Chapter Six

Artists as Artisans

The poet's conscious activity focuses primarily on the form. The world liberally supplies the subject matter (stoff), while the meaning (Gehalt) arises spontaneously out of the fullness of his soul. The two meet unconsciously; and ultimately it is impossible to tell which is responsible for the result.

— Goethe.

The art of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das is inseparable from their inmost feelings and thoughts. Their poetry is the happy offspring of theme and form as they are both self-conscious artists who attach a great value to craftsmanship. Goethe's words prove to be true in regard to the poetry of Sexton and Das. In their chosen medium of literary art language serves as the vehicle for their ideas and most sincere feelings.

Both Sexton and Das consciously exercise their option in respect of the diction, style and imagery suited for their themes. This chapter analyses the techniques self-consciously employed in the poems with regard to their themes.

Sexton started writing as a highly methodical poet, paying heed to metrical and rhyme schemes and reworked on her manuscripts several times, a practice she learnt in the Poetry Workshop, taught by John Holmes, a professor of Literature at Tufts. It was at Dr.Orne's instance that Sexton enrolled herself in the Holmes Workshop. "You, Dr.Martin came directly
out of that experience, as did so many of the poems in her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The poem has six stanzas, out of which the first stanza has the rhyme scheme ‘abc abc a’, and the other five stanzas have the regular rhyme schemes “abc abc b”. To cite any one example,

You, Doctor Martin, walk
From breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
Where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk. (CP 3)

Sexton concentrates not only on the rhyme but also literally on the graphic lines of the poetic structure she creates, namely a picture of a ladder or a staircase for every ‘abc abc’ rhyme scheme: Further, she pays attention to syllable counts of each stanza. These early poems can be called her adolescent lyrics in rhyming iambic pentameter.

Sexton’s progress in Holme’s workshop in 1957 was meteoric. Every poem in the first volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* came under scrutiny during this period, as did many of the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*. Maxine Kumin, her friend cum fellow poet, recalls:
There was no more determined reviser than Sexton, who would willingly push a poem through twenty or more drafts. She had an unparalleled tenacity in those early days and only abandoned a “failed” poem with regret, if not downright anger, after dozens of attempts to make it come right. It was awesome the way she could arrive at our bimonthly sessions with three, four, even five new and complicated poems. She was never meek about it, but she did listen, and she did respect the counsel of others. She gave generous help to her colleagues, and she required, demanded, insisted on generous response”. (xxiv, xxv)

Sexton attended the John Holmes workshop for two years, and felt that she was ‘real’ there: “These are my people” (Middlebrook 50).

Sexton learned studying the tricks of making smooth, complex stanzas in 1957. Her early poems are short, often humorous or sentimental, with their rhythm and rhyme communicating her message. An example is “Traveller’s Wife” written on the aa bb cc scheme around the time that Sexton joined Holmes’s Poetry class:

Although I lie pressed close to your warm side,
I know you find me vacant and preoccupied.
If my thoughts could find one safe walled home
Then I would let them out to strut and roam.

I would, indeed pour me out for you to see,

a wanton soul, somehow delicate and free. (CP 48)

The poem closes effectively with a strong rhyme on an image of a wife’s pain on her husband’s departure: “You must not find, in quick surprise, / one startled ache within my vacant eyes” (48). The internal rhymes of “ache” with “vacant” and “quick”, of “find” and “my” with the end rhyme “surprise” and “eyes” show Sexton’s growing strength as an artist.

Sexton’s earliest poems in 1957 were about her therapy, directly and descriptively. The sheer act of writing took Sexton out of herself. Once she told Dr. Orne that a poetic image “can’t be determined – just appears – not willed. I suppose you would be surprised to know how little I understand my own poems” (Middlebrook 61). The reason is that writing used to put her into a state of trance, not quite different from that of her psychoanalytic treatment.

In poetry, Sexton found a true and proper home for her powers of invention. She came to understand that the symptoms of her mental illness were like metaphors, conveying meanings rich with personal life. Further, masking the technique of association in the class room, meant for her the use of figurative language as a mode of thought, a fact which she realized during her initial hospitalization:
I was thrilled ... to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well... someone! And then later, a while later, and quite a while I found out that Martin talked language ... I don’t know who else does. I don’t use it with everyone. No one of my whole street suburb neighbours ... . (CP 64)

Sexton thus came to understand that poetry is nothing but the art of language, expressed by the artist from an uncommon perspective:

It is the split self; it seems to me, that is mad woman. When writing you make a new reality and become whole. ... It is like lying on the analyst’s couch, reenacting a private terror, and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience. (64)

Though Sexton considered her suicidal depression as a form of ‘language’, she did not identify mental illness with creativity: “Not all language is poetry. Nor is all poetry language” (64). But the two were linked in her origins as a poet, as but for her suicide attempt, she would not have ended up as a depressed housewife, heavily medicated: “The surface cracked
when I was about twenty eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself. ... It was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine" (65).

One of the best poems in which Sexton registers her desire for the condition she frequently sought and rarely achieved during therapy sessions by falling into trances is "Music Swims Back to Me", which presents a daring representation of the perspective of a mad woman:

La la la, Oh music swims back to me
and I can feel the tune they played
the night they left me
in this private institution on a hill. (CP 6)

Some kind of a break down has exiled the persona to an asylum. "Which way is home?" - She steps further into madness. In the second stanza, when Sexton uses the violent imagery of "strangled cold" and "moon too bright, / forking through the bars to stick me / with a singing in the head", in her metaphors, the music is not simply a memory but a former identity that overtakes her.

Sexton’s biographers have noticed that poring over her rhyming dictionary, Sexton would work out elaborate sound patterns and rhyme schemes by hand and then, at her type-writer, fill them slowly to the brim with images, sentences, and phrases that finally turned into poems. Here is
an example of a manuscript of “The Operation, showing Sexton’s plan for
the poem on a page.

Sexton’s worksheets show that her earliest poems very often began
with a formal problem. She would type a phrase or line at the top of a page,
and from there would develop a path of end rhymes a means for her pools
of feelings. And feelings in turn would give birth to images, which had to
be then fitted into the boundaries set by the end rhymes and some
boundaries would give way, and finally this flow of images would turn into
a work of art. The poem “Some Foreign Letters”, for example, is written in
5 stanzas of 16 lines each, having the regular rhyme scheme- “aa bc bc de
de fg fg hh”. Under the influence of the poetry class, Sexton was gradually
shaping a preference for the dramatic lyric in place of the moody strains of
her earlier verses.

In many of her early poems, Sexton practised the regular rhyme
scheme. In “Her Kind”, she uses ‘ababcb’ pattern in the first stanza of the
poem, ‘ababac’ in the second stanza, and again ‘ababcb’ in the final
stanza.

Her poem “The Exorcists” has five stanzas of six lines each having
the regular rhyme scheme ‘abc abc’ and “Unknown Girl in the Maternity
Ward” has again five stanzas of eleven lines each, having a more regular
rhyme scheme ‘ab ab ab ab a’. Many more examples can be cited for Sexton’s use of regular rhyme scheme from her earlier poems.

Besides the poetry workshop conducted by John Holmes, Sexton also happened to attend several seminar classes conducted by Robert Lowell, where she learned how to analyse particular nuances and sound effects – “I am learning leaps and boundaries”

He taught me great. It was as easy as filling an empty vase.
After all, I didn’t know a damn thing about my poetry early. 2 years ago I had never heard of any poet but Edna St. Vincent... and now do know how to walk through lots of people’s poetry and pick and pick over. (Middlebrook 94)

It was in Lowell’s class that Sexton made the scheme of the early drafts of “The Double Image”, trying to achieve the effect of a spontaneous – sounding first person narrative within – the complex rhymed stanza, building up a dramatic narrative:

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of a mirror
placed on the south wall,
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all. (CP 38-39)

It was observed that Sexton spent over three months on writing this poem
of two hundred and forty lines.

George Starbuck, Sexton’s contemporary fellow poet has recalled
how Sexton made use of words:

I was, and Mas was, much more interested in tricks and word
play. Anne would pick up on that. She’d notice one of us
writing an acrostic, and she wrote may be four acrostic poems
addressed to other members of the group. I think one of them
stuck into one of her books. (Middlebrook 62)

The numerous worksheets of “For God While Sleeping” show
Sexton working out a double acrostic using Starbuck’s name. In one draft
the poem had thirty-one lines, the first letter and the last letter of each line,
spelled down the page, read “S T A R B U C K S L U S T I S NAUGHTY

Sylvia Plath was also a regular participant in Lowell’s writing
seminars at Boston University. Plath too considered Lowell’s Seminar as a
stimulus for a break though in her poetry, and regarded Lowell’s and
Sexton’s subject matter, such as mental breakdown, as “peculiar private and taboo subjects”, which influenced her most:

I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother; as a mother who’s had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting. (Middlebrook 105)

Lowell himself has appreciated Sexton for her extra ordinary power as a poet especially in her earlier poems, when he supplied a cover blurb for Bedlam:

Mrs. Sexton writes with the now enviable swift lyrical openness of a Romantic Poet. Yet in her content she is a realist and describes her very personal experience with an almost Russian accuracy and abundance. Her poems stick in my mind. I don’t see how they can fail to make the great stir they deserve to make. (Middlebrook 119)

Sexton composed her later poems in various experimental forms, often without any life, Sexton’s later works allude to mythology, fairy tales,
religious motifs, romantic love, motherhood, and relationship between the sexes.

In her second collection, All My Pretty Ones (1962), Sexton began to experiment with a less formal and more spontaneous approach to her themes. Her mastery over vivid imagery is seen in almost all her poems. Sexton herself has remarked, “I am the one who creates, not thinks … and if by mistake I should think – it is in symbols and metaphors ...” (Middlebrook 188).

In “The Operation”, Sexton presents her identification with her mother with an extraordinary imagery, combining surgical technologies and terror:

I plunge down the back stair
calling mother at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn.
Its nerves pull like wires
snapping from the leg to the rib.
Strangers, their faces rolling like hoops, require
my arm. I am lifted into my aluminum crib. (58)

Though the rhymes and the scenes of hospital routines provide some comic suggestions in this poem, they do not fail to intensify the cumulative pathos in it.
Sexton’s penchant for vivid imagery is evident in “With Mercy For the Greedy”, a vision of Christ’s martyrdom in which He is eaten alive by rats:

My friend, my friend, I was born doing reference work in sin, and born confessing it. This is what poems are: with mercy for the greedy, they are the tongue’s wrangle, the world’s pottage, the rat’s star. (63)

The imagery “rat’s star” is an important allusion to Sexton’s favorite ‘palindrome’, “rats live on no- evil star”. Her biographers have recorded that in 1958, possibly during her week with Soter, Sexton had produced an awkward little exercise titled, “An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love”, in which she tried for the first time to explain the significance to her of this bit of wordplay:

Busy, with an idea for a code, I write signals hurrying from left to right, or right to left, by obscene routes, for my own reasons; taking a word like “writes” down tiers of tries until its secret sites make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
can amazingly and funnily become STAR
and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out, to store
forever kindly, as if it were a star
I touched and a miracle I really wrote. (Middlebrook 124)

"Rat" was one of Sexton's metaphors for her sick self. In the religious poem "In Deep Museum", she has made rats the agents of Christ's death:

... I have forgiven murderers and whores and now I must wait like old Jonah not dead nor alive, stroking a clumsy animal. A rat. His teeth test me; he waits like a good cook, knowing his own ground. I forgive him that, as I forgive my Judas the money he took. (64)

In another poem, Sexton has used the very title using a palindrome, "Rats Live On No Evil Star", with the sub-title, "A palindrome seen on the side of a barn in Ireland". Here she uses the image of the "rat" to symbolize human race:

... Eve gave birth.
In this unnatural act
she gave birth to a rat.
It slid from her like a pearl.
It was ugly, of course,
but Eve did not know that
and when it died before its time
she placed its tiny body
on that piece of kindergarten called STAR
Now all us cursed ones falling out after
with our evil mouths and our worried eyes
die before our time
but do not go to some heaven, some hell
but are put on the RAT'S STAR
which is as wide as Asia
and as happy as a barbershop quartet. (360)

This word play, as Sexton calls it a 'miracle' occurs with the use of rhyme:
"words chosen for kind of likeness (sound) displayed other kinds once set
in place, expressing meanings more abundant than the poet intended"
(Middlebrook 124).

It is very difficult to single out any one poem for effective use of
imagery. For instance, in "The Fortress", a poem about a mother taking a
nap with her daughter, Sexton concocts imagery from what they can
observe from their window:
Outside, the bittersweet turns orange.
Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat branches, finding orange nipples on the gray wire strands.
We needed the forest, curing trees like cripples. (CP 67)

The poem “Flee On Your Donkey”, is a long, ambitious poem of 240 lines about the manner Sexton managed to channel some of her unconscious processes into artistic forms, almost a sort of new poetics of the unconscious. The persona complains how the doctor, “better than Christ”, has “promised me another world”. Yet despite many years of treatment, nothing has changed:

Years of hints
strung out – a serialized case history –
thirty-three years of the same dull incest
that sustained us both. (CP 100)

but the only change that has happened is that “disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it!” (103).

Such a self-discovery kindles a decision in her to “Turn, my hungers!”:

flee this sad hotel,
ride out on some hairy beast, ...
Ride out

any old way you please! (CP 104)

Otherwise she is sure to die in the hospital, still trapped in “the fool’s
disease” (105).

‘Illness’ is presented in the poem as entrapment in symptoms that
appear again and again: “I came back” is an important line. And ‘Wellness’
is the ‘muse / nurse’ the persona holds “in my hand”. The rhyme relates her
power with her femaleness and with her process of cure, and represents the
muse as the doctor’s assistant. In the poem, Sexton points to a ride on a
metaphor that combines Christ, riding to Jerusalem astride a donkey, with
Rimbaud, from whose coinage she adopted the title “Flee on Your
Donkey”.

The reference in the poem “my hand” has many meanings drawn
from Sexton’s therapy. She came to recognize that Nana’s “mild white”
hands had aroused sexual feeling she did not wish to accept, and her desire
to return to Nana was a most neurotic symptom, which she acted out in her
trance by asking Dr. Orne to be Nana, with herself holding his hand. To go
“without luggage or defenses” suggests that her hunger for Nana needs
gratification.

Sexton also identifies ‘hand’ with her mother Mary Gray, whose
strengths are what she herself hold on to, ie, the packs of cigarettes. Mary
Gray was a smoker, as was Dr. Orne. the ‘muse / nurse’ is also the ‘good mother’ who has survived in Sexton’s psyche by Dr. Orne’s encouragement of her creativity. On the other hand, “the hand”, is also identified by Sexton with punishment:

Hornets have been sent.
They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.
Hornets, dragging their then stingers,
hover outside, all knowing,
hissing: the hornet know.
I heard it as a child
but what was it that he meant? (CP 98)

Hornets and bees were Sexton’s symbols for “some terrible evil, some truth, that’s always around even when everything’s all right” (Middlebrook 178). A male image figures in the poem. Like her father when he was drunk and angry, the hornets too knew about Anne’s sensuality. She used to turn her bedside radio to “The Green Hornet” and “The Shadow”; the man inside the radio could see her masturbating. These lines foreshadow all the bad things “he” – God, Daddy, the analyst – can tell as he “hover(s) outside, all knowing.” Yet this omniscient figure is transformed in the course of the poem from a threat to a partner, as her “bachelor analyst” becomes a helpful and trustworthy one with whom she can burden herself:
I stared at (my dreams)
Concentrating on the abyss
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,
uncountable miles down,
my hands swinging down like hooks,
to pull drams up our of their cage.
O my hunger! My hunger! (CP 101)

Sexton’s technique in writing poems like “Flee On Your Donkey”
was to take “what my unconscious offers me”:

Writing is much more unconscious. Even though therapy
itself should be, should have a whole lot of unconscious stuff,
you’re aware of (your thoughts) – they become conscious.
Not all my poems become unconscious. Yet every book is an
attempt – or every poem is an attempt – to master those things
which aren’t quite mastered. For example, if I was talking
about a love affair: that was an ego, conscious meaning (i.e.,
subject matter). When I write without that vehicle, I don’t
have that conscious meaning, I have the unconscious going
everywhere. (Middlebrook 68)

Sexton was sure that it was the unconscious that had shaped her poem
and that there was also a method in the madness. In another poem, she
produced a circular story line that circles outward in a flight at the end:

"Turn my hunger! / For once make a deliberate decision. / ... Anne, Anne, / flee on your donkey ... ."

Another kind of consciousness (ego) was supplied by the end rhymes such as "X's and reflexes", "muse and mouse", "sent and meant", and the internal rhymes such as "inked -in" with "winked and", "donkey" with "car-keys", which occur at frequent but irregular intervals. Irregularity suggests that to the disordered senses, random things and sounds can seem comically alike. As Sexton herself comments rhyme "adds a sound effect, a clang in your mind" (Middlebrook 180). This disorderly clang of the rhymes is very much in tune with the theme of struggle for insight, that carries "Flee On Your Donkey" to its striking ending.

Every poem by Sexton is written in a metaphorical language, and it is quite difficult to separate the metaphors from her poems. Common similes too abound in her poems. In her poem "Elizabeth Gone", Elizabeth functions as Sexton herself at whose death, Sexton presents an elegy:

You lay in the nest of your real death,
Beyond the print of my nervous fingers
...
You lay in the crate of your last death,
But were not you, not finally you; ... (CP 8)
Sexton’s use of metaphorical language is so complex that one is hardly able to comprehend its meaning at its first reading. Sexton was quite used to pouring out her emotions, thoughts, feeling and passions, only through metaphors.

Perhaps, “Her Kind” is the best example for such a kind of metaphorical writing:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,

waved my nude arms at villages going by,

learning the last bright routes, survivor

where your flames still bite my thigh

and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

A woman like that is not ashamed to die.

I have been her kind”. (CP 16)

Sexton relates herself in this poem to the witch who haunts ‘the black air’, leaving her restless soul burning with a defiant spirit. Similar metaphorical leap is seen in “The Black Art” also where one makes a self analysis of her own paranoic self:

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 vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warn the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl. (CP 88)

Sexton’s “December 18th” is perhaps a fine example for her use of the metaphor:

Catch me. I’m your disease.
Please go slow all along the torso
drawing, beads and mouths and trees
and o’s, … (CP 220)

In several of her early poems, images of hospitalization, illness, asylum, fleshy ‘fruits’, ‘vegetables’, ‘plants’ and ‘flowers’, ‘birds’ and ‘animals’ are used widely. In a series entitled, “Bestiary U.S.A”, Sexton brings in a gallery of brutal species starting with ‘Bat’ and allots separate poems for eighteen different species of the fauna including birds, fish and insects, giving us the rationale behind such an attempt: “I look at the strangeness in them and the naturalness / they cannot help, in order to find some virtue in / the beast in me.” (CP 497).

Images of confinement and entrapment are employed widely in Sexton’s poetry. Images such ‘bait’, ‘locked’, ‘gate’, ‘cell’, ‘closet’, ‘prison’, and ‘knot’ occur in various places in her poetry. Images related to
‘death’ such as ‘coffin’ are also used widely. In “Letters To Dr. Y”, Sexton ironically relates ‘cradle’ with ‘death’: “Death, / I need a little cradle / to carry me out” (561).

Images of all the salient musical instruments such as the ‘piano’, the ‘flute’, the ‘siren’, the ‘bell’, the ‘drum’, find a place in a Sexton poem:

I have a dream-mother
who sings with her guitar,
nursing the bedroom
with moon light and beautiful olives.
A flute came too,
joining the five strings,
a God finger over the holes.

Sexton employs the imagery of colours, in an original fashion in several of her poems: phrases like “red tongue” (CP 544), “red dance” (530), “yellow heat”, “green girls” (542), “pink coffin”, “green death” and so on vouch for Sexton’s inventiveness.

Images of the parts of the human body like ‘hands’, ‘fingers’, ‘mouth’, ‘nerves’, ‘breast’, ‘penis’ are all strewn in the body of Sexton’s verse. In “The Break”, for instance Sexton uses the images of bones and ‘heart’ in a striking unusual context:
My bones are loose as clothespins,
as abandoned as dolls in a toy shop
and my heart, old hunger motor, with its sins
revved up like an engine that would not stop. (CP 192)

Sexton's poems present images of "cosmos" including 'earth',
'water', 'fire', 'sky', 'wind', and also the planets, connecting the
microcosm and the macrocosm. Images of "seasons" also frequent her
poems. In "The Operation", she writes:

After the sweet promise
the summer's mild retreat
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
I come to this white office, .... (CP 56)

Sexton shows an instinct for anaphora and reiteration, in instances
such as the following one:

... I will conquer myself.
I will dig up the pride
I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.
I will take a crowbar
And pry out the broken
pieces .... (CP 558)
Often, Sexton’s poems seem to be a hasty and careless journal stuck with brilliant phrases. Even the most formally arranged poems have no real structure under their formal structure – “they run on, they chatter, they moan, they / repeat themselves, they deliquesce” (Vendler 230).

According to critics like Katha Pollit, Sexton wrote many poems that are “histrionic, verbose, flaccid, mechanical, sentimental, mannered and very very boring” – (78). However, to even such critics, Sexton’s verse has an enormous appeal: “One puts down this enormous book (“The Complete Poems”) with the nagging feeling that all along a slim volume of verse was trapped inside it … And yet the gems are there” (Pollit 78). Responding to Katha Pollit, Diane Middlebrook raises a question in a stout defence of Sexton: “How are the gems related to surrounding poems? Is the ungemlike work inferior as art, or does it represent different artistic goals?” (53).

Sexton’s method of writing, which she referred to as “milking the unconscious”, often produced a loose – structured poetry dense with simile and freaked with improbable associations. In a poem addressed to James Wright, Sexton herself acknowledges that she is aware that the effect of some of the poems offended certain tastes, “There is too much food and no one left over / to eat up all the weird abundance” (CP 88). While some of Sexton’s most admired poems such as “All My Pretty Ones”, “The Starry Night”, “Wanting to Die”, work like well-lubricated machines, moving effortlessly on rhythm or rhyme, other poems such as “The Furies” and “O
Ye Tongues" which are equally powerful depend either on despair or ecstasy of associations, that flow like an open tap. To some of her readers, "The gems, or closed forms, tend to be early; the looser style, later." (Middlebrook 53).

The range of Sexton's voice is singularly remarkable and impressive. She is capable of writing precise, restrained, formal or dazzling diction as the wide range of her poems shows. She can also be witty in poems such as "Housewife", "Some women marry houses / It's another kind of skin; ..." (CP 77).

Sexton began her poetic career as a rhymester but moved away from it as she matured, and used free verse, much more suitable for her free-flowing feelings. Though Sexton makes an excellent use of free verse adapting it to her themes, she is not altogether without any negative comment on it. In the words of Katha Pollit,

Sexton's free verse, early and late, is lax and rambling and self-indulgent. She starts a poem pages before announcing its subject, or she starts on one theme and wanders off into another. She uses language carelessly, relying on repetition, that bluntest of instruments, instead of an aural pattern: assonance, off-rhyme, half-rhyme, rhythms and pauses. Rather than use images that relate so as to deepen them all,
she uses arbitrary throw-away similes reminiscent of Roethke at his most annoying. (78)

Even in her later works, Sexton shows the same level of feverishness on anything and everything she wrote from God to her therapist, from the signs of the Zodiac to the Vietnam War dead. On the one hand, she is an artist who wasted her talent by refusing to discipline it, and on the other hand, she is an anguished mentally ill woman who managed to write a few magnificent poems out of her inner chaos that work as literature. The fact remains that poetry for Sexton remained always a matter of half art and half therapy,

Critics often find themselves quoting F.Scott Fitzgerald’s famous remark that there are no second acts in American lives, and Sexton is squarely in the tradition of writers whose careers are a long downhill slide from early achievement. But Jarrell provides a kinder epitaph. “A good poet”, he said, “is some one who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great”. Never mind the numbers or whether they were evenly spaced out over the course of her life. Anne Sexton did her standing out in thunderstorms. Her rain-soaked poems will vanish. The lightning-struck ones will remain. (Pollit 79)
Other critics also have set on record their reverence for Sexton's verse. According to Greg Johnson,

Sexton is a Primitive, an extraordinarily intense artist who confronts her experience with unsettling directness, largely innocent of "tradition" and privately developing an idiom exactly suited to that experience. As Louis Simpson remarked after the publication of her first book, "This then is a phenomenon ... to remind us, when we have forgotten in the weariness of literature, that poetry can happen". (83)

It is true that in some of her later works, Sexton is uncertain about the direction of her writing, as she seems to rely on the melodramatic voice of her early poems, frequently repeating herself.

As an artist, in short, she seems to stop growing. As a result, the American literary myth that a writer is only as good as her last book has been extremely damaging to Sexton, as expressed in the form of harsh or dismissive reviews of her last volumes. (Johnson 84)

Diane Middlebrook seems to be much more sympathetic towards Sexton and traces her change in later work to her illness:

She had changed as an artist; as a sick woman, she did not change: repetition of destructive patterns was one of the
symptoms of her illness. To survive as a poet meant to attain another, a less reportorial relation to the subject of her pathology. Beginning with poems written for her third volume, “Live or Die”, Sexton gradually abandoned the polarity sick / well which gives underlying structure to the poems of “Bedlam” and “Pretty Ones”. (92)

“Food” metaphors dominate Sexton’s “The Jesus Papers” particularly the metaphor of breast milk as a form of generosity and salvation:

I am small
and you hold me
you give me milk
and we are the same
and I am glad.
No. No.
All lies.
I am a truck. I run everything
I won you. (CP 338)

Flowing from the Madonna’s breast, the milk offers the infant its first knowledge of human connection and separation. The experience of separation is what is underlined in these poems. Thus, the infant Jesus,
separating from the breast, fantasizes himself as a ‘truck’ an image that recalls Sexton’s guilty happiness at discovering her poetic gift as won at her mother’s expense, “I did not know that my life, in the end, / would run over my mother’s like a truck.” (CP 121).

In some of Sexton’s poems on Christian theology, the vicariousness of Christ’s death, like her own death wish, is readily acknowledged, though in purely human terms:

... Jesus went on by

with his heavy burden. ...

became heavier and heavier. ...

He was carrying all the boots

of all the men in the world

which are one boot.

He was carrying our blood.

One blood.

To pray, Jesus knew,

is to be a man carrying a man. (384)

such a recognition of vicariousness of Jesus’s suffering can be seen in Sexton’s last two volumes, “The Death Notebooks” and “The Awful Rowing Toward God”. In “Rowing” Sexton states that she spent her life ignorant of God, waiting for her as a destination:
... I grew, I grew,
and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,
still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked,
and I grew, I grew. (CP 417)

During the period of writing the poems of "Awful Rowing", Sexton was preparing to separate from her husband, and was groping for a spiritual destination, which will provide her with the stability of a household and the escape of an island:

... will not be perfect
it will have the flaws of life,
the absurdities of the dinner table,
but there will be a door
and I will open it. (CP 418)

Unlike her childhood home, unlike the "cruel houses" (417) of married life including the mental hospitals she has lived in, this island at least she believes will house a paternal presence who might embrace and rescue her at last. But when she arrives in "The Rowing Endeth", "at the dock of the island called God" (473), she does not find the expected door. There was no shelter and no embrace. Instead, she and God "... squat on the rocks by the sea / and play -- can it be true - / a game of poker" (CP 474).
The hand she had dealt Sexton calls a royal straight flush. It is a run of 9-10-J-Q-K but the ace is missing from the straight run, because the winning hand is God’s five aces,

A wild card had been announced,
but I had not heard it
being in such a state of awe
when He took out the cards and dealt. (CP 474)

The persona ends up as a loser again and she joins the winner in his “untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha”. God’s aggressive masculine presence in the poem connects him with the other father figures in Sexton’s poetry including the doctors, and the lovers in whom she never found any healing touch. God’s “wild card” signifies His powerful dominance over her, and she realizes that there is no magic embrace which is equivalent to God’s wild card, which can “get rid of the rat inside me”. The theme of most of the poems of this volume may be regarded as Sexton’s “rowing” exercises towards the redemptive island.

In these poems, Sexton explores the myths of the American culture, and the archetypal relationships among mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, gods and humans, and men and women. Apart from her conceptions of poetry as art and as therapy, she also has a hilariously irreverent concept of poetry as witch-craft. This contributed to
the pleasure she took in writing the volume, *Transformations*, which begins, “The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me…” (CP 223).

The retelling of Grimm’s fairy tales offers a rich medium for her colourful imagery. Besides, psychological complexity of these rules allows her to move in and out of relationships, providing ample room for wit. Throughout this volume, we can enjoy Sexton’s prowess in characterization, dramatization, and description. She starts a narrative once, thus: “there was a king as wise as a dictionary” (230). With the result, she creates eerie and a grotesque effect, where she always remains her sharpest, “Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter, / and I will salt it and eat it. … / The queen chewed it up like a cube steak” (CP 225).

Commenting on Sexton’s use of fairy tales, Helen Vendler points out that the tales in the *Transformations* “gave Sexton a structure of the sort she was usually unable to invent, for herself, a beginning, a middle, and an end. Her poems tend on the whole, to begin well, to repeat themselves, to sag in the middle, and to tail off” (73).

In this volume, Sexton finds enough scope to which she can bring her intelligence, wit, knowledge, and invention into play. In Stanley Kunitz’s words, it is “a wild, blood-curdling, astonishing book” (97). He is full of praise for her *Transformations*.
Going through her nine volumes of poems, one has the sense that here was a poet with talent to burn – and she was burning it, letting it go to waste on the poverty and mishandling of the material ... What remains to be done for Sexton is not biographies or criticism or collections but the publication of the selected works, including only the very best poems and the entire "Transformations" – the final editing that will bring to light how much she really did achieve. (qtd. in Middlebrook 97)

When there are critics on her side to praise her poetic talents, there are also critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks, who criticize Sexton's techniques especially in her volume, "48 Mercy Street",

Inaccurate metaphors ... Vulgar imagery ... A disturbing repetitiousness of tone and technique pervades the book. Words like 'little' and 'tiny' recur again and again, part of the falsely deprecatory litany of self-pity. The tone and monotonous concern remains that self explicitly declared inadequate but nonetheless the speaker's only real interest. ... The verse implicitly argues that anguish is self-justifying, neither permitting nor demanding the further pain of balance self-knowledge or the illuminations of controlled imagination and poetic technique ... pain ... produces such work as Anne
Sexton’s later poems, yet … art requires more than emotional indulgence, requires a saving respect for disciplines and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites, of the self. (484)

On the whole, Sexton excels herself in this text as an artist by dramatizing successfully her feelings in poetry. Sexton’s success as a poet primarily rests here in the visualization of her visions. “Sexton was drawn to see the importance of her own vision, her own ‘sense of order’, and so she became a poet. And in ‘John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further”, she explains her amazing capacity to translate visions into language” (George 3).

Kamala Das is also an adept in shaping her use of language in keeping with her themes. Das is one of the most distinctive and original of Indian poets writing in English today. She has published only slender volumes of poetry, but some of her poems are bound to find an honorable place in any future anthology of Indian poets which all her poetry originates. All her poetry is in the nature of a “Psychic Striptease”, and she always, “exudes autobiography”. Her experiences have been limited compared to those of Sexton and so also her range.

Unlike Sexton, Kamala Das is bilingual, who writes both in Malayalam and English. When asked why she chose to write in English,
she replied once that English being the tongue most familiar to her, she used it to express herself:

Probably English was thrust upon me. ... I don't think there is any particular language you dream in. Of course, English words have come up in my dreams but I suppose, I haven't given it much attention. Certainly English words are there just as English words are here in daily life. ... I don't think I attach much importance to the language I try to convey my message in. Language is not even necessary. How does the baby communicate with the mother? (Kaur 157-58)

Thus Das's choice of English as a medium of her art was by no means a deliberate one. One of her better known poems, "An Introduction", throws light on her use of English:

... Why not speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half—English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to cows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre. (OP 26)

In other words, she recognizes the immense possibilities in English
to communicate the various shades and nuances of her feelings, itself being
a vast storehouse of emotional equivalents. It is useful and transmutes her
"joys", "longing" and "hopes" into a sensitive and plastic mould of
expression, "the speech of the mind". These lines also reveal that, to Das
what she says is more important than the medium in which she says it. She
confirms the view that the choice of medium is only of marginal
significance since a genuine poet does not choose to write in a language
which he is not fully conversant with. According to Suresh Kohli, "'An
Introduction' is vitally communicative, is as much as a comment on the
poem as an indication of Mrs. Das' use of language which is not her mother-
tongue" (29).

Like Sexton, Das too received no formal education and has received
no university degree. Still, almost instinctively, she is aware of the value
and significance of words, and recognizes the fine shades of meanings. In
the poem entitled, "In Words", she recounts her sense of the value and significance of words:

All round me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing
From within .... But I tell myself, words
Are a nuisance, beware of them, they
Can be so many things, a
Chasm where running feet must pause to
Look, a sea with paralyzing waves,
A blast of burning air or
A knife most willing to cut your best
Friend's throat .... Words are a nuisance but
They grow on me like leaves on a tree
They never seem to stop their coming,
From a silence, somewhere deep within .... (OP 36)

Das's lyric "Without a Pause" is a refined statement on poetics:

... Write without
A pause, don't search for pretty words
Which dilute the truth, but write in haste, of
Everything perceived, and known, and loved .... (OS 83)
If Sexton started writing poetry as per her psychiatrist’s suggestion, Das started writing poetry as a result of an inner urge and her overflowing feelings of sadness and frustration. In her autobiography “My Story” (101) Das writes about the first instance when she wrote a poem. Being upset with her husband who hated their son’s midnight disturbances and locked him up in the kitchen one night she “felt miserable” and “lost whatever emotional contact” she once had with him. She also happened to see that her husband and her friend “behaved like lovers” in her presence, and once to celebrate her birthday they “shoved her out of the bedroom” and “locked themselves in”:

I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through. ... One night I left my sleeping family and went up to our terrace.... I wanted, for a moment, to fling myself down, to spatter the blanched brilliance of the moonlight with red blood stains. ... when I returned home.... I lit the reading lamp in our sitting room and began to write about a new life, an unstained future:

“Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay.
Let nothing remain of that yesterday....”

I sent the poem to the journal of the Indian P.E.N. the next morning. My grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets
Das concentrates more on her emotions than on any poetic techniques. She does not give any importance to rhyme scheme unlike Sexton and writes only in free verse. Neither does she spend much time in the selection of words or in re-drafting. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Das:

Q. Your language (English at least) is very finely chiseled. Do your works undergo lots of vetting and redrafting before you finalise?

Ans: There have been some poems which did not need any repair work, any editing, for example, the poem “Composition” which just got written at night and I was surprised to read it in the morning. One night my sister kept a tape recorder by my bedside. I was not aware of it. In the morning she got twenty four tiny poems” (Kaur 157)

However, this does not mean that Das writes carelessly. As a matter of fact, her diction reveals her mastery of her chosen medium expressing simplicity, felicity and clarity. Commenting on her poetic diction, Anisur Rehman says that her words are neither splendid nor glittering, nor
conceived on a grandiose scale. She is a poet in the confessional mode, and hence, her diction is drawn largely from the language of every day use:

Kamala Das’s poetic diction has nothing to do with philosophical musings or religious chants. Nor does she wield her instrument to compose songs of love or of nature. It is no Pandora’s box, but a cluster of simple counters emotionally charged and, at times, transformed into emotions themselves. She is unlike the modernists whose dislocated syntax startles us as much as their poetic apprehensions puzzle. Kamala Das does not make experiments with words but only imparts a personal touch to them. Diction is not a tool in her hands but a poetic medium pure and simple (30).

Das uses words imaginatively so that they are adequate to express her emotions. Sometimes, a powerful verbal drama is enacted through her use of emotionally charged words. Thus in “My Grandmother’s House”, the use of the word, ‘withdrew’ is vivid and active, and as a result the empty, deserted house comes to life to be a co-partner in grief. Similarly, in the following lines from “A Hot Noon in Malabar”,

This
Is a noon with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent ones, who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle voices. (OP 24)

The words “jungle voices” adequately convey their emotions, enact a real
drama and impart to the poem its peculiar ambience. She is not a conscious
artist with words, her diction is commonplace, she does not hunt for words,
but words come to her naturally. As Srinivas Iyengar points out,

It is no mean achievement that while giving the impression of
writing in haste she reveals a mastery of phrase and control
over rhythm – the words often pointed, envenomed, and the
rhythms nervously, almost feverishly alive. It is quite
remarkable that her words assume various forms with the
shift in attitude and are, consequently tortured, relaxed or
plain as the situation demands. Words are neutral, colorless, a
cemetery of dead metaphors until they are used in an emotive
way in poetry. (31)

The words and metaphors of Das pulsate with life since they embody
feelings and not thoughts. She has observed:

It is not essential that a good poet should change and recreate
the language. But some words when used by a poet are
changed and acquire a different meaning. Every good writer
is a sculptor with words. An artist has the right to do what he
thinks best with his material. This right he acquires gradually with experience. (31)

Das herself has acquired this right, and so in her hands words acquire a new meaning and significance. Thus, in “My Grandmother's House”, “frozen air”, “blind eyes of the window” and “armful of darkness” are the metaphors of silence, loneliness and past memories.

In one of her interviews, Das has made clear the purpose of her use of ‘ellipses’ in her writings:

Q. You often leave dots at the end of your sentences. Are there the points where you feel that language is not adequate to convey the subtleties of your thoughts, That silence could sometimes be more effective than speech?

Ans: I don’t believe in writing from A to Z. I want to leave certain things unwritten. I want to let the reader participate and fill some spaces with his own thought. (Kaur 158)

Anisur Rehman justifies such ellipses and repetitions:

These are not the mechanical intensifiers; rather they reveal the poet’s tendency to discount the use of many words and rely on just one word for the maximum effect. They also
create a sense of drama and the sound pattern that emerges, corresponds closely with the phonetics of thought. (32)

Repetition of a phrase (Anaphora) is as common in Das as in Sexton. The ellipses indicate at times the silence after a pause and also pinpoint the poet’s suffering. The repetition of a phrase followed by ellipses occurs in Das’s “Substitute”: 

It will be all right, it will be all right,

It will be all right, between the world and me.

It will be all right, if I don’t remember

The last of the days together …. (OS 94)

The ellipses suggest here both the pains and joys of living the last of the days together. In a nutshell, these are some of the most expressive devices of communicating a real sense of suffering. The poet makes a virtue of them instead of regarding them as mere contrivances.

There are instances of the use of anaphora in other poems as well: “I shall leave all the heavy luggage behind / I shall leave two teddy bears and a child” (OS 27) and

If I close my eyes I see nothing.

If I shut my ears I hear nothing.

Nothing but nothing
Inside or outside
the nothing that resides
as an ache within
the only content
the human cask can contain. (CP 82)

Eunice De Souza finds variant meanings when she comments on repetitions in Das:

A stylistic device which reinforces the predominately emotional quality of these poems is Kamala Das’s frequent repetition of words, lines and even sections of a poem. One of the few poems in which repetitions work in Kamala Das’s poetry is “Substitute” in which the repetition of the phrase, ‘It will be all right’, it will be all right’, suggests exactly the opposite, in fact: the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life. But she often repeats words which don’t bear repeating. There is no need to repeat ‘their naked fear....’ (An Anthology to Goutama), ‘to forget / To forget oh, to forget’ (The Sunshine Cat), or ‘cough, cough their lungs out’ (The Flag). The lines would be stronger with the repetition cut out. (32)
Like Anne Sexton, Kamala Das’s range of imagery covers a wide range. In one of her interviews she comments on her use of images in her poetry,

Q. You have a very vivid imagination and I am fascinated by your images. Do you think in images?

Ans: I don’t think in images, I suppose. But images do get born in my thoughts suddenly.

Of late, Das’s poems present several images associated with ‘hospital’ and ‘pills’. In “Gino”, for example, we get a string of images of sepulchral journey on the hospital trolley such as “obscene hands”, “ward boys”, “long corridors”, “X-ray room” (OP 13) etc.

In Das’s “The Lunatic Asylum”, the readers can detect acute feelings of pain and frustration that they find only in Sexton.

There is a light
Burning all through the night
At the lunatic asylum,
An unshaded
Bulb shaped like a tear drop,
Hanging from the deadwhite ceiling
Of the hall, to chase the moody shadows.
... Those large and hot
Insomniac lanterns
Under which grey spectres dance in
The sepulchral
Ball rooms of their minds. ... (CP 31)

The image of 'somnambulistic' sleep appears in several other poems too.
Like Anne Sexton, Das also uses the condition of 'trance' in some of her poems. In "The Descendants", while giving an account of a couple making love Das writes of "... the heaving, lurching / Tender hours passed in a half-dusk, half-dawn and./ Half-dream, half-real trance...." (OP 33).

As in Sexton, in Das too, there are plenty of instances for the use of the imagery of 'plants', 'trees' and 'flowers'. Das talks of a 'mythic hoodoo tree':

Puny, these toymen of dust, fathers of light
Dust children but their hands like the withered boughs
Of some mythic hoodoo tree cast only
Cool shadows and with native grace bestow
Even on unbelievers, vast shelters. (OS 58)

In "The Sea at Galle Face Queen", Das employs the image of the "katurmuringa" against the background of the city ruins, after a bomb blast
(p.59). In “Radha Krishna”, she talks of a “kadamba tree”, in tune with a mythic love relationship:

This becomes from this hour
our river and this old kadamba
tree, ours alone, for our homeless
souls to return someday. (OS 104)

In “After July”, Das uses the image of ‘jasmine’ against the background of civil war in Colombo … no flower – seller / Came again to the door with strings / Of jasmine to perfume the ladies’ hair” (OS 75). In “A Requiem For My Father”, Das uses the image of “jasmine” associating it with the festival of “Onam”: “This time for Onam I shall not decorate my floor /
With flowers, father, for I dressed your chest with jasmine / When you died a few weeks ago.” (OS 114). In “A Phantom Lotus”, Das uses the image of the “lotus” – “A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams” (93).

As in Sexton, images of ‘birds’ and ‘animals’ too abound in Das. The “crow” figures in several of her poems: “… At noon / I watch the sleek crows flying / Like poison on wings – …” (OS 55). In “An Introduction”, Das employs the image of the “crow” as well as the “lion” while asserting English as her language of poetic expression. (26). The ‘koel’ figures more than once in Das. In “Ghanashyam”, Das says “Ghanashyam, / You have like a koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart” (OS 94).
Both Sexton and Das are confessional artists, who have succeeded to a remarkable extent in transforming their emotions into artistic expressions. Both have a rare flare for dramatization of feelings, on account of their poetic perceptions. Sexton’s poems cover a wider range and her poetic output is far more prolific compared to Das. Sexton has also sweated it out to master the craft of versification, despite her own penchant for poetry. In Das, the themes are limited as most of her works centre round the motif of heterosexual love. Das writes a more spontaneous verse paying lesser heed to the art of versification, compared to Sexton.

There is an undeniable tragic element about the art of both. In the case of Sexton, her tragedy began at birth, with her flawed inheritance and childhood. In the case of Das, she, by and large, grew more and more aware of the tragic element around her. It goes to the singular credit of both the poets under discussion that they have found their distinct voices both as poets and as individuals in the world of art.
In “Radha Krishna”, she talks of a “kadamba tree”, in tune with a mythic love relationship:

This becomes from this hour
our river and this old kadamba
tree, ours alone, for our homeless
souls to return someday. (OS 104)

In “After July”, Das uses the image of ‘jasmine’ against the background of civil war in Colombo … no flower – seller / Came again to the door with strings / Of jasmine to perfume the ladies’ hair” (OS 75). In “A Requiem For My Father”, Das uses the image of ‘jasmine’ associating it with the festival of “Onam”: “This time for Onam I shall not decorate my floor /
With flowers, father, for I dressed your chest with jasmine / When you died a few weeks ago.” (OS 114). In “A Phantom Lotus”, Das uses the image of the “lotus” – “A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams” (93).

As in Sexton, images of ‘birds’ and ‘animals’ too abound in Das. The “crow” figures in several of her poems: “… At noon / I watch the sleek crows flying / Like poison on wings – …” (OS 55). In “An Introduction”, Das employs the image of the “crow” as well as the “lion” while asserting English as her language of poetic expression. (26). The ‘koel’ figures more than once in Das. In “Ghanashyam”, Das says “Ghanashyam, / You have like a koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart” (OS 94).
In "Afterwards" where she presents her lonely musings, Das reveals her 'guilt' through the image of the rat:

Caught in this yellow disc of light,
You turn, like a guilty rat
And draw your rocky home over you
Like an irremovable shell. (CP 138)

The image of the 'rat' used in connection with 'guilt' is common to Sexton too. Sexton also symbolizes some inner urge in her which torments her as 'rat', and here Das compares herself to a 'guilty rat' which symbolizes the 'guilt' in her. In "The Snobs", Das uses the image of the 'buffalo':

One house crouches in dust in the
Evenings, when the buffaloes tramp
Up the road, the weary herdsman
Singing soft Punjabi songs, and
Girls from free municipal schools
Pause shyly at our gate and smile. (OP 44)

This is a typical weary evening scene one comes across in every part of suburban India.

In Das's gallery of imagery, as in Sexton, there are images of 'entrapment', a theme common for both. In "The Old Play house", Das uses
the image of the ‘taming’ a bird. (1). Images of ‘cage’ (10), ‘snare’ (29), ‘prison’ (67), ‘slavery’, ‘nest’ (17), ‘cocoon’ (48), and ‘web’ (51) figure in various poems of Das.

Like Sexton, in Das too, we can see images of ‘death’ and terms associated with it such as ‘corpse’ (45), ‘cemeteries’ (30), ‘tombstone’ (31), ‘coffin’ (77), ‘carcasses’ (37), ‘cremation ground’ (43), ‘graves’ (78), ‘bier’ (84), ‘funeral pyre’ (14). In “Ghanashyam”, Das writes:

Life is water, semen and blood
Death is drought
Death is the hot sauna leading to cool rest rooms
Death is the last, lost sob of the relative
Beside the red walled morgue. (OS 94)

Images of ‘cosmos’ also appear in Das, as in Sexton. The image of the “Sun” is used most frequently as a symbol of lust in her poetry. In “The Dance of the Eunuchs”, the “Summer in Calcutta”, and several other poems, the ‘sun’ with its heat is an agent of pain, suffering and passion. Like Sexton, all the four elements — air, fire, earth and water — also contribute to the imagery and symbolism in Kamala Das.

If Sexton makes use of the fairy tales and the myths associated with Christian religion, Das makes frequent allusions to the Radha –Krishna and Mirabai legends to provide a mythological structure to extra-marital sex in
her poetry. ‘Krishna’ is the mythical lover, and Radha and Mirabai are the eternal seekers.

Das writes poetry at times omitting all punctuation marks. For instance, in “The Swamp”, she writes, “In malabar during the rains after one singularly dark week and one hot morning our backyard was a swamp my feet cracked the grey crust and i sank with a wail” (OP 52). Perhaps it is one of her devices to express her momentary chaotic condition of mind. Sexton and Das also employ the literary genre of the dramatic monologue to depict all the nuances of their feelings.

Das is a great and original poet with a distinctive poetic personality of her own. When at her best, she remains unequalled and matchless. But often she fails in her attempts at artistic self-control. As Eunice De Souza points out,

Obsessive, confessional writing can be a source of power. It can also be tedious if it get out of control, and then no amount of mere problem is not knowing when to stop. A good number of the poems in each book could have been cut out without any sense of loss because they tend to express emotions, already expressed, in a weaker way, with the result that the cumulative impression is of a rather relentless whine. (34)
Both Sexton and Das are confessional artists, who have succeeded to a remarkable extent in transforming their emotions into artistic expressions. Both have a rare flare for dramatization of feelings, on account of their poetic perceptions. Sexton’s poems cover a wider range and her poetic output is far more prolific compared to Das. Sexton has also sweated it out to master the craft of versification, despite her own penchant for poetry. In Das, the themes are limited as most of her works centre round the motif of heterosexual love. Das writes a more spontaneous verse paying lesser heed to the art of versification, compared to Sexton.

There is an undeniable tragic element about the art of both. In the case of Sexton, her tragedy began at birth, with her flawed inheritance and childhood. In the case of Das, she, by and large, grew more and more aware of the tragic element around her. It goes to the singular credit of both the poets under discussion that they have found their distinct voices both as poets and as individuals in the world of art.