CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Confessionalist poetry, in both the traditions we have attempted a study seems to concern itself with an examination of the self. This examination is necessitated by the fact that the self is multilayered, conditioned by society, religion, culture and the millieu. As a result, only a deep probing of the poetic self can lead us to an understanding of how the self is constituted in the poet. Though there has been a quest for the self in other schools of poetry, such as Romanticism and Transcendentalism, there is a difference between these quests and the confessional quest. Other schools of poetry postulate the existence of an essential or Absolute Self that is untouched by institutional conditioning. Confessionalist poetry, on the contrary, does not accept this possibility as it attempts to uncover these layers only to reach the point aporia with the bewildering realization that the self always remains a construct.

The confessionalist mode has been accommodated both in the occidental and the oriental poetic traditions from very early times. The religious and mystical poetic traditions of both the East and the West, with subtle differences, however, have made the self the centre of poetic situs. In these traditions, the exploration of the self is taken up rather unconsciously to realize its infinitude. The possibility of experiencing wholeness and integration, which lies beyond the facade of disunity, is accepted and poetry is used as a medium to record the movement of the self towards this goal. Though Modernism looks back to this integrative
experience with nostalgia and holds it up as an ideal, it also resigns itself to the acceptance of the fact that such an integration is not possible any more. Confessional poetry, which came into its own during the Modernist times, responds to this condition by seeing the inner schism as an extension of external fragmentation. Interestingly, though the mode is based on modernist premises, it has postmodern implications: though the confessional poets do not lament the loss of integration, they accept it as a real condition and give expression to it in their poetry.

As we have said confessionalism has been a common aesthetic credo with poets of both the West and the East. However, the attitudes, techniques and poetic stances employed by the poets from these two traditions vary because of the difference in the social, cultural and literary contexts. Each individual poet while responding to the unique confessional tradition also brings to bear her individual response to the tradition, which is governed by the contexts of her individual experience. This is to say that while the confessional tradition provides points of convergence, the cultural traditions create points of divergence.

The poetry of Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia, were taken as primary material to prove the hypothesis that the differing social, cultural and literary contexts resulted in differences in their poetry. Beginning with a survey of their respective literary traditions, the dissertation moved through a thematic analysis of their poems to a brief comparative study which identified the commonalities and differences between them. The reason for the choice of the two poets lay again in a critical understanding of the tradition. While Sylvia Plath can be seen as the progenitor of the American women confessional poets, Kamala Das occupies a
similar position in the context of Indian English women poets. Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia are their worthy successors, who carried forward the tradition while also reinventing and reinvigorating it.

The first chapter of the dissertation sketched the American and Indian poetic traditions rather briefly in order to prepare the grounds for the argument that followed. It then went on to examine the concept of the self as it went through successive paradigmatic shifts in both traditions. In the context of the American tradition of poetry, the confessional self, the chapter argued, succeeded the Puritan and the Transcendental self.

The Puritan self was identified as being defined by moral and religious codes in the chapter. The individual self in its connection with the divine self was the concern of Puritan poetry, as it sought to trace the perfecting of the individual self in the divine self. A relentless inquisition of personal suffering was undertaken by the Puritans as a spiritual exercise to interpret and justify God’s design. Further, the individual destiny is considered to be inextricably intertwined with the communal destiny of the Puritans as each personal memoir is seen as a microcosmic representation of the Puritan community’s collective introspections. The Transcendental self, which succeeded, was spiritual in nature. The Transcendentalists posited a self that is beyond the binaries of this world and transcends all human faculties such as emotion, feeling, thought intellect and even intuition.

The chapter argued that confessional self, which was first explored by Robert Lowell, is not an inward metaphysical exploration but a relentless probing of the anguished and
suffering self. The anguish and suffering are felt at an intensely personal level and poetry that
dealt with this is seen as a substitute for psychotherapy.

Continuing the same methodology, the chapter went on to trace the trajectories of the
self in the Indian tradition. The chapter established the movement from the Romantic self
through the mystical self to the confessional self in Indian poetry in English. The early Indian
writers in English, influenced by British Romanticism, explored through their poetry the
infinite possibilities of the human self by positing a dichotomy between the mundane world
and the aesthetic world. A response to this is seen in the poetry of Tagore and Aurobindo,
who consciously foregrounded the mystical experience of the self. A brief transition stage
can be seen in the poetry of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy who explore a hybrid self, before
the ushering in of confessional poetry by Kamala Das. The chapter argued that while the
male poets sought to problematize national and linguistic identity, the female probed their
gender and personal identity.

Chapter II identified major themes in the poetry of Anne Sexton. Her own depression
and the long periods spent in mental asylums become the raw material for her poetry.
Madness and poetry, the chapter argued, are identified in her poetry, especially because of
her therapist’s advice to her to write poetry to deal with her frequent bouts of depression.
Anne Sexton explores relationships with reference to four types: filial, marital, maternal
(both between her mother and herself and between herself and her children). The chapter
argued that the relationship between the father and the daughter was the most
psychologically disturbing, since it is overcast by hints of incest. In the poems of Sexton, the
husband-wife relationship, the chapter argued, is seen as a concrete representation of androcentrism. The husband is a figure of authority and marriage itself is seen as a repressive institution in which the woman’s infinite variety is reduced to the housewife’s deadening monotony. The mother-daughter relationship, as handled by Anne Sexton, the chapter suggested, is characterized by a love-hate attitude. While the poet feels overpowered by the mother’s influence, she also sees herself as a threat to her mother’s very existence and also as her mother’s rival for her father’s love. Her relationship with her children, the chapter showed, was tinged with the guilt she was not available to them. In contrast to this guilt is the aggressive stance of considering motherhood as a burden.

The chapter connected the constant probing of the inner schismed self with obsessive thoughts about suicide and death. However, the chapter also established that death itself was the centre of her aesthetic system, as the death of the suffering self is the birth of the poetic self.

Chapter III undertook a parallel analysis of the thematic concerns embedded in Mamta Kalia’s poetry. This study revealed that though the themes of relationships and aesthetics are common to both poets, there is a conspicuous absence of a preoccupation with abnormal states of consciousness and with death. The father-daughter relationship is seen more in social terms than in psychological terms and the Electra Complex, a prominent presence in Sexton’s poetry, is not seen in Mamta Kalia’s poetry. The husband-wife relationship is equally restrictive and claustrophobic in Kalia’s poetry. The chapter also
examined the handling of the mother-child relationship in both its aspects, in Mamta Kalia’s poetry. Kalia looks at rage as the aesthetic impulse of her poetry.

Chapter IV attempted a comparative study of the two poets not to argue that poetry transcends cultural differences but to establish that it is rooted in the literature-cultural complex. The chapter attempted identifies the complex commonalities and critical differences between them. It accounted for the commonalities in terms of the confessional mode and for the differences in terms of their cultural moorings. It established that the incest motif so ubiquitous in Anne Sexton in the context of the father-daughter relationship is completely absent in Kalia’s poetry because social and cultural norms do not allow an expression of this. Similarly, the difference in their aesthetic principles was also seen as a concomitant of the social and cultural context. If Anne Sexton’s poetry is a means to deal with personal disturbances, Kalia’s is a poetry of rage. The poems that were taken up for detailed analysis in Chapters II and III were taken up again in the fourth chapter to establish the commonalities and differences between the poets.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Though a lot of critical material is available regarding confessional poetry, especially the American tradition, it still proves to be a fertile area of research. This dissertation had attempted to study not just the American tradition but also the Indian tradition. The work’s scope was determined by the comparative methodology, with reference to themes, chosen. However, if confessional poetry is approached through other literary theories, a number of research possibilities emerge.
A comparative study can also be undertaken from a postcolonial perspective and this would lead to the exploration of the appropriation of the Western confessional mode in the postcolonial context. Indian confessionalism itself can be traced in greater depth with reference to women poets in particular, beginning from the Bhakti poets such as Andal and Mirabai. A rigorous and thorough study of the tradition would help establish the Indian roots of the modern confessionalist mode beginning from Kamala Das. One more possibility would be an expanded, full-length study of the paradigm shifts in the conception of the self in poetry, briefly explored in the first chapter of this dissertation. This study would be especially a rewarding one as it would provide an alternative framework – moving away from a mere chronological framework – to understand the tradition of both American poetry and Indian Writing in English.