118):

> In dreams
> I hack you (11-12)

Sunita Jain also finds fault with her mother for not allowing her to have her own way and yet she discloses her desire not to hate her as she says in the poem “Mother” (Jain 81), “I have tried not to curse you” (9). Unlike in the handling of the theme of the father-daughter relationship – where there is a discernible difference between Sexton and Kalia – they are more or less alike in their attitude towards motherhood.

The confessional woman poet’s assault on patriarchy does not stop with her father but is extended to her relationship with the husband. The two prominent themes that have been dealt with by several traditional and modern poets seem to have influenced both Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia. Anne Sexton finds her husband more an object of fear and hate than of love. Her poem “Walking Alone” subsumes these emotions of hate and fear:

> husband, husband,
> I lust for your smile,
> ... and your chin, ever Nazi, ever stubborn
> ... I love you the way the oboe plays.
> I love you the way skinny dipping makes a body feel.
I love you the way a ripe artichoke tastes
Yet I fear you,
as one in the desert fears the sun (7-23)

Anne Sexton’s yearning to see her husband smile illustrates his stiffness as he also exemplifies Nazi-stubbornness. The repetition of “I love you” only shows her desperate attempts to love him despite his shortcomings. The final imagery of the desert announces the death of all her love as it signals the end of love-relationship that exists between husband and wife. A poor substitute for love happens to be “fear” in the case of the poet and one can easily imagine the plight of a traveler in the midst of the desert and the blazing hot sun. It is definitely not an enjoyable experience and so is Anne Sexton’s relationship with her husband. In the words of A.R. Jones, “the relationship between the inner and outer worlds is fractured, the outer world holding up a mirror in which the inner world can see its distorted self” (22). Sexton’s use of the analogy of the desert exemplifies the notion of Jones for the outer world, the desert, helps her capture the inner hatred she has for her husband. The desert is no objective correlative to her but a ‘distorting subjective correlative,’ which effectively parodies the ideals of husband-wife relationship.

In another poem “Live or Die,” Anne Sexton shows the woman’s helplessness where she waits, meaninglessly and without hope, for her husband to love her. But she has the painful realization that they both have become strangers to each other.

We are not lovers.
We do not know each other.
We look alike

but we have nothing to say.

...

A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier

because they share the same dirt

and the same blows.  

Life is looked upon as a battle field and the soldiers here are the husband and the wife. They share the same roof and, therefore, they are not enemies. Yet, there is a painful, ugly commonality between the two for “they share the same dirt and the same blows”. Both the husband and the wife realize at the end of the day that they are not made for each other and still they continue to live together. As a result, their marital life is devoid of love and the irony is that they fully know this “dirt” but they pretend to be “man” and “wife” in the eyes of the society.

However, Anne Sexton does not fail to bring out the cruelty of the husband figure openly. In the poem “The Wifebeater” she talks about the way the husband beats his wife and daughter:

There will be mud on the carpet tonight

and blood in the gravy as well.

...

Tonight all the red dogs lie down in fear

and the wife and daughter knit into each other
Until they are killed. (1-29)

The maladjustment with the husband, because of his cruel behavior, fills the poet’s mind with disgust. In “Again and Again and Again” her anger breaks out with annihilating force:

Oh the blackness is murderous

…

and I will kiss you when
I cut up one dozen new men
and you will die somewhat
Again and again (15-21)

Anne Sexton’s husband had a touring job and as a result Sexton had to deal with the pressures of loneliness. This loneliness is all the more distressing because even moments of physical intimacy are marred by thoughts of impending physical separation and present emotional vacuity. This finds expression in her poem “Traveler’s Wife” (Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters 25):

Although I lie pressed close to your warm side,
I knew you find me vacant and preoccupied.
...
But instead I have a cup of pain to drink,
or I might weed out an old pain to think.
Perhaps old wounds have an easy sorrow,
easier than knowing you leave me tomorrow… (1-10)

This meaningless marital existence forces Sexton to seek divorce. As Annamma Joseph writes: “As the father daughter relationship is a metaphor for the research for the masculine forces within society in her effort to reach self-realization, divorce is a metaphor for the shedding off of the masculine influence completely, prior to her achieving total independence” (81).

Sexton presents her horror and despair in *The Divorce Papers*. In “The Wedding Ring Dance”, a poem from *The Divorce Papers*, she expresses her hatred for the husband, now divorced:

I dance in circles holding
the moth of the marriage,
thin, sticky, fluttering
its skirts, its webs.
The moth oozing a tear,
Or is it a drop of urine?
The moth grinning like a pear,
Or is it teeth
Clamping the iron maiden shut?
The moth,
Who is my mother,
Who is my father,

Who was my lover… (1-13)

Poems such as “Where it was at Back Then”, “The Wedlock”, “Landscape Winter”, “Despair”, “Killing the Love”, “The Break Away”, “The Love Plant” are also written by Sexton to probe into the conflict that prevails between the man and the woman in the context of a love relationship.

The women confessional poets do not only talk about love between the husband and the wife, but also discuss how marriage has forced them to undergo domesticity which they hate. Betty Friedan described the housewife as the epitome of female non-identity and passivity, and is convinced that the very condition of being a housewife has a progressively dehumanizing effect on women. “I am convinced”, Friedan writes, “there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who ‘adjust’ as housewives … are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps” (264-265). Friedan further argues that

housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. Sexual love and motherhood had to become all of life, had to use up, to dispose of women’s creative energies. As this began to happen, each labour-saving appliance brought a labour-demanding elaboration of housework. Each scientific advance that might have freed women from the drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and washing, thereby giving her more time for other purposes, instead imposed new drudgery, until house work not only expanded to fill the time available, but could hardly be done in the available time (240-241).
Indeed, the 1950’s marked a new phase in women’s domestic destiny. “Doctors had even diagnosed a syndrome called “housewife’s fatigue”, requiring treatment with tranquilizers. Robert Lowell called the decade “the tranquillized fifties” ” (Showalter 391). Sylvia Plath also talks about the tedious nature of her domestic responsibilities. In one of her letters she states, “a poem a day before breakfast…. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (Letters Home 466). A Alvarez observes, “Sylvia seemed effaced, the poet taking a back seat to the young mother and housewife” (The Savage God 6). Plath’s poem “The Applicant” (The Colossus and Other Poems 221-222) describes the dehumanization of women involved in marriage. The bride is described as:

A living doll, everywhere you look
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. (33-35)

Plath’s rage turns against the whole society as her poem “Purdah” (The Colossus and Other Poems 244) witnesses a similar expression moving from suffering to rage:

I shall unloose
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart ………
The lioness,
The shrink in the bath,
The cloak of holes. (52-57)
Anne Sexton probes the problems of the wife in her poem “Housewife”. The opening line “Some women marry houses” says it all. In the words of Elaine Showalter “The woman was the wife of the house, wedded to it, bound to it. Caring for it was like the obsessive cleansing, purification, and care of her own female body scrubbing away its dirt and impurity its sign of sexuality and procreation” (A Jury of Her Peers 392). The woman is not able to escape the suffocation caused by domesticity as “It’s another kind of skin” (“Housewife” 2) Anne Sexton also reiterates the fact that the model of a woman happens to be her mother and that she unconsciously follows her mother follows her mother’s footsteps.

The tiresome nature of domesticity is highlighted not only by confessional women poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but even black women poets, such as Maya Angelou, have dealt with it. In fact, Maya Angelou’s poem “Woman Work” (New Vistas 15) lists out the innumerable tasks she has to perform everyday:

I’ve got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I’ve got shirts to press
The tots to dress
The can to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick       (1-14)

This shows how a woman who has artistic insights and aspirations allows herself to be stifled by the role of housewife without any protest.

Mamta Kalia has chosen the marital milieu to explore the relationship between man and woman. Again it is not a very optimistic picture of love and marriage that she captures in her poetry. For, the poem, “Sheer Good Luck”, shows that her relationship with her husband is prosaic and frustrating to the extent that she fails to acknowledge “marriage” as a significant event in her life:

But nothing ever happened to me
except two children
and two miscarriages       (15-17)

The poem, “New Deal”, pleads for starting life afresh burying the hatchet once and for ever evolving “new contexts with new references”. The persona intends to strike a compromise by following the policy of “let bygones be bygones”.

Let’s together forget our horrors-in law
Your “never-enough” salary
my “never-enough” needs…
In short, let’s forget
the proverbial thorn
and smell the proverbial rose. (9-16)

The marital concord is an illusion that they painstakingly create in order to make the reality bearable. The poem foregrounds the pathetic schism between illusion and reality.

A common-place description of what happens at home between the couple is found in the poem “Dubious Lovers”:

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 every time 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)
Mamta Kalia ruthlessly points out that their life together is no material for a romantic epic but only for a limerick. The reference to “end” and “beginning” bring together aspects of time and space, both of which seem to be stagnant causing their relationship to fester.

Mamta Kalia also highlights the impact of the man on the woman that even when the wife is away from her husband she is unable to operate on her own. This is comparable to Sexton’s poem “The Traveller’s Wife”. Kalia is so used to the loss of individual identity within marriage, that she finds herself “a corollary,” which has no existence of its own but can only follow a theory which is substantial. She is so used to her secondary, dependent role that she almost accepts it as second nature:

I followed you like a corollary
Now I am away from you,
missing my handcuffs,
feeling stupid
On this long unpromising Sunday (44-48)

The use of the term “handcuff” is significant as it reminds one of prison. The poet conveys the idea that the woman is imprisoned in the guise of marriage and that she can hardly escape from the boredom and monotony offered by marriage.

While the poem “Love Cure” talks about how “nothing changed nothing”, it also poignantly states that “Nothing broke the prison-gates within which (she) stood”. So she writes:
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)

Mamta Kalia, here, rejects the social institution of marriage outrightly. She also de-romanticizes it.

The problems of a homemaker discussed by Anne Sexton are also the preoccupations of Mamta Kalia. She is unsparing in her vehement criticism of her husband’s callous indifference to her accomplishments and sacrifices:

Love made a housewife out of me.
I came with a degree in Textile designing,
Skill in debates, dramatics and games
…
You don’t realize
You don’t sympathise.

(“Love made a Housewife out of me” 1-30)

One finds a similar portrayal of the dwarfing of the woman into a mere homemaker in “You Planned to Tame a swallow” by Kamala Das too:

… You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (12-17)

The end of the poem “Matrimonial Bliss” is typically Mamta Kalia in its bitter sarcasm. All that a woman can call her own in a marriage are her illnesses and she resents any intrusion that will take away even these elements which give her identity:

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. (30-33)

In “After Eight Years of Marriage”, Kalia recalls how her parents inquired of her married life at the in-laws when she visited them for the first time after marriage. She felt that the query - “Are you happy, tell us” was most naive, as it is “an absurd question” to be addressed to a married woman in Indian society, where docility and pliancy define her existence. She concludes saying:

So I swallowed everything.
And smiled a smile of great content. (22-23)
In the Indian Society, marriage means not just building up a relationship with the husband but involves marrying, as it were, a whole family. The emotional adjustments a bride is obliged to undergo in a joint family are terribly disturbing:

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 (5-10)

In her poem “My Hair Held a Fragrance Once” Mamta Kalia says:

My hair held a fragrance once -
A fragrance you associated with so many flowers

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

Now when I lower my head
You only see dandruff and grey hair. (1-6)

Thus Mamta Kalia, in her several poems, exposes the hypocrisy involved in matrimony. She foregrounds in her poetry the plight of a married woman and the unacknowledged agony and emptiness experienced by her. Yet, despite the death of love and affection, what surprises her is she still awaits her husband’s arrival anxiously despite her feeling “all disjointed inside”.

But the moment I hear your footsteps
I put all of me together
And give you my best smile …

(“Matrimonial Bliss” 18-20)

Kamala Das, too, concentrates on the idea of pretence involved in man-woman relationship. It is idealized as the most genuine, honest and open of relationships but unfortunately; it turns out to be a kind of drama enacted by both the husband and the wife. It does not take much for the disillusioned poet to realize, like Nora of A Doll’s House, that she will have to leave one day the man and the world she is tired of:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust

(“You Planned to Tame a Swallow” 8-11)

Marriage has always imposed more stringent rules and regulations on women. As a consequence, we find women giving vent to their agony in their poetry and there seems to be no difference whether she belongs to America or India, as exemplified by the poetry of Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia.

Anne Sexton also talks about her relationship with the children in her poetry. As Sexton’s hatred for her mother led her to guilt, in the same way her abandoning of her
children caused great disturbances in her later on. On July 21, 1953, Linda Gray was born; motherhood, to Sexton was overwhelming. “Anne had found child birth horrifying and later avoided even discussing it” (Anne Sexton). The tiresome job of caring for her baby depressed her and she finally ended up in the asylum. This is a well-known psychological condition called post-partum depression. Her frequent stints at the asylum prevented her from caring for her children, and left her with a feeling of guilt:

In “The Double Image” she writes:

I am thirty this November.

You are still small, in your fourth year.

We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,

Flapping flat and washed. And I remember

Mostly the three autumns you did not live here.

They said I’d never get you back again.

I tell you what you’ll never really know.

all the medical hypothesis

that explained my brain will never be as true as these

struck leaves letting go. (1-11)

Again and again Anne is reminded of her decision to die soon after the birth of her second child. When the child becomes ill, just months after her birth, she feels that same poem, “The day life made you well and whole /I pretended I was dead” (“The Double Image” 24-26). But many of her poems to her children show the unconditional love that she has for her
children despite her ill health. In fact, she shares her thoughts and feelings with her daughters through poetry:

What I would to say, Linda,

Is that these is nothing in your body that lies.

All that is new is telling the truth.

I’m here , that somebody else,

an old tree in the background.

(“Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” 88-92)

The following lines are addressed to her second daughter:

Today, my small child, Joyce,

Love your self’s self where it lives.

There is no special god to refer to; or if there is,

Why did I let you grow

in another place……

(“The Double Image” 34-38)

The guilt which she acquired from her negligence of motherly duties haunted her till the end of Sexton’s life. Her unfulfilled quest for a wholesome, unfractured self gives her the impetus to address her daughter, exhorting her to go beyond the constructed social, gendered, cultural self to find her individual self.
In “Three Women” (Winter Trees 50), Sylvia Plath documents her pregnancy experience, as a cause of isolation.

... It milks my life

... 

A power is growing on me, and old tenacity.

I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,

This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain

The air is thick. It is thick with this working

I am eyes are squeezed by this blackness.

I see nothing. (134-147)

In the same poem, she presents the despair of the mother’s world:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?

How long can I be

Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,

Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?

The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow

lap at my back ineluctably.

How shall I soften them, this little lullaby?

How long can I be a wall around my green property? (396-403)
Thus both the American women confessional poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath have discussed the responsibilities that go with motherhood which eventually leads to depression and loneliness.

In the case of Indian women poets, as Bajaj observes, “A very high premium is set on motherhood in India but we do not have corresponding filial love expressed in the poetry of … women poets” (68). In fact, we have an example in Anuradha Potkar’s “Motherhood”, an English translation of her Marathi poem. In this poem the narrator shows how she looks upon motherhood as a cramping responsibility. In this conflict between freedom and responsibility, she realizes that no matter how hard she might try to put it aside, it is ‘never going to leave’ her because it is an essential part of her.

Just once
I wanted to leave the garments of my motherhood
On the riverbank
Enter the bottomless waters of life
Just once
Like a small bird, spreading its wings toward the sky
I wanted to bathe in that clear blue
Just once. (1-8)

The realization of the speaker that motherhood is not a mere “garment” but “the skin”, actually says it all. The paradoxical nature of the act of motherhood is brought out by the poet when she says that it both nourished her and also has pushed her into the bottomless
pain. Hence the poet finally settles down with the decision to cling on to motherhood as it clings on to her. The woman is not afforded a cultural space to express a negative account of motherhood, as it has been sanctified and the authoritative version alone is allowed to retain currency. All other versions of motherhood are untenable. This is the position that the confessional poets in India challenge through their writing.

Mamta Kalia, like Anuradha Potkar, too, does not celebrate motherhood. Her poem “No, I’m no Pelican to my Sons” is an assertion of her refusal to fall in line with the conventional image of a mother as a all-sacrificing nourisher.

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

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby 618), Pelican is a large water-bird with a large bill under which hangs a pouch for storing food. Mamta Kalia, the mother of two sons, uses the imagery of the bird “pelican” to convey her refusal to cater to the physical and emotional needs of her children. She finds her role as a mother demanding and, therefore, the use of the strong, dramatic “No” right at the
beginning of the poem. She also adds that she is no “dove” to her love which means that she is not a tender, gentle, peaceful creature like the conventional lady-love.

In another poem “Sheer Good Luck” she says,

So many things
Could have happened to me
But nothing ever happened to me
except two children
and two miscarriages (1-5)

The fact that she considers the birth of two children as a mere inconsequential happening in her life describes her attitude towards motherhood. She sees nothing divine or sacred in becoming or being a mother. As in her other poem “I must Write Nicely Now” she records that “You can’t adjust with your own children.” What matters at the end of the day is reality and if one has to accept the bitter, unpleasant realities of life, one cannot afford to be romantic. And Mamta Kalia says that children are no exception.

The confessional poet primarily explores her “self” in her poetry. The “hurt” she has received from the man-made world does not allow her to easily think beyond herself. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar has pointed out that “the endless reiteration of such hurt, such cynicism, must sooner or later degenerated into a mannerism” (680). Tradition hardly allows an artist to map out his personal fears and anguish in the form of art. Hence, there in fear lurking in the mind of the woman confessional poet whether her poetry would be accepted or not. This fear
is ‘transferred’, in the Freudian sense, on to the persona she creates. While the persona she creates is unable to go beyond the limitations imposed by the patriarchal world, the very act of creating this persona enables the poet to question the values of such a world. It is one of the reasons why Anne Sexton talks about “this inward looking which society scorns”. Yet the confessional poet continues to tread the rarely chosen mode of poetry for she firmly believes that “one’s real world is not what is outside him. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end” (Das 109).

Anne Sexton in “Self in 1958” poses the query “What is reality?” and the entire poem tries to fetch an answer by analyzing the true state of her ‘self’.

I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel and close
Am I approximately an I. (2-6)

Sexton’s conviction that she is a mere “plaster doll” shows how she just exists as a decorative piece performing or acting as per the dictates of others. And in this process she has probably lost her “self”, that is, her identity. She continues to inquire,

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of ruin or fears? (31-35)

Reality is no more real for Anne Sexton as she is forbidden to reveal her true, real self. The doll is “plastic,” “synthetic” – an artificial self constructed in keeping with social and cultural norms. She loses her autonomy and her selfhood. Her self is dilapidated, laid waste; it has been mechanized with pent-up tension and fears below the surface. It is through her poetry that she probes below the surface to engage with “ruin or fears.”

In “Someone Else’s Song” Kamala Das also talks about the loss of selfhood through silencing, which she challenges by appropriating others’ “songs”: “I am a million, million silences / Strung like crystal beads / On to someone else’s / Song” (qtd in The Poetry of Kamalas Das 19).

When Mamta Kalia discusses her “self” as one which is devoid of identity she includes every married woman across the world undoubtedly. The poem “Anonymous” brings out the plight of the married women whose “self” has been completely eroded.

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 rag, I way,
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 Kamlal or Vimla
or Kantu or Shanta,
and feel happy,
I am no longer Mamta Kalia. 

The repeated use of the first-person pronoun “I” refers to Mamta Kalia herself and it is also ironic as the person who is devoid of identity and individuality is so particular in referring to her “self” constantly. The poet lists out the mundane domestic chores she undertakes which in reality have stifled the “life” in her. She seems to have lost life in the process of living. The stereotypical role that is enforced on her has resulted in the death of her individuality. Alliteration, which usually embodies consonance, here, becomes a marker of dissonance, as it is suggestive the enfeebling monotony and repetitiveness of her life.

Thus, the confessional poet is concerned with the revelations of the self, the joy, the suffering, the longing and the anguish of the self caught in the welter of existence. The
exploration into the self has been termed as narcissistic and the confessional poets have been held guilty of this obsession of the inner self. But as it has been pointed out “To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be death” (Gilbert 25). In their book *The Madwoman in the attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that “for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and her “self” (17). Playing the role of a conventional woman consumes her entire life, and in this process she ceases to live. In most case, women, unlike the phoenix, is unable to rise from her ashes. This is the reason why Mamta Kalia says that she is no longer Mamta Kalia or Anne Sexton wonders what reality is as she looks upon herself as a mere doll, devoid of life. Sashi Deshpande writes “Today … I believe that the female of the species has the same right to be born and survive and to fulfill herself and shape her life according to her needs…I believe that woman (and men as well) should not be strait-jacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them’” (qtd in *Feminine psyche* 133).

Both Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia have articulated their views regarding transmuting life into art, which is actually life unmasked. The commonality found in the themes in their poetry is interesting as they both regard art as a medium through which they can vent their feeling like anger, frustration and disappointment.

In the case of Anne Sexton, the act of writing was to be therapeutic as her psychiatrist believed. It allowed her to explore the dark recesses of her inner mind. She discusses her craft and vocation as a poet in several poems. Having admitted to the fact that her “business”
as a poet “is words”, she uses the analogy of a bee to refer to the words as they are the ones which give life to her otherwise dead thoughts.

My business is words, Words are like labels,  
Or coins, or better, like swarming bees.

(“Said the poet the Analyst” 1-2)

Anne Sexton looks upon herself as a witch who deals with strange things.

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night,  
dreaming evil….

(“Her kind” 1-3)

These lines have to be contrasted with the confession she makes in “Ambition Bird”:

I would like a simple life  
yet all night I am laying  
poems away in a long box.

It is my immortality box,  
my lay-away plan,  
my coffin  
All night dark wings  
Flopping in my heart.  
Each an ambition word.  

(10-18)
Creativity and its process have always intrigued poets and Anne Sexton is no exception. Though she would like to lead a normal woman’s life, words continue to haunt her even in her sleep. According to Sexton a woman who deals in words is considered to be a social outcast.

A woman like that is misunderstood
I have been her kind

(“Her kind” 13-14)

Shirley Jackson was one of her literary models; she had read that Jackson wrote “like a witch with broomstick dipped in blood”, and felt, “God damn it, that’s what I want to say about me” (Middlebrook 160). The concluding lines of the poem anticipates the gruesome death meted out not only to witches, but also to poets like Sexton who would like to identify with witches.

The title of one of her poems is “Black Art” which continues to look upon the act of writing poetry as witchcraft.

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and Islands
weren’t enough, as if mourners and gossips
and vegetable were never enough
She thinks she can warn the stars
A writer is essentially a spy
Dear love, I am that girl. (‘Black Art’ 1-8)

Poetry, which has been considered witchcraft, has been turned into a rite of exorcism to do away with this patriarchal construct. Anne Sexton finds actual solace and comfort in her craft and hence she is happy that at least the poetic muse keeps her company, wherever she is, whether it is day or night, home or asylum.

Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse. (20-22)

The poetic muse is the nurse who treats her insanity by nourishing the creative faculty in her, which in turn, aestheticizes her insanity and it is well-exemplified in her own words that the act of writing resulted in “rebirth of a sense of self, each time stripping away a dead self” (Plimpton 258).

Therefore, her heart is full of gratitude for the doctor who advised her that her God is in the typewriter and also to try her hand at writing.

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
When the pressures of the existing world had engulfed her, it was her physician who showed her the world of poetry where she could seek shelter. Yet the poetic world which ‘led her by hand’ and the one which is supposed to be therapeutic could not contain the urge to die for long. She confesses her realization of the failure of poetry to sustain her anymore in the poem “The Silence”.

I am zinging words out into the air
and they come back like squash balls.
Yet there is silence.
avways silence.
...
The silence is death
It comes each day... (23-29)

Despite her engagement with poetry, Death creeps in, in the form of silence. In fact, the articulation of her pain has not done much to heal her wounds, as the very same words which contain her agony hit her back as squash balls. The apt epigraph given by Anne Sexton to the poem only proves this: “The more I write, the more the silence seems to be eating away at me” (Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems 318).

“Was the witchcraft of poetry a survival tool or a death wish?” asks Elaine Showalter (433). If one were to answer this question, it might be said that the strange craft of poetry
became a tool of survival in the hands of Anne Sexton till she were to embrace death. In a 1965 letter to Charles Bowman, Sexton said, “Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem” (*The Art of Sylvia Plath* 175). The poem, a source of life, outlives the creator, in the context of the confessional writer conferring immortality upon her.

Mamta Kalia writes in her poem “I write”.

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

Kalia does not mince words when she talks about the spur called anger which is the prime instrument which forces her to write. She also makes it clear that poetry is a weapon in her hand as she is a weakling who cannot probably go beyond thoughts and words. She acknowledges her inability to act and, therefore, she would like to find a release for pent-up feelings in the form of poetry.

I my hour of discontent
I neither should rave nor rant
I simply fill ink in my pen
And spill it with intent
But now I’m fed up
Using my pen like a sword
Grating at best only verbal discord

(“In my hour of discontent” 1-10)

These lines again discuss the content of Mamta Kalia’s poetry which is nothing but “discontent”. But very soon the poet realizes that even her poetry does not change the state of affairs just like her “shouts” or “rants”. It should be noted that Mamta Kalia did not publish any more poetry in English after the publication of *Poems ’78*, her second volume of poetry.

In the poem “I must Write Nicely Now”, Mamta Kalia talks about her compulsion to write not about her nightmares but about her dreams. But then she is unable to dream as she only screams in her sleep.

Except yourself
You feel everything is fake (18-19)

The understanding of one’s world as a fake does not bring forth ordinary poetry but only bitter ones as the one she writes. Her poetry, therefore, can be viewed as a critique on life as she finds it or experiences it.

While both Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia have dealt with themes like love, marriage, motherhood, and their relationship with mother and father, in their own unique ways, there seems to be certain differences too, in the sense that themes like death and female physicality are completely absent in Mamta Kalia. These differences could be attributed to cultural differences. “The sociologist of literature finds an ally in the traductologist. To translate honorably means to be alert to the fact that the language of every poetic work
contains countless historical allusions and social conditionings. These factors become enormous when the semiotic system and the audience are changed” (277). This observation made by Claudio Guillen in the context of translation can be applied to poetry as well since every act of writing poetry is an act of translation, too – an act of translating the inner self into words.

Anne Sexton’s obsession with death and her eventual suicide have been already dealt with in detail in Chapter Two. And it is understood that it is her dissatisfaction with life which concluded in her unnatural death. In the case of Mamta Kalia, on the contrary, despite the terrible state of affairs she seems to continue to bear with the ebb and flow of life. Similarly, like Anne Sexton, Mamta Kalia also talks about marital life devoid of love but, unlike Anne Sexton, Mamta Kalia continues to live with her husband till date.

The other major difference between Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia is the theme of female physicality. Anne Sexton does not hesitate to talk about her feminine experiences such as menstruation and abortion, and she also refers to her bodily parts such as the uterus and the breasts in her poetry. Such references do not find a place in Mamta Kalia’s poetry. “Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which twenty years later, seems far less daring ... Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint” (Kumin xxxiv). The rigid social structure of India would not have tolerated Mamta Kalia if she had written about the taboo subjects. Even the discussion of sex openly by a woman poet is discouraged in India for when the Indian confessional poet
indulges in such descriptions, the response of her critics, as Kamala Das points out, is as follows:

> My poems had been read by several people. My articles on free love had titillated many. So I continued to get phone calls from men who wanted to propose to me. It was obvious to me that I had painted of myself a wrong image. I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy. A few of our acquaintances tried to touch me and made indiscreet suggestions. I was horrified. When I showed my disgust at their behaviour they became my bitterest critics and started to spread scandals about me (*My Story* 191-192).

This confession of an Indian confessional poet can be considered as the reason why Indian women writers, including confessional poets, hardly discuss taboo subjects in their works.

Similarly, while Anne Sexton is known for her preoccupation with death, Mamta Kalia does not seem to be haunted by death. In fact, Mamta Kalia seems to have a passion for life as revealed in her poem “Before Time Outlives Us”: “Before time outlives us / let us live life to the full” (1-2). This appreciation of life in Mamta Kalia, despite her disappointments and frustrations, is interesting. In this regard, she differs from Kamala Das too, for Kamala Das, at times reveals her longing for death: “Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but in natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements” (*My Story* 215). According to K.R. Ramachandran Nair, “It is the call of love that enables her (Kamala Das) to resist the temptations of death and suicide” (105).
Thus, cultural climate is one of the deciding factors which either allows a woman poet to choose her themes or curtails her choices. In the case of the women poets discussed in the dissertation, Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia, there are both complex commonalities and critical differences. And together they seem to have transcended the conventional theory of what art is. When the patriarchal world of scholars expected the woman writer also to be objective, these writers are primarily subjective for, after all, “confessional writing proceeded from the subjective experience of problems and contradictions that women experienced in their lives” (Joannou 107).

Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One’s Own* wryly comments on the impossibility of women creating masterpieces, because of the prevailing social conditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (50). She imaginatively recreates the fate of women writers throughout history. As Anne Finch, countess of Winchilsea, protested in her poem, “The Introduction” (*The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 168):

> Alas, a woman that attempts the pen,  
> Such an intruder on the rights of men,  
> such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,  
> The fault can by no virtue be redeemed. (9-12)

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were considered shamelessly forward or tragically insane if they attempted to take to writing as a profession. Aphra Behn, one of the first professional woman writers, had to face ostracism from society because she
dared to enter where angels feared to tread. The woman writer who did not apologize for her literary efforts was defined as mad and monstrous or sexually debased. Consequently, a woman who wanted to be a writer had to come to terms with the roles she had to play – which were often the extreme types of angel or monster which male authors generated for her. Before woman can write, she must kill the “Angel in the House”. In order to create, the woman writer had to first destroy the myths and images built around her.

Today’s woman writer has become the “Angel Beyond the House”. Yet, the struggle goes on for self-expression in a social milieu which still looks upon her with distrust. The emphasis on the selflessness of the Angel in the House had to be negated before a woman could write. The angel in the house had to be metaphorically killed before the woman writer could record the story of her own self-definition. And it is through this self-assertion that she can ultimately create a new literature.

This constant pressure upon a woman’s psyche in turn gives way to anger. Adrienne Rich looks upon anger as a potential creative force in women:

for women to dissemble anger has been a means of survival, and therefore we turn our anger inward. Women’s survival and self-respect have been so terribly independent upon male approval. I almost think that we have a history of centuries of women in depression: really angry women, who could have been using their anger creatively, as men have used their anger creatively (Adrienne Rich’s Poetry 111).

Although Anne Sexton made the following observation, “Plath had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. I’d always been afraid, ever in my life, to
express anger” (“Kevles Interview” 94), she has always tried to record her anger in a subtle manner. In a 1959 letter to Carolyn Kizer she writes:

My two children keep interrupting my chain of thought for a cookie, girl scout variety. I have two girls, age 5½ and 3½, and a good husband who is not the least a poet, and very much a businessman - but all in all a happy marriage in the suburbs. I have only been writing for a little over a year. But have really put energy into it and would be no one at all without my new tight little world of poet friends. I am kind of a secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs in my square house on a dull street (Letters 70-71).

Mamta Kalia also talks about the role of anger in her creative output as she confesses,

In my hour of discontent
I neither shout nor rant.
I simply fill ink in my pen
and spill it with intent

(“In my Hour of Discontent” 1-4)

The anger is the result of the difficulties involved in juggling between roles of mother, wife, cook, and housekeeper plus the additional responsibility to nurture her talent as a writer. The woman writer is not able to give up her traditional roles assigned by the world as “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf 73). In her urge to fulfill her responsibilities at home and give expression to her inner creative urge at the same time, she invites more trouble for herself and this eventually results in anger or ‘insanity,’ as society
perceives it. “The ‘problem that has no name’, which drove women in America to tranquilizers, alcohol, and psychiatrists was a sense of failure to live up to unattainable ideals” (Dowson 6). This observation cannot be limited to American writers as it can be extended to poets in other parts of the world too. Of course, owing to probably the cultural moorings, Mamta Kalia has not blatantly shown signs of rage as Anne Sexton, the American confessional poet does. But this does not prevent her from highlighting the feelings of insufficiency in her poems. In her essay on “Why women write as they do” Shalini Rawat observes that “while Mamta Kalia remains a detached spectator of her work, thus retaining her sanity, Plath internalized the anger and shame of not being a successful house wife and mother” (Spectrum 7). This difference between Mamta Kalia and Sylvia Plath as pointed out by Shalini can be extended to Mamta Kalia and Anne Sexton as it is the same ‘anger’ and ‘shame’ one finds in the poems of Anne Sexton also. Thus, beyond the aesthetics involved, these two confessionals have validated their personal experience through poetry and what matters is the way their poems draw attention to sensations which evade the strictures of language. According to Denise Levertov, “when a woman is writing something out of their own outer or inner experience it will bear the mark of ... their gender”. And she also adds “of course if you speak honestly for yourself, then you find that you have, as it turns out, spoken for others too” (Spears 117).

Thus the study of the predominant themes handled by the two chosen confessional women poets reveals their exploration of their feminine “self” through their creative “self”. Therefore, confessional poets cannot be co-opted into the category of feminist poets. Anne Sexton, as Caroline King Barnard observes, “did not consider herself a feminist” and to be
more specific she adds that “Anne Sexton was not a consciously feminist writer” (81). When Anne Sexton and her poet friend Maxine Kumin were asked by Elaine Showalter what difference would it have made if there had not been “a women’s movement,” Kumin replied “We would have felt a lot less secretive” and Sexton added “Yes, we would have felt legitimate” (*No Evil Star* 173). This response of Anne Sexton says it all that her poems do talk about femininity laced with her personal experiences. It is this approach which allows her art to be appreciated by the outside world despite her personal outpour of feelings. It is the same in the case with Mamta Kalia too. When even Western women poets were hesitant to speak back to the patriarchal world, then one can imagine the predicament of the Indian confessional poet like Mamta Kalia. The closed socio-cultural world prevents the writer from giving details of her personal life in her so-called confessional poetry. Surmounting all these stifling social and literary conditions, these two poets have emerged as “Angels Beyond the House”, though one, that is, Anne Sexton has paid a heavy price by embracing death, and the other poet, Mamta Kalia, has virtually stopped writing poetry in English. To conclude, these two women writers seem to exemplify the following observation of Kathleen Raine: “Writing poetry changes people, it is a means of self-discovery. We don’t create great art but at least we create ourselves” (138).