Chapter Four

Conflicts as Cores of Creativity

All great literature, I think it is fair to say, arrives from tensions and conflicts within the artist’s mind, dilemmas that the artist consciously or unconsciously attempts to work out in art. Without these tensions, literature usually remains flat. (Brink 16)

“Woman must write her self … Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement … Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is world-wide” (Cixous 245). True to this observation, Anne Sexton and Kamala Das have traced in their poems some of the conflicts in their personal lives whose significance transcends all national and cultural frontiers thereby achieving universality. For them, poetry means little more than the projection of every woman’s experience in lyrical art. As Curtius observes, “A poet’s thematic range is the catalogue of his typical reactions to specific situations into which life casts him. The theme is in the subjective realm. It is a psychological constant. It is innate to the poet” (qtd. in Weisstein 126).

W.D. Snodgrass remarked, “family trouble, troubles in your love life, have caused people a hundred times more real agony than all the wars, famines, oppressions and the other stuff that gets in the history books” (150), and both the poets, being sensitive and rebellious in their innate dispositions raise their voices against similar obstacles in their respective
cultural milieux. This chapter seeks not only to study some of their conflicts in some depth, but also interrogate the intrinsic merit of their art depicting such conflicts.

T.S. Eliot’s assertion in the “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (26) indicates the dualism that operates in the poems of Anne Sexton. As George observes, “personal transformations from housewife to poet, from sanity to madness, from love to loss, and from life to death were always her subjects. Sexual anxiety, relationships between parents and children, the ambiguity of role reversals were her firmly established territory” (xix).

Anne Sexton’s poems reveal “intimate details of her emotional troubles” (Marowski 311). To begin with, Anne Sexton experienced some extremely violent, deeply hurtful experiences in her childhood. Even as a very young child, Sexton had to face severe psychological conflicts on account of her own parents. As Spivack observes, Sexton “wrote out of her private pain without censoring” (27), and as Lois Ames remarks, once Sexton shouted, “You should use your grief. No matter what happens, you should swim out of the pain with a finished book held high in your hands!” (112). In “Young”, Sexton presents the emotional detachment that marked her own relationship with her parents:
My mother’s window a funnel
of yellow heat running out,
my father’s window, half shut,
an eye where sleepers pass. (CP 51)

As normally happens with any child, such a gap between her parents and herself makes Sexton seek solace in the company of Nature. The young Sexton’s mind was teeming with conflicts and being unable to confide them all with her own parents, as most children do, Sexton raised the issues that bugged her to Nature: “I, in my brand new body / which was not a woman’s yet, / told the stars my questions” (51-52), and her conversation with nature brought her thoughts of God. Significantly the pressing conflicts in her tiny heart made the young poet think of several incoherent objects which emerged in her troubled mind, that could not resolve any of her conflicts: “and thought God could really see / the heat and the painted light, / elbows, knees, dreams, good night” (52). She hates herself and feels like an “exile” to her own real self, some one trapped in a nightmarish web:

I was locked in my room all day behind a gate
a prison cell.
I was the exile
who sat all day in a knot. (CP 118)

At the psychological level, loneliness caused by the indifference of the parents is the utmost source of torture for any child. Given the refined
sensibility of a poet what Sexton experienced at this stage must have been extremely hard and unendurable for her. Interestingly, Sexton's art takes her readers to her past, for a profound interrogation into the indifference on the part of her parents. To Sexton's young mind, it occurred quite painfully that 'being a third child' she was, in short, "the unwanted, the mistake / that mother used to keep father / from his divorce" (CP 118). Much bitterness seems to brood over these lines. That her birth was simply an excuse to prevent her parents' divorce and probably that was the cause of their own irrational anger towards her, was a constant source of anxiety for Sexton as a child.

Sexton's readers can clearly visualize the conflicts that tugged at the child's heart when she describes her seeking resort for play in the closet meant for discarded shoes: "the closet is where I rehearsed my life, all day among shoes" (CP 119). The closing lines are significant as they underline her repeating the agony of her painful conflicts time and again, suggested by the imagery of a 'rehearsal'.

Dwelling on her anxiety in her childhood, Sexton writes: "I did not know that my life, in the end, / would run over my mother's like a truck", adding what

... would remain

from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear
the unsaid more clearly. (CP 121)

This “small hole” in her heart is the black hole of all her struggles and inner conflicts which remained invisible to the entire world.

What was particularly injurious to Sexton’s self-confidence as a child were the shocking “nightly humiliations” she received at the hands of her mother. Her mother had the habit of coming “to force me to undress” every night. What Charles Gullans points out in general about poetry comes true in Sexton: “Poetry was the product of anguish; ... the anguish has become the poetry. To suffer is to be creative” (21).

In “Pain for a Daughter”, a poem addressed to her own daughter, Sexton recalls this incident with much pain. Once when Sexton watches her daughter dressing a wound in “the dog’s paw”, to cleanse the wound with hydrogen peroxide until pus ran like milk on the barn floor” (CP 163), she is reminded of her own childhood fear recalling how her own father used hydrogen peroxide to clean Sexton’s own body as a daily routine:

Blind with fear, she sits on the toilet,
her foot balanced over the washbasin,
er her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand
performing the rites of the cleansing. (164)
As nobody else came in for rescue, Sexton felt deserted and devastated.

In striking contrast, Das does not suffer any such painful hurt at her mother’s hands. If there is any hurt feeling in Das as a child, it relates to the sense of guilt she felt with her great grandmother and their Nalapat house. She always related her grandmother and their house simultaneously. She had equal love for them and the house is as alive as her grandmother is. Das’s guilt consists in the fact that she has not carried out the promise she had made to her grandfather:

When I grow old, I said,
And very very rich
I shall rebuild the fallen walls
And make new this ancient house. (OP 16)

When her grandmother died, Das “looked deep into her eyes / Her poor bleary eyes / And prayed that she would not grieve / so much about the house” (17). After her grandmother’s death, Das’s associations with the house slowly ceased to be, for she had to migrate to other towns. Though the house subsequently collapsed with each of her pillars groaning, Das’s guilt remains still unabated.

As it is rightly observed, “Confessional poetry derives its tone from the conflict between the awareness of the present malady and the inexorable urge to seek joy through reminiscences of past experiences” (Nair 97) and
“one’s own inner intensities and conflicts as well as the world’s crushing injustices and uncontrollable laws (social and natural) are converted into the language of neurosis, hysteria and break down. This is counter pointed by a capacity for deep joy and peace, presented mainly as nostalgia or vision” (Rosenthal 394).

Guilt seems to be the predominant motif in Sexton’s conflicts too, with regard to her mother but Sexton’s guilt is of a different kind. In “The Double Image”, we read that when Sexton’s mother fell a victim to breast cancer, she charged that it was Sexton, who was responsible for it, with her repeated attempts at suicide, consequently causing considerable financial problems for her. She stubbornly refused to forgive her daughter till her death, a fact that contributed not a little to the cumulative sense of guilt in Sexton: “I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said. / And she never could … / I wasn’t exactly forgiven …” (CP 37).

Sexton’s persistent attempts at suicide made her mother also more and more ill, due to constant stress and anxiety: “She turned from me, as if death were catching / as if death transferred, / as if my dying had eaten inside of her” (CP 38). One day having lost all her patience, Sexton’s mother openly charged Sexton for having been the root cause of her dreadful disease: “On the first of September she looked at me, / and said I gave her cancer” (CP 38). Her mother’s unforgiveness made Sexton feel a wide range of feelings like guilt, self-pity, anxiety, insecurity, loneliness,
fear and anger: "I lived like an angry guest, / like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child" (CP 37).

As Sexton was disgusted in the extreme, with her father's incestuous relationship with her, life after her mother's death, seemed highly problematic and challenging in her eyes, and seeking emotional comfort, she might have thrown herself into the arms of casual lovers as a kind of escapism or thorough rebellion. At this stage, she also began to hit the bottle:

Since then I have pretended ease,

loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough

to shed my daughterhood

or sweeten him as a man. (44)

The death of her mother marked the death of her childhood for Sexton as the poem declares. She had lost the only inexhaustible source, from which she could have always over drawn love, as her birth-right. "Death – the deaths of friends and relatives, her own death, domesticated as suicide – rose yeastily in the oven of her mind, like a loaf of exotic bread" (Gilbert 162).

As Rukeyser declares, "the issue in most of Anne Sexton's poems has been survival, piece by piece of the body, step by step of poetic experience, and even more the life entire, sprung from our matrix of
parental madness” (155). At the same time, “her work veers between good and terrible almost indiscriminately ... the bad poems are bad in much the same way as good ones are good: “in their head-on intimacy and their persistence in exploring whatever is most painful to the author” (Alvarez 14-15).

Kamala Das’s poems do not reveal such nerve-wracking conflicts in her poems. At the most she has made only some passing remarks on her mother in her autobiography or in the interviews she has given. In one such interview with Iqbal Kaur, she answers a question raised in respect of her mother:

Q. Now, since your mother stays with you I’m sure you get solace and comfort from her whenever you are disturbed. She must be a big moral support.

Ans. My mother has never been able to give me the love and security that I needed. She has always been indifferent. Even now, she invariably sides with my husband whenever there is a problem. (161)

In a very few words here, Das has revealed what has been her own attitude to her mother. Das does not seem to have any deep emotional attachment for her mother like Sexton has and hence has little ground for suffering from any acute conflicts.
Nevertheless, Kamala Das has written several poems on her father. Das obviously seems to have been more devoted to her father, though on various occasions Das also highlights the fact that he was the root cause of most of her sufferings in life, for, it was he after all who forced Das to marry at the very early age of fifteen, as a kind of 'punishment'. To Iqbal Kaur's pointed question, she has responded in the following manner:

Q. Why did your father marry you off when you were just fifteen?
Ans. 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. (166)

In the poem, “Next to Indira Gandhi”, she addresses her patriarchal father with caustic irony:

You chose my clothes for me
My tutors, my hobbies, my friends,
And at fifteen with my first saree you picked me a husband
I am grateful
For choosing for me a man
And a life of suburban dullness. (OS 118)

It was Das's turn for revenge when she started having affairs and publishing her confessional kind of art and autobiography that made her
father very upset. Sensing his resentment, Das wrote addressing him again:

“... I
Loved him although I was bad, a bad
Daughter, a writer of tales that
Hurt, but in the task of loving
The bad ones were the best...” (117)

Often she felt that her father was a man of words and not of palpable affection and action. He had grossly failed to satisfy the longings of a

In “My Father’s Death”, Das confesses the conflict between her and her father: “... There was a cloud of tension / Between him and me. I brought him / Shame, they say ...” (OS 116).

Despite all these verbal assaults, Das continued to entertain a profound love for her father. For all her defiant stand in public, Das “feared” her father so much that she would not dare to reveal it in his presence, and ironically, “... only in a coma / Did he seem close to me, and I / Whispered into his ears ...” (OS 117). There can be little doubt as regards Das’s conflict over her love-hate relationship with her father. The paradox in the comment expressed in the following lines bears ample testimony to Das’s mixed feelings:
daughter who expected so much understanding from him: "You should have hugged me, father, just / Once, held me to your breast, you should / Have asked me who I was, in truth." (117). It is significant that in "A Requiem for My Father", also Das reaffirms her love for her father: "I loved you father, I loved you all my life" (115).

This profound love for her father prevents Das from developing any intense or active hatred towards him for all the indifference he showed in making the vital decisions in her life. Her unexpressed love for her father, his relative neglect of her and her basic fear for him as a patriarch endowed with moral strength and dignity – all torment Das within.

Thus, Das’s grounds for the conflicts in her relationship with her father has several aspects to it the chief of them being his presumptions and thoughtless arrangement of her marriage as a ‘punishment’; his neglect of her for her ‘brooding ways’, and ‘dark skin’ as a child; and his gross insensitivity and ignorance of her love for him. Such an attitude of having been wronged by her father at an early age gave way to feelings of hurt, shame, guilt, revenge, anxiety, fear and severe depression in Das in adulthood.

Apart from their conflicts with their parents, both Sexton and Das found themselves in perennial conflicts in their respective married lives, which ultimately found their way into their poems. Rather late in life, Anne
Sexton arrives at the sad awareness, "Now we are both incomplete" (CP 509). She is disappointed in getting love, care or concern from her husband at the moments of her need: "When I shout help in my dream / you do not fold me in like a slipper its foot" (570).

Sexton's married life, as she presents, is incomplete and is totally a failure. Further, Sexton is very often tormented by fear in her married life. To make matters worse, she and her husband grow more and more incompatible day by day:

couldn't you just go float into a tree
instead of locating here at my roots,
forcing me out of the life. I've led
when it's been my belly so long. (CP 512)

Along with the feelings of unsatisfied yearning, fear, anger, incompatibility, there is also a gnawing sense of guilt that broods over Sexton's mind, while pondering over her married life. For instance, her poem, "Divorce", is replete with agony; guilt, self-pity and solitude; and helplessness and hopelessness:

I have killed our lives together,
axed off each head, ...
I have killed all the good things,
but they are too stubborn for me.

They hang on. (CP 512)

Sexton is well aware that she has been considerably responsible for the ruin of their marital life. Here the blame for failure is shifted onto her own self. Neither Sexton’s mental state, nor psychotic depression was the sole cause of the conflict Sexton faced in marriage. This shifting of blame onto herself has been mainly the consequence of Sexton’s own psychosis.

To start with at least, Sexton found in their married life some “companionship” and there was even “compassion” in their relationship. Unfortunately, as the years went by, everything turned from bad to worse:

The little words of companionship have crawled into their graves, the thread of compassion, dear as a strawberry. (513)

Sexton digs up from her own past, memories of layers of suppressed love, which included, “the mingling of bodies / that bore two daughters within us” (513). Sexton recollects all the goodness she found in her husband in the beginning as one who was not only genuinely in love, but brought a tremendous sense of order in her life. In the following lines, Sexton admits her own shortcomings in marriage, in not openly or warmly appreciating her husband’s role in her life:
… I have been, for months,
trying to drown it,
to push it under,
to keep its great red tongue
under like a fish. (513)

Ironically, however much Sexton tries to keep her love from him secret and unexpressed, she cannot help loving him. The more suppressed her passion, the more powerful it grows inside her:

but wherever I look they are on fire,
the bags, the bluefish, the wall-eyed flounder blazing among the kelp and seaweed like many suns battering up the waves and my love stays bitterly glowing,
spasms of it will not sleep. (513)

Sexton’s emotional incompatibility with him grew mainly due to her neurosis and psychosis, which eventually led to their legal separation. Sexton’s sudden awareness of her insecurity in her husband’s absence and separation rendered her psychic condition even worse. Her mental incompatibility urges her to divorce him at once but at the same time her emotional dependence on his love makes her continue to yearn for him. These two extremely opposed polarized emotions completely depress her
psyche, making her lament: “I am helpless and thirsty and need shade / but there is no one to cover me – / not even God” (513). In her utmost pain, she feels that even God has deserted her at last.

“Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is” (Ramakrishnan 203), and such a struggle is evident in Das’s poems. Her struggle with herself and the outside world took the form of a “conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe” (Kohli 190). Das’s poems reveal feelings of guilt, frustration, anger, shame, hurt, and revenge, all of which ultimately drag her into conflicts of her own. As Raizada puts forth, “the predicament of her inner self rather than that of the external one that manifests itself in her poetry” (114).

Das’s “Larger Than Life Was He”, a poem on her marriage opens with a dramatic opening: “The living must ultimately / triumph over the dead / and outlive them in moderate calm” (OS 112). Das, “the living”, is not able to “triumph over” or “outlive” “the dead”, because she lacks that “moderate calm” which marriage has denied her. Hence, she feels that she is not among “the living” at all now and is very much “the dead”. The following lines dwell on the cause of her unrest:

In twenty weeks
my grief gave way to faint stirrings of guilt.
In the ganzy sleep of dawn
I had not lain against him
for fifteen years or more
I had tried as satiated wives did
to wean him off desire. (112)

To start with, she kept him within the marriage prison as a punishment but realizes with guilt that she too is in the same condition that he is. They have not a single pleasant memory of an occasion to share or a kind word to exchange for fifteen years, though they continue to live as man and wife:

My celibacy flowed like a river in spate
between the twin beds in our room
There are no memories that enthrall,
no fond phrase capsuled in thought,
It was never a husband and wife bond. (112)

Das’s phrase “no fond phrase capsuled in thought” conveys a strikingly similar thought in Sexton’s “The little words of companionship / have crawled into their graves, the thread of compassion”.

Das’s lines are highly ironic, conveying her pain, in a powerful manner, despite their superficial tone of levity:
We were such a mismated pair,
Yet there were advantages, I admit
he was free to exploit and I was free
to be exploited. (112)

Nevertheless, the guilt, even with regard to marriage, in Das is not solely
directed against the ‘self’. On the contrary, Das holds her partner
responsible for the fiasco: “I could have been Sita to his Rama / had I been
given half a chance” (112).

Das also charges her spouse for taking an entirely undeserved credit
for the nurture of her sons, to which he had made little contribution:

I reared three sons,
he was too busy to watch them grow
but he it was who wore the faded face
that they recognized as their father’s. (112)

There is a pronounced grief in Das that her husband never spent much of
his time for the family as he happened to be a workaholic. There is a strong
feeling of disillusionment on the part of the protagonist to possess and to be
possessed, herself being a seeker of emotional attachment. Her partner, on
the contrary, seems to deliberately withdraw himself from beyond her
sphere of possession in love.
Such a compulsive tendency for withdrawal on the part of her partner leaves Das, utterly solitary and miserable. The darkness of the night, in all its bleakness becomes her sole companion: “Only a few bed bound chores / executed well, tethered him to me / Emotion was never a topic” (112).

The following passage, steeped in irony, highlights her husband’s taciturn nature, sterile workaholism, chauvinistic intrusion into privacy and self-centred possessiveness:

Do I miss him?
Of course, I do, for larger than life
Was he. I miss that brusque voice
sending out the strays
hugging their manuscripts
meekly as unwed mothers did
their illegitimate offspring
I miss his censoring my daily mail
his screening each phone call
and the insulation of his care. (113)

There is a striking difference in the way Sexton and Das depict their marriage-related conflicts. Sexton divorced her husband on the grounds of incompatibility, and did not make any attempt at divorce. Even after her
divorce, Sexton continues to entertain serious regrets over her decision and acknowledges some of the traits of her former husband, like his dependability. Talking of Sexton's divorce, Mc Cube suggests that "her biggest enemy seems to be herself; her mind leads her into dangerous, sometimes thrilling places, away from love of herself, away from life" (221). As Mitgutsch points out, Sexton has "a female self-consciousness rather than a feminist consciousness" (131). "The more she struggles against the rigid hierarchical scheme of patriarchy, the more she is trapped by it" (Ostriker 191).

In fact, Sexton never hesitates to use her "Transformations" as "problem-creating stories", thus raising her voice in anti-patriarchal protest. Carol Leventon draws the attention of her readers to the dual – and paradoxical – positions Sexton tends to assume with regard to the empty exhibitionistic women, paraded on the patriarchal stage:

Her unflinching view of the sheer weight of the socialization process leads her to portray women as empty puppets in a show written, directed, and produced by a patriarchal culture for its own benefit; at the same time, these women's very emptiness, which renders them incapable of claiming autonomy, of countering the patriarchy, and – at times – of perceiving the significance of what has happened to them causes Sexton to distance herself from them. (143)
As Linda Wagner observes, Sexton’s poems are marked with “exuberance, anger, guilt, frustration, and finally self-acceptance” (229). Mazzocco too observes, “Beneath the recklessness of so much of her language there’s always a strange passivity, a great unknowingness or fear” (19).

In a vital sense, both in Sexton and Das, the feministic stances assumed are highly paradoxical. True they are great rebels and can train all their guns against patriarchal woes in any given moment. But on a sudden moment of reversal, they are both capable of celebrating the warmth they find in the embrace of some male.

In the poem, “I Shall Some Day”, Das opens the poem underlining her urge to “leave the cocoon / You built around me”, but towards the close of the same poem, takes a complete U-turn of feeling:

... But, I shall some day return, losing
Nearly all, hurt by wind, sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further jaunt or a further spell
of freedom, and I shall some day see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your nest of familiar scorn ... (OP 48)
When Jussawalla comments on Das's poems, he says, "her self as woman and ... her self as poet and artist ... are tied together. The "feminine sensibility" can be described as her personal self: her feelings as a woman, her physical desires and her evolution from teenage bride to adultress and mother figure" (54).

This same idea recurs also in Das's "A Relationship": "I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace / And even death nowhere else but here in / My betrayer's arms ..." (OP 41). As Kurup rightly points out, "the central burden of her poetry is her typical feminine awareness of the chasm between expectation and reality and the failure of the feminine self to an emotional liaison between the two" (134).

Such swings of moods in Das if taken seriously are symptomatic of severe psychological conflicts deep within her. The line "hurt by wind, sun and rain" shows her fear of the unknown outer world, while "hurt by fierce happiness" is indicative of her own sense of guilt, and the phrase, "shut my eyes and take refuge" shows her anxiety for capitulation. As Subash Chandra rightly observes, "From a certain feminist point of view, most specifically that which sees all marriage, and all heterosexual relationships as inevitably oppressive to and exploitative of women, Kamala Das may not only be feminist, but also probably an anti-feminist" (146).

In one of the interviews with Iqbal Kaur, Das answers a question relating to such a backtracking on issues on her part in her poems:
Q. You say you are a liberated woman but having stayed here, I have noticed that you obey the commands of your husband like a computer – something which cannot be expected of even the most ordinary women now-a-days. How do you explain this gap between what you think you are and what you really are?

Ans. I'm a fond wife; I'm a fond daughter but I don't know whether fondness has anything to do with tradition. I believe we are born free … I am free to the extent that the choice is mine now. Whether I stay here and look after my sick husband or whether I should quit, that is to be decided by me. I stay on here and look after him because I think it is out of character for me to abandon anyone who needs me … If my obeying his whims can put him in a good mood, I don't lose anything. I don't want to make an issue out of it because I know it would hurt him. … I am free to give him compassion and I am free to obey his whims. I am free to that extent because I can make life miserable for him if I want to, if I disobey him. But why should I? I have seen him suffer … His existence is precious to me” (160).

In the light of these remarks, Das emerges as sensitive as well as sensible, sentimental as well as practical, and yet the conflicts in her do
emerge through all her paradoxical exposition of her inner self. Her poems "are situated neither in the art of sex nor in feelings of love, they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desires for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self dramatization and feelings of shame and depression" (King 151).

In a sense, what Simon de Beauvoir comments on any woman who faces a struggle between herself as an individual and as a female, is applicable to both Sexton and Das:

... for the young woman ... there is a contradiction between her states as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for the woman so difficult and decisive a moment. Upto this time, she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her sovereignty. Not only is she torn ... between the past and the future, but in addition, conflict breaks out between her original claim to be subject, active, free and on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social pressure to accept herself as a passive object. Her spontaneous tendency is to regard herself as the essential: how can she make up her mind to become the inessential? But if I can accomplish my destiny only as the other, how shall I give up my ego? Such is
the painful dilemma with which the woman-to-be must struggle. (qtd. in Charles Chadwick 42)

The struggle in the case of both Sexton and Das may be traceable to the universal condition of women, as perceived by de Beauvoir. For it is only marriage which makes both these women aware of the autonomy due to their gender and its consequent dependence on patriarchal social conventions.

Apart from their marital conflicts the art of both the poets in question deals with the conflicts, resulting out of their extra-marital affairs. Both step out of the limits of their marital bonds, seeking solace in extra-marital relationships from time to time, eventually ending up only blaming themselves. Regarding their extra-marital affairs, both Sexton and Das exhibit feelings of hurt, regret, self-pity, and guilt in their poetry. Both assert that they were only "momentary" and Sexton, for example, has revealed the fleeting nature of such sensations in her poem, "For My Lover, Returning To His Wife", presenting a study of contrast between a wife and mistress, in this case her lover’s wife and herself. As a mistress she comes under a severe conflict, resulting from her passing thoughts of acute jealousy, helpless feelings of possessiveness and agonizing moments of anxiety:

She is all there.

She was melted carefully down for you
and cast up from your childhood

cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies. (CP 188)

Sexton feels that the wife is unassailable, on account of her constancy, omnipotence and resistance to change, as “exquisite” and “as real as a cast-iron pot”. Sexton as a mistress in the eyes of her lover on the other hand, is little more than a “momentary” “luxury”.

Sexton’s poem goes on further building blocks of contrasts between the wife and the mistress, and realizes, for everything she is, the wife is “more than that”, for she is his “have to have”. In contrast, his relationship to her is “an experiment”. His wife has brought forth “three children” for him and hence she must withdraw from his life for good. She resolves at the end, thus, to let him go to his wife: “I give you back your heart. / I give you permission” (CP 189).

Still, for all her gesture of generosity, she being a mistress is seething in bitterness and anger within:

for the fuse inside her, throbbing
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her
and the burying of her wound –
for the burying of her small red wound alive – (189)

The mistress’s language seems to verge on the prurient, in her the scene of love-making between her lover and his wife, almost like a dog responding to her call:
the curious call
when you will burrow in arms and breasts
and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair
and answer the call, the curious call. (190)

Sexton closes the poem conceding the triumph to the unassailable wife, a solid monumental peak to be climbed on by the husband, if necessary, on all focus:

She is so naked and singular
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid. (190)

In sad contrast, a mistress is expendable: “As for me, I am a watercolor. / I wash off” (190). This poem lays bare several of the conflicts that continue to haunt and torment Sexton’s psyche. Sexton expresses her feelings of revulsion and guilt for being a mistress in several other works too such as “Barefoot” and “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman”.

Like Sexton, Das’s art too shows the self-awareness of her guilt, her depraved condition in life as a mistress. Her “Glass”, presents such a sense of guilt over her self-degrading love affairs:

With a cheap toy’s indifference
I enter other’s
Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary home. ... (OP 21)

It is interesting to note that while Sexton considers her role as a mistress "momentary", Das considers hers as "temporary".

In "The Stone Age", Das tells us how she would run and knock at another man's door, with her guilty soul being fully alive to the curious and watchful eyes of the neighbours, only to vanish like rain at the end:

... I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Through peep-hole, the neighbours watch,
They watch me come
And go like rain. ... (OP 51)

In "The Proud One", Das recalls how, at the end, with feelings of a cute bitterness, ache and guilt, the tide turned against her: "Is it any wonder that / He felt hurt when the old wife turned whorish and / Withdrew from under him? ..." (D 18).

In "Gino" again, Das talks of her illicit but irresistible lover's self-complacency towards her as a mistress, while making love: "While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another's / Country. ..." (OP 13).
All the same, the very awareness that he is “another’s” torments her. Hence, despite all the ecstasies they find in their extramarital affairs, both Sexton and Das end up with conflicting feelings of shame, hurt, guilt and failure. It is essential to note here Nigam’s comparison of Das with Sexton:

The poetry of Kamala Das, like that of … Anne Sexton drawing heavily on the personal life, shows an involvement in intimate feminine experience. But whereas … Anne Sexton falls into the pitfalls of sentimentality and sensationalism, the poems of Kamala Das create a feeling of genuine pain which moves the readers. It is her sincerity of feeling and her honesty, to own the incongruity that creates pain. The cry of her heart is the cry of any ailing and ageing wife; and this is how the universal blends with the personal. (100)

“Most of what we regard as literature, … revolves around human character and emotion” (Gardner 114). Interestingly, both Sexton and Das have given also expression to the emotional conflicts they underwent with regard to their love for their respective children in their poems. Sexton exhibits her emotional conflicts in respect of her daughter in movingly graphic terms. Due to her recurrent psychotic depressions and chronic spills of her illness, she could not take care of her little daughters in their infancy and childhood as a mother. They grew up under the care of her mother-in-law where they lived for more than three years in her absence — a fact that
hurt Das’s maternal pride terribly and her heart is filled with immense guilt. In “Double Image” she writes:

There is no special God to refer to; or if there is, why did I let you grow in another place. You did not know my voice when I came back to call. All the superlatives of tomorrow’s white tree and mistletoe will not help you know the holidays you had to miss. The time I did not love myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove. There was new snow after this. (CP 36)

The single opening line “why did I let you grow / in another place”, puts in a nutshell what all Sexton wants to say as mother. It reveals her cumulative feeling of guilt consequent to her failure as a mother who forshook her own child for a crucial period.

A similar conflict is expressed also in Sexton’s “A Little Uncomplicated Hymn” written for her daughter, Joy:

except the ditch
where I left you once,
like an old root that wouldn’t take hold,
that ditch where I left you
while I sailed off in madness

over the buildings and under my umbrella,

sailed off for three years …

When Sexton tells her daughter that the birthday candle “burned down alone on your birthday cake” for the first three consecutive years, her own heart seems to be burning for the latter, melting all alone, in pity and love.

The last two lines of the poem are quite significant for they express openly Sexton’s inner conflict. She wants “so much to forget” the misery of those years which her daughter too “tries each day to forget”. Sexton’s guilt can also be seen in the lines: “You were mine / and I lent you out” (CP 152). In fact, the daughter’s pain seems to be even more poignant as she tries “each day to forget” her grief.

Sexton also expresses a feeling of anxiety even with regard to her relationship with her daughter. As a true mother, she is anxious over her daughter’s future, though she is not able to foresee what her daughter’s life would be like and wishes her peaceful life ahead in the following existential poem:

Outside the bittersweet turns orange;

Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat branches, finding orange nipples
on the grey wire strands.

We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples. (CP 67)

Sexton also does not know what her daughter’s future will be. Sexton’s poem registers a vague conflict caused by her anxiety as to whether her daughter would be prepared to face those changes with courage or not. Further, Sexton is reminded of her mother whenever she sees her own daughter. As Jung observes, “every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, so that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter” (162-63). Henderson remarks, “Initiation is, essentially, a process that begins with a rite of submission, followed by a period of containment, and then by a further rite of liberation” (156).

In “Double Image”, Sexton writes of her guilt once again regarding her daughter Joyce. She regrets how due to her mental illness, the baby’s arrival was not welcome as that of someone special. Instead, her daughter was merely considered to be an unwanted guest: “You came like an awkward guest / that first time, all wrapped and moist / and strange at my heavy breast” (CP 41). But later, Sexton finds her daughter’s love extremely valuable in her life as she has grown very much emotionally attached to her mother. Now, she expects her daughter to be mother-substitute:
I needed you. ... 
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (CP 42)

Sexton is quite self-conscious here of her own selfishness in exploiting her daughter’s love. Sexton expressed this conflict to her doctor, “I want to be a child and not a mother, and I feel guilty about this” (Middlebrook 39). That she is not able to perform her role as a mother from the giving end, seems to constitute the vital source of inner conflict in Sexton.

In “Your Face On The Dog’s Neck”, the possessiveness in Sexton comes to the fore, when she sees the little girl sitting with her “face on the dog’s neck”. Sexton’s inordinate love for her daughter works up a vicious temper in her, directed against the girl’s pet. The persona wonders why her daughter should allow the dog to touch her when she is very much there to touch her everywhere she wants: “My darling, why do you lean on her so? / I would touch you, / that pulse brooding under your Madras shirt,” (CP 153).

Perhaps the close of the poem reveals Sexton’s long-brewing conflict brewing in her, after all, is triggered off by her unnatural and acute feeling of jealousy:
... your eyes open
against the wool stink of her thick hair,
against the faintly sickening neck of that dog,
whom I envy like a thief ... . (153)

The final lines in the poem mark a pathetic climb down for the 'persona':

I will crouch down
and put my cheek near you,
accepting this spayed and flatulent bitch you hold,
letting my face rest in an assembled tenderness
on the old dog's neck. (154)

This confessional poem contains still plenty of unexpressed conflicts
wracking the mind of Sexton. As Margaret Honton observes, "the study of
mother-daughter relationships in the poetry of Anne Sexton indicates a
partial resolution of conflicts with her mother and considerable success in
establishing a joyous relationship with her daughters" (113). Several critics
have studied the mother-daughter relationships in the poetry of Anne
Sexton, and her major images in developing her themes, are according to
Demetrakopoulos, typical of the Demeter–Kore archetype" (119) which
Newmann calls "the fruit-mother to flower-child / maiden transition in the
matriarchate" (307), Newmann has shown that, "the woman, too has to 'kill
the parents' by over throwing the tyranny of the parental archetypes" (205).
Compared to Sexton, Das does not exhibit any such acute feelings of possessiveness or conflicts towards any of her sons. What is striking about each of Das's poems is that she presents her sons against different backgrounds. For instance, in "Requiem For a Son", Das dwells on her son against the backdrop of his death in an accident. She expresses a mother's agony at his sudden demise expressing her intense agony. First of all, becoming a proud mother itself is a rare royal honour on earth, given to women, for they are builders of something greater than an empire:

Her laments were silent, her heart was a throne room
locked for years,
Where she walked alone with a mirror in her hand. Death is Ordinary. To live on an earth built upon layers and Layers of bone requires an extraordinary Courage, to walk the corridors of this prison and note with A quite joy the saplings bursting from the cracks in stone and know for certain that life will go on. ... (OS 78)

There is nothing left in the mother, in a world without her son.

In their poems addressed to their children, Sexton reveals her intense affinity towards her daughters, while Das expresses her love for her sons. Sexton's feelings of conflicts with regard to her children are extremely poignant and loaded with care and anxiety. Das's poems on her sons are utterly free of any feeling of guilt or conflict.
More than any other single factor, it was Sexton’s incestuous relationship with her father throughout her life that resulted in the most damaging conflicts she suffered from. It was quite an unusually sad situation from which Sexton could hardly recover herself totally. In “The House”, Sexton talks of her own father’s excessive lust: “His mouth is as wide as his kiss” (CP 72).

Sexton also narrates the feelings of humiliation she had, at the hands of her father:

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to slam the door on all the days she’ll stay the same,

and never ask why and never think who I ask,

to slam the door and rip off her orange blouse.

Father, father, I wish I were dead. (74)
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Sexton is not able to withdraw herself from her father’s dogged pursuit even after she reaches her middle age. She feels as if she is imprisoned. Though she does feel disgusted with this sordid state of affairs, she is not capable of redeeming herself. Another poem reveals Sexton’s fear for her father’s sexuality who makes her engage him in oral sex: “I was afraid to eat this father-food” (CP 322).

Though Sexton seems to narrate all these experiences with her father in a casual manner, she undergoes recurrent feelings of guilt, anger, shame, and hurt. What is tragic about Sexton’s relationship with her father is that
she herself, out of her own free will, was a party to their depraved affair. Consequently, her guilt is not easy to get over with. It is her part as an active participant in the crime that makes Sexton feel so unpardonably wretched and guilty: “We were conspirators, / secret actors, / and I kissed you” (CP 327).

Das’s poetry does not exhibit any such incestuous conflict with his father like Sexton’s does.

Another striking aspect to be noted in Sexton is her religious allusions in her poems using Biblical characters to identify some of her own experiences. Interestingly enough, in “The Legend of the One-Eyed Man”, Sexton identifies her guilt with that of Judas: “Like Judas I have done my wrong. ... / look into my face / and you will know that crimes dropped upon me” (CP 113). Here, Sexton seems to identify her own guilt with that of Judas, but she also associates her mother with the mother of Judas:

Judas had a mother
just as I had a mother. ...

His mother had a dream.
Because of this dream
he was altogether managed by fate
and thus he raped her.
As a crime we hear little of this.
Also he sold his God. (115)
Judas's relationship with his mother in Sexton's narrative is totally her own parodic deconstruction. Sexton often reveals feelings of guilt towards her mother for having deprived of her peace, happiness and money as well as for giving her cancer, as a result of her own repeated attempts of suicide. Here while comparing herself with Judas, she adds the line, "Also he sold his God", making his guilt deeper than her own.

Unlike Sexton, Das has not referred to any names associated with religion in her poems to exhibit any severe conflicts.

Both Sexton and Das reveal their conflicts in their 'dream' poems. Sexton says in "Flee On Your Donkey",

In trance I could be any age,
voice, gesture – all turned backward
like a drugstore clock.
Awake, I memorized dreams.
Dreams came into the ring
like third string fighters,
each one a bad bet
who might win
because there was no other. (CP 101)

In "The House", Sexton gives a lively account of her dreams which occur without any logic: "In dreams / The same bad dream goes on. / Like
some gigantic German toy,” (CP 71). It is interesting to know that these
dreams are simply the outcome of Sexton’s poignant conflicts, resulting
from her painful experiences. Also, she dreams of her death as well as her
return from it: “At thirty-five / she’ll dream she’s dead / or else she’ll
dream she’s back” (74) which clearly shows Sexton’s psychic dilemma
which found its way ultimately into her poetry. As Colburn observes, “the
thorough going dramatization of human experience in her poetry is
responsible for the highly charged emotional reaction it is capable of
eliciting” (283).

Like Sexton, Das too reveals her dreams as the outcome of her
heart’s conflicts. In “Composition”, she reveals her wavering mind relating
it to the waves of the sea which occur constantly in her dreams:

there was off and on a seascape

in my dreams

and the water

sloshing up

and sliding down. (OP 4)

In “Gino” too, Das talks of various dreams that torment her.
Whatever she is not able to get in real life, she is hopeful to get them in her
dreams: “one only gets / The life one deserves, and dreams only such
dreams as / The old soul can comprehend. ...” (13) but still she is not able
to get good dreams because of her inner conflicts. Only fearful dreams
loom large around her.

Her sexual experience with various men and the resulting bitterness
also gives Das such dreams and she feels tormented:

... of aeroplane
Bursting red in the sky .... I should be dreaming his
Peerless dreams, his dreams of sunlit villae and of fat
Half-caste children, lovelier than Gods, and of
Drinking wine in verandahs, he and I, ageing,
And at peace, all disguise gone from us. (13-14)

Das is also able to dream of her lover as how she wants him to be,
and what she wants him to do. These are all "peerless dreams" in which "all
disguise [are] gone from us" and hence they are "lovelier than Gods".
Dreams can thus serve as emotional fulfilment in Das.

The most frequent mental conflict Sexton shows in her poetry,
comes out as a result of her torment of death. "There were instances when
emotional integrity triumphed, notably when her eye turned inward on her
life's obsession, suicide, the impulses toward which had yielded her an
identity as strong as, and possibly stronger than, any she had found as a
poet" (Robinowitz 76). With her rare lust for death, Sexton appears to have
become a suicide maniac in her later years.
In “Imitations of Drowning”, Sexton says that she did have her initial “fear / of drowning” that went on even “for two years” but gradually “death, that old butcher, will bother me no more”:

This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying went on and on in water as white and clear as the gin I drink each day at half-past five.

Going down for the last time, the last breath lying, I grapple with eels like ropes – it’s ether, it’s queer and then, at last, it’s done. … (CP 107-108)

Again in “The Addict”, Sexton dwells on her insatiable thirst for death, her invisible fascination for suicide, relishing the prospects in detail:

It’s a ceremony but like any other sport it’s full of rules.

It’s like a musical tennis match where my mouth keeps catching the ball.

Then I lie on my altar elevated by the eight chemical kisses. (CP 166)

Though the diction employed in the description of Sexton’s consumption of sleeping pills is apparently comical, in reality, it is a very pathetic experience. Sexton’s urge for death can be traced as a condition in the
schizophrenic, as Laing states: “the experience and behaviour that gets labelled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation” (114-15), and Vernon describes the condition of the schizophrenic person being tormented by “two absolute polarities with no in-between” (24). This conflict is also seen in her rejection of herself being a confessional poet, when once she told an interviewer: “Well, for a while, oh for a long while, perhaps even now, I was called a ‘confessional poet’. And for quite a while I resented it” (Heyden 309).

The most famous twentieth-century comment on suicide was Albert Camus’s, in The Myth of Sisyphus: “There is only one philosophical problem which is truly serious; it is suicide. To judge whether life itself is or is not worth the trouble of being lived – that is the basic question of philosophy” (208). It is generally assumed in the context of Camus’s thought, that suicide would be a negative judgement of the “worth” of life. In Sexton’s case, the contrary is true.

Das’s revelation of her death urge in a few poems sound much less poignant than Sexton’s. Das does not exhibit any inordinate yearnings for death, though she does express her desire for death, especially, at times of great disappointments and conflicts. Das is not infatuated with Death. Das’s death wish is born merely out of “sad necessity”, while Sexton’s passion for death can be likened to an infatuation.
Like Sexton, Das too shows a mild feeling of jealousy at the death of Sylvia Plath. In an interview with Iqbal Kaur, for the question, “What impact did Sylvia Plath’s poetry and her The Bell Jar make on you?”, Das says: “I like tragedies. I like sad stories. Therefore, I enjoyed reading Sylvia Plath’s poetry as well as The Bell Jar. I admire Sylvia Plath for her courage to kill herself” (159).

When Das admits that she admires Sylvia’s courage to kill herself, she indirectly reveals her own innate penchant for suicide. “Suicide is more attractive because it displays determination and protest. Albert Camus, said once, ‘killing yourself amounts to confessing’. The confessional poet’s fascination for suicide is not a pretence; both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton committed suicide. In Kamala Das, the suicide wish has always been strong but not precipitate because of her essentially spiritual psyche and deep sensitivity” (Nair 97). He also says that Das’s concern with death is “an extension of her preoccupation with the theme of love-lust frustration” (104). She writes in My Story, “Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements” (215).

As Patricia Meyer Spacks observes, “Anne Sexton can be seen as a victim of an era in which it has become easy to dramatize self-indulgence, stylish to invent unexpected imagery regardless of its relevance,
fashionable to be a woman and as a woman to display one's misery” (188). She “in attempting to substitute art for life runs up against her perennial dilemma” (Nucifora 311-12). Her poems are “written from the extreme knife edge of self-slaughter”. They are “festering wounds, alarm bells of unbearable pain” (Bell 3). Thus, both the artists in question present several of their inner conflicts in their poetry.