Chapter Three
Writers as Rebels

A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us – Kafka.

The poems of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are essentially feminist in their thematic content. “An interest in Women’s autobiographical writings has accompanied the interest in personal feminist critical styles. Some feminist critics have argued that traditional autobiography is a gendered, “masculinist” genre, given that its established conventions emphasize action, triumph through conflict, intellectual self-discovery, and public renown” (Murfin 127). Taken as a whole, the emotional burden of their works suggests a trenchantly rebellious disposition. As Jarrell said, “A good poet is someone 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” (qtd. in Pollit 71). This chapter makes an attempt to trace the strain of protest in their respective works of art, in order to make a comparative estimate of their revolts from a mutually illuminating perspective.

As for Anne Sexton, the raw material (‘Stoff’) of her poems are the ‘stuff’ of her experiences in her own private life. She wrote “frankly, extravagantly and without apology about the experience of women” (Pollit 67). Her poems are romantic, written in an explicitly self conscious style
and concern mostly about her personal relationships whose intensity finds an inimitable expression in her emotional outpourings. Her poetry is “concerned with exploring the collective experience of women, ... tells a number of different stories about the fate of womankind in the world” (Colburn 166).

Sexton resorted to the writing of poetry, which “was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine” (Marx 30), as a sequel to counselling, following a nervous breakdown. “On 29 May 1957 she attempted suicide” (Middlebrook 42) and her psychiatrist Dr. Orne counselled her, “You can’t kill yourself, you have something to give. Why, if people read your poems they would think, ‘There’s somebody else like me!’ They wouldn’t feel alone” and this was the message Sexton called her turning point: “I had found something to do with my life” (42-43). It is obvious that in seeking to set down her personal experiences in print, the poet is trying hard to shed her “own sicknesses in books” (qtd. in McClatchy 32), in an implicit quest for self-recognition. “The desire to be immortal was a strong motive for Anne’s writing, she said, Death while allowing her immortality, was to be a lover, mother, a comfort, as well as assuring that Anne would be remembered” (Spivack 29). This very urge is symptomatic of her poetry as an expression of protest and explains the Wordsworthian dimension of her art suggestive of a transmutation of personal emotions into impersonal art. “She had the courage to speak publicly of the most intimate of personal experiences, the
ones so many share. She became a spokesperson for the secret domestic world and its pain” (Johasz 151).

Sexton never chooses to label herself as a feminist. In fact, she presents before her readers the image of an exhibitionist, who loves to appeal to her audience only on the strength of her glamour, thoroughly exposing herself, which in itself may be disgusting or unsavoury in the eyes of certain feminists. As Mc Cube observes, Sexton’s “worst enemy may be herself: she is caught in what is a uniquely feminine trap of simultaneously celebrating herself, exploiting herself, letting herself be exploited, and apologizing for herself” (226).

Nevertheless, though Sexton does not intend to resolve any of the issues relating to women’s struggle, several of her poems describe the difficulties of being a woman in a society and a rebellious, non-conformist woman at that. “The woman weary of gender journeys into a dream to find the answer to her predicament” (George 108). Oberg points out that “Anne Sexton has been intensely aware of herself as woman and a woman poet” (87). Her “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” reveals Sexton’s inmost longing to disown her own womanliness:

I dream that I can piss in God’s eye.

I dream that I’m a boy with a zipper.

It’s so practical, la de dah.
The trouble with being a woman, Skeezix,
is being a little girl in the first place.
Not all the books of the world will change that.
I have swallowed an orange, being woman.
You have swallowed a ruler, being man. (CP 385)

This passage speaks volumes of Sexton's innate impatience to do away with her female identity and her desperate eagerness to flaunt a masculine front. Wearing a “zipper” in order to “piss”, marks an assertive, aggressive posture, highlighting the poet's trenchant feeling of “penis-envy”.

Sexton's poem “Consorting with Angels” also dwells on her nascent disapproval of her own female identity:

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks …
I was tired of the gender of things. (CP 111)

As Jeremy points out, “Class, race, and culture [are] always categories within gender, since women’s and men’s experiences, desires and interests differ according to class, race and culture” (20). The very gender she has inherited strikes Sexton as something unbearable, as it is her
identity as a ‘female’ that constitutes the very core of all her problems. “Sexton is very uneasy with her femaleness” (Mc Cube 227) and this is what Betty Friedan seems to mean when she says that Sexton suffers from “the problem that has no name” (11). As Kristeva points out, “the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. What can ‘identity’, even ‘sexual identity’, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?” (214-15).

Interestingly enough, a similar deep-seated disapproval of her femininity and desire to play an andro-centric role in life, is traceable in Das’s poetry too. She wrote against society which insisted on establishing “the significant difference between the lives possible to men and to women and the violence necessary to men to maintain their position of authority” (Heilbrun 16). In “An Introduction”, Kamala Das confesses:

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me I shrank pitifully. Then … I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored My womanliness … . (OP 27)

As Devindra Kohli rightly points out, her poetry is her sincere effort to “redefine herself and her world without … by breaking away completely and violently from the traditional roles of women” (190). Judith Kegan
Gardiner detects, “anger and self-doubt” in the mind of a woman-writer in the context of patriarchal compulsion, and goes on to state that “what unifies women’s writing is the psychology of oppression, the psychology of women living under patriarchy” (121). But as Freud remarks, “the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others” (153).

Significantly, in both the poets the imagery of the “breasts” emerges as the epitome of all the signifiers standing for the ‘femaleness’ or womanliness. Both the poets being highly self-conscious women of extraordinary glamour, are also painfully aware of the predicament in the context of their respective milieu, presupposed by their very feminine identity, a condition which both perceive as something fraught with a certain implicit injustice they both resist.

In the case of Das, such a hatred directed towards her womanliness is eminently a direct outcome of her impatience with the male-dominated caste she hails from, traceable right from the tender age of her early childhood. In one of her interviews she asserts, “I wanted to remove gender difference” (Kaur 164). She “openly revolts against the traditionally accepted strange, queer womanhood concepts in the Indian society, which is so awkwardly full of abominable shams and cants” (Sharma 3). Such a non-conformist stance vis-a-vis the presupposed gender roles of her
contemporary society on the part of Das, attracts at one point, an admonishing counsel from some of her immediate neighbours: “… Dress in sarees, be girl / Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook / Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in …” (OP 27), though the poet-protagonist chooses to rebel against the whole lot of them and, “ignored / My womanliness” (27). As Pandeya observes, “a woman is a woman but her secret desire to be a male finds expression in Kamala’s poem” (41). As Freud observes, “‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ have no basis in biology, but are constructed by the child’s familial relationships” (97). Freud also “found that ‘normal’ sexuality itself assumed its form only as it travelled over a long and tortuous path, may be eventually, and even then only precariously, establishing itself … unification [from bisexuality into one gender] and “normality” are the effort we must make on our entry into human society” (qtd. in Mitchell 17).

Both Sexton and Das vent forth their utmost venom in their open and flagrant transgressions against familial and social conventions and taboos, particularly those slapped against women, even to the extent of risking the wrath of their immediate neighbours. The societies in which they live, be it America or India, expect the ‘persona’ of their poems to adapt themselves to the needs and expectations of their respective societies embedded in their social rules and codes of behaviour. “Women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly
contained by the dominant group” (Showalter 346). The structures imposed on both the poets have been highlighted in art on several occasions, by both of them, and they discussed “female experience previously hidden or overlooked” (Greene 6).

Most eminently, both the poets under discussion seem to entertain and/or endorse several values and notions unacceptable to the existing norms in the sphere of marriage. Both the poets, for instance, view the institution of marriage as an inadequate structure incapable of providing or ensuring happiness and fulfilment, fraught with the potential for all kinds of undeserved frustrations, disappointments, hurts, humiliations, ultimately provoking nothing but hostility and indignant rebellion.

Marriage produces a single social unit, wherein differences among individuals are seemingly dissolved under one name, the name of the father. Thus whether one views marriage as the blissful coming together of equal voices speaking in unison, or as the site of an ongoing dialogue between individuals continuously affirming their differences, we cannot escape the structure it imposes, the patriarchal society it sustains. (Furman 76)

Besides both the women are talented and articulate enough to transmute the suppressed pains of several ordinary, voiceless women, leading mediocre
humdrum lives. A shrill tone of protest or rebellion is audible in several of the poems written by both of them.

Anne Sexton’s pronouncements on romantic love can be seen amply manifest in several of her poems, compiled in a single volume entitled Love Poems. Interestingly enough, in none of these poems on love, does Sexton talk of her husband at all, though she has found a place for him in her group of poems entitled “The Divorce Papers” (Part III 45 Mercy Street 1976), which express her feelings towards him in particular and marriage in general.

In “The Wedlock”, Sexton expresses her disappointment in respect of her expectation of love and security from a husband. He shows his rudeness and primeval brutality towards her with no “ounce of gentleness” (CP 510). Sexton presents her sad plight having been reduced to a mere passive ‘thing’ dominated by his brutal force: “More often now I am your punching bag. / Most days I’m curled like a spotted dog” (510). In “Landscape Winter”, Sexton presents the plight of her role as a housewife as voiceless helplessness: “And within the house / ashes are being stuffed into my marriage,” (511).

In “Walking Alone”, Sexton employs the image of the crucifixion, suggesting the persecution she has undergone, laying a specific stress on her husband’s skill in inflicting an acute sense of pain in her: “this torn
wedding ring, ... / I hold up my hand and see / only nails” (515). In “Bayonet”, Sexton articulates the poignancy of her anger, evoking the figure of a man who can respond to the erotic tenderness of his wife, only with a sharp brutality of a murderous invader: “What can I do with this bayonet? / ... It was made to enter you / as you have entered me,” (515). There is a deep-seated feeling of revenge in her, making him pay for his act of ‘penetration’ which she considers as a violation on her personal territory.

Sexton’s “The Wedding Ring Dance”, names her marital bond as a “moth” and a “web”, from which she must free herself: “the moth of the marriage, / thin, sticky, fluttering / its skirts, its webs” (CP 516). Sexton detests not only her marriage but also everything that reminds her of her marriage, such as the “wedding ring”: “… the indent of twenty-five years, / like a tiny rip leaving its mark, / the tiny rip of a tiny earthquake” (516).

Here, Sexton confesses to a twenty-five year old “rip” in her microcosm / macrocosm. In this particular anthology, Sexton refers to her married years of 25 years also as “my twenty-five years of hanging on” (519); “the twenty-five year old sanctioned love” (520) and “twenty-five years split from my side” (522). She compares her ‘crack’ in marriage to that of an “earthquake”, a deep vertical split that appears, however, ‘tiny’ on the surface. The very refrain of “dancing” in the poem is suggestive of Sexton’s growing hysteria deep within her inner world.
In “When the Glass of My Body Broke”, there is a definite feeling of entrapment when she talks of “Hands / growing like ivy over me” (518). In “Walking Alone”, she employs the related homophone “I.V.”, saying love enters my blood like an “I.V.”, and it’s his “whiplash” (514). Both the images “I.V” and “Ivy” suggest the dominance of the masculine gesture of ‘entering’, ‘dripping’ and ‘growing over’ and the increasing stress on the part of the woman to submit and ultimately the consequent feeling of depression over a feeling of entrapment. “I.V” and “Ivy” thus function as a minimal pair, whose variance is emphatically underlined by this proximity / identity at the aural level.

In “The Break Away” Sexton employs the imagery of “bait” connoting even more explicitly a sense of entrapment in marriage, with a man lost in himself: “I took the bait / and was pulled upward, upward, ... / and became a woman who learned her own skin” (CP 523). The above lines, however, can also present a paradoxically harmonious interrelationship that marks the bond of a man and woman in marriage.

Ironically, though, compared to the gigantic passion roused in the woman, the marital bond emerges only as “tiny” (523) in “the dead city of my marriage” (525). The fury of the physical passion of her husband is quite unlike that she witnessed in her other lovers. The following is a graphic description of the oral sex initiated by her husband before whom she feels utter helpless and submissive: “his furious ice cream cones of
licking, / remains to cool by forehead with a washcloth / when I sweat into the bathtub of his being” (528). There is, however, also a latent suggestion here, of fear of dominance, in the presence of her husband in the above lines, as she cannot help feeling a profound sense of horror whenever she recalls her union with her husband.

Sexton’s poem “Killing the Love” expresses her painful awareness of her vulnerable, solitude and death-in-life, reflecting the utter failure of her marriage: “Now I am alone with the dead, / my insides are empty / and my face is as blank as a wall” (CP 529). It is perhaps only through an obsessive indulgence in sex and excessive passion that Sexton tries to ward off her solitude from her “tiny marriage”. In “The Lost Lie”, Sexton confesses to her feelings of hatred for her husband, perhaps as a result of her perception of the latter’s dominance: “Still I feel no pity for these oddities, / in fact the feeling is one of hatred” (CP 533).

Sexton’s “End, Middle, Beginning” marks a milestone amongst this group of poems for it highlights the fact that Sexton was a rebel right from her conception in the womb. She narrates how even as a foetus she tried to stick on to the inner walls of her own mother’s womb, when the former tried for an abortion:

There was an unwanted child.

Aborted by three modern methods
she hung on to the womb,
hooked onto it
building her house into it
and it was to no avail,
to black her out. (534)

Sexton presents herself emphatically as a rebel having a highly non-conformist disposition, who can survive against several daunting odds. As Greg Johnson observes, “Anne Sexton’s poetry is a search for identity” (4), and her singular talent for survival continued throughout the later stages of her life too: “Rocks were placed on her to keep / the growing silent,” (534).

Sexton mischievously recounts some of the distracting strategies she adopted, even as she was getting suppressed in her quest for progress, in the same poem: “They locked her / in a football / but she merely curled up / and pretended it was a warm doll’s house.” (534).

Having overcome all the early obstacles in life, Sexton developed a unique skill in handling the challenges posed by her love-affairs as an adult:

Later, later,
grown fully, as they say,
they gave her a ring,
and she wore it like a root
and said to herself,
To be not loved is the human condition, and lay like a statue in her bed. (534-35)

In fact, Sexton grew tough enough to reconcile herself even with the asphyxiation of lovelessness as a grown-up. Quite uncharacteristically of her, she continued to entertain some optimistic notions of love, atleast, in her marriage: "love took her in his big boat / and she shoveled the ocean / in a scalding joy" (535). Nevertheless, much to Sexton’s chagrin, this joy proved to be a shockingly short lived one for her, transporting her all the way right back to where she had started in life: "the boat turned into paper / and she knew her fate, / at last." (535).

Though her life seemed to be a process of continuous struggle for sheer existence, Sexton was able to face it boldly and register her defiance of it most of the time, though she could not avenge it totally.

Kamala Das too has voiced similar feelings of being a helpless and tormented victim in the sphere of marriage. In My Story, she writes, "As a marriage, in the conventional sense, mine was a flop" (203). She describes her husband as "the man who did not ever learn to love me" (98). However, unlike Sexton, who has written about marital discord in a full-length anthology of poems, Das has not accorded any such prominent space for her poems on the subject. The poems written on the theme of marital disharmony are, by and large limited in Das, compared to Sexton.
However, Das’s poem entitled “The Old Playhouse”, alone is sufficient to highlight the deep feelings of disappointment, disgust, and despair, deeply entrenched in the heart of the defiant poet in the teeth of domination she met, at the hands of her domineering husband. “In a bitter, piercing, cathartic tone, Kamala Das ridicules traditional imposters, show of masculine strength and also man’s lust” (Sharma 3). He also says that “confessional poetry of Kamala Das has been inferred to be associated with cathartic effects and intense feminine sensibilities” (10).

Das’s poem is a forthright and sharp arraignment of her husband, which visualizes the overtures of the newly weds, almost in terms of two enemies strategically ranged against each other:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. … (OP 1)

Here, Das uses the image of the wild bird ‘swallow’ to indicate the woman’s instinctive ‘urge to fly’. Such an ‘urge’ to fly or escape from a suffocating confinement could have also been a resultant of her own excessively sensitive or rebellious disposition. The very tone of the opening line of the poem, “You planned to tame the swallow” suggests an accusing,
judgemental voice raised against someone who planned but could succeed in his attempt to "tame" her and hold her captive in "the long summer of your love", and who wanted her to stamp out her very identity. "The long summer", here stands for the mere heat of physical love and the "homes left behind", for whatever the background she comes from, which has given her a distinct identity. The tone of emancipation as embodied in her "urge to fly" shows Das's unquenchable thirst for unlimited freedom which cannot be curbed by any man in her life. The close of the poem makes it abundantly clear that Das is quite self-possessed even in marriage and is not in dire need of knowing any male anew. In contrast, her husband is utterly lost in self-complacency and egotism:

... It was not to gather knowledge

Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn

What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every

Lesson you gave was about yourself ... (1)

Thus, Das's problem in marital strife stems primarily from the basic fact of her husband's excessive smugness and self-absorption. As Niranjan Mohanty observes, "a truly liberated woman writer must be prompted to uncover herself, uncensor her writing; for these processes she touches the supinely secret unconscious of the female ego" (52), and here Das suits all the demands of the "truly liberated woman".
As a husband, her mate seems to revel in his own sexual prowess and the power he can exercise over his wife’s physique, expecting her to be totally subservient to his lust and yet in the end, rewarding her warmth with little more than filth. The wife means nothing more than another ‘possession’ to her husband, who would remain for ever his faithful vassal and slave: “… You called me wife, / I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and / To offer at the right moment the vitamins” (1).

Quite naturally, over the years, such an iniquitous marital order results in a progressive diminution on the part of the woman, in striking contrast to the monstrous development of the male: “… Cowering / Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic leaf and / Became dwarf. I lost my will and reason” (1). These words echo Virginia Woolf’s saying that “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man as twice its natural size” (36).

While marriage lent her husband an enormous ego that was “monstrous”, she herself had lost all her initial identity, having lost her “will and reason”. Das suggests the confining nature of her husband’s claustrophobic room, as symbolic of his own oppressive male chauvinism:

… Your room is

Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,

All pervasive is the male scent of your breath.

The cut flowers

In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat . . . . (1)

This made her treat “marriage” as “a game of cruelty” (My Story 26).

In short, her marital status has been reduced to be a cheerless stage of a playhouse plunged in darkness, from where the audience have departed: “... There is / No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old / Playhouse with all its lights put out. ...” (1). Das has thus, an irrepressible ‘urge’ to free herself from all kinds of unjustifiable confinement, and hence she raises her voice in protest. As Devindra Kohli rightly point out,

She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her make up, so that not only is she able to speak of the common woman and her basic need for love and security with inside knowledge, but cannot help, in addition, expressing an ambivalence proceeding from her own duality, proceeding from, that is, the combination in herself of a need for domestic security and the desire for an independence, an independence consistent with a non-domestic mode of living.

(27)
According to Das, it is the despotic ego of her husband, and the consequent psychological depression she suffered that drove herself into the arms of the men seeking love and understanding. “The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual – spiritual fulfillment from the husband leads to her search for it in extramarital relationships with other men” (Chavan 61). In “The Maggots”, she makes it abundantly clear that she has gone so far away from her husband emotionally, that she feels as numb as a corpse at her husband’s touch:

That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt so dead that he asked, What is wrong, Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said, No, not at all, but thought, What is It to the corpse if the maggots nip? (OP 22)

She thought Krishna as her lover and said, “It was only by imagining that he was with me that I could lie beneath my husband to give pleasure” (Radha 277).

Like all confessional poets, who “give literary form a new sense of personality, attaching value to the image of man presented by clinical psychology” (Palmer 4), in “An Introduction”, Das writes of her husband’s cynicism and sadism latent in his overtures of love as a husband: “... he
drew a youth of sixteen into the / Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten” (OP 26).

Das always associates her husband with brutal lust and cruelty. Even when she is ill and is kept on sedatives, her husband would come around, craving for the satiation of his carnal needs. In fact, her vulnerability during those silent, supine moments, seems to excite him all the more keenly. But the net result of such tasteless encounters leaves her hurt and humiliated:

On sedatives
I am more lovable
Says my husband

And my ragdoll – limbs adjust better
To his versatile lust. (“Herons” OS 105)

In “Convicts” again Das describes the only kind of love she and her husband could share in each other’s company. The inhuman condition of enslavement constitutes the central imagery of the poem:

That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other’s parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot Sun. ... (OP 25)

Das treats her soul-destroying predicament in marriage as an immediate threat, and longs to extricate herself from it, as her sense of freedom as an individual is so irresponsible. “A refusal to adhere to the conventional role models imposed on an Indian woman by a discriminating society is a recurring motif in her poetry” (Vijayasree 137). There are moments when she listens to her inner voice, calling for a revolt: “Woman, is this happiness this lying buried / Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive, / The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame” (“The Conflagration” D 20).

Curiously enough, Das derives a peculiar joy whenever she is able to inflict some psychological hurt on her husband in return. This is the motif behind her plea for “the return of a social order that allowed woman to have more than one husband if she so desired” (Eve’s Weekly 35). The following passage describes a scene where she gleefully dwells on a proactive stance a woman takes against her husband when she makes him feel her sexual dominance over him in a pathetic fashion. There is thus an undertone of sadistic irony that Das finds, in contexts where a man is revenged upon / vanquished by a woman playing openly the role of an initiator of illicit affairs:
Perhaps it had begun as a young man's most natural desire to subjugate a girl. But when she, being silly, spurned him, he took the country as his bride and rode her for thirty years. Is it any wonder that he felt hurt when the old wife turned whorish and withdraw from under him? I saw him that day lying nailed to his bed, in imitation of the great crucifixion, but, loving him, I found no courage then even to be kind.

("The Proud One" D 18)

In particular, Das holds her husband singularly responsible for her turning whorish in her attitude towards sex. When she got married, her husband said, "You may have freedom / as much as you want. / ... Freedom became my dancing shoe," ("Composition" OP 4).

Das's promiscuity is spurred on by a hope that she would eventually meet with some interesting man who would answer her need. With every interesting man she meets, "I must / most deliberately / whip up a froth of desire" ("Composition" OP 5).

Indulgence in sheer sensual pleasure has almost ended up as a fascinating game with Das. It is little wonder then that Das's love life
eventually went thoroughly out of her control and she became indiscriminate and permissive in her choice of her partners in bed:

After that love became a swivel – door,
When one went out, another came in,
Then I lost count, for always in my arms
Was a substitute for a substitute.
Oh! what is the use, explaining
It was a nameless, faceless crowd. ("Substitute" D 6)

Das's poem "A Man is a Season" places the blame squarely at her husband's door for her reckless ways of endearing herself with permissive men. Neither did she find fulfillment in the arms of any one of her lovers, as she began to realize that she, being a woman, had needs which no male individual could meet, as man's sexual prowess was short-lived compared to hers:

A man is a season,
You are eternity,
To teach me this you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' arms. (OS 80)
Ironically, Das’s experiences with the other men in her life are pathetically frustrating as the one she had with her own husband, for they all turned out to be equally callous and selfish:

They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget ... and, they said each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you ... (OS 81)

Though Das indulged herself for long in this heady show of “empty love” like almost a nymphomaniac would have done, she has not lost the core of her heart and soul to the garish lure of sensuality. She played the role of a promiscuous woman perhaps only to avenge the brutality of her callous life partner.

Having been cheated in her marital relationship which could be summed up only as “brief and brutal sex”, Das realized “then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its
legal orbit. I wanted to be given identity that was lovable” (My Story 84). She was even prepared to offer unconditional love, to perfect strangers as she poetically puts it, “Like alms, looking for begging bowl was my love which only sought for a receptacle” (105). Soon love transformed her life completely.

Again Das mentions the underlying motive of revenge in several of her encounters with sensuality: “When he returned to Bombay the first letter that he wrote was not to me but to a girl-cousin who had allowed him to hug her while he walked towards my home in the evenings. I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him; at least physically” (My Story 95). Das feels that being unfaithful to her husband is the greatest punishment she could ever inflict on him. Ironically, as regards her own self, her very marriage turned out to be a veritable punishment for her. Responding to the question as to why her father had married her off when she was just fifteen, Das has gone on to record: “He had warned me that if I did not do well in Maths, he would marry me off. Unfortunately, I could never do well in Maths, and hence I was married off as a punishment” (Kaur 161). Kamala Das recalls this specific patriarchal mode of punishment with unmitigated bitterness: “You chose my clothes for me … / And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband” (“A Requiem for My Father” OS 118).

Being essentially a rebel, Das turns, revengeful against both the men in her life. On the whole,
the crux of Kamala Das’s poetry is a search for identity. In this process of self-search, she oscillates between her nostalgic past and nightmarish present. Past is a symbol of security, love and freedom, and present stands for insecurity, pretensions and bondage of society. Her consciousness lies stretched between these two poles; it is drawn towards the positive past but held back by the negative present. One emotion, however, that is common to both the states, is that of pain. (Nigam 101)

There is a pronounced difference in the sensibilities of Sexton and Das. While Das cites her cruel marriage as the strongest and all-sufficient motive for all her flamboyant extramarital affairs, Sexton does not flaunt any such well-defined motive for her extramarital affairs. Sexton too has had her share of painful experiences in her marriage, but she has never stated in any of her poems that it was the poor quality of her marital bond that made her go astray. In the case of Sexton, sexual promiscuity was the direct outcome of her severe psychological depressions, caused by a complex of several other personal and social factors associated with her heredity and environment.

Apart from Sexton’s marriage and its sad fall-out, there is also a deliberate transgression on the part of Sexton against the taboos imposed by the family structure in mainstream America, that encouraged Anne Sexton
to opt for promiscuity. Several of Sexton’s poems daringly depict the highly questionable kind of family relationships she was subjected to, quite early in life. Whether it is America or India, family structure demands certain inviolable code of human relationships, rebellion against which entails disastrous consequences.

Some of Sexton’s poems make startling and recurrent references to certain stark incestuous episodes involving some of the responsible adults of her own family. One such reference in Sexton is to the kind of relationship she had had with her great aunt Nana in “The Waiting Head”: “Surely I remember the hooks / of her fingers curled on mine,” (CP 32).

Sexton’s biographer Lois Ames has gone on to record that “I could never believe anything but that Anne was a victim of child sexual abuse by both Nana and father” (Middlebrook 58). “The Moss of His Skin” by Sexton makes an open confession of the gruesome habit of oral sex she was subjected to by her own father as a small child:

I held my breath
and daddy was there,
..............................
I lay by the moss
of his skin until
it grew strange. …
... I hold my daddy

like an old stone tree. (CP 27)

As Irigaray opines, “It would be too risky, it seems, to admit that the father could be a seducer, and even eventually that he desires to have a daughter in order to seduce her” (qtd. in Gallop 502). But as Shoshana Felman observes, a “female psychology” is conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture, and “The sine qua non of feminine identity in patriarchal society is the violation of the incest taboo, i.e., the initial and continued ‘preference’ for daddy, followed by the approved falling in love and / or marrying of powerful father figures” (7). Though she dwells graphically on the events which narrate how she fell a prey to her father’s sexual advances, there is also some suggestion in the poem that Sexton herself felt in a mysterious fashion sexually drawn towards her father. In her “Cripples and Other Stories”, she candidly admits:

Father, I’m thirty-six,
Yet I lie here in your crib,
I’m getting born again, Adam,
as you prod me with your rib. (CP 163)

As Juliet Mitchell points out, the Oedipus Complex is not only “a metaphor for the psychic structure of the bourgeois nuclear family under Viennese
capitalism” but “a law that describes the way in which all [Western] culture is acquired by each individual” (xxi). Bettelheim further points out that “it is only our love for our parents and our conscious wish to protect them that leads us to repress our negative or sexual feelings for them” (23).

Unlike Anne Sexton, however, Kamala Das does not mention any such incestuous relationship with any member of her family in her poems.

It is interesting to note that both Sexton and Das have dwelt upon lesbian relationship in their poems. Some lines of Sexton justify plainly certain traits of lesbianism:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
The mentor
and the student
feed off each other. (“Rapunzel” CP 245)

Das too admits having had a lesbian affair in her “Composition”: “I have lost my best friend / to a middle-aged queer / The lesbians kiss their love at me” (5).

Thus, both Sexton and Das confess their lesbian tendencies in their art. As hetero-sexuality is the dominant norm in American and Indian
societies, both the poets in question have shown a rare kind of autonomy and courage to make their choices in love, on their own personal terms. Adrienne Rich argues that sexuality, as much as motherhood, is medicated by the culture and that lesbianism is more than just “sexual preference; it is a challenge to the institution of heterosexuality, which, in its present form, is structured to keep women under male power” (qtd. in Showalter 451). In a sense such an openly defiant streak of homosexuality itself can be called symptomatic of their gyno-centric rebellion against the patriarchal, chauvinist society, and can be interpreted as a salient ‘feminist’ trait.

Both the poets discussed here have also transgressed the conventional limits in respect of their openly admitted extra-marital love affairs. Sexton makes repeated references to her extramarital affairs in the different volumes of her poetry, the most striking among them by far being her volume of verse entitled Love Poems devoted perhaps exclusively for a graphic account of such affairs. No reader of Sexton can read these poems without experiencing a sense of shock at the numerous affairs narrated in it.

Sexton gives vivid accounts of her different lovers in her poems. As for their identities, one lover is represented as a musical “composer” (CP 175) who simply tunes on the music in the nerves of her body. Another lover is represented as an “architect” (175) whose “fingers” are “the key to everything”, which make her come “alive”. Another is represented as a “carpenter” (174) whose fingers, in a sense ‘rebuild’ her. According to
Sexton yet another lover is “an industrialist” (204) who “is building a city, a city of flesh” in her. She calls one such lover “my voyager” (207) too “dogging up the old globe”. In fact, Sexton calls all her lovers as “migratory birds” (216) who “‘ll be back / with their built-in compass”. It is so very plain that the ultimate aim of all these lovers is little more than their own respective sexual quest, utterly devoid of soul, in sharp contrast to her own predicament: “my need is more desperate!” (188).

Like Sexton, Kamala Das too has admitted the vast sexual hungers in her, citing numerous episodes from her life. “I often walked with young men along the sea flaunting my unconventionality” (Debonair II 41). A silent burden of Das’s poetry has been her yearning for love, explicitly spelt out in the context of several love episodes. In one such poem, Das declares her own “unending lust”, when

… his limbs like pale and
carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me, and the sad lie
Of my unending lust. (OP 15)

Das is also much disappointed to realize that all such relationships after all are mere skin-deep: “This skin-communicated / Thing that I dare not yet in / His presence call our love” (15).
Nevertheless, despite all such revelling in the delight of sheer physicality, there is also a genuine profound quest in Das, as expressed in “Loud Posters” that she has “Spent long years trying to locate my mind / Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath / The bone. . .” (OP 47).

The tense, “I’ve spent long years trying” seems almost to imply that the poet is still pursuing her search. Das may be excitingly sensual as Sexton is, in her depiction of sensuality by the sheer, uncommon degree of relish she finds in doing so. In comparison with Sexton who hails from a relatively more permissive American society, Das has required perhaps a greater courage to talk of violating such taboos of a sexual nature, coming as she does from a much more restrictive and orthodox – not to say, hypocritical – social milieu. In spite of all their differences, Sexton and Das emerge as strikingly rebellious and defiant in the face of age-old social conversations and taboos. Their extraordinary assertion of their right to indulge themselves in the titillation of the flesh as women artists, strikes at the root of the conventional structure of the family which essentially constitutes the basis of any human society.

In fact, Anne Sexton goes a step further, when she starts challenging the established structures of religion in her poems. Her poetry marks her mental agony, sense of personal loss and her quest for an end to all ills in life. For a while, Sexton turned to God as presented by the church having failed in the spheres of marriage, children and all human relationships. Her
“framework of reference is ultimately religious” (Jones 25). For a time, the search of God proved to be a kind of adventure for her. According to Annamma Joseph, “Religion is a search for the thinkers and a cure for the believers” (135). Sexton felt that her protestant religious identity was too narrow and unbearably oppressive for, she felt that God was indifferent and almost spiteful towards humanity. Moreover, she could not approve of the Christian religion which looks upon Man as essentially sinful. Hence, in a sense, through her art, Sexton “attempts to create a new spiritual environment which would be a liberation to her to create her own God” (Palaniyappan 71).

The last three volumes from Sexton entitled The Death Notebooks (1974), The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975) and the posthumous 45 Mercy Street (1976), however, show a distinct change of direction in Sexton’s religious poetry. For in these works, Sexton creates a new God of her own, quite unlike the crucified Christ or the God of the Old Testament. As Philip Wheelwright points out, communion between man and God represents “assimilative ritual which consists in reaffirming and attempting to intensify man’s continuity and partial oneness with nature, or with the mysterious creative force behind nature” (179). It is true that the “God” of these poems is ‘transcendent’ in terms of the social, domestic, and sexual existence of man and is only one who can really save her. In the course of
the “Psalms” in the *The Death Notebooks*, Sexton prays “that God will digest me” (CP 399).

*The Death Notebooks* contains, in fact, three sequences – “The Death Baby”, “The Furies”, “O Ye Tongues”. *The Book of Folly* has three more volumes in the series – “Angels of the Love Affair”, “The Death of the Fathers” and “The Jesus Papers”. The opening poem, “Gods” in “The Death of Books” is so powerful that it brings out Sexton’s bewilderment and disillusionment with the collapse of her faith in God and all established religions and theological concepts:

Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods.

She began looking in the sky –

expecting large white angel with a blue crotch.

No one.

She looked next to learned books

and the print spat back at her

No one. (CP 349)

The use of the symptomatic refrain “No one” reiterates the poet’s anguished cry of frustration over the failure of her quest. Eventually having arrived at the conclusion that God is not to be found in any external source, the poet gives up: “At last / she cried out / and locked the door” (349). Sexton, thus, withdrew herself from the outside world of action into an
inner word of chronic solipsism. In Sexton’s nine-poem sequence entitled “The Jesus Paper”, in The Book of Folly, “each centering on the motif of female victimization within patriarchy” (Ostriker 187), man’s sensuality turns out to be the dominant theme. “Jesus Dies” presents Jesus’ crucifixion as something that satisfies an unsatiable hunger, which Jesus vicariously shares with every human individual:

I want heaven to descend and sit on My dinner plate
and so do you.
I want God to put His steaming arms around me
and so do you. (CP 343)

It is significant that Jesus is presented here as a man of multitudes, of hunger and weaknesses, though he remains at the same time, as one attempting to surmount them.

In “Jesus Awake”, Jesus is pictured purely in carnal terms as someone trying to suppress his own sensual hungers through fasting: “His sex was sewn into Him like a medal / and His penis no longer arched with sorrow over Him. / He was fasting” (CP 338).

In “Jesus Asleep”, Jesus’s “sore need” for Mary comes to the surface and persists with him, until at last he gets satiated with his crucifixation:

He swam through the godhead
and because He had not known Mary
they were united at His death,
the cross to the woman,
in a final embrace,
poised for-ever
like a centerpiece. (CP 339)

“Jesus Cooks” presents Jesus as one who is likely to do mean things,
just to save his own face on every important occasion:

Jesus took the fish,
a slim green baby,
in His right hand and said, oh Lord,
and the Lord said,
Work on the sly
opening boxes of sardine cans
And He did. (CP 341)

Sexton feels that a religion that hinders heaven, prohibiting analysis
and exploration, and attempts to impress the humans sheerly through a
mode of mystification is simply not her cup of tea. Sexton once remarked
of Jesus, for instance: “Hell, He’s no goody-goody if He’s worth anything!
... I probably can’t stand to have Him so much better than me” (Ferrari
282). Beatrice Berg on the other hand comments that Sexton is fascinated
by another Jesus: “Perhaps it’s because he can forgive sins” (7).
Apart from such open, recurrent repudiations of religion, Sexton also daringly presents Jesus visualizing Him in purely sensual terms attributing to Him nothing but carnal passion. He raises up the Harlot in her poem thus:

Again He held up His hand
and the Harlot came and kissed Him.
He lanced her twice. On the spot.
He lanced her twice on each breast,
pushing His thumbs in until the milk ran out,
those two boils of whoredom. (CP 340)

The above descriptive mode not only reveals Sexton's psychological trauma, but her rebellious outburst against the established religion on the whole. According to Sexton's friend Maxine Kumin, there was a period when Sexton was obsessed, desperately with a need for certain vital absolution in religion:

Anne sexton was strongly attracted to, indeed sought vigorously a kind of absolutism in religion that was missing from the Protestantism of her inheritance. She wanted God as a sure thing, an Old Testament avenger admonishing his chosen people, an authoritarian yet forgiving God decked out in sacrament and ceremony. Judaism and Catholicism each
exerted a strong gravitational pull. Divine election, concession and absolution, the last rites, these were her longings. (364)

However, Procopiow comments, “All the irreverence begins to resemble old-fashioned Puritan repression. The further paradox lies in the coy and very unliberated way Sexton pursues God, her ultimate seduction!” (3).

Sexton’s poem “The Sickness Unto Death” with its touch of hope, marks the final phase of Sexton’s spiritual exploration. There is an unmistakable tone of disgust with herself in this poem, which might have originated from a profound sense of guilt miserable depravity on the part of Sexton:

I kept saying:
I’ve got to have something to hold on to.
People gave me Bibles, crucifixes, a yellow dairy,
but I could not touch them,
I who was a house full of bowel movement,
I who was a defaced altar,
I who wanted to crawl toward God
could not move nor eat bread.
So I ate myself. (CP 442)
The poem admits to a certain self-conscious inadequacy in the pure and august presence of God. Sexton also realizes that it is precisely at the point of the death of her own sinful inner ‘self’ that Jesus confronts her, breathing into her a new life. He “put(s) His mouth to mine / and gave me His air.” (CP 442). Such a glimpse of liberation through redemption is the nearest that Sexton comes, to the established tenets of Christianity. As Axelrod points out, “the resolution, as the poet herself knew, goes beyond poetry to belief” (361).

The poem, “With Mercy For the Greedy” in Sexton’s second volume, All My Pretty Ones, projects some of her views on religious belief. The poem “has a dramatic occasion as well as a persuasive message” (Capo 227). Sexton had a Catholic friend called Ruth Soter to whom she had confided once that she had had an abortion. Soter immediately wrote to her asking to seek forgiveness through sacraments of the Catholic Church, enclosing a tooth-marked wooden cross. This poem is Sexton’s reply in which she expresses her own view on Christianity.

In the five stanzas of the poem, Sexton sets up two parallel kinds of “mercy”: the one available to Ruth through religious practices, and the other kind of mercy Sexton herself can achieve, through writing poetry, both of which derive their potency from confession: “Like Soter’s cross, Sexton’s metaphors are vehicles of Spirit” (Middlebrook 123). Soter is able to find mercy through the sacrament of communion, which is denied to
Sexton: "I detest my sins and I try to believe / in the Cross. … / But I can't. Need is not quite belief" (CP 62). It is significant though that Sexton has hung Ruth's cross around her neck:

All morning long
I have worn
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,
tapping second hand, softly waiting to be born. (63)

Interestingly, the poem closes with a paradox connecting Sexton's view of mercy with that of Soter's:

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)

Mary Daly calls Sexton's trying to redefine God an "ontological self-affirmation" (32).

Sexton's religious views can also be seen from her letters addressed to her poet-friend Snodgrass. Sexton wrote them at a time when she thought
that her problems might be better understood in spiritual rather than in psychiatric terms. An extract from one such letter to Snodgrass quoted in her biography underscores Sexton's agnosticism:

I certainly don't believe in God ... and that's rather sad of me. ... I wish religion would work with me. As far as I can see life is just packed with dead people and God knows I keep bumping into them every which way I try to turn (Middlebrook 122).

Thus Sexton emerges also as one of the most persistent spiritual explorers in art, whose journey reveals different facets of an ironic doubter, an earnest quester, a desperate believer, a deplorable despairer, a happy celebrant, and an uncompromising recorder of human emotions who could stare unflinchingly at Truth, till the end. It is true that Sexton could mock her God, dreaming she could "piss in God's eye" (CP 385) but was careful to concede that "God is only mocked by believers" (CP 337). Before she became a submissive supplicant, she produced some of the most startling criticism of what according to her cultural milieu spiritual and sacred. She deconstructed the life of Christ in "Jesus Papers" with singular venom, using the most savagely profane imagery and idiom she could devise. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that she searched out God in the "private holiness of my hands" and in the remote regions of inner earth, ocean and sky. Her deities ultimately resided in the "mother, father I'm made
of" (CP 55). As a critic has opined, she “settled perhaps, for a patriarchal father-god, but she also sought to identify a transcendent mother-goddess she could not name” (George xxi). As Demetrakopoulos comments, “Sexton unfortunately seeks connections with a masculine god; she no longer projects her own feminine images into a vision of a patterned, containing and loving universe” (CP 358) and C.B. Cox admires her “wry self-consciousness” and her tendency to deal with religious themes and images (106).

It is really amazing to come across such a vast range of spiritual views from Sexton, who dwelt for the major part of her career on sensuality. In striking contrast, the poems of Kamala Das do not dwell much on religion or spirituality. In the words of K. Radha, “Politics and religion are not given much importance in her [Das’s] poems” (23). In the words of Das herself,

... I never knew any
Politics, wielded no religion or
Caste to empower my claims; yes, never
Feared calumny, poverty, pain or death. (OS 78)

Kamala Das who staunchly condemns religious intolerance, writes in her poem, “The Inheritance”, about the bitterness caused by religious fanaticism. Her poems refer to the Muezzins’s high wail from the minarets
of the mosque, the chapel bells announcing the angelus, and the Brahmin’s
dassonant chant from the temple with equal panache. As regards religious
fanaticism, it “was our only inheritance” she says with disgust:

... we

Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate, illogical
And chose not to believe – ...

... Slay them who do not
Believe, or better still, disembowel their young ones
And scatter on the meagre innards.

and she concludes the poem thus: “O God, / Blessed be your fair name,
blessed be the religion / Purified in the unbelievers’ blood” (OP 20) in a
tone of paradoxical sarcasm.

“The Blind Walk” is a prose-poem in which there is a synthesis of
love, anxiety of separation and longing for union with the Divine. The mind
is visualized as a city through which the poet walks. It is a walk enveloped
by the “cold poisonous breath of the sea”. The symbolic walk is spattered
with agony and obstructions: “I have left my glasses behind this to be / a
blind walk this is to symbolize my life” (OS 90). She has lost the lover,
“the only landmark I could recognize” in the city. His name lies “cradled in
her breath”. The changes, symbolized by the blind walk, prompt her to
wonder “has the city changed too?” The city’s change establishes the
transformation of the poet's mind from the sensual to the spiritual exemplified by her desire for union with the Divine. The poem concludes with an impassioned appeal to the Lord to come to her leaving "other playmates". The soul's union with the Divine is visualized through the fertility image in the last line. "The red busses" and the felled "lovers tree" are symbols of the forces that destroy love. The "dark rivers", the "lighted boat" and "the sea" suggest the journey of the soul from the past to the future where it merges with the Supreme. In this poem, Kamala Das comes closer to Anne Sexton's 'rowing towards God'.

Apart from these religious poems, like Sexton who uses the stories from the Christian mythology, Kamala Das employs stories from the Hindu mythology, especially the myth of Lord Krishna and Radha to suit her yearning for love but unlike Sexton, reproduces the myth in her poems in the traditional format and does not venture to change or rewrite it. In the words of Radha, "The legends of the Radha-Krishna relationships has exercised an irresistible fascination on the people of our country from time immemorial" (13). Apart from its interest as a love story, it has given many layers of meanings to the readers. Perhaps the most widely accepted of the interpretations is that it is a symbolic representation of the eternal quest of the human soul for the Divine. She once wrote

In one of the Sanskrit plays written on palm leaf by an unknown writer, I came upon a fascinating passage. Radha
abandoned for some years and lovelorn, entreats a traveller to go to Mathura and give message to Krishna. When asked to describe her lover, she says with tears in her eyes, “I do not remember his colour or his height or even his face, all I remember is the bliss I felt when he was inside me, like a seed inside the earth. … Love is beautiful whatever four lettered name the puritans call it by. It is the foretaste of paradise. It is the only pastime that involves the soul. (“Obscenity in Literature” 35-36)

In Kamala Das, the relationship is quite often more physical than spiritual. To Dwivedi, Das also “Sometimes gives a mythical framework to her search of true love and identifies it with the Radha-Krishna myth” (312).

As referred to in her autobiography, Kamala Das was perhaps inspired by the poems of her great grand mother’s younger sister, Ammalu, on Krishna and also by those of her own mother, Balamani Amma, both of whom were ardent devotees of Krishna. Das herself liked listening to the bhajans of Ghanasyama. In fact, Das considers that all men are only the different ‘avatars’ of Krishna. “I have always thought of him as my mate”, she writes in Femina (19) and “I looked for the beautiful Krishna in every man. Every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna” (Love and Friendship 15).
In one of her articles, Das confesses her longings, “Often I have thought of Radha as the luckiest of all women, for did she not have his incomparably beautiful body in her arms? … How are we to get close to him without the secret entrances of the body which may have helped us in establishing a true contact?” (Femina 19).

In a very short piece, “Krishna”, Das says that his body is her prison. She cannot see anything beyond it. His darkness blinds her and his love words shut out “the wise world’s din” (OP 75). She has love to give and she is in search of a container for it as alms go in quest of a begging bowl:

The only truth that matters is
That all this love is mine to give,
It does not matter that I seek –
For it a container, as alms
Seek a begging bowl, a human
Shape to envelope its wealth. (“A Phantom Lotus” OP 93)

She loves God – or Krishna – the blue face, a phantom lotus on the waters of her dreams, who has no body. In this poem, Radha’s devotion to the Lord is identified as faith or trust. Love is faith as everything else is perishable: “Heed / My faith alone, all the rest is / Perishable and as such, but / Delusions. …” (93). In a world of ‘delusions’ or Maya, the only substantial emotion is devotion which does not need any container like a
body for preservation, or any idol for expression. The poem expresses a singular search for love in Das without the least associations of the physique.

The poem “Ghanashyam” is addressed to Krishna who “like a koel built your / nest in the arbour of my heart” (OS 94). Her life, which had so far been a jungle, is now astir with music. But whenever she approaches him, he vanishes like a spectral flame and she is left in the cold. So she migrates to “warmer climes”.

In panic I asked don’t you want me any longer,
  don’t you want me
Don’t you, don’t you?
In love when the snow slowly began to fall
Like a bird I migrated to warmer climes. (OS 94-95)

In this poem, Kamala Das identifies herself with Radha and seeks to realize a union with the Lord. The Radha-Krishna myth provides an objective correlative for Das’s passionate yearnings and repressed desires. She was nurtured in an environment which was greatly devoted to Lord Krishna. In My Story, she writes, “In the morning I went into the prayer room with my grandmother and sat for an hour listening to her read the Bhagavatham and the Gita” (92).
Das was so obsessed with the devotion that she was almost sure her first child would be a son and he would look like Krishna. Her surrender to the Lord makes also the end of a search for a deeper and more permanent union between herself and the husband because she has identified the Lord with the husband: “I shall love you I told him, not speaking aloud but willing Him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine” (My Story 92).

Hence this poem can be taken as Das’s deepest ardour for the Lord and her zeal for self-surrender. Unlike the other poems of Das, there is no tension here, but a sense of peace and devotion. The small spark in her becomes a “spectral flaming”, a symbol of her shining devotion. The “flame” conveys the devotee to the “red eye of death”, experienced as heat: “Death is the hot sauna leading to cool rest-rooms” (95). While the body is dissolved in the heat, the soul is released into the cool retiring chambers of immortality.

There is a total involvement and surrender in Das’s adoration of the Lord: “With words I weave a raiment for you with songs a sky / With such music I liberate in the oceans their fervid dances” (95). The beauty of the Lord (lover) like a “spectral flame” perplexes the poet. The flame of the prayer lamp symbolizes her future and death. Thus, the meditation on death takes her back to sensual thoughts of physical love and its irrelevance compared to the divine love for which her soul thirsts. Das gives a painful
account of the “tragc game” she played with her lover, “We played once a husk-game, my lover and I” (95), a game of lust, the ‘husk game’, played with disgusting regularity in “A stark white loneliness / Like bleached bones cracking in the desert-sun” (95). The ‘sun’ imagery here stands for the sterile and tedious nature of existence.

Each sexual act with the husband raises the ontological question of reality. Her longing for the divine love is fraught with doubts, resulting in many questions: “Who is loving who / who is the husk who the kernel / Where is the body where is the soul?” (95). Her craving for love finds its correlative in the mythical figure of Ghanashyam. But even such a hope seems to her to be unhelpful at times: “You come in strange forms / And your names are many” (95). At this point, Das brings in the bond between the mother and her baby for scrutiny. Attachment is the enemy of spiritual tranquillity. When a child’s umbilical cord falls, physical separation happens between the mother and her baby but emotional attachments are quick to follow. To Das, these are nothing but traps which enslave the humans: “I want a peace that I can tote / Like an infant in my arms” (95).

According to Das, wisdom comes only in silence. The image of the housewife completing the household chores points to Das’s readiness to meet the silence of liberation through death: “Wisdom must steal in like a breeze / From beneath the shuttered door” (95).
Spiritual wisdom comes with the softness of the breeze which is unfelt by the senses. In the spark of this wisdom, the poet visualizes herself as a fish, an enchanted fish, caught in the net cast by Ghanashyam in the “narrows of my mind”:

Shyam O Ghanashyam
You have like a fisherman cast your net in the narrows
Of my mind
And towards you my thoughts to day
Must race like enchanted fish. (95)

“Ghanashyam”, in its turn, brings in several echoes from the Bhagavad Gita. The poet craves for wisdom through silence and devotion because that is the pathway to ultimate peace. For instance, “He who has faith, who is absorbed in it (i.e. wisdom) and who has subdued his senses gains wisdom and having gained wisdom he attains quickly the supreme peace” (Radhakrishnan S. 171).

“A Paper Moon” expresses the poet’s dissatisfaction with the “ghost of happiness” that embraces her. True happiness rests in the soul’s ultimate union with the Divine. The “Paper moon” pinned to the “curtain’s blue” suggests Krishna’s face that holds both purity and spiritual grace (OS 102).
In “Lines Addressed To A Devadasi”, there is a sublime mood of desires. The first five lines suggest an awareness of the sameness of all experiences resulting in a feeling of satiety:

Ultimately there comes a time
When all faces look alike
All voices sound similar
And trees and lakes and mountains
Appear to bear a common signature. (OS 101)

Is this rarified mood persons and words cease to have any meaning: “It is then that your desires cease / And a homesickness begins” (101). The image of the Devadasi sitting on the temple steps is like the soul returning after its journey in the world. As Anisur Rahman has remarked, the poem does not show any “signs of exhaustion” (30), but shows a sense of spiritual reawakening and an awareness of human destiny.

The poem, “Radha Krishna”, also stresses the same mythological relationship between the persona and her lover:

This becomes from this hour
Our river and this old kadamba
Tree, ours alone, for our homeless
Souls to return someday
To hang like bats from its pure

Physicality. … (OS 75)

As M.L. Sharma avers, “Her nostalgic attitude towards the Radha-Krishna or Mirabai myth, like her nostalgic attitude towards her grandmother and the “red house that had / stood for innocence” manifests, in essence, only a symbolic retreat to realms of innocence, simplicity and purity” (108).

Apart from such expressions in her poetry, Kamala Das expresses similar feelings in her autobiography, My Story and also calls herself her lover “Carlo’s Sita” (153) and in Calcutta, one of her neighbours’ “Gayatri” (149). Thus, Das employs Hindu mythology to convey her feelings of love towards her lover. It is a passionate search for authentic love through a carnal medium; spirituality through physicality; ultimately, a quest of the individual for a comprehensive merge with the divine, expressed solely through sensual imagery. Das’s use of such sensual imagery is directly derived from numerous instances of such imagery from the myth, mythology, art and architecture belonging to the Indian tradition, where it figures as a fitting objective correlative for spiritual devotion. In Das’s use of Radha-Krishna myth, Archer’s comments seem to justify her breaking of social ties through adultery:

By worldly standards they (Radhas and the Gopies) were committing the gravest of offences, but they were doing it for
Krishna who was God himself. They were therefore setting God above home and duty, they were leaving everything for love of God and in surrendering their honour were providing the most potent symbol of what devotion. (67)

However, Das differs from Sexton, in her treatment of religious tradition and mystical iconography, which clearly acknowledges the oneness and inseparableness of body, mind and spirit on the one hand, and the individual soul and the Divine on the other.

It is interesting that both Sexton and Das recognize spirituality as another dimension of carnality and employ startlingly erotic imagery in their works preoccupied with spiritual quest. There is, nevertheless, a yawning gulf between the craftsmanship and degree of inventiveness they exhibit in their respective works of art. Sexton obviously emerges by far, as the more original in respect of devising the objective correlative for her explorations of spirituality. As regards Das, she fashions her imagery against a plethora of Indian mystic iconography, celebrating the divine unimmanance in the human physique and recognizing without the least reservation the spiritual dimension of the most uninhibited exhibition of carnality in the spheres of art, philosophy and architecture of India, though she does infuse the imagery she chooses to employ in her verse, with an uncommon energy and imaginative vigour of her own.
Both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das employ images of entrapment in their art, registering their impatience and challenging defiance. In her maiden poetic volume entitled To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), Sexton is preoccupied mainly with her psychic disability and associations with asylums. She calls her sickness itself a confinement, a “hutch” in the poem, “Hutch”. The recurrent depressions and bouts of terrifying fantasies and traumas she suffers from, as much due to her awkward situations as the awkward people connected with her, whom she names the “wild pigs”:

Hutch

of her arms, this was her sin:
where the wood berries bin
of forest was new and full,
she crept out by its tall
posts, those wooden legs,
and heard the sound of wild pigs. (CP 27)

Though she talks of the ‘hutch’ as a true rebel, she does not continue to remain within, but tries to ‘creep out’ from it.

Sexton has written sensual poems on the childhood hurts she has endured in her family, which do include certain occasions of confinement. In the poem, “Young”, Sexton recalls how she was confined in a ‘big house’ as a ‘lonely kid’ (CP 51) and in “Those Times....” she calls a
“grotesque house” (CP 118). The words Sexton employs like “graveyard”, “locked”, “gate”, “prison”, “cell”, “exile”, “knot”, all reveal clearly her own perception on her confinement. She also uses such images of punitive confinement in the same poem like “belts”, “box” and the “window” which of course strike the persona as “precious” (CP 120). She also uses the word “closet” in the same poem: “I hid in the closet as one hides in a tree” (119) but what is striking about the following lines is that imaginatively she gives expression to the volume of her urge and sense of urgency to break out of her confinement:

I grew into it like a root
and yet I planned such plans of flight,
believing I would take my body into the sky,
dragging it with me like a large bed. (120)

She is not a kind of woman who will perish in her confinement. Instead, she broods “like a root” and continues to entertain “plans of flight” “into the sky” dragging her large bed as a fully emancipated rebel. That she is irrepressible in the final count is forcefully conveyed through the powerful imagery of an elevator: “And although I was unskilled / I was sure to get there or at least / to move up like an elevator” (120). The following lines underscore her innate, indomitable energy and secretive ungleeful resolve for her eventual evolution into a healthy womanhood:
With such dreams,

storing their energy like a bull,

I planned my growth and my womanhood

as one choreographs a dance. (120)

Sexton’s “To Lose The Earth”, talks of the images of “cave” (CP 123), “coffins” and “the tons of suffocating dirt” (125). Her “Old Dwarf Heart”, refers to “a nest / from an abandoned field” (OP 54). In “The Operation”, she says how “I wait like a kennel of dogs / jumping against their fence” (CP 58). In “A Curse Against Elegies”, she employs the image of a ‘scapegoat’: “when he came scuffing in through the yard / looking for a scapegoat. / I hid in the kitchen under the ragbag” (CP 60).

Sexton uses the repressive image of “girdle” in the very title of a poem, “Woman with Girdle” (CP 70). Simone de Beauvoir presents her analysis of the condition of the second sex, including the role played by women at home: “But she has no other job than to maintain and provide for life in pure and unvarying generality; she perpetuates the species without change, she ensures the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home, seeing to it that the doors are locked” (405). This enclosed round of housework is also described by Sexton in “House Wife”, where she uses the image of ‘house’ with its ‘walls’ itself as a place of confinement:

Some women marry houses,

It’s another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother
That's the main thing.  (CP 77)

As Middlebrook points out, "Sexton experienced the home as a sphere of confinement and stultification ... for her the verb "do" meant action in a social realm other than the family" (9). Capo rightly observes: "Sexton's feeling of entrapment is embodied through language that is self-reflexive and ultimately solipsistic" (92).

Das exhibits feelings of entrapment in several of her poems. Her poem, "The Prisoner" expatiates on the same theme, bringing her claustrophobic sensation under a sharp focus:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare.  (OP 29)
This small poem of six lines, reinforces imagery associated with confinement like "escape" and "snare". According to Kohli, the term "trapping" suggests "the trappings of lust from which she must free herself to know true love" as well as "the soul's cry against its mortal dress" (113).

Das's "Convicts" dwells on another kind of captivity, namely the grip of sensual passion: "There were no more / Words left, all words lay imprisoned / In the ageing arms of night ..." (OP 25). Her "Captive" describes how all these sensual excesses in her life, have reduced her love to a mere empty gift; a gilded empty container, and a "captive": "for years I have run from one / gossamer lane to another, I am / now my own captive" (D 17).

Das's "The Descendants" employs images of "crucifixion" and "yielding" suggestive of her feeling of being kept in detention:

We have lain in every weather, nailed, no, not
To crosses, but to soft beds and against
Softer forms, [...] 
[...] We were the yielders,
Yielding ourselves to everything .... (OP 33)

Das uses the locking imagery of a "cocoon" in "Kumar Gandharva":
Cocooned now in song, and yet / unsafe, for in every little pause / My ears must lose their peace, ..." (OP 42). It is significant that in this context, Das
associates the tight image of cocoon with the feeling of insecurity. The image of the “cocoon” occurs also in “I Shall Some Day”: “I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon / You built around me with morning tea” (OP 48). Das is not the kind of woman who could be kept under detention and hence she wants to “leave the cocoon” which her chauvinistic partner has built around her.

In “The Stone Age”, Das brings in several other images of confinement. She likens her husband to a spider “weaving webs” around her: “Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind, / Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment, / Be kind. …” (OP 51). She also refers to his moment of supreme indifference to her, to a “drawing room” which he would “build round me”:

... You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. … (51)

It is significant that Das chooses the inanimate imagery of “bird of stone”, “granite stone” in order to denote her death-in-life, as suffocation makes her go breathless. As an individual endowed with a refined sensibility, she has totally lost her privacy as he intrudes upon her in her precious moments
of serene recreation and independence: “With loud talk you bruise my pre-
morning sleep, / You stick a finger into my dreaming eye” (51).

In “A Feminist’s Lament”, Das raises her voice against the entire
male chauvinistic, superstitious society that abets and promotes the
wrongful entrapment of women by men, training the latter right from their
“infancy”:

... Trained from infancy
to wear the flannels of cowardice
next to her skin, trained to lie inert
under a male, trained by rows
to feed her, ... (OS 127)

In “Her Kind”, Sexton explores the fate of woman in her role as the
outcast witch – a legendary woman of great power, who ultimately falls a
victim to the reactionary forces that oppose her. It is an early poem from To
Bedlam and Part Way Back whose central character is the outcast witch, a
figure who appears frequently in her work. In the three stanzas of the poem,
this legendary figure of woman’s power is cast in a variety of situations and
illustrated in terms of the roles of her character as rebel, servant and victim.
According to Middlebrook, “‘I’ in the poem is a disturbing marginal female
whose power is associated with disfigurement, sexuality and magic” (449).

The first stanza of the poem presents the witch in her role as rebel –
a woman of freedom and power who, becoming “braver at night”, goes out
"haunting the black air". As she does her "hitch", soaring "over the plain houses", moving "light by light", during her nightly journey, she is "dreaming evil", planning her revenge against society that rejects and oppresses her, making the witch a "lonely thing", an isolated, "twelve-fingered" freak who is seen as being "possessed" and "out of mind". "A woman like that is not woman, quite", but rather some fear-inspiring, inhuman "thing", and concludes it saying, "I have been her kind" (CP 16).

The second stanza of the poem presents the role of the woman as the man’s servant. In this role, the witch is a woman who uses her magical powers for "rearranging the disaligned" elements of the world. In spite of this, she is not able to remedy her own situation:

I have found the warm cave in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves;
whining, rearranging the disaligned. (CP 16)

In spite of all her positive contributions to the world, this witch seems to find her role dissatisfying as her "whining" complaint suggests. Thus Sexton concludes saying again, "A Woman like that is misunderstood, I have been her kind", once more asserting the representative nature of this character too.
In the third and final stanza, another familiar image of the witch is presented, namely that of a victim. In this stanza, the character's assessment turns from an account of her own activities to a description of her treatment at the hands of her persecutors. This turn is shown by the introduction of the second person address, as she turns and speaks directly to those who oppress her:

I have ridden in your art, 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. (CP 16)

Sexton again concludes using the refrain, equating her own personal situation with that of the character in the poem: "A woman like that is not ashamed to die. / I have been her kind". Once again, the stanza suggests that what is presented here is another kind of the fate of the witch, namely that of any woman. Pools comments that in this poem, Sexton "managed most successfully to bring about an element of shock, the kind of shock one wants in poetry" (3).

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 extramarital affairs. Sexton’s art offers much greater space to vend forth her rage and revenge. Das’s case is different. Her poems “are not innumerable; nor is there much variety in theme” (Venugopal 143). Like the Sun or the Moon, 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 success in ensuring a greater ‘space’ in the dialectics of gender politics is no mean achievement on the part of Kamala Das. As Matilde Joslyn Gage demands, “It has become one of the women’s first duties … to call public attention to its false doctrines and false teaching in regard to the origin, condition and subjection of the women” (542) and both Sexton and Das have done their duties extraordinarily well. On the whole, both of them come under Elaine Showalter’s categorization of the Feminist Phase which enabled women to reject the constraints of womanhood. They made literature a stage for dramatizing the suffering of women (139).