Chapter Two

Artists as Autobiographers

Artists must be sacrificed to their art. Like bees, they must put their lives into the sting they give.

- Emerson

In the case of several authors, autobiography has provided vital clues in the interpretation of several works of art. As Das herself asserts in My Story "A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament for a moment" (165). It can go a long way also in expounding the core of the conception and design of art, in Anne Sexton and Kamala Das. A detailed study of the autobiographical elements in their poetry is perhaps inevitable for a sound comprehension and analysis of their creations.

"All confessional art, whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be haunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed" (Philips 2), and it is true with the spontaneous artist Anne Sexton whose "most striking poems were directly autobiographical" (Middlebrook 239) and who makes no bones of her feelings in poetry, being devastatingly shocking in her manner of expression. As Olney claims, writing of autobiography is "a very daring, even a foolhardy undertaking - a bold rush into an area where angels might well fear to
tread” (3), and Sexton certainly “seems to draw her materials from the worlds of private torment, seeking the deep secrets of the self, even if the implications of these secrets are potentially destructive” (Malkoff 21). Her poems “have always come from the frontiers of the personal” (Green 376), and it is “impossible for us to read ‘objectively’” (Ostriker 205).

Kamala Das too is a spontaneous and uninhibited artist. Interestingly enough, several details dwelt on in her My Story emerge in a transfigured form in her verse. The feelings Das expounds in her poems are little more than logical and sometimes fanciful projections of her own intensely felt and touchingly etched out personal experiences, recounted in her sensational autobiography. As Poulet puts forth “it is not the biography which explicates the work, but rather the work which sometimes enables us to understand the biography” (58). This chapter examines the creative skills in handling the personal elements in Anne Sexton and Kamala Das.

The art in Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, in general, is a fascinating amalgam of memory and experience in the here and now; the past as well as the present. Often, the poets in them submerge into their past ‘selves’ and dramatically reappear again into their immediate present in their poems. “The exploration, in rotating flashbacks, produces some riveting line-images” (Kerr 12). The range covered in their art extends from emotions of their childhood and adolescent nostalgia to the discerning years of their critical vision and maturity of womanhood, dwelling, in particular,
on their inmost traumas pertaining to the emotional, physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of their sensuality. True to M.L Rosenthal’s assertion that confessional poems “put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization” (79), both Sexton and Das put themselves at the centre of their poems exhibiting their experiences in life.

Anne Sexton and Kamala Das belong to two nations of vastly different cultures which inhibit their equally diverse individual sensibilities. Sexton’s poetry “conveys a sense of powerfully felt experience in strikingly concrete images” (Ferrier 365). Sexton being an American, constructs the edifice of her poetry against the American milieu, highly self-conscious of her cultural heritage: “I live in Western, Mass, Middle-Sex county, / U.S.A., ...” (CP 385). As Harrex points out, “the medium of her literary form whether verse or prose – of its theme, imagery, tone, style, cultural content – seems peculiarly indistinguishable from the medium of authorial voice and personality” (2).

Kamala Das being an Indian, writes her poetry against a typically Indian background: “I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar,” (OP 26). As Ramachandran Nair observes, “her poetry is not merely Indian like that of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu before her, but a passionate expression of
the universal experience of love, despair, anguish and failure apprehended through a feminine Indian sensibility” (1).

Anne Sexton’s poems which are “anguished in tone and autobiographical in content” (Howard 303), dwell on the details of places. Sexton once told an interviewer: “Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get the story at its heart” (Kelves 22). As Virginia rightly observes, “Sexton gives us an almost day-by-day account of her intimate life” (xvii). For instance, she points out how the memory of her native Squirrel Island in Maine, is inextricably associated with that of her own grandfather:

Sometimes on the island, in down Maine,
in late August, when the cold fog blew in
Off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell,
and grandfather’s cottage grew and strange. (CP 4)

Towards the close of this poem, Sexton strikes a note of nostalgia for this childhood experience, which appears like a dream to her now. She says, “opening my eyes”, “still, I search in these woods … find nothing worse / than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns” (CP 5).

Of all the places mentioned in Sexton, Boston seems to be the most favoured one for Sexton. Boston was the first permanent place of settlement in Sexton’s life and this accounts for Sexton’s partiality for the city. The
city even figures as a maternal character in her life, where she has to “feed a minimum / Of children their careful slice of suburban cake” (21).

In “The Kite”, Sexton describes West Harwich, Massachusetts, with an intense feeling of nostalgia, recalling a summer day of 1954, with almost a Wordsworthian feeling for the Sylvan Wye, reflecting the past in the present. Sexton too visits the place after an interval of five years and sets down her memory in a wonderful poem: “It was much the same / five years ago. I remember / how Ezio Pinza was flying a kite” (CP 12). Sexton’s power of memory is something to be astonished at, and as she herself said, “I have a terrible memory – it’s all a mystery to me, it all just happens” (Kelves 43). As A.R.Jones points out, Sexton’s “ability to realize complex landscapes of mind in visually concrete terms is one of the main sources of her poetic strength” (35). Significantly, Sexton’s views of places are tinged with a certain objective, cool-hearted detachment, associated more with thoughts than emotions.

For the most part of her married life, Kamala Das spent her life in the metropolitan cities of India. Reference to ‘Calcutta’ occurs in many of Das’s poems such as “Summer in Calcutta”, “Wild Bougain Villae” and “Of Calcutta”: “By the memories of carnage and of death, yes, our / Calcutta, where we lived as children once” (OP 56). In “Delhi 1984”, Das describes the 1984 riots in Delhi that broke out following the murder of Indira Gandhi.
Her “Farewell to Bombay” registers in the most unmistakable term Das’s emotional attachment to the city of Bombay: “I take leave of you, fair city, while bears / Hide somewhere in my adult eyes / And sadness is silent as a stone” (OS 38). It is the teeming humanity of the city that endears the metropolis to the poet, who bids a painful farewell to the “slender shapes behind window panes”, “to yellow moons”, “to the birds”, “to the crowd / Near the sea”, “to the silence and the sound”, “to streets that I never walked”, “to lips that I never kissed”, “to children / Lovely as flowers” (38).

Das’s works “The Anamalai Hills” and “Anamalai Poems” bring out her passionate devotion to the Anamalai hills, where time stands still, and nature has her own superbly somnolent routine, allowing mists to linger a little longer on the craggy peaks:

There are no clocks here at Anamalai, no cock crowing the morning in, as the muezzins call from cold mosques
Only the mist so absentmindedly lingering on long past the dawn’s legitimate hours and the invisible bird’s crazed cry, occasionally from the mosquito tree. (OS 47)

In this poem, Das “allows herself to luxuriate almost erotically, in the crisis of the self” (Raveendran 152) and it is the work of the soul “gripped by the
torment ... of solitude and devoured by a longing for community” (Lukacs 45).

In “For Cleo Pascal”, Das writes of her stay in Canada, lovingly dwelling on the typical grandeur of Canadian silence. Her “At Chiangi Airport” talks of the splendour of Singapore: “And, at Singapore I told myself, travel light, / ... The airport unveiled death’s lustrous chambers” (OS 46). Das’s “Smoke in Colombo”, captures a blood-chilling episode she encountered during her stay there, when “On that last ride home we had the smoke / Following us, ...” (OS 58). K.Radha feels that Das’s “Colombo poems’ show her “as a champion of the oppressed and the suffering and as a bitter foe of dictatorship” (7-8).

The poems of both Sexton and Das show a special kind of love the poets have for their childhood homes. Sexton’s intensely felt pain at the division of the parts of her ancestral house among her two sisters on the death of her mother, reflects her profound attachment for the home of her childhood:

... I trip
on your death and Jesus, my stranger
floats up over
my Christian home, wearing his straight thorn tree. I have cast my lot
and am one third thief
of you .... (CP 42)

The haunting sense of pain Das feels for her dying ancestral home in Malabar and its unfulfilled promise are presented in her "Blood". Das identifies herself so close with the house that she feels in its ultimate collapse, the death of some animate being. From every town she lives in, "I hear the rattle of its death / The noise of rafters creaking / And the window's whine" (OP 18). In My Story, she writes, "From every city, I have lived I have remembered the noon in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a homesickness" (36).

Das is full of her proud and dignified ancestral Nalapat house in Malabar, Kerala. To her, "The House" was far from being inanimate. "Kamala draws sustenance from memories of childhood and of her home in Malabar" (Nair 19). At her great grandmother’s death: "... I thought I saw the windows close / Like the closing of the eyes / I thought I heard the pillars groan" (OP 18).

The Nalapat home has emerged almost as one of the living characters in Das’s poems, as it so powerfully evokes the memory of her great grandmother. In one of her interviews, she asserted "If there is a paradise on earth for me, it is this, this old house beside the sea" (1973, 19). It is her ardent devotion to the family of ancient heritage that renders the
poet's ancestor so admirable in her eyes: "... I love this house, it hurts me much / To watch it die" (OP 16). As Murali has rightly observed, "for her there is neither escape from, nor extinction of personality, but only as escape into personality" (113).

Several of Sexton's poems express her intense feeling for the sea and the seascape. "The sea was in her history and in her daily experience" (Shurr 194). Sexton attributes considerable feelings to the sea, as she invests the waterfront with a past which she values highly:

Oh my Atlantic of the cracked shores,
those banished gates of Rockport and Boothbay,
those harbor smells like the innards of animals!
Old childish Queen, where did you go,
you bayer at wharfs and Victorian houses? (CP 134)

In an interview, she once said, "I ... live right near the sea and love it. Your region becomes embedded in you" (Madden 178).

Das too recalls the seascape of her native Malabar with intense nostalgia:

I set forth again
For other towns,
Left the house with the shrine
And the sands
And the flowering shrubs
And the wide rabid mouth of the Arabian Sea. (OP 18)

Sexton’s recollections of childhood are vivid, replete with the memory of her grandfather, great grand father, great aunt, father, mother and daughters. “She spoke in a direct, intimate way of people she loved. Her concentration on human relationships produced sharp, masterful portraits of people who were worth keeping alive, or worth resurrecting. That they were often “all her pretty ones” creates part of her poetry’s poignancy” (George xii). However, Ian Hamilton is of the view that “there is the burden of minute personal detail, the family album, the local history, the pile of old letters, that swarms upon the poet as she digs back into her life; that so much complicated feeling could just have vanished” (128). Das, on the other hand, has recalled the memoirs of her grandmother, great grandmother, father and sons. As Brewster observes, Das’s poetry “charts the world as seen from a woman’s eyes, as wife, lover, mother and grandmother, each role constituting different demands and a different perspective on the people around her. At odds or in harmony with them, the poet channels experience at a grassroot level through the contemplative eye of the imagination and is defined in her personal relationships” (98).

Sexton reveals her singular devotion towards her great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley whom she affectionately calls Nana, appearing in many of
her poems and who exercised an immense influence on her. Das entertains similar feelings of devotion towards her grandmother. When her grandmother died, she felt that “I am so alone / and that I miss my grandmother” (OP 5).

Both Sexton and Das accord to their respective fathers a prominent place in their poems. Sexton gives vent to her own peculiar strains in her relationship with her father. Some of her poems express a feeling of rejection and some others talk of his obsession with amassing wealth: “My father’s calls clicked each night / intent on making money” (CP 162). If her mother disapproved of her levity, her father was utterly indifferent: “Mother frowned at my wasted life, / My father smoked cigars. / … My father didn’t know me” (CP 162). Her father’s drunkenness turned out to be the last straw in their relationship: “The year I ceased to believe in you / is the year you were drunk” (CP 326). In short, Sexton does not find anything admirable about her father and accuses him of debauchery, drunkenness, cunning, lethargy and hollow sentiments:

... He went out on the rotten blood
he used up on other women in the Middle West.
He went out, a cured old alcoholic
on crooked feet and useless hands.
He went out calling for his father
who died all by himself long ago. (CP 100)
Das's father too played a dominant role in shaping and influencing her daughter's life. In fact, Das had come to entertain a great fear for her father: "Next to Indira Gandhi my father I feared the most" (OS 118). She had the notion that he disliked her for her dark complexion and took recourse to short lived love affairs. Whether true or not true, there was a distinct gulf between Das and her father. It is only after his death, Das summons enough courage to comment on his ideas:

Father I ask you now without fear
Did you want me
Did you ever want a daughter
Did I disappoint you much
With my skin as dark as yours
And my brooding ways. (OS 118)

Dwelling on the sickness and the funeral of her father, Das also records the agony only a daughter can feel for her father, who had lived a valiant life: "They did the lumbar puncture / Folding you like a canvas chair / Yet you did not once protest" (OS 115). The poem also celebrates the essential dignity of the dying man who could elicit a silent admiration even from his hidden enemies: "For nine days and nights you were on the rack / While your secret foes came to watch you die" (OS 114).

Sexton's recording of her father's death too is moving. She recalls how he leaves them alone, "Where you followed our mother to her cold
slumber, / a second shock boiling its stone to your heart / leaving me here to struggle and disencumber” (CP 49-50). The poet has a different and unique way of looking at her father in his death, quite contrary to that of the world that pays him simply a formal homage: “Gone, I say and walk from church, / refusing the stiff procession to the grave / letting the dead ride alone in the hearse” (CP 49). In Das, the agony over her father’s death is conveyed in cryptic monosyllables: “I have seen death / And I shall not forget” (OP 48).

Sexton records the illness of her mother in several of her poems. In “The Double Image”, which Greg Johnson praises as “the longest and the finest of the poems” (20), we read that Sexton’s mother fell a victim to breast cancer. “The Operation”, which P. McDonnell calls a “journey into autobiography” (135) likens the development of Sexton’s foetus in her mother’s womb to that of the cancer ravaging her mother’s body: “It grew in her / as simply as a child would grow, / as simply as she housed me once, fat and female” (CP 56).

Sexton’s mother Mary Gray, herself a poet, entertained a queer jealousy of her daughter’s skill as an established poet of the time. Like Sexton’s mother, Das’s mother Balamani Amma was also a famous poet writing in Malayalam. However, unlike Sexton, Das’s autobiography does not record any of her mother’s feelings of resentment or jealousy in respect of her skill as a poet.
Both the poets in question are mothers, and regardless of their nationalities, they dwell on certain universal feelings of motherhood. While Sexton’s maternal feelings are solely directed towards her daughters, those of Das are exclusively meant for her sons. Nevertheless, what is common between the two poets is their ‘motherly’ kind of anxiety for the well being of their children. Sexton records her joyous feeling when her daughter calls her ‘mother’, a word that falls in her ears as a link, a long, apparently endless human chain: “You call me mother and I remember my mother again, / Somewhere in greater Boston, dying” (CP 41). Ironically, Sexton also sees her mother in her daughter:

... didn’t want a boy,  
only a girl, a small milky mouse  
of a girl, ... needed another  
life; another image to remind me. (CP 41-42)

In poems such as “The Fortress” and “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman”, Sexton shares with her daughter some feelings of anxiety over the latter’s safety and future. As Demetrakopoulos points out, the mother-daughter relationship underlies the development of “feminine consciousness in women”, which he terms “Demeterkore configuration” (118) and C. Kerenyi calls it “the archetype of feminine destiny” (xxxi), and Bolen also shows how it applies to “women’s psychology” (89).
Having suffered much in life, she warns her daughter to understand the real nature of her body and its needs and possible traps. Being a genuine artist, unlike several old mothers, Sexton, however, takes cognizance of her daughter’s feminine sensibility at the threshold of her puberty:

Oh, darling, let your body in,
let it tie you in,
in comfort.

What I want to say, Linda
is that women are born twice. (CP 148)

hence, Sexton counsels her daughter to be thoroughly forewarned: “standstill at your door, / sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone” (148).

This kind of a shared, vicarious anguish in her recollected experiences is the peculiar feature that marks off Sexton’s autobiographical poetry. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that Sexton’s poems to her daughters bring out also the transcendent, universal kind of maternal love, regardless of its infrequent eccentricities.

[Her] power lies in her talent for dramatizing her own existence in the wide range of its moods, memories, relationships, aspirations, desires, and for doing this without
evading the necessary consequence of having to face herself squarely in the mirror of her art. (Mills 110)

Das too expresses her maternal feelings for her sons in her poems and like Sexton, she also gives expression to universal feelings of motherhood including anxiety and love. In fact, motherhood constitutes the core in Das’s poem “The White Flowers”, which presents the anxiety of a mother over her infant son born in an age of violence of war and despair. The ‘white flowers’ in the poem, get contrasted against a backdrop of blood shed. However, the poem shifts from the specific focus of a mother lamenting over her newborn son to the more general “weeping of old mothers”, thus transcending the personal and moving towards the universal: “Today some of us will rise and sing of love / In voices never as sweet before, for love like life / Is sweetest just before its ends” (D 24). The closing lines focus on the anxious mother, who simply blesses her child with long life: “Today I shall kiss the crown of my baby-son’s head / And wish him a long life before putting him to bed” (24).

In “Jaisurya”, a personal poem, Das dwells on the pain as well as the gain attending a child’s birth. Urinda Nayar points out that this poem “is about the primal hunger of the womb” (53). It is raining cats and dogs outside, even as her son is born:

... It rained on the day of my son

Was born, a slanting rain that began with
The first labour pain and kept me
Company, sighing, wailing, and roaring
When I groaned. … (D 27)

On this occasion, the “rain” pouring outside is suggestive of the incessant and yet intermittent labour pains preceding childbirth. The breaking of dawn in the poem suggests the ceasing of the pains with the arrival of the baby, here a ‘son’ resplendent as beaten gold of the ‘sun’. Das finds in the ‘sun’ an objective correlative for her ‘son’:

Out of the mire of a moonless night was
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of
The wrong is born the right and out of night
The sun-drenched golden day. (28)

Das has also written about her dead son in one of her poems: “I was / The Maker of your world, said the mother, but when you died you seemed / To take away mine” (OS 78). Here, Das expresses the view that “there is nothing like love” (OS 47), and asserts that maternal love can even redefine the course of eternity: “I live and wither, you die, but blaze with a wondrous life, for / A mother’s love often fashions a kind of eternity” (78).

Sexton’s poetic art includes a veritable picture gallery of real life persons, designed and executed with a keen observation and a striking sense of colour. Hayden Carruth opines that Sexton’s poems are
documentaries of experience where images and ideas “may be strengthened and consolidated in more fully objectified, imagined poems” (698). In “All My Pretty Ones”, Sexton ponders over an album of photographs and identifies a “small boy” who “waits in a ruffled dress”, a “soldier who holds his bugle like a toy” and a “velvet lady who cannot smile” (CP 50). In “The House”, she gives an amusing catalogue of different people whom she has observed carefully, as for instance, the Irish boy, “who dated her”, the maid “as thin as a popsicle stick”, the aunt who ‘continues to knit”, the house boy whose “jacket shines”, and the milkman who “walks in his cartoon” (73). As it is rightly observed by May Swenson, “her method is as uninhibited as entries in a diary or letter” (165).

Das’s memory too embraces certain indelible images etched out in her childhood memory as, for instance, “Nani” which dwells on a suicide episode far beyond the grasp of the child protagonist (OP 40). In “For Auntie Katie”, Das recalls an aunt who commands an immense respect in her eyes (OS 129) and in “Fathima” she dwells on a cancer patient precious in her view (OS 35).

Besides recollections of people, there is also in Sexton and Das a long series of pictures of certain events which continue to remain memorable. As Lally observes, “Sexton’s poems are full of common things” (3) and as Marvin Bell points out, “Perception has two meanings: sight and insight. I believe that both sight and insight derive from fierce
consciousness, whether it begins in looking at a small object or in paying
attention to all of the implications and resonances of an idea or image” (38).
In “Torn Down from Glory Daily”, Sexton dwells on the imagery of
seagulls. She watches them “striking the top of the sky” and a particular
gull which descends to the shore to pick up bread crumbs making several
other gulls follow its trail (CP 6).

In “Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall”, Sexton
describes how a portrait of a woman and “a pewter urn / pinned to the
tavern wall”, kindle in her a sudden romantic urge to join the company of
the prophets (CP 19), and her “The Road Back”, talks of the return from a
vacation, with the laughter of summer, with the white birds forgotten in the
excitement of the drive home (CP 30).

Das also narrates quite a few memorable episodes from her life in
her poems. In “The Dance of the Eunuchs”, “the pathos, the helplessness
and the meanness of the situation are worked and fused together into the
superb lines that embody Kamala Das’s exquisite identification with the
barren spectacle of the spasm-shaken Eunuchs” (Saha 24). For instance, she
captures every gesture of the eunuchs and the electric atmosphere they
usher in: “Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some / Were dark
and some were almost fair. Their voices / Were harsh, their songs
melancholy” (OS 70). As Eunice de Souza observes, Das sees in the
eunuchs, “writhing ‘in vacant ecstasy’ a devastating, image of her own sterility” (44).

In “Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road”, Das describes a funeral scene. Even in a dismal scene like this, Das’s pen does not fail to register the brilliance of the marigolds: “Those dark, thin corpses / All bound with strings of tuberose / And the brilliant marigold” (D 23). As Nair observes, “Kamala Das’s fascination for funeral, cremation and corpse is … a way of dramatizing the contrast between life and death, love and lust” (106).

Anne Sexton “uses poetry to express her painful and extremely personal experiences” (Miller 288). James Tulip comments that Sexton’s poetry is “a poetry of effects ... a rhetorical projection of a personality set off against a world of hard factual things” (45). Sexton’s poems record the deep psychological hurt inflicted on her as a child by her own parents which continue to haunt her till the end. Her poem “Young” captures in vivid terms the loneliness of her childhood: “I lay on the lawn at night, / clover wrinkling under me, / the wise stars bedding over me” (CP 51). In “Those Times …”, Sexton continues to probe into her childhood loneliness lacking human warmth and company. At six, “I lived in a graveyard full of dolls ... / I was locked in my room all day behind a gate, / a prison cell” (CP 118). The terrible cruelty Sexton faced in her childhood at the hands of her own parents perhaps might have been one of the incipient causes that led to Sexton’s schizophrenic depressions in her life later. Such terrible
childhood ordeals were certainly spared for Das, except that she too had her own share of solitude to face as a sensitive child.

In her autobiography, *My Story*, Das recalls a childhood hurt inflicted by a teacher that would not easily disappear from her mind: "I went away to the farthest fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely oh I was so lonely ..." (67). She recalls the same episode in her poem, "Punishment in Kindergarten": "That picnic day when I lay hidden / By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun / Standing lonely in the sky" (OS 72). Vijay Nair is not far off the mark, when talking about Das, he says, "her childhood impressions were indelible and educative" (111). While the "stars" were the only comrades for the child Anne Sexton, the "white sun" was the only companion to the child Kamala Das.

Both Sexton and Das suffered from illness, either physical or mental, and underwent treatment through extended periods of hospitalization which they recall in their poems. There are innumerable poems on her mental illness by Sexton where she opens unhesitatingly the door to the darker side of her life. Especially, her fist volume, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is "Anne Sexton’s attempt to dramatize her mental illness" (Capo 88). In "Music Swims Back to Me", Sexton dwells in detail on her illness and her painful stay in the psychiatric home: "They lock me in this chair at eight
a.m. / and there are no signs to tell the way, just the radio beating to itself” (CP 7).

The poems collected in this volume, Anne Sexton herself observed were, “all about my own madness” (L 80). In “You, Doctor Martin”, Sexton gives expression to her disgust with her frequent admissions to the psychiatric home: “I am queen of this summer hotel / or laughing bee on a stalk / of death” (CP 3). In the same poem, she describes the daily routine of the in-patients in the hospital. The inmates stand in broken lines trying to bring in some kind of order out of disorder. Paul A. Lacey’s analysis of the images of the poem is very significant: “The images emphasize the helplessness and childishness of the patients and the false connections of words and ideas which characterize madness – ‘the frozen gates of dinner’, We move to grave in our smock of smiles” (100).

Sexton’s hospitalizations occurred after every suicidal attempt she made, as a result of her recurrent breakdowns. She developed an unquenchable thirst for death, a severe obsession which would eventually take her life: “Death was simpler than I’d thought. / The day life made you well and whole / I let the witches take away my guilty soul” (CP 36).

The same poem reveals Sexton’s deep longing for death, how she even pretended to be dead at times and how some of her suicidal attempts
were not even very genuine: “I pretended I was dead / until the white men pumped the poison out,” (36).

Like Sexton, Das too has openly talked about her bouts of illness in several poems. One such poem is “A Requiem for My Father”, which makes a glancing reference to her ailment: “From childhood to middle years I have had a raw deal, / Illnesses and loveliness” (OS 115). Further, Das’s poems such as “After the Illness”, “The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit”, and “Old Cattle” dwell on the poet’s fits of illness and her penchant for seeking the comfort of a hospital.

The persona seems to feel benumbed at the existential vision of mutability and mortality, associated with illness and death. These poems serve also as subtle camouflages that conceal their inner inevitable agony. The persona’s sombre self control over her feelings in these poems indirectly points to her neatly acquired inner stability and poise. As in Sexton, in Das too, there have been impulsive moments when she contemplated suicide. In her poems such as “The Invitation”, and “The Suicide”, Das expresses a desire for a watery grave: “All I want now / is to take a long walk / into the sea” (OS 9). In real life also, Das made attempts at suicide. As Bhargavi P.Rao says, “her autobiography records her attempted suicide twice” (124).

As Suguna Ramanathan observes, “the sea indicates that oceanic bliss of non-separation in which the self is not distinguished from the
external world” (22) and according to Northrop Frye, “[water] belongs to, a realm of existence below human life, the state of chaos or dissolution which follows ordinary death, or the reduction to the inorganic. Hence the soul frequently crosses water” (146).

The frequent visits to the hospital have tormented the minds of both the poets. Sexton feels nervous at the very thought of the hospital: “I’m afraid of needles / I’m tired of rubber sheets and tubes” (CP 69). The scene of the hospital disturbs Das even in her dreams. Very often she suffers from hallucinations and nightmares: “Of ward-boys, sepulchral, wheeling me through long corridors / To the X-ray room’s dark interior” (OP 13).

Tranquilizers too play a significant role in the lives of both the poets. Sexton is fascinated with these tablets as they are her only source of solace and comfort in the midst of her physical and mental agony. Her “Lullaby” dwells on the merit of such pills: “My sleeping pill is white. / It is a splendid pearl; / It floats me out of myself,” (CP 29). While discussing the significance of the title, Cheryl Vossekuil is of the view: “The very title “Lullaby” connotes something soothing, and the juxtaposition of sleeping pill and lullaby conjures an elemental sense of comfort” (123). For Das too, the tranquilizer is the only means of escape, as she puts it artistically in her poem “Luminol”: “the cold and / Luminous sleep banked in / The heart of pills, …” (OP 12). In one of her interviews, she has confessed, “I had shut
my own conscience in a golden cage and served it with sleeping pills mixed in milk” (27).

Like Sexton, Das too confesses to her readers, her schizophrenic depressions and psychotic outbursts, whenever people gather around her, accusing her saying,

… Don’t play pretending games,
Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love. …. (OP 27)

Sexton’s poems reveal the intensity of her solitude and thickening of the dark shades of suicidal impulses. In poems such as “Sylvia’s Death”, “Wanting to Die” and “Suicidal Note” she explicitly reveals her wish for death by suicide. When she heard the news of Sylvia’s death by suicide she was shocked and was filled with jealousy. She wondered how Sylvia did “crawl down alone / into the death I wanted so badly and for so long, / the death we said we both outgrew” (CP 126). In “Wanting to Die”, she expresses her burning passion for death by suicide: “Suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know which tools / They never ask why build” (142). According to Diane Hume George, the very poem “has become a kind of suicide attempt” (22).
Death-wish in Sexton’s poems is presented as a crazed longing for ultimate power, whereas Das’s poems do not reveal any such passionate lusting for death. In fact, in several of her poems, Das talks of love, life and vitality of nature and humanity. Whenever life tends to threaten her, Das simply plays with the ‘idea’ of death momentarily, just as a means to escape from her immediate pains. Das’s fleeting references to her preference for death in moments of intense crisis is more human than the abnormal, psychotic death-wish of Sexton.

The poems of Sexton and Das reveal a considerable degree of maturity with the years. In “Wall Flower”, Sexton feels elevated and secure enough to be able to forgive the faults of others: “I have forgiven all the old actors for dying / A new one comes on with the same lines, / like large white growths, in his mouth” (CP 76). Das too reveals similar feeling of acceptance and forgiveness in her “Composition”: “I have reached the age in which / one forgives all. / I am ready to forgive friends” (CP 8).

In “Forest Fire”, Das pictures herself as a forest fire swallowing everything at sight, moving like the west wind, with a Shelleyan energy. Like forest fire the poetic self “has engulfed the world beyond the self ... she assimilates the fond details of life in myriad forms and projects an inclusive human consciousness” (Rahman 78). Das reveals her feeling of maturity of accepting whatever comes her way, appreciating every challenge, like the forest fire. The ‘fire’ imagery is profoundly ‘Indian’ in
the sense, everybody is finally consigned to burning flames at death, thus participating in the all-consum ing fire of cumulative maturity of mankind.

Sexton loves her childhood so much that she cannot ever bear the thought of growing into adulthood. The poem "Where I Live in this Honorable House of the Laurel Tree" is written as spoken by Daphne to Apollo:

Too late
to wish I had not run from you, Apollo,
blood moves still in my bark-bound veins.
I, who ran nymph foot to root in flight;
have only this late desire to arm the tree
I lie within. (CP 17)

On the other hand, Daphne, regretting her nymph days, and lamenting her imprisonment in the laurel, here standing for a "House" is Sexton's own mouth piece regretting her loss of the good old past and grieving over her present lot, locked in a suburban family:

I am a fist of my unease
as I spill toward the stars in the empty years,
I build the air with the crown of honour; it keys
Me out of time and luckless appetite. (17-18)
Das too reveals a similar nostalgia for her days of childhood. The poem, “Composition” depicts her sadness in attaining adulthood: “The tragedy of life / is not death but growth / the child growing into adult” (OP 4). Vijay Nair finds a close resemblance of these lines with Wordsworth’s “Heaven lies about us in our infancy” and that “shades of the prison house begin to close / Upon the growing boy” in ‘Immortality Ode’ (113).

Das feels the loss of childhood particularly with respect to the sheer loss of spontaneity:

That was long ago,

Before the skin,

intent on survival,

learnt lessons of self-betrayal. (3)

As Brewster rightly points out, “this symbolic death of innocence and transition into the world of sense experience occurred when “the skin / Intent on survival / learnt lessons of self-betrayal” (103).

There are some interesting contradictions too with regard to some of the poems of these two poets. For instance, in “The Kite”, Sexton describes the place West Herwich, Massachusetts during her second visit there in 1959, and contrasts it with her first visit there in 1954, five years earlier. When she describes the place, she says, “It was much the same / five years ago. I remember / how Ezio Pinza was flying a kite” (CP 11). In the same
poem, in the following lines, she contradicts herself and says, “I mean, it was different that time / with Ezio Pinza flying a kite” (12).

In “For the Year of the Insane”, Sexton confesses her stand on religion: “The black rosary with its silver Christ / lies unblessed in my hand / for I am the unbeliever” (CP 131), and in “The Jesus Papers”, she deliberately mocks God but asserts her belief in God: “‘And would you mock God?’ / ‘God is not mocked except by believers’” (CP 337). The contradiction of ideas in contexts such as these, shows clearly that Sexton’s poems, more often than not, are records of her feelings and thoughts running in her mind at a particular moment. Most of her statements in her poetry are not her final verdict of absolute truth made after considered deliberations of subjects.

In Das too, we can come across some contradictions. In “Blood”, she talks of her ancestral house: “You see this house of ours / Now Three hundred year old” (OP 16). Referring to the same house in “Composition” Das writes: “The house was four hundred years old” (7). In “The Old Playhouse”, her husband is presented as a person who “planned to tame a swallow”, and wanted her to forget “her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless pathways of the sky” (OP 1). But in “Composition”, he is presented as one who gives his wife “freedom, as much as you want” (4). Das’s works are replete with contradictions, and statements such as these in Das do give rise to certain doubts in the minds of some of her readers as to
whether there was ever a dire need in her life to go on the quest of an ideal lover at all.

In the case of both the poets, in sharp contrast to their childhood poems of memories, their poems on the present, dwell chiefly on their experiences as women. These poems explore their present ‘selves’, throwing light, in fact, on the kaleidoscopic dimensions of their inner selves as they boldly lay bare their souls before their readers like open books. The exploration of their recollections reminds us, in a sense, of the recollections of poets like Wordsworth. They were able to bring alive “the buried and neglected female past” (Lerner 166). For Sexton and Das too, poetry, no doubt, ‘is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ as most of their poems are little more than their own emotions “recollected in tranquility”.

There are some undeniable traits of romanticism, in the poets in question, in respect of focusing their prime attention on their own ‘selves’ in most of their poems. The autobiographical touch in a work itself has something essentially romantic about it. The desire to escape from their immediate sources of pain is seen in both these poets, though it is strongly pronounced in Sexton. Her frequent visits to the mental hospital shuts her heart in prison, and she yearns to escape from the snares of the hospital scenario. In “Flee On Your Donkey”, she writes: “Six years of such small preoccupations! / Six years of shutting in and out of this place! / O my hunger! My hunger!” (CP 99). As Caroline King points out, “the poem
proceeds by going backward and forward in time through various associative processes the speaker musing upon the death of her mother and father, her relationship with her therapist, her hospitalizations, her suicide attempts” (58).

Poetry is often a mode of escape with Das too, as she finds a greater security in baring her inmost secrets and most radical views in art, while attempting to escape from the harsh realities of life. In her interviews she asserts that poetry has saved her in her sufferings and that she is even grateful to those people who inflicted pain on her, as otherwise, she could not have written poetry at all. In her interview with Iqbal Kaur, she admits:

I can’t but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they hadn’t hurt me, I couldn’t have been a poet at all and probably the only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the right to live as a poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am grateful to him for the sufferings inflicted on me in my youth, for without them I would not have written poetry at all. (162)

Poetry has thus been a source of escape to Kamala Das, as well. Writing to her is “an appetite, a psychic necessity, a spiritual hunger, a biological desire to write away the loneliness and the betrayal” (Ahmed 130).
In “Anamalai Poems” for instance, Das expresses her yearning for such as escape in explicit terms: “If someone would only remove the sun from my way I would not have to face another sorrowful day ...” (OS 110). Such a wish for escapism springs essentially from Das’s fear of a world of suffering and pain.

Sexton employs several images for presenting her yearning for escape. One of them is the image of the ‘bird’ as a symbol of escape:

All night dark wings
flopping in my heart.
Each an ambition bird.
... He wants to fly ...
He wants to pierce the hornet’s nest
and come out with a long god head. (CP 299-300)

Das also employs the image of ‘bird’ frequently for suggesting ‘escape’. In “The Old Playhouse”, for instance, Das compares herself to the “swallow”, who has an incessant “urge to fly” in “the endless / Pathways of the sky” (OP 1).

The deathwish of their poetry, fits of their suicide mania, addiction to pills and Das’s longing to merge with the sea are all different aspects of escapism in the poets’ art. Seeking an escape in the pills, Sexton strives to “make arrangements for a pint sized journey” (i.e) death. In “The Addict”,

...
Sexton confesses further that she very often does this and that she is the “queen of this condition”: “I’m an expert on making the trip / and now they say I’m an addict” (CP 165). According to Philip Legler, it is “one of the finest poems in the book in which the poet finds her most striking metaphor for contemporary man, for his fascination with self-destruction, with death, with hell” (27), and Eugene Pool calls it an “unforgettably prickling excursion into the human consciousness” (15).

Das’s mode of escape too is sought through her death wish by drowning herself in the sea. In “The Suicide”, she admits, “I tell you, sea, / I have enough courage to die” (OP 39), and in “The Invitation”, it is the sea that invites her to die, and she accepts it in the end because “how long can one resist?” However, the sea is simply an objective correlative in Das’s art. The whirling currents in the depth of the sea, the inherent nature of the sea to bury in itself the boundless and timeless thunderous billows of the waves, echo the very quintessence of Das’s raging soul.

Anne Sexton’s poems are all “intensely personal, vividly and deeply felt … she was going as far down as she could into the cave of herself to find out exactly what was there” (Smith 28). Several of the poems of Sexton and Das dwell on their extra marital love-affairs. Whether or not the accounts of such affairs are genuine, these poems do seem to indicate an earnest attempt on the part of the poets to escape their conventional roles in marital bondage. Sexton exhibits her experiences of love, much true to her
own self. Sexton’s poetry is “full of the superbly obsessive use of one’s life which makes of honesty a fashion” (Bagg 24).

Apart from her love poems included in other volumes, she had brought out a whole separate volume for giving an account of her love-affairs, naming it *Love Poems*. Here, Sexton emphasizes “the predatory character of love-affairs, each participant involved in a big game hunt for self-fulfillment” (Axelrod 182). Most of the experiences dwelt on highlight the carnal and the sensual.

In “Eighteen Days Without You”, Sexton undergoes a living death- hibernation – when her lover is gone for eighteen days:

... You are gone.
I hibernated under the covers
last night, not sleeping until dawn
came up like twilight and the oak leaves
whispered like money, those hangers on.
The hemlocks are the only
young thing left. You are gone. (CP 206)

Innumerable poems included in her *Love Poems* tell stories of Sexton’s illicit promiscuous love-affairs. According to Mona Van Duyn, Sexton’s accounts of her love-affairs are crude and not fully-felt responses:

“The poems have little to do with believable love, having none of love’s
privacy and therefore too frequently repelling the reader; they have a little to do with believable sexuality as an act of intercourse performed onstage for an audience” (140).

In Kamala Das, “autobiographical explorations have been largely limited to her sex life expressed in intensely confessional tone” (Nair 133). Das makes use of several Hindu myths and legends in her love poems. For instance, in “Radha”, it is the women who go seeking out their lover Lord Krishna:

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste, and all the doubting
And the reasoning.
So that in his first true embrace, she was girl
And virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You . . . . (OP 9)

In poems like these, the myth serves as an ideal objective correlative. Das has commitment to “poetry as the concrete correlative of emotional experience” (Williams 118). The persona, a love-sick woman finds no
solace in her present in her married life and so can find bliss only in the arms of her lover Krishna, who offers her companionship at the intellectual, spiritual and emotional levels. By seeking comfort in the Radha-Krishna myth, Kamala Das “builds up a mythic pattern within her own predicament and achieves a double purpose: “one, she associates the myth with experiences of loss and longing to represent her own quest for ideal love and its failure, and two, she uses it as a symbol for the soul’s desire to merge with the God head” (Kurup 111).

Ironically, in every lover she comes across, Das fondly hopes to see Lord Krishna. In “Love”, she is an addict to ‘His’ love:

Until I found you,
I wrote verse, drew pictures,
And, went out with friends
For walks. …
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies, content,
In you. … (OP 23)

As Jacobus rightly points out, “the feminine takes its place with the absence, silence or incoherence that discourse represses” (12).
With Das, every love ends in failure and disappointment, as she cannot see the incarnation of Lord Krishna in any of her lovers. In “Composition”, she admits her failure in love: “I have failed. / I feel my age and my / uselessness” (OP 9). In this poem, “the personal self, transformed into the universal, human self through poetry, appears to arrive at the ultimate vision of the meaning of existence” (Chawan 146).

Often love affairs in Das’s poems merely work out towards an end in physical union, and amount to little more than that. For instance, in “The Freaks”, she discovers that her quest for love is “Nothing more alive than the / Skin’s lazy hungers” (OP 11). Fail as she might with individual lovers, Das’s thirst for true love and here yearning to be loved can never subside. In “The Suicide”, she writes that she wants to be loved, and “If love is not to be had, / I want to be dead, just dead” (OP 35). Hence, “her poetry is a dissertation, and that too a well documented one, of her lived experiences” (Sharma 43).

To Das, the state of being unloved is worse than deadly death. Her handling of her purely personal affairs in her poems is far different from that of any other poet, especially, the women poets in Indian literature. It is Das alone who dares to expose her nudity with such a singular transparency in almost every line of her love poems. She is essentially true to her own Truth which in the case of several women, can remain only as a dream. Normal poets write under a natural fear of being scrutinized by the ruthless
society. Consequently, they would rather try their utmost to conceal a good deal of their personal experiences in their art. Das does never seem to worry about the consequences of baring it all to her readers. Her aching creative soul would always find an uninhibited expression in everything she creates.

Unlike in Das, Sexton’s poems do not reveal any kind of quest for an ideal lover like Lord Krishna. Perhaps Sexton’s handling of love affairs in her poems does indicate an escape of some kind from the trauma of her mental illness. Das’s treatment of love is pronouncedly poignant and emotional. Her quest is desperate that she pledges herself, body, mind and soul in the hands of strange men. Pathetically enough, Das fails in her quest for such an ideal lover. Moreover she lives in a relatively more conventional Indian society, which scrutinizes the personal life of every woman watching her every move thus limiting and inhibiting such a search. Sexton’s society is far less ruthless and far more permissive for her experimentation even in the sphere of love.

Sexton’s handling of her own personal life in her poetry is, indeed, purposeful. “Sexton’s way of fighting is instructive” (Coxe 29). As Spivack rightly judges, “her best material included not only her own suffering, but a more universal outreach” (26). The therapeutic value of her own poem is undeniable. “Poetry for Sexton was always a matter of half-art, half-therapy” (Pollit 71). After all, Sexton started writing poetry on the explicit suggestion of her psychotherapist as a means of cleansing her heart to pour
out everything, evil and good, from her mind. As she herself said, “the surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight” (Kelvess 172) and her writing “helped keep her alive. It gave her a reason to work” (Spivack 30). It was a much needed catharsis for the poet, and “the main impulse behind her poetry is therapy” (Heyen 20).

Paul Lacey rightly observes that Sexton’s poems “are both aesthetic and psychological, both impersonal and highly personal, and they come together in the process finding adequate form, or, to put it another way, in exerting control over the chaos and making it yield up meaning” (97). Sexton indulges in “self-revelation without stint, tell all in an expose of her innermost working that amounts to literary seppuku” (92). What Robert Phillips commented on the confessional poets that they “return that which is uniquely human to poetry” (10) is very much true of Sexton. Her poetry is “a self-contained world where human experience takes shape as literature” (Lawall 6).

Sexton’s art has turned out to be also an excellent case study for others interested in moral, religious, spiritual and emotional issues concerning the individual and the society at large. As A.R. Jones rightly points out, Sexton “believes poetry to be morally directed” (27). Heyen comments, “If you could document the imagination, experiences, … it might be of some value to someone someday … and this is what she had to say about her life” (310).
On the other hand, discussing Sexton, John Holmes has observed:

I am uneasy ... that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrowed a diary that it would be clinical only. Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experiences seems to me very selfish – all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them. ... It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It's all a release for you but what is it for anybody else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? (qtd. in Middlebrook 45)

First of all, even Holmes does not refute the clinical value of Sexton's poetry. There is no question of 'forcing' anyone to read the works of Sexton, unless he or she wishes to. Sexton is a product of a society which needs constant evaluation and correction even on matters related to morals. Surely, some of the needless pains Sexton suffered from could have been prevented, had the society in which she lived, paid a little more attention to vulnerable children, uncounselled, adolescents, uncaring parents – themselves a product of a consumeristic society and mindless and thoughtless adults indifferent to the fact of pain they inflict on the less fortunate fellow beings.

As Suzanne Juhaz puts forth, Sexton's poetry "presents an aesthetics of personal poetry which is conscious that the poem, because it is an object
that communicates and mediates between person and person, can offer, something special for others as well as oneself” (150). Sexton’s poems, which reflect and express private suffering, personal crisis, psychological difficulty, and emotional upheaval are intended to move beyond the pure expression of anguish and to have, as Sexton declares “the effect of the axe”. The epigraph is a quotation from a letter of Franz Kafka:

... the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within. (King 42)

Diane Hume George in her book Oedipus Anne, observes that “the frozen sea within us, as Sexton knew it, always iced by consciousness which keeps us from the depths of both pain and pleasure that arise from breaking the surface and plugging into the past that creates the present” (30-31). Sexton’s assumption of the personal is an expression of creative life that “is rebirth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed” (Ellman 174). Sexton’s poetry has become both an interior and exterior quest for meaning. According to Axelrod,
... like a Phoenix, she rises out of the ashes of her own selves, in each successive book creating herself and her world anew. In this act of creative imagination – which ultimately aims to mend the 'cracked mirror, to reunify the poet with her real inward and outward universes – Anne Sexton profoundly fulfils E.M. Forster's prescription for our modern Cartesian dilemma 'Only Connect'. (184)

However, Beverly Fields is of the view that “the poetry of Anne Sexton expresses a number of symbolic themes which have been read as literal autobiography. Because her work is difficult, the biographical approach to the poems has been a temptation; but while there are elements of autobiography in it, the poetry cannot always be interpreted in this way” (73). Dickey praises that Sexton’s “candor, her courage, and her story are worth anyone’s three dollars” (64). However, she is not without blame also. Jon Rosenblatt comments harshly that “Sexton’s work exemplifies the worst aspects of confessionalism: an impulse to confess without adequate means to transform the personal material” (167). Helen Vendler comments that “Sexton’s poems read better as a diary than as poems” (443). Marilyn R. Farewell, on the other hand, sees the autobiographical approach of a woman in feministic point of view, “she will tend to speak from personal experience because she is socialized in that way and because the ‘universal’ literary theory experience is not hers” (149), and Lehmann is of the view
that "her tortured confessions seemed to be personal yelps rather than universal cries" (148).

Like Sexton, Das is invariably at the centre of everything she writes, her self being the nucleus of her art. "The 'self' being the poetic nucleus of her poetry, her poetry is subjected to enacting psychic striptease of her sweating – self mirroring her life in all its nakedness" (Kurup 134). In "Composition", she states quite explicitly: "I must let my mind striptease / I must extrude / autobiography" (OP 5). Contradictory to the idea of Daruwala, that "the therapeutic element is missing in confessional poetry written in India" (55), Das's poems, as the above lines indicate, are therapeutic. Kohli calls it a "sort of compulsion neurosis" (20). And also, as Williamson puts forth, no one is concerned with controversies such as "whether the writing of personal poetry is in fact healthful and purgative for the poet – a kind of spiritual progress – or whether it can be almost the reverse, a destructive reopening of psychic wounds" (13).

As regards Das's art, it is even not accurate to call it merely autobiographical. For the mind to 'striptease' one's life, does not mean the same thing as writing an autobiography. Das has herself ventured to answer this issue in one of her interviews with Iqbal Kaur: "I don't regret having written it because there was a need at that time ... I wanted to make women of my generation ... realize that they were equal" (167).
If this were indeed the purpose of Das's confessional and rebellious writings, Das's art, that explains several questions relating to her deliberately resorting to exhibitionism, sensationalism, egoism, egotism and through it all perhaps, an implicit didacticism. However, as works of art, Das's contribution will have an abiding value for its virtues of the transparency of her confessions, the translucence of her chosen idiom and the indomitable courage of her daring new vision.