Chapter Seven

Summing Up

Poetry should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt - Bruce King.

Several modern critics see Comparative Literature as a very essential but supplementary kind of discipline that helps critics arrive at the right kind of assessment of the worth of literary works. In the words of Remak, Comparative Literature can be viewed “... less as an independent subject, which must at all costs, set up its own inflexible laws, than as a badly needed auxiliary discipline, a link between organically related but physically separated, areas of human creativeness” (8).

Both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das through their works of art gain new insights into truth: “Among the arts, literature, specifically, seems to claim ‘truth’ through the view of life (‘Weltanschauung’) which every artistically coherent work possesses” (Wellek 34). While discussing her objectives in art, Kamala Das has observed that the purpose of her poetic art is to ‘disturb the society’ by exhibiting her self and so is the case with Anne Sexton. Her objective of poetic art is the revaluation of her own life providing didactic lessons for her readers. Their art is not for its own sake. It is to equip the readers with new perspectives to look upon the multi-
faceted life, by keeping them fascinated by the mystery and beauty of the life on earth.

Weisstein's observation that "the primary components that constitute and standard literary work are subject matter (stoff) itself, theme, motif, situation, image (Bild), trait (Zug) and topos" (129) is very much true with regards to the poetical works of Sexton and Das. Their poems burst out from their hearts with a fine blend of subject matter drawn from their own life situations and the striking lyrical imagery with their metaphorical leaps. They both also satisfy Wellek's stress on the need for the proper organisation of these constituent elements in art, placing special emphasis on their mode of integration and unity in structure:

Literature must always be interesting; it must always have a structure and an aesthetic purpose, a total coherence and effect. It must, of course, stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very various ... life can be heightened or burlesqued or antithesized, it is in any case a selection of a specifically purposive sort, from life. (212)

Both Sexton's and Das's poems are interesting, aesthetic, purposive, coherent, effective and related to various life situations which have been dealt in detail in the preceding chapters of the present thesis.
The opening chapter of the thesis, "Introduction: The Poets and their Times", introduces the poets Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, their creations and their respective backgrounds enabling the readers to glean sufficient basic insights into their respective social milieux, with a view to understanding and interpreting what is feminine, feminist and female about their art in comparative terms.

The second chapter "Artists as Autobiographers" deals with the personal elements in the works of the two poets under study. It seeks to analyse how both the women have exploited their own lived out experiences in their poetry, thereby universalising their personal feelings, and how both of them have self-consciously rendered their art autobiographical and that too in a dramatically confessional mode.

There are certain interesting common features in respect of the motifs in Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, when their poetic art is viewed from an autobiographical perspective: their self-conscious effort to occupy the 'centre' of their art; high degree of consciousness of their privileged ancestry; nostalgia for places and landscapes; affinity for their ancestral homes and lively interest in ancestors; devotion to their fathers and estrangement from them at a certain stage in life and consequent guilt; their devotion to their children and maternal anxieties; their love of their own mothers; fond recollection of childhood episodes; their solitary moments in childhood; the tedious periods they spent in hospitals for treatment and
distaste for treatment meted out there; expressions of death-wish; the embracing of humanity showing forgiveness and acceptance in their maturity; and their escapist recourse through extramarital affairs.

However, there are pronounced differences between the works of the two authors. To Sexton, recollections of places stand mostly for presentation of vivid pictures and landscapes. To Das however, even a cityscape primarily means the teeming humanity there. Further, Das feels sufficiently intimate with cities like Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay that she does not flinch from being critical of any of them. Both of them are impulsively moved at the grandeur of beauty in Nature. Sexton sees the Atlantic as the ‘bayer at wharfs and Victorian houses’ and Das writes how ‘from each city I lived in ... I stole out often to walk this winding road, laying aside my poor body that had perhaps no home ...’. Of the ancestral homes recalled by the poets, Das’s feeling for hers in Malabar has been more vividly realized in art as it is given almost a rare personality of its own, in “I thought I heard the pillars groan”. In the words of Dr. V. Sam Sahayam, Kamala Das’s poems “gush forth her singularly profound feelings for the past”. They “portray the compelling charm of the poet’s childhood in a Malabar home, which offered her moments of superb sense of peace and tranquility” (94).

Das’s devotion to her father seems to be quite healthy while Sexton’s love for her father is all muddled with the intense guilt over
incestuous dimension of their relationships. Moreover some of Sexton’s references to her father are nothing if not vituperative, and quite deservingly so. Sexton’s grief over her father’s death is expressed through an internalized feeling while Das’s response to her father’s demise, indirectly acknowledges his exceptional dignity as an individual, and is crafted with greater care, with the rhythm consisting of the right kind of well-chosen monosyllables. As regards Sexton’s feelings of guilt, separation and resentment over her relationship with her mother, they are far more poignant than in Das. Though both the poets adore their children, Sexton’s admiration of them is pronouncedly on a physical level. She is also beset with a sense of guilt for not being an ideal mother, she longed to be.

Interestingly, most of the recollections of childhood in Sexton whose life ended tragically in a suicide are happy ones presenting at times a comical vision. In contrast, most of the memories recorded in Das who has had a happier lot in life are tinged with sadness. Even the brilliant dance of the brightly dressed eunuchs does not fail to register this melancholy strain.

Sexton’s hospital poems are highly subjective and dwell on the agony she undergoes, while those of Das are objective and the pain depicted in them is by no means immediate. Similarly, the poems on deathwish in Sexton are an outpour of her own inner anxiety and despair, while Das’s poems on the same smack of mere posturing. As for the social
vision in their poems, if Sexton's poetry lays stress on the need for greater liberation in American politics, Das's art makes direct appeal to the dire need for secularism in the Indian scenario.

To sum up, Sexton's poetry is moving on account of the poignancy of her real life experience and the pathos underlying all her life's major events. "What is heroic in Sexton's case ... is the earnestness and scrupulosity with which she mastered her craft, developed her highly original voice, and set about the task of communicating her experience to others" (Johnson 72). Sexton's readers cannot help being profoundly disturbed by the failure of an exceptionally talented and beautiful woman endowed with a magnanimous spirit of forgiveness and acceptance, when they read lines such as the following:

Six years of shutting in and out of this place!
O my hunger! My hunger!
I could have gone around the world twice
Or had new children – all boys.

If Sexton's poetry is primarily in the pity, then the appeal of Das's poetry is its endorsement and total acceptance of our human heritage, and utter empathy with humanity as a whole and its enchanting lyricisms. As Shyam Asnani rightly observes, she can "universalize her joys and sorrows, and correlate her own emotions with those of others. It is this broad and
universal vision that lends her poetry the ring of authenticity and invests it
with a depth of feeling” (77).

The third chapter, “Writers as Rebels”, analyses in some detail the
lives of Sexton and Das as rebels in their lives as well as in their literary
works. The poems of Sexton and Das are essentially feministic in their
thematic content. Compared to Das, there is greater range and variety in
Sexton such as her mental illness, her obsession with death in which
mission she finally ‘succeeded’, her treacherous childhood spent in the
company of mindless parents, her shocking exposure to incestuous
relationships, her repudiation of religion, her marital problems and her
conflicts over extra-marital affairs. Sexton’s art offers much greater space
to vend forth her rage and revenge. Das’s case is different. Her theme is
uniquely centripetal. Everything in her art centres around the theme of
love. But writing on such a limited range of issues to be able to register her
voice and succeed in ensuring a greater ‘space’ in the dialectics of gender
politics is no mean achievement on the part of Kamala Das.

Both Sexton and Das are rebels as writers. However, they rebel
against different values and institutions. Sexton rebels against primarily the
moral code approved of in the mainstream American society, and her
religious creed. Das rebels only against the morals sanctioned by the
cultural milieux in which she lives and grows.
Perhaps both Sexton and Das are similar in the sense they both write poems which predominantly deal with sensuality. Sexton’s poems on sensuality range from incest and violation of her privacy right from her childhood years to the permissiveness and promiscuity of her adulthood. Das’s poems on sensuality are by and large erotic, primarily pampering to the expectations and taste of voyeurs and avid readers on sexuality. If Sexton’s rebellion consists in her giving explicit expression to all the perversions and abuse of which she is a victim, Das’s revolt pertains more to a pronounced feministic kind of a greater and greater demand for autonomy and space for female sexuality in the realm of gender politics.

Sexton’s erotic descriptions can at best be called uninhibited or explicit, while, Das’s mode of description seems to cater to a popular taste in society that could mean mate-realistic profit. For example, Das herself has gone on record that she wrote her sensational autobiography for the sake of paying some medical bills. Sexton tries to shed her sicknesses in the books she writes, while Das’s erotic poems verge on the highly exhibitionistic. If the former’s art tends to be by and large psychotherapeutic, the latter’s poetry is commercialistic.

As regards the sexual experiences dwelt on by both the writers, in the case of Sexton, she seems to have been more sinned against than sinning. Sexton’s was a tragic fate growing as she did; a daughter of a father with intensely perverse sexual habits and a mother who was utterly
wanting in sensitivity and maternal empathy. Neither was her husband of any great emotional assistance. Being endowed with an extremely beautiful physique, an exceptionally warm, charismatic and generous disposition and gentle feminine ways – Sexton could hardly weather the storm that never ceased to haunt throughout her life.

In the case of Das, she happened to belong to a privileged stratum of an urban society, having originally descended from a well known affluent family from Kerala. Despite all the reasons Das enumerates in her art regarding the circumstances that turned her into a promiscuous lover, Das’s love affairs seem to be mostly the consequences of her own curiosity and choice, as she has a pronounced penchant for initiating any kind of sexual tryst. Being endowed with an exceptionally charming and voluptuous body, she did not have to wait for long or go hunting far or wide to take a lover.

In Sexton, there is an acute sense of guilt which impels the poet to turn to religion for consolation and self-acceptance. Beneath all the vituperative venom Sexton pours out against God, there is a profound strain of pathos in her poetry, pleading and begging the divine for forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation.

Guilt is a motif that is strikingly absent in Das. Whether as an adolescent or adult, Das shows a high degree of self-possession. If she chooses to endure something her husband does, she will do so. In any given
moment, Das reserves with herself the absolute option to go ahead or put an end to an affair. Curiously enough, because Das herself decides in a deliberate, self-conscious manner, the course of her own action in the sphere of sexuality, she does not suffer from any pronounced feeling of guilt.

It is her unbearable burden of guilt that makes Sexton return to religion and its comfort. In the case of Das, her utter lack of any pronounced feeling of guilt, causes no conflict in her mind, despite all the affairs she freely indulges herself in. Several of Das’s poems are vindications of her mode of punishing men, especially husbands and lovers, through defiant acts of love.

If Sexton’s art is fraught with guilt and seeks acceptance from her God, Das’s poems tend to seek a tacit kind of approval of her sensual acts of revenge from her readers. The tendency for pressing for more and more space for autonomy in the sphere of man-woman confrontation, never ceases to function in Das. Sexton’s art, in a sense, traverses the entire gamut of sensual experience and shares for its remotest frontier, the sphere of spirituality. Das’s heavily erotic art is very much confined to the man-made world, in the final analysis. Even the names of gods and goddesses she has exploited from the Hindu pantheon, are little more than erotic symbols in her extremely flamboyant and compelling art.
The fourth chapter, “Conflicts as Cores of Creativity” presents how conflicts lie at the core of art in Sexton and Das. Being sensitive, autonomous and rebellious by nature, both the poets turn out to be revolutionaries in their artistic vision. Both find the values governing their respective social milieux, patriarchal in essence, and hence advocate resistance at the socio-political level. Some of their poems capture the pain of their conflicts in graphic terms.

However, the manner in which both of them have transformed their conflicts into art, is scrutinized in this chapter. Though the works of both the poets reveal conflicts, the causes that trigger off conflicts, the modes of confrontation and the qualities of works that present such conflicts often show marked differences, mainly owing to the different sensibilities of the poets. One of the primary motifs of inner conflicts namely guilt, is conspicuously missing in Das. Sexton’s psyche is scarred by the inexorable stamp of incest, inflicted on her at an extremely vulnerable age. The chapter seeks to take a close look at the impact of such conflicts on the qualities of the literary art of the poets.

Sexton’s conflicts spring up from her terrible experiences she encountered in her childhood, especially in the hands of her own parents. Das, on the other hand, did not happen to face any such humiliations in her childhood. While Sexton expresses feelings of guilt in her relationship with her parents and daughters, Das does not reveal feelings of guilt with regards
to her mother or sons except her tensions she had with her father, who, according to her, is the sole cause of her agony in her married life.

Both Sexton and Das were tormented by the conflicts in their married lives. While in Sexton, the guilt is directed against her own "self", in Das, it is not directed against herself. Instead she holds her husband responsible for all chaos in their married lives.

It is essential to note that both Sexton and Das sound paradoxical in their feministic stances. Both of them reveal anti-feministic attitudes in being dependents on their lovers. Most of their conflicts result out of their extra-marital affairs, and they also exhibit feelings of tormentation with regard to being mistresses to their lovers.

While Sexton expresses her conflicts pertaining to abortion and incestuous relationship with her father, Das's poetry does not dwell on such conflicts. However, conflicts arising from illness, frequent hospitalizations, and suicidal impulses are common to both of these poets in question. Most of the confessional poets suffered mental illness and spent time in mental hospital. Some committed suicide. According to Rosenthal, breakdown and suicide are part of the "imaginative risk" that poets who are "sensitive enough to the age and brave enough to face it directly" must take (74). Writing poetry then became their driving force. They understood that poetry was the art of language. Instead of endorsing or exploiting madness
or pain, their poetry come to terms with human suffering in order to redeem it. Poetry is not a way of evading the purgatory of human experience but a means of facing and controlling it.

The fifth chapter, “Sensuality as Key to Sensibility”, studies at length the subject of sensuality, expounded in such an uninhibited fashion in their art by both the artists. Both the poets employ sensuality as a prime tool to reveal their sensibilities in varying degrees, and each in her own turn, vouches for the fact that sexual pleasure can never provide complete joy a woman hopes for. Behind their frank exposition and exhibition of passions, there is a strong awareness of feeling that such pleasures, however pleasurable they might be, are essentially tragic in the end, as they do not answer in ultimate terms, any of their ontological quests. In the contaminated mode of the sexual affairs, carnality can also give way to an inexorable load of guilt, resulting in one’s own psychic ruin as exemplified in the poems of Sexton and Das.

In respect of confessing the private and the personal episodes of their love affairs in all their nakedness, while Sexton reveals an intense fascination for and obsession with the body, Das expresses her gradual awareness of the need for something far beyond the body. Hence Sexton, with all her passionate obsession with her own beautiful body, which finds considerable excitement in auto-eroticism as well, emerges certainly as far more ‘confessional’ of the two. Even while talking of abortion and issues
related to the menstrual cycle of their female bodies and maternal functions of the body, Sexton scores higher in her frankness of description. Sexton excels Das in the domain of incorporating even the most unsavoury and seamy aspect of the female body into the artistic and aesthetic ambit of her poetic art.

Besides discussing their own feminine bodies, Sexton also vividly describes the female bodies of others especially her daughters and mother with frankness, bordering on the psychotic, while Das does not include any such descriptions of other women of her household in her poems.

Apart from presenting the female bodies with their special sensibilities, both the poets indulge in exploring the charm of the male body in their own different ways. Both Sexton and Das glorify the parts of the male body as charming as well as intriguing; arousing considerable curiosity. Nevertheless, while Sexton stops with such an eulogizing and euphoric admiration for the body of the male, Das raises also issues such as what she feels as abominable in the body of the male, from distinctly feminine or female perspective, calling it a “prison” and its glamour as “trappings”. Though Das does present the various aspects of the male body from the point of female sensuality, Sexton emerges as the winner in bringing to light the glamour of the male body. Even in the sphere of description of the functioning of the body of the male in poetic metaphors, Sexton scores higher than Das by inventing and introducing novel
metaphors like “architect”, “carpenter”, “baker”, etc., which make a
definite stamp on erotic art in general.

In the confession of their love affairs, both the poets in question
discuss frankly their indulgence in various love affairs with men. Behind
the veil of the metaphorical language, Sexton gives full length narrations of
the private secrecy of the man-woman encounter, which even borders on
the pornographic and indulges herself in a joyous exploration of physical
pleasures and momentary sexual ecstasies. Das does not lag far behind
either in the sphere of sharing her private love episodes with men or women
or celebrating the joyous dance of sensuality in the sphere of love. As
Dwivedi puts forth, “like American ‘confessional’ poets she accepts whole
heartedly the demands of the body” (22). Yet there is some additional
innate wisdom, perhaps imparted by cultural inhibition and personal
cynicism which holds Das in check, and makes her exercise greater self-
control and take the moorings of her course of progress from more reliable,
impersonal landmarks of cultural values. Perhaps, it is this incipient
cautions and self-assurance that have lent Das a greater poise and self-
control both as an artist and as a woman, and that have also saved Das from
the tragic course of events that overwhelmed Sexton.

Nevertheless, Sexton’s explicitness or Das’s relative euphemism – in
the mode of her poetic expressions alone should not be considered for
forming a critical estimate of her art. There is explicitness, directness and
disarming candour in Sexton, it is true. But the readers must also bear in mind that Sexton’s is an injured psyche, bearing the marks of her victimization, at every stage of her life, especially her childhood. This singular factor alone may have contributed its own share with regard to the utter disregard of inhibitions in Sexton. For Sexton, the search ends with the physique. For a greater performance, she feels forced to jump out of her skin, which in her case tuned out to be the main cause of her tragic end.

Das’s art may be relatively more euphemistic and less explicit than Sexton’s is. But to her singular credit, Das has maintained her poise and balance as an artist and individual to this day, taking all the injuries she met with in her love life in her stride. The charm of her poetry does not only rely on her lively appreciation of the loveliness of the human body, graceful rhythm, grandeur and glow in the moments when it burns and shines in love, but also her intuitive and consistent self-possession, insightful cynicism regarding purely carnal expressions of love; her idealistic – even Platonic – longing for a transcendent kind of more lasting relationships, her vicarious identification with the masses of human individuals with regard to her perceptions of body, mind and spirit and above all, the supreme message of acceptance and loving forgiveness of all mankind in the years of her maturity which her poetical art gives expression to, and which the poet so richly deserves in return.
The sixth chapter, “Artists as Artisans”, discusses some of the important techniques used by Sexton and Das in their poetry. Sexton and Das have chosen their diction, style and imagery suitable for the respective themes they expound in their verse. 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 verification, despite her own penchant for poetry. In Das, though the themes are limited, she writes a more spontaneous verse paying lesser heed to the art of verification, compared to Sexton. There is an undeniable tragic element about their art, and they have succeeded in finding their distinct voices both as poets and as individuals in the world of art.

In their mature phase as artists, both Sexton and Das employ images and objects which turn a greater profundity in the allusiveness and suggestive strength, thus considerably enhancing the literary quality of their works. Sexton and Das have an astounding felicity in employing telling symbols in their fiction. Most of their images are significant and are highly symbolic, perfectly in tune with the situations in which they are employed. Both of them emerge as assured symbolists as their symbols are profound, well organized and integrated to the basic themes of their poetry. In the
process, the art of Sexton and Das tends to emerge also as profoundly metaphorical.

It is mainly through imagery that both the poets lay bare their innermost souls, likes, dislikes, aspirations, interests, beliefs and goals testifying to the truth of Coleridge's comment: "... Images, however beautiful ... do not themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion, or by associated thoughts or images awakened by the passion" (177).

To both Sexton and Das, imagery is an important vehicle of perception. In the words of Rene Wellek, "The visual image is a sensation or a perception, but it also 'stands for' and refers to something invisible, something 'inner'. It can be both presentation and representation at once" (188).

As regards the interest evinced by both the poets in floral and bestial imagery, Ellen Mores' interesting observation is highly pertinent:

All the creatures – the flowers, the insects, the cats – that women writers use to stand in, for their own sex, ... Women may be particularly fond of birds because they are a species of littleness metaphor by which women define themselves or because they are tortured as little girls are tortured or because
they are ‘beautiful and exotic creatures’ and ‘universal emblems of love’. (67)

The art of Sexton and Das is marked by a profoundly keen sense of irony. As regards the ideological stances assumed by both the poets in question, Stimpson’s critical statement is highly relevant: “The powerless have a culture of resistance, which works through code; through direct statement of polemic; and through the indirection of irony and parody” (227).

Dramatic monologue serves as a vehicle for ironic truth in both Sexton and Das. They make an effective use of irony in order to capture all the nuances and shades of feelings involved on the part of their own selves in a particular situation, thereby striving for a greater comprehensiveness and authenticity in their art.

Sexton and Das use both the third person and the first person narrative. They use the third person narrative as it is highly flexible and has no defined or prescribed limit as to what extent the poet can share with the reader what she considers as the subject of interest.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das have thus emerged as successful confessional poets as viewed in the light of their personal and rebellious outcries, conflicts and promiscuity in their poems. As Louise Bogan opines, outlining highly emotional personal relationships requires courage; further more to describe fully the dark conflicts of the self without shipping over
into the shrill voice of confession or the sobbing note of self-pity requires high control at every conscious and unconscious level (126). Both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das exercise marked self control in their self expression and thus emerge as poets who have transformed their personal conflicts into poetic outpourings that transcend all national and cultural frontiers thereby achieving universality.