CHAPTER 6

ANNE SEXTON AND KAMALA DAS:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

As the exponents of the confessional poetry, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das betray a world of identities as well as differences. These identities can be marked in their careers as well as their missions and creative sensibilities, reflected in poetic modes, and poetic techniques. They are so deep-rooted that they establish a permanent kinship between the two poets. As for differences, they are mostly superfluous, being the differences of geography and culture of their respective countries that can influence but only marginally, the type of poetry written in the confessional mode.

Since Sexton and Das are not content to write simply their autobiographies in the confessional mode, but intent upon to create mythologies of their self, they go on to draw the material for their poetic adventure from their own life history. Incidentally, life for both of them was a saga of rebellion, victimization, humiliation, agony, exploitation, disgrace, and abuse. Subsequently, for the most part of their lives, Sexton and Das had to live in the house of pain, enduring the buffets of the world around, autocratic and callous parents, deceitful lovers, tyrannical and cruel husbands, demanding children, scandal mongering neighbours, etc. In this drama of pain, there were some interludes of happiness provided by some loving elderly relatives.
Sexton and Das were born rebels and they had to suffer for the rebellion against their family and society. As rebels, their course of life was parallel to each other. Anne Sexton as a child, according to her biographers, was "demanding" and troublesome:

Often a source of family irritation, she was forever leaping from room to room with one purpose in mind to be noticed. Her parents threw up their hands at Anne's pranks... Constantly defying adult authority, she ate cake in her bedroom, threw rotten apples at the ceiling, and rummaged through Blanche's dresser drawers in secret.¹

Much at the same time, throughout her school years, she was energetic, flirtatious, and vivacious. Nevertheless, she liked to enact the role of the class rogue. At home, her parents denied her the much needed filial love, as she was put in a boarding school:

Each time I give lectures
or gather in the grants
you send me off to boarding school
in training pants.²

Likewise, Das's father was also autocratic and indifferent rather callous to her. He was so busy with his work at the automobile firm that he had no time for his children. As he was not pleased with the manners of his daughter, he got her admitted to a Christian school. "When I was nine, "writes Das in My Story," my father, coming home on leave, found me to have become too rustic for his liking and immediately admitted me into boarding school run by Roman Catholic nuns."³

Furthermore, when he was not satisfied with his daughter's progress in Maths, he got her "married --- as punishment."⁴ For this callousness, Das always had a grudge against her father. But at the same time she also loved her father and was
proud of him. In this way both Sexton and Das were obsessed with their father. There are several poems in which they show this obsession by seeking their lost fathers. Sexton seeks her father not only by writing poems on him but also by creating father figures. In “Cripples and Other Stories,” She expresses her ambivalent attitude of hate and worship towards him. She hates her father, for he broke her heart and worships him for he was perfect in his demeanour. Sexton was her father’s Electra and felt herself guilty of her father’s death. Therefore she began to seek him in various garbs, e.g. in the garb of a doctor, a teacher, and even the Christ or God. The experience of this search is embodied in All My Pretty Ones and Live or Die. Although Das’s obsession with the father-figure is not so acute, it is there surfacing in such a tremendous poems as “Glass” included in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems. She writes:

I do not bother
To tell: I’ve misplaced a father
Somewhere, and I look
For him now everywhere.\(^5\)

Interestingly, Sexton and Das bear an identical grudge against their mother as well. Sexton’s complaint was that her mother did not understand her. There were only two occasions when she had some sort of understanding of her daughter. But it was too late:

My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her.

\((\text{SP 111})\)

Anne also complained about her “mother’s inability to deal with suicide attempts.”\(^6\) Likewise there was a lack of understanding between Das and her
mother. She also blamed her mother for her failure to provide emotional stability and sense of security and to check her suicidal tendencies. In her interview with Iqbal Kaur, she complains of her mother’s inability to give her much needed “love and security,” her indifference, and her siding with her (Das’s) husband when there was some quatter.\(^7\) However, in spite of their moral inabilities and emotional inadequacies, their mothers had something positive to contribute. As both of them were poets of some stature, they provided their daughters with their poetic legacies, instilling poetic fervour in their sensibilities.

Anyhow in the long run, the two poets adopted an attitude of reconciliation and forgiveness towards their parents. In poem after poem Sexton refers to her sense of guilt felt towards her mother. She invokes this theme in “The Deep Image,” “Dreaming the Breast,” and in “The Operation.” She refers to the breasts, belonging to her mother, in a symbolic way. For her breasts are the source for the life-giving milk as well as of cancer which she received from her mother:

The breasts I knew at midnight
beat like the sea in me now. \(^{\text{(SP 179)}}\)

and

In the end they cut off your breasts
and milk poured from them
into the surgeon’s hand
and he embraced them
I took them from him
And planted them. \(^{\text{(SP 179)}}\)

However, Das did not betray a guilt-consciousness towards her parents. The wounds she received from them healed with the passage time. She developed
a sense of equanimity and forgave everybody responsible for her suffering, as she
told Kaur:

I can’t but forgive people who caused me to write poetry. If they
hadn’t hurt me, I wouldn’t have been a poet at all and probably the
only thing that really matters to me is my poetry, my writing and the
right to live as a poet. So far as my husband is concerned, I am
grateful to him for the suffering inflicted on me in my youth, for
without them I would nor have written poetry at all.8

To forgive her husband was certainly a brave act on the part of Kamala
Das. For it was her husband who was responsible for his suffering, physical and
mental, for discomfiture and demeaning of her feminine self. In The Old
Playhouse, Das bitterly remembers what her husband had given to her and her sad
plight to which she had been reduced by him:

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juice. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse 1)

Although her marriage was a “flop” and there were “interminable” periods
of “silences” between her and the husband, she did not divorce him, for, as she told
Iqbal Kaur she was so compassionate and sentimental that she could not “give
away even a cat.”9 She continued to take care of him. She tells Iqbal Kaur about
her compassionate attitude about her husband and parents: “I’m a fond wife, I’m a
fond daughter.”10 She goes on to add that she continues to obey him in spite of his
bad habits:
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. He is used to opening my letters. He is used to taking the telephone and answering it the way he likes to. It has become a habit with him. But I am free I think 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. Last year, he was in coma. I nursed him back to health. His existence is precious to me.\textsuperscript{11}

Sexton’s married life was none too happy. Like Kamala Das, she also had tried adultery, developing extra-marital relations. Her husband had to tolerate her affairs. Sexton too was careful not to write poems on his husband’s relatives, even though she wrote a lot about her husband, especially in the poems of \textit{Eighteen Days Without You}. It seems that her husband was not so much a source of unhappiness as her own wayward activities. Nonetheless at the fag end of her life, she asked him for divorce which was granted in November 1973. On October 4, 1974, she died.

As confessional poets, Sexton and Das went on to acknowledge their affairs with a number of lovers, both factual and fictional. Both of them celebrate their extra-marital loves in order to have a complete experience of a full blooded love and explore womanhood in its entirety. Obviously, both of them emerge from this type of love with a sense of bitter disillusionment, followed by an enlightenment revealing the piety of the husband-wife relationship. In “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” the poet asks her lover to return to his wife.

\begin{quote}
I gave you back your heart.
I give you permission -
for the fuse inside her, throbbing
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her
\end{quote}
and the burying of her wound -
for the burying of her small red wound a live -

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.

(SP 130-131)

Das too had many affairs so much so that love became a “swivel-door” through which lovers came and went away. As she wrote in “The Invitation,” she was without success “for the right one/To come.” Ultimately Das became a captive of her own designs, as she writes in Captive:

What have
we had, after all, between us but the womb’s bended hunger, the muted whisper at the core... For years I have run from one gossamer lane to another, I am now my own captive.

(The Descendants 17)

Even though Sexton and Das were not fond daughters and wives, they were fond mothers. They exhibit sincerity and emotion, while writing about their children. Both the poets depended on their children for emotional stability. Sexton’s feelings towards her daughters were a little more poignant. For she realized that there was the same gap of communication between her and her daughters, especially the younger one, Joyce that had spoiled her relations with her mother. In “Pain For a Daughter,” Sexton expresses her sense of shock when her daughter refuses to recognize her as mother after her (Sexton’s) return from the hospital. The girl becomes terrified and cries for help. This scene breaks the heart of Sexton:
I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God, help me!
Where a child would have cried Mama!
Where a child would have believed Mama!

(SP 113)

Sexton was intensely attached to Joyce so much so that her illness was
sufficient to disturb her and to evoke her consciousness of guilt. In “The Double
Image,” she writes:

... a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angles spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They rattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucer.

(SP 28)

Indeed Sexton loved her children, but she did not relish her motherhood.
Nor did she relish her pregnancy. It is on record that she was quite depressed
during her second pregnancy. According to Sexton and Ames, “Anne was
unprepared for the responsibility of another infant, an inquisitive two-year-old, a
household, and a husband. Her anger and concomitant depression deepened” (Self
Portrait 22-23). Naturally after the birth of Joyce she suffered a nervous
breakdown and was admitted to mental hospital.

Das was equally attached to her sons in as much she too became disturbed
by their illness. When Monoo, her first son, was stricken with polio, she became
quite upset, and cried. The boy was also upset as he asked his mother “Why do you
cry, Amma, am I going to die.” Das became quite emotional, embracing the boy,
shaking her head vehemently saying “no, no, no” (My Story 114). Describing another attack of illness on him she writes:

After my return from the nursing home, life became difficult for me. My eldest son who had come to be by my side during my illness, fell ill, contracting measles from my little son. Both were delirious with the high fever and I saw on their faces an ominous glaze.

I still hugged to my left side the pain I went to the hospital with, and to eat the sedatives prescribed for me I was not willing. I wanted to remain awake and vigilant at the beside of my son who stared at me with unseeing eyes mottled by red veins.

(My Story 204-205)

In reality Das revelled in her motherhood. The labour-pain which she felt was transformed into shrieks of joy. She felt proud in the act of loving creation. In “Jayasurya” the tinge of blood at childbirth appeared as the arrival of a new dawn. Das felt that she had become the earth-mother. The act of childbirth signified the fulfilment of a woman’s life which was no longer an empty container.

In typical voice of an Indian woman, she writes:

When the rain ceased
And the light was gay on our casuarinas leaves
wailing into the light he came,
so fair, a streak of light thrust
into the fading light. They raised him
to me hen,
proud Jaisurya,
my son, sparated from a darkness
that was mine
and in me.
The darkness of rooms
where the old sit,
sharpening words for future use
The darkness of sterile wombs
And that of the miser’s pot
with the mildew on his coins.12
Besides, children, Sexton and Das found a real emotional anchorage in the loving lap of the grand old ladies of their family. To Sexton, this emotional security was provided by her aunt Anna Ladd Dingley. She was the soft white lady of her heart. While Anna, who lived with them, was alive, she felt secured and happy. But after her death, Sexton’s heart was shattered. In poems like “Elizabeth Gone” and “Some Foreign Letters” she goes on to express this unbearable loss. In “Elizabeth Gone” she tries to console by loving her aunt’s clothes and by remembering her “apple shape,” “the simple crèche of her arms,” “the August smells” of her skin (SP 13). In “Some Foreign Letters,” her sense of loss becomes all the more acute, as it is overshadowed by a sense of guilt as well. By reading her letters, she projects a living image of the lady of her heart:

I know you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.

(SP 14)

The sense of security and stability which Sexton found with Anna, Das found with her grandmother. In her poems she remembers her with great feeling rather with a sense of poignancy. In My Story she tells us that she spent much time with her. “None had loved me as deeply,” she writes, “as my grandmother” (My Story 113). Whenever she fell ill, it always her grandmother who nursed her to health and life so long the old lady was alive. In “Composition” she fondly remembers “lying beside” her, listening to the “ceaseless whisper” of the sea (The
Old Playhouse 3). While indulging in her mental “striptease” and extruding “autobiography,” she tells us how much she is missing her grandmother:

The only secrets I always
with hold
are that I am so alone
and that I miss my grandmother.

(The Old Playhouse 5-6)

To the love-lorn poet, she was the only source of love. When the source stopped, the house in which she lived became for her silent and cold; as she writes in “My Grandmother’s House”:

There is a house now for away where once
I received love... That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon.

(The Old Playhouse 32)

Among other things both Sexton and Das were nostalgic of the days of their psychic suffering, remembering their hospitals, even their room numbers, doctors, and a persons attending on them. Sexton never mentions her hospital as hospital but as the “Summer Hotel” (SP 9) of which she is the queen and “the summer’s mild retreat” (SP 52). Her attitude towards her doctor, Dr. Martin, is ambivalent, as she mentions him sometimes as a lover and sometimes as father or even God-figure. In “Flee on Your Donkey,” she writes:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

(SP 77)
She had every reason to regard her doctor as a man from the divine world, because it was he who gave her a new lease of life:

I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,

(Sp 78)

Das also fondly remembered her hospital, her room number “Room No. 565,” she writes, “was familiar to me. It was therefore like a homecoming. My doctors were extra kind. They held my hand and talked to me with affection. There was in particular a young, balding one, who smoked Benson and Hedges and scattered their butts on the floor. I liked the smell his thick fingers left on my hands” (My Story 185).

Likewise, Das also felt attached to her doctors and attendants. She became enamoured of Shirley as well as Dr. Pankajam Karunakaran. With her ministrations, the lady doctor brought Das back to life, with her warm touch and gentle voice. She kept death away from Das. She became infatuated with her doctor’s figure and behaviour. She wrote:

She was the kindest woman I had ever known. Her patients adored her and when I was well enough to walk about I sat near the hall-window watching the poor patients queeving up with their babies on their hips and the medicine-bottles in their hands. She did not take money from the poor but made them feel that the gratuity was only due to friendship. Every patient felt that she was somebody special.

(My Story 136-137)

The careers of Anne Sexton and Kamala Das were identical not only in digging the skeletons of their relatives and friends but also in their aims and
objectives. They had one and the same aim viz. championing the cause of women. Though at the outset, Sexton wrote poems as a measure of self-therapy but later this therapy was elevated to public-therapy. She made clean breast of everything not because she wanted to purge herself of her obsessive guilt-consciousness but because she wanted to purge the minds of their fellow sufferers as well. Her doctor persuaded her that her poems might prove beneficial to her readers, suffering from mental diseases. Though self-exposure, was something arduous and embarrassing, she went on to make this difficult choice requiring the Jacaston dare devil courage and for which she was subsequently ridiculed by her relatives, friends and teachers alike. The public reaction against this type of poetry was too strong:

At the time everyone said, “You can’t write this way. It’s too personal; it’s confessional: You can’t writ this, Anne,” and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission."

Besides, John Holmes her first mentor, “expressed his doubts about (the) public confessions.” He reminded her of the psychical dangers of going too far in the direction of self-digging. For such things are disastrous not only from the psychical point of view but also from the social point of view. But in spite of warning, she continued to proceed in this direction and ultimately achieved a measure of success:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which twenty years later, seems for less daring.... To day, the remonstrances seem almost quaint.
Kamala Das on her part, shared Anne Sexton’s aims and objectives. Initially she wrote poetry to explode the volcano simmering within her. But later on, using the might of her pen, she fought not only for her personal liberation but for the liberation of the womankind. “She wanted,” writes Iqbal Kaur, “liberation from the stifling social reality which doomed women to immanence liberation from the past, i.e. liberation from the age-old tradition of silence on women’s part and for Kamala Das, as for saint, Beauve, writing became liberation.”16

But for championing the cause of women, through personal confessions, she had to pay a heavy price in terms of personal problems and social prestige. She caused great embarrassment to her family that her father “threatened to commit suicide.”17 and her relatives thought that she was a “threat to their respectability.”18 She herself was upset by the rumours about her life generated by her disclosures “I wept like a wounded child,” she writes, “for hours rolling on my bed and often took sedatives to put myself to sleep” (My Story 166). She was so associated with love and lust that people made phone-calls. Even her relatives began to approach her for sex. However, in spite of disasters, disapprovals and embarrassment she remained as determined as ever. “I compromised,” she stated, “with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all the boats that would have reached me to security” (My Story 220). In her aim of the emancipation of women through self-exposures, Das remained as audacious and relentless as Sexton. Through her writing she disturbed society breaking its complacency and liberated herself and her class. She helped women to realise, what Iqbal Kaur phrases as the “self
worth.” She made them bold enough to refuse “victimization and exploitation by men.”¹⁹ To quote Das:

I don’t even have to speak about the exploitation that all of us suffer at the hands of men. They know when they see me. Probably, I symbolize something for women. I symbolize courage I don’t think women in Kerala are any longer victims. It wasn’t so about twenty years ago. Almost every woman was a victim and had to submit to tortures mental and physical. But the position has changed now and perhaps in some small way my writings and speeches also have made some difference.²⁰

Coming to the poetry of Sexton and Das, we discover same identities that we find in their careers and poetic missions. However, we should always remember that neither in their careers and mental make-up nor in their poetic exploits they were exact-twins. While Anne was an epitome of the American frivolity Das retained in her waywardness, the tough mentality of a Nayar woman. Much in the same way Sexton deserted her husband but Das, while suffering more from her husband’s behaviour, did not think of deserting him. Likewise, their poetry, though betraying similarities of themes, tone, temperament, language, poetic strategy etc. is defined by the separateness of their country, climate, and cultural background. Even though their conceptions of the self, body, love, sex, life, death, and even of poetry, and religious experience strike same chords of the confessional mode, they produce a different music, since their instruments belong to different backgrounds.

Interestingly the poetry of Sexton and Kamala Das is rooted in a common mode and even in a common source, Walt Whitman, the Whitman of “Calmus” poems, celebrating human body in its full splendour. The influence of Whitman
was pervasive. Robert Phillips calls him "an important precursor of confessional poetry."21 Almost all confessional poets acknowledged their debt to the American poet. "It was Whitman," writes Phillips, "who taught courage to many moderns – the courage to write about what they are and where they have been."22 Berryman, Roethke, Sexton, Plath, and Ginsberg were his acknowledged fans. Naturally Das also felt his influence. When Iqbal Kaur asked her about the authors who "left an indelible mark on [her] mind,"23 she promptly told: "Perhaps Walt Whitman did to some extent. In childhood he was the only poet who impressed me."24

Furthermore, both Sexton and Das acknowledge Sylvia Plath's influence on them. Plath's influence on Das was immense and far-reaching in as much shared Plath's approach to the problems of life and death. In a letter to Newman, Sexton wrote: "We were just two barflies – talking of death – not of creation. What she did in her last poems, is I feel, worth a whole life time."25 Sylvia and her death has been the subject matter of a number of Sexton's poems. No other poets understood the language of death and its intensity to an extent Plath and Sexton did. Das also admired Plath for poetry and personal courage. She tells Iqbal Kaur:

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.26

It is no wonder that Das came to share Plath's way of dying. Ramesh Kumar Gupta, in his long article finds echoes of Plath in "The Suicide":

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead. (BKD 28)

Then he goes on to quote the following lines from Plath by way of comparison:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else?
I do it exceptionally well. 27

With their poetic culture, cultivated under the influence of Whitman and Plath and many others, Sexton and Das wrote their autobiographies in the manner of a modern poet who “invites us to share in his pursuit of identity to witness the dramatization of the daily events of his experience so closely resembling our own; to be haunted by the imagery of his dreams or the flowing stream of his consciousness; to eavesdrop on relationships with friends and lovers; to absorb the shock of his deep-seated fears and neuroses, even mental instability and madness, and through them to realize the torment of our time.” 28

Even though Sexton rejected the mythological archetypes in favour of autobiography, she went on creating mythologies of her self with the fusion her personal experience with those borrowed from other sources or woven by her creative imagination. Das’s imagination was manifestly mytho-poetic, enabling her to create myths with the blending of fact and fiction. Both of them shared, what the psychologists call, “the leaky ego,” and the supreme confidence and determination of a confessional poet to cut the frozen sea within them not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of others as well. In a way both of them rose above their weaknesses to give vent to their experiences so much so that they became known for their exemplary courage. Anne Sexton has been seen as,
having the large, transparent, breakable, and increasingly ragged wings of a dragonfly — her poor, shy, driven life, the blind terror behind her bravado, her deadly increasing pace... her bravery while she lasted.29

Likewise, Das, though possessing the breakable wings of a dragonfly, refused to succumb to the pressures exercised by the world. She remained as uncompromising and relentless in her mission as ever. Iqbal Kaur tells us that she never accepted the conventional norms imposed on womankind by society:

But true to her convictions, Kamala made no compromises with her conventional society’s expectations from women. Even though she would get temporarily disturbed by the fact that she was being associated with lust and sex and was misunderstood to be an immoral woman — a corrupter of youth, she was not prepared to accept the society’s prescriptions the does and don’ts it prescribed for women she says.30

However, under the veneer of a robust self, Sexton and Das, possessed a leaky self, sick and vulnerable, craving every now and then for existential security. Painfully aware of their weak points both within and without, they attempted to fight their way out of their internal and external quagmire. Sexton’s self, wilting under the pressure of an overpowering sense of guilt and loss, always engaged in exorcising the ghosts of her parents, relatives, and friends, and fighting with the external world, began to seek security in the though of madness and death. The poet who championed the cause of women ultimately became herself tired of being a woman. Sexton gave went to her tiredness in the poem titled “ Consorting with Angels”:

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. (SP 83)
Das's self of a Nalapat Nayar lady, hurt and dwarfed by her husband, bruised and cheated by lovers, scandalized by her neighbours and relatives, and ultimately deformed by the bouts of illness, seemed to lose its grip on life. She also felt tired of her body. She wrote in "Gino":

This body that I wear without joy, owned
By man of substance, shall perhaps wither, battling with
My darling's impersonal lust, Or, it shall grow grass
And reach large proportion before its end.

(The Old Playhouse 14)

But Das's self differed from Sexton's in case of guilt-consciousness. Nor did she attempt to exorcise the shadowy spectres lurking in the consciousness. Her self was actually the victim of the virile tyranny and masculine hierarchies.

Both Sexton and Das were the incomparable analysts of the leaky self and the supreme singers of love and the human body, especially of the female body with all its beauty, and ugliness. They did not hesitate to reveal the unravelled secrets of the female body, its cycles and its seasons. Sexton wrote many poems on themes relating to the organs and motions of the female body especially her hands, mouth, breasts, legs, and uterus, showing an unprecedented boldness in revealing the most intimate secrets of female physiology. She embodied these revelations in poems like "Housewife," "Menstruation at Forty," "The Breasts," "In Celebration of My Uterus," "The Operation," "The Abortion," etc. "In Housewife," she did not hesitate to reveal the mysteries of the female organs. In "The Furies," she goes on paint the beauty of female organs, along with male organs:
Women have lovely bones, arms, neck, thigh and I admire them also, but your bones supersede loveliness. They are the tough ones that get broken and resist. I just can’t answer for you, only for your bones, round rulers, round nudgers, round poles, numb nubkins, the sword of sugar.
I feel the skull. Mr Skeleton, living its own life in its own skin.

(SP 210)

Along with the description of female mysteries, Sexton unfolds the nuances of the touch-game and passion and ecstasy, it generates. In the poem “The Breasts,” she expresses the sensual delight of young girl at the touch of the hands of her lover:

But your hands found me like an architect.

(SP 123)

The speaker seems alive with the touch of lover’s fingers:

I am alive when your fingers are.

(SP 124)

Sexual fulfilment makes the speaker unbalanced:

I am unbalanced.

(SP 124)

The touch of lover’s fingers on her breast makes the speaker mad with over excessive sexual fulfilment:

I am mad the way young girls are mad, with an offering, an offering...

(SP 124)

Sexton relishes to poetize such unpoetic subjects as operations, abortions, menstruations and masturbations that have no tinge of beauty in them. She finds
poetry the most unpoetic things. For instance, we can cite a few lines from “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator”:

The boys and girls are one tonight.
They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.
They take off shoes. They turn of the light
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

(SP 137)

Sexton as a poet of love was attentive to the charms of human body. However, she was more attentive to delineate the forbidden subjects of the female anatomy than with the ideal flights of love. Furthermore, her love poems displayed an intense hatred for the male tribe.

Das is no less attentive to the mysteries of human body. While celebrating human body Das is more poetical than Sexton, since she enacts the drama of love through the passionate motions of the body. She talks of “body’s wisdom” (“A Relationship”), “wombs blinded hunger” (“Captive”), “the hacking at each other’s parts” (“Convicts”), and “[s]tanding nude before the glass,” “the jerky way he Urinates,” “[t]he warm shock of menstrual blood” and “[e]ndless female hungers” (“The Looking Glass”). Das images are more erotic and concrete than Sexton’s. She describes the sexual experience of women with man in a language of openness and candour. For instance, she writes in “The Old Playhouse,” about the way a woman reacted to her man:

You were pleased
with my bod’s response, its weather, its usual shallow convulsions. You dribbed spittle into my mouth, you poured yourself into every nook and cranny, you
embalmed my poor lust with your sweet bitter juices.

Though Das is preoccupied with the motions and movements of the female body, she is also aware of the charms of the male body. She does not ignore the peculiarities of human body and the pleasures it offers. Aware of the ugliness of human mouth as dark cavern housing uneven teeth ("The Freaks") and the terrible hand swaying like a hooded snake ("The Stone Age"), she is equally mindful of beguiling graces of the male body. To quote a few lines from "The Looking Glass":

Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the sky walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Uranates. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.

(The Descendants 25)

In spite of her bitter experiences as a wife and a beloved, she does not want a woman to escape from man but she asks her to offer what she has:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. On yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
without him afterward may have to be faced.

(The Descendants 25)

The celebrations of human body that we find in Sexton and Das are the legacies of their narcissism, which characterize their conception of love. They celebrate their bodies, since they are victims of self love. Self-love has its own
repercussions. It compels them to adopt a rigid attitude towards mankind and 
drives them to a sense of isolation and alienation. Interestingly while revealing the 
hidden aspects of female physiology, as well as psychology the windows of their 
minds are shut off, since, they unable to know the genuine feelings of their 
counterparts. Unable to find loving security in their lover’s arms, they attempt to 
find it in the divine arms or in the lap of figurative and literal death.

The conception of love that we find in Sexton and Das is not only 
narcissistic but also incestuous. Throughout her life Sexton is tormented by an 
Electra complex. She continues to unfold her obsessive experience to the fag end 
of her life. In “Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman,” of 45 Mercy Street, she writes:

I have been divorcing him every since, 
going into court with Mother as my witness 
and both long dead or not 
I am still divorcing him, 
Adding up the crimes 
of how he came to me, 
how he left me.

(SP 253)

Sexton struggled to divorce the memory of her father as well as the protective 
company of her husband. She intended to find her loving security in the company 
of Christ or God:

I’m mooring my rowboat  
At the dock of the island called God.

(SP 217)

Thus Sexton gets her emotional anchor only in God but in an unprecedented 
manner.
The elements of narcissism and incest, though not so strong as in Sexton, go on to inform Das’s poems as well. She expresses the obsessive intensity of this complex in “The Old Playhouse.” Narrating destructive quality of narcissism she writes:

for love is Narcissus at the water’s edge haunted by its lonely face, and, yet is must seek at last an end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors to shatter and the kind night to erase the water.

(BKD 101)

According to P. Mallikarjuna Rao, narcissism forms the first stage of Kamala’s quest for ideal love. In this phase, the lovers are “chained” in self admiration. “It is in the second phase of ideal love that the lovers transgress the boundaries of their egos or narrow selves to merge with each other, as such merger ensures total freedom. The poet beholds such an exemplary relation in the love between Radha and Krishna. She surmises herself as Radha who goes in search of Krishna, the ideal lover, in spite of her marriage.”31 Like Sexton’s, Das’s quest for ideal love to be precise, existential love overreaches the barriers of self-love and enters the temple of divine love, however with a marked difference. While Sexton, though more surcharged with a sense of divine ecstasy, does not have the experience of merger, Das has. In her poem “Radha” she writes:

Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but
You.

(BKD 25)
Kamala finds the fulfilment of love not only in the divine merger but also in her motherhood. She revels not only in child bearing and child rearing but also draws utmost satisfaction in giving birth to children, as we find in her poem “Jayasurya.” Sexton though she loved her children does not display such satisfaction. In so far as the human, world is concerned, Sexton and Das find love not from males but from elderly females. Sexton’s greatest source of love was her grandmother Anna Ladd Dingley. In Das’s case as well, her grandmother was her angel of love.

Coming to incest, so central to Sexton, is not pervasive in the poetry of Das. But it is there in some or the other form. In “Glass,” it appears as “a Freudian search for the misplaced father figure.” The poet unsuccessfully moves from man to man in quest for her true home. Her search is similar to the search of a woman for her eternal lover Krishna. In “Glass” Das gives, what Devindra Kohli calls, “a clinical version.” of this search:

With a cheap toy’s
indifference I enter other’s lives and make of
every trap of lust a temporary home. On me
their strumming fingers may revive the found melodies
of a poet. I give a wrapping to their dreams, I give
a woman-voice, a woman-smell and I do not
every brother to tell, I have misplaced a father
somewhere...
and I look for him now everywhere.

(BKD 103)

In their quest for God or freedom or release, Sexton and Das do not hesitate to follow strange and unorthodox ways – the ways of madness, and death, especially death by suicide. Like most of the confessional poets Sexton renders us a fine
exposition of the manic states. In the poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she gives a moving account of the experience of her depression, mental breakdown, and her hospital days. In “Music Swims Back to Me,” she tells us how like a child she is lost in the darkness of the asylum. Even her guide is unable to tell her the way out. She is highly perturbed and restless, as she finds no signposts in the room:

Wait Mister. Which way is home?
They turned the light out
and the dark is moving in the corner.
There are no sign posts in this room,
Four ladies, eighty,
In diapers every one of them.

and

They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.
and there are no signs to tell the way,
just the radio beating to itself
and the song that remembers
more than I. Oh, la la la,
this music swims back to me
The night I came I danced a circle
And was not afraid.
Mister?

Das’s madhouse-experience does not achieve the poignancy and depth of Sexton’s experience. Although she too had suffered from manic depressions and was hospitalized several times, she could not dramatize her experiences in a way Sexton did. Nevertheless she had such a poem as “The Lunatic Asylum,” to her credit, in which she gives a fine portrait of its inmates. Referring to the light burning in the asylum, throughout the night, she tells us,
It burns harshly, a sun that
Does not ever set, but her sher still burns
The lamps in their skulls, those lights that
The bromides or the electric whiplash
Of every week cannot put out.
those large and hot, insomniac lanterns
under which hazy spectres dance
in the sepulchral ballrooms of their minds.

(BKD 127)

Das goes on to ask the reader not to pity them, for because they are brave:

No, do not pity them, they were
brave enough to escape, yes, to step out
Of the brute regimentals of sane
routing, ignoring the bugles, the wail
Of sirens and the robots stern
bark, hup two three, hup two three,
hup two three...

(BKD 127)

Like most of the confessional poets, both Sexton and Das are great painters
of death. Their conceptions of death attain such mystical heights. To them death
loses its terrible teeth and assumes the role of a benign liberator from the prison of
the flesh. To Sexton death, which she defines as “a thin alley” in the mind (SP
92), appears as lover and in many garbs of an actor with various masks, is a
“cherub,” and finally even a god. In her poem “For Mr. Death Who Stands With
His Door Open,” the poet welcomes death as her lover and also as an actor:

Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks.
Once you were sleek, a kind of Valentino
with my father’s bathtub gin in your flask.
With my cinched-in waist and my dumb vertigo
at the crook of your long white arm
and yet you never bent me back, never, never,
into your back guard charm.

(SP 203)
It is no wonder that Sexton sings the hymns of death in the poems of The Death Notebooks. In “Baby” the sixth or the final poem of “The Death Baby” embodied in The Death Notebooks, Sexton hails death as a cherub with milky wings.

Death
you lie in my arms like a cherub.
as heavy as bread dough.
Your milky wings are as still as plastic.
Hair as soft as music.
Hair the color of a harp.
And eyes made of glass,
as brittle as crystal.

(SP 208)

Ultimately Sexton comes to understand the real role of death as a liberator. She realizes that death is not the end of life, but the beginning of a new life:

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters. Death comes with its bagful of pain yet they do not curse the key they were given to hold.
given to hold

For they open each door and it gives them a new day at the Yellow window.

(SP 224)

With the realization that death is really a liberator and an usher opening a new door of existence, she begins to love death. But the best form of death envisaged by Sexton, is suicide. In “Clothes” (The Death Notebooks), she expresses her intention to commit suicide and to go to God as a clean one, wearing clean clothes:

Put on a clean shirt.
before you die, some Russian said,
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,
so I’ll try to comply. 

(SP 216)

It is only in this purified condition that she wants to proceed towards God:

And I’ll take
my painting shirt
washed over and over of course
spotted with every yellow kitchen I’ve painted.
God, you don’t mind if I bring all my kitchens?
They hold the family laughter and the soup.

(SP 216)

In “For the Year of the Insane,” Sexton writes of water as an agent of purification

In the mind there is a thin alley called death
and I move through it as
through water
My body is useless,

(SP 92)

Although Das’s conception of death as a liberator is neither so profound nor so comprehensive, it is certainly poignant and deep. It has a unique intensity which comes from her ability to give a condensed account of death. The whole gamut of experience poetized by Sexton in Live or Die and The Death Notebooks is condensed in Das’s poetic marvel “The Suicide.” Even though Das seldom visualizes the seductive and manifold roles of Death to the extent Sexton does, she experiences all those horrors, pangs, and fears which one endures in one’s struggle with death. She is as restless as Sexton to throw her body before entering in the vortex of the sea:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.
Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two"
I throw the bodies out,
I cannot stand their smell,
Only the souls may enter
The vortex of the sea.

(BKD 27)

For the most part of her life Das was preoccupied with the idea of death. “I have been for years,” she writes in My Story, “obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality” (My Story 218). As we have seen in “The Suicide,” she prefers death by water, i.e. by drowning in the sea. She writes in My Story:

Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning my self to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements. But rest is a childish fancy, a very minor hunger. The shark’s hunger is far greater than mine.

(My Story 215)

In “The Suicide,” she contemplates death by drowning in a powerful and moving way. She envisions how her dead body like deadwood would rise the tide, bruising against the coral roofs. Relating her various poses forced upon her, she expresses her tiredness and disgust with life. In the end of the poem she imagines her soul leaving the body and singing the song of freedom:

Lights are moving on the shore.
But I shall not return.
Sea, toss my body back
That he knew how to love.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be free.
Take in my naked soul
That he knew how to hurt
Only the soul knows how to sing
At the vortex of the sea.  

(BKD 31)

Indeed Das’s intensity of experience whether in celebration of human body or death is unprecedented in the poetic realm of modern literature.

Sexton and Das are not poets of sensationalism, simply exposing the secrets of the female body and celebrating manic states. They are also poets of transcendence which they achieve through lifting their consciousness to religious heights. Significantly, they are not strict adherents of some specific religious tradition, but have a religious temperament which surfaces in their poetry every now and then. Furthermore, they also claim to have religious experience, even though they believe only in an existential religion. Sexton’s had the visions of “God or of, Christ, or of the Saints.” Das also had the vision of Durga on the operating table: “I saw her in red,” she writes in My Story, “resplendent in gem-encrusted jewellery. It was with the vision that I became unconscious on the operating table” (My Story 185).

However on the point of religious conviction, there is a world of difference between them. Sexton is more steadfast in her belief than Das who adopted rather a shifting stance in the matter of religious faith.

Obviously both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das have tremendous faith in their Muse. She is the sole companion who never deserts. Even in the days of utter loneliness she is there to console them and to nurse them back to life. As Sexton writes in “Flee on Your Donkey”:  

221
Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse.
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse.  

(SP 75)

To Kamala Das as well poetry is her sole companion in loneliness, rather her instrument of overcoming loneliness. In “Anamalai Poems” she goes on to write:

If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness.

(BKD 154)

Like most of the poets, they are convinced of the cathartic and purifying quality of poetry. For Sexton poetry is an effective and powerful form of the individual as well as social therapy. She believes that poetry possesses the power of the Kafkan “ax” to cut the “frozen sea” within an individual. Furthermore, poetry milks the unconscious for the images, literary symbols, answers, and insights. The poetic process resembles the process of therapy. Kamala Das blends the cathartic element with her voice of protest. Its volume increases with the increasing intensity of the confessional tone. Prof. S.D. Sharma states, “the more poignant her confessional tone is, the more is her cathartic import.”

Sexton and Das are greatly concerned with the part played by words in the composition of poetry. They are equally concerned with the origin, meaning, and the effects of these words in life. In “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” Sexton writes:

My business is words. Words are like labels,
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
as if words counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.

(SP 17)
Das’s treatment of words is, however, more profound and comprehensive than Sexton’s. She wrote more poems on the theme of words than Anne Sexton. These poems include “Words,” “Convicts,” “An Introduction,” “Speech,” “Words Are Bird,” “The Word in Sin,” etc. These poems deal with different aspects of the mysteries of the verbal phenomenon. Interestingly her conception of the sources of words seems equivocal. She locates their origin in the silence of the deep sea within. At the same time she visualizes them as growing naturally like leaves. To her words are also the instruments of nuisance. Das is also aware of the inadequacy of words, as she writes in “Words Are Birds”:

Words are birds.  
Where have they gone to roost.  
Wings, tired,  
Hiding from the dusk?  

(BKD 137)

In expression Sexton and Das use and experiment with the forms conspicuous to confessional art. Discarding the indirect forms of the Modernist poets, they apt for direct forms, especially autobiography. However, in their autobiography, they frequently blend fictional stories to give it a semblance of objectivity and universality. Both in Sexton and Das, there is a fair mixture of fact and fiction. Furthermore, their poetic diction is marked by the use of colloquial language. While Sexton’s colloquialism is marked by American slang, Das’s language, as she acknowledges (is in “An Introduction,” “is half English, half Indian” (BKD 12). In their language, there is a charm of novelty, and a peculiar intensity that comes from felt experience. However, both of them reinforce their
diction with traditional forms and structure and traditional means of embellishment like figures of speech, literary devices, imagery, and symbolism. While writing the history of her leaky self, Sexton uses the devices of structure, lyricism, understatement, irony, metonymy, metaphor, imagery and symbolism. As for structure, she habitually updates old and orthodox structures, making them relevant to her confessional mode. Using freer forms of versification, she reinforces them with the old figures of speech like metonymy to bring out truth, literal as well as emotional.

Sexton also excels in the use of metaphorical devices to structure her confessional outbursts. She invests her utterances with lyrical intensity and music frequently produced by the repetitions of letters, words, phrases, and even sentences. However, the most remarkable part of her poetic diction is the use of sharp, provocative, and crystal images, which provide a haunting quality to her poetry. The imagery of the poems like “Starry Night,” “Lament,” and “Live” can be considered as the landmark of the poetic art. Furthermore, Sexton uses various forms of irony and understatement to separate her self from the poetic self again to create an illusion of objectivity and universality or to make personal impersonal and to reduce sensationalism. Likewise, with the device of metonymy, Sexton brings out the emotional truth hidden under the cloak of literal truth or facts and figures.

Ostensibly Das is greater artist than Sexton. Since Sexton is one of the originators of confessional poetry, her technique suffers from all the defects of a beginner. But when Das began to write, confessional mode was in its full-fledged
form. Therefore she had to make few experiments. She had only to modify, enlarge, and refine the existing form. Furthermore, she reinforced the confessional mode with the literary devices of the Eliotic school, especially with its imagery and symbolism. Furthermore, she did not hesitate to use figural devices in a more pronounced way. Naturally we find an abundance of such devices as ironical statement and understatement, juxtaposition, oxymoron, dialectical position, analogy, paradox, aphorism, suggestiveness, etc.

However, the area in which Das leaves Sexton far behind is certainly imagery. She draws the rich variety of her imagery from a number of sources natural as well as human. From the natural world, she produces elemental images of the natural powers and the denizens of the natural world – the images of the four elements and the animals, including, the sun, and the sea, the birds like bats, herons, swallow, crow, etc. From the human world, she uses the images of body, death, and various motions of the human and mind. Das employs these images in a number of ways, for creating background as well as for delineating various moods and state of consciousness. Although Sexton’s poetry is remarkable for the richness and emotional intensity of her imagery, she hardly equals rich variety and beauty of Das’s images. She also surpasses her American counterpart in providing symbolic dimensions to her elemental imagery.

To sum up, Sexton and Das, being confessional poets par excellence, betray a world of identities and differences in their poetic techniques. Identities or to be precise similarities, stem from their common vocation, while differences spring from the difference of their cultural background. Since both of them put their self
on the central stage of their poetic consciousness, their sensibility is personal and private which expresses it through the medium of autobiography. But since this sensibility reveals a new self, half real and half imagined and hitherto buried under the debris of the unconscious, in new garbs, it assumes a mytho-poetic form. In a way the confessional mode of autobiography of self takes the contours of the mythology of self. However, self which Sexton and Das delineate is not a normal self but a leaky self of a female, painfully conscious of her suppression by the male tribe.

Sexton and Das begin the exploration of their leaky self by digging the skeletons of their parents, husbands, relatives, and friends. While Sexton digs these skeletons with an acute sense of overpowering guilt and remorse, Das does it almost without the burden of guilt. In her poetry the element of confession merges with social protest. Furthermore, in Das disillusionment with her family was not so complete as it was with Sexton. Interestingly despaired of their parents and husbands, both of them found solace and emotional security in the love of their children and grandmothers. They also inculcated fond memories of their doctors and friends who helped them to recover from their illness and manic depressions.

In their individual and social aims, both Sexton and Das possessed a common approach i.e. to awaken their respective societies from their complacency by shock treatment to purge them from their psychic and social sickness and win for their female tribe, a place of honour. In their poetic mission they felt inspired by Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath. Sexton and Das engaged themselves in the pursuit of their aims with courage and uncompromising attitude, paying heavy
price in terms of social prestige and personal health even life. In this struggle Das gained an upper hand in comparison to Sexton.

As poets, Sexton and Das were the supreme singers of human body, especially female body, both of its beauty and ugliness. They excelled dealing with the taboo subjects and human body including the mysteries of its private portions, its cycles and seasons. They also dealt with love, especially the narcissistic, or self-destructive love in which Das outscores Sexton. Both of them found love’s satiety in the divine embrace. This satiety was more prominent in Sexton than it was in Das. In the portrayal of the incestuous love as well, Sexton surpassed Das.

As confessional poets, Sexton and Das dealt with manic states of depression, psychic imbalances, madness, and even suicidal tendencies. Both of them delineate morbid conditions with profundity and poignancy. But in relation to sheer details, Sexton stole the show. In their creation of the portraits of death, both Sexton and Das were class by themselves. Their poetry embodied many hymns to the savage god i.e. death. For them death was both a liberator and an usher opening doors of the eternal life. Sexton’s Live or Die and Das’s “Clothes” and “The Suicide” were among the finest poems on death.

Coming to the formal aspect, both Sexton and Das had tremendous faith in the power of poetry as a steadfast friend, cathartic agent, liberator, and agent of transcendence. They were equally concerned with the mysterious roles of words. However, Sexton’s treatment of words was not as comprehensive as that of Das who wrote many poems on the subject. In their treatment of free verse, colloquial
language, structural forms, lyricism, figures of speech, poetic devices like imagery and symbolism both Sexton and Das marked a close kinship. While in structural devices Sexton went past Das, in imagery, it was Das who left Sexton far behind. In the end one can say that as confessional poets both Sexton and Das produced excellent poetry which can hardly be surpassed.
Chapter 6 – Notes


8. Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 162.


16 Iqbal Kaur, “Preparatory Note,” *Perspectives* VIII: hereafter cited as Note.

17 Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

18 Kamala Das, qtd. Note, Kaur VIII.

19 Kaur, Interview, *Perspectives* 163.

20 Kamala Das, Interview, *Perspectives* 163.


22 Phillips 4.

23 Kaur, Interview, 159.

24 Kamala Das, Interview, Kaur 159.


26 Kamala Das, Kaur 159.


30 Kaur, Note, Kaur IX.


32 Kohli 112.

33 Kohli 112.

34 Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 24.

35 See, Kevles, McClatchy 28.