CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The modern form of Confessional poetry was one of the chief channels of modern creative consciousness of the English speaking world. It dominated the poetic scene of America and the Commonwealth countries, especially during the third quarter of the twentieth century. It produced such stalwarts as Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Stanley Kunitz in America and Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Judith Wright, and Margaret Atwood in the Commonwealth countries. It also inspired such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Karl Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell. However, the most representative poets of this genre are undoubtedly Anne Sexton and Kamala Das, since their poetry embodies the most distinctive elements of the confessional mode. Naturally Anne has been regarded as “the reigning high priestess of the confessional school”¹ and Kamala Das no less, since “she also exploited the mode like Plath and Sexton.”²

These confessional poets wrote a number of widely acclaimed and national and international prize-winning works, including such masterpieces as The Lost Son (1948), Life Studies (1959), Heart’s Needle (1959), To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), All My Pretty Ones (1962), The Far Field (1964), Dream Songs (1964), Ariel (1965), Live or Die (1966), The Testing Tree (1971), Summer in
Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Power Politics (1971), etc. Among these books, those of Anne Sexton, especially To Bedlam and Part Way Back and Live or Die, and Das, especially The Descendants and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems are conspicuous, since they outshine the works of other poets in the use of this complex mode.

Confessional poetry was the typical product of the circumstances peculiar to the second half of the twentieth century, especially the post-war reactionary tendencies surfacing in the social, cultural, and literary realms of America. As the typical product of the age, it captured the mood of the contemporary world, its frustration and disillusionment, its priorities and problems, its aspirations and inhibitions as well as its exposures and disclosures. It voiced the predicaments of a generation which was caught in a double mood of reaction and retention or continuity, reaction against the established order and continuity of the romantic values of self-expression. Tremendously shaken by social and political upheavals as well as cultural revolutions and fed up with the politics of cold war and military pacts, the generation strongly reacted against the prevalent cults of massification, and reductionism, and big business which reduced men into non-entities. In literary realm too, people of the generation became impatient with the conventions of Modernism which stood for collective mind and impersonality.

But much at the same time, the generation aspired to retain the lessons of the new science, especially psychology and biology which threw fresh light on human behaviour. It continued to evince keen interest in the findings of Freud’s disciples like Jung and Lacan. The generation was tremendously fascinated by the
works of Alfred Kinsley, especially in his books *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953). It became also attentive to researches in biology that revealed not only the inner working of the mind but brought in the lime-light the beauties and banalities of human body as well. In literature it aspired to adhere to the subjective streak and direct expression to unlock the secrets of the inner world and the outer world alike. While discarding Modernist conventions, they endorsed the poetics of Postmodernism.

People, especially the poets reacted against Modernism, because they found it redundant and outdated, unable to cope with the growing problems of life and demands of self-expression. The Modernists emphasized tradition, objectivity, and anonymity against individuality, subjectivity, and personalism. They urged that an author’s personality and life should not find place in his writings. They excluded the personal element because they wanted to rid the poetry of biographical excesses and the romantic obsession with personality – an obsession which diverts attention from the central subject, i.e. the poem.

Although with a new Eliotic “orientation towards human experience and towards its expression in language,” Modernist poetics was able to evolve effective modes to deal with modern experience of frustration, disillusionment, sterility, alienation, and the erosion of human values caused by the invasion of an industrial civilization, the impact of the great War and its aftermath, and the researches in psycho-analysis. Eliot, the high priest of Modernism, made a concerted effort to revive man’s contact with the springs of joy. He described with gusto the Unreal City with its dirt, aridity, and shoddiness, its vulgarities and
falsities in a highly allusive and resonant style. He exposed the impatience and cheap quackery of modern values by putting them against richness and ancient faith, art, and humanity. Eliot contrasted the sterility of the contemporary world with the glories of romance and the world of the great saints, the teachers, and the creative artists. He also brought into relief the beauty and the splendour of the world of Nature.

In his effort to bring poetry close to the rhythms of modern life, Eliot was helped by Yeats, Pound, Stevens, Williams, and Moore. Emphasizing tradition, objectivity, and anonymity against individuality, subjectivity, and personalism, they produced "a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony and wit." They excluded the personal element because they wanted to purify poetry from subjectivism and personal extremism. Obviously the Modernist stance provided concepts to interpret and forms to articulate the experience of the War-ravaged landscape of 1920's. But it was not able to give vent to the experience of coming generations. The Modernist poetics of objectivity and impersonality was not adequately armed to explore the recesses of mind of 1950's and subsequent decades. Besides, the theories propounded by Modernist critics also tended to constrain the free flow of imaginative energy.

With the failure of Modernist poetic conventions, poets began to move away from the standards set by John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Yvor Winters. In 1959, Robert Lowell, a staunch follower of Eliot, wrote Life Studies in which he abandoned traditional metres and highly wrought diction for freer forms and colloquial language. Theodore Roethke also explored more open forms. Both
Lowell and Roethke and the poets who followed them did not escape from personality but into personality. They cultivated their own inwardness as material for poetry or to look for the immediacies of their own situation from valid experience. Discarding their faith in tradition and systematization, they sought personal modes of expression to embody their own perceptions and intuitions. Besides, they did not try to interpret their mystical experience in the framework of tradition. Renouncing their faith in myths, natural or religious, they returned to secure haven of autobiography.

The poets of new consciousness invited their readers to share in their “pursuit of identity to witness the dramatization of the daily events of [their] experience.” They also urged them to inculcate the imagery of their dreams and to swim in the flowing stream of consciousness. The new poet asked people “to absorb the shock of [their] deep-seated fears and neuroses, even mental instability and madness, and through them to realize the torments of our time...”

The Postmodern poets, like the adherents of Modernism, revived Romanticism. But their focal points were different. While the poets of Modernism were inspired by the poetics of Coleridge, the poets of Postmodernism expressed their faith in the early Wordsworth who conceived of a poet, as a man speaking to man without impediments. His conception was faithfully followed by Lowell, Roethke, Sexton, Logan, Snyder, O'Hara, Levertov et al. Influenced by surrealism, expressionism, and Chinese and Japanese poetry, they found their precursors in Whitman, Williams, Hart Crane, and poets of European and Latin American countries.
Besides new psychology and Wordsworthian romanticism, there was yet another factor which boosted confessional poetry. It was the radical feminist movement, which made great noise in the Continent as well as in the States. Championing the cause of woman’s rights in a male-dominated society, it also stood for rescuing the woman-poet from her, what Suzanne Juhasz defined as the “double-bind situation, one of conflict and strain.”

This movement went a long way to inspire at least women confessional poets, including Sexton and Kamala Das to write like women and reveal the mysteries of the female body. Sexton became intent, as Jane McCabe writes, “on finding ways to think and feel about the female body in heterosexual, homosexual, even onanistic contexts.”

In India, as Kamala Das tells Iqbal Kaur, it was not as “noisy as it has been in the West,” it appeared only as “a very quiet revolt.” Nevertheless, it influenced many Indian women writers including Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, and Tara Patel.

Thus Postmodernism, new psychology, and to some extent the feminist movement combined to produce a new genre of modern poetry which revived old mode to avoid the strict formalism and impersonality of Modernism and thus assured a new era of personal poetry in America. The term “confessional” in its present form has been most probably used for the first time by M.L. Rosenthal. In 1967, he wrote: “The term ‘confessional poetry’ came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell’s Life Studies in 1959.” He further remarked that “because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and
psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies, the word ‘confessional’ seemed appropriate enough.”

However, neither the term ‘confessional’ nor the ‘confessional mode’ of poetic expression is new. Both of them have an ancient origin. Before taking up the history of the terms, ‘confession’ and ‘confessionalism,’ let us understand how they are understood in common usage. The word ‘confession’ is derived from the verb ‘to confess,’ which means to acknowledge or to admit. It has a religious connotation as well as it denotes a Catholic practice in which a guilty person confesses his or her guilt before the Father Confessor in the Church and also prays for forgiveness. The word ‘confessional’ refers to the place where confession is made. It is precisely in this sense, that Oxford Dictionary defines it as “a private place... in a church where a priest sits to hear confessions.”

Moreover, in the Catholic circles, the practice of making confession was clearly purgative and therapeutic, as its aim was to unburden one’s conscience and to rest in peace. For nearly, fifteen hundred years, the priest and the church continued to give relief to the guilty, the morally isolated, and the disturbed psyche. But as the influence of the church waned, people turned to other means of confession. In Protestantism, ‘Confession’ required a secular mode and people were encouraged to write diaries and memoirs to make some sort of confession. From religion, the term ‘confession’ was adopted by the psychiatrist. While trying to ascertain the cause of a patient's neurosis, the doctor made him to confess or to narrate the incident’s, causing his abnormal state of mind. By the process of self-analysis, the psychiatrist helps the patient to purge his buried experiences.
Confessionalism thus became a process of therapy in which a patient recounted and recalled his or her past experiences to get rid of them.

From religion and psychiatry, the practice of confession crept into modern literature when some mentally disturbed poets, specially Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were encouraged to poetize their experiences of, what the psychiatrist defines as the “leaky ego” or the experiences, buried in their unconscious. Poetry became a therapy, which removed the dead self and facilitated the birth of a new self. Confessionalism as a poetic mode has also an ancient background. It was used by Sappho as early as the sixth century B.C. In Sappho, we can find certain startling lines like, “why am I crying?/ Am I still sad/ because of my lost maidenhood?” According to Robert Phillips, in these lines Sappho “outsextons sexton.” Sappho was followed by Catullus, a poet of later classical times. More than two thousand years ago, Catullus wrote about personal suffering, “I hate and love/ And if you ask me why,/ I have no answer, but I discern/ can feel, my senses rooted in eternal torture.” St. Augustine also accepted the mode to articulate the afflictions of his inner life. In our own times John Berryman gave us an existential version of soul’s inner life. Earlier in the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his great poem Confessions with echoes from Augustine. Rousseau’s poem was followed by the confessions of De Quincey, Musset, Chateaubriand, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Rilke et al. In America it was Walt Whitman whose “Calamus” poems were highly confessional.

However, confessional poetry which existed only as an occasional formal phenomenon developed into a powerful poetic mode. Taking cue from the Catholic
tradition, Baudelaire, Rilke, and Whitman as also from his disciples like Snodgrass and Sexton, Robert Lowell launched the confessional school of poetry, which gradually became one of the most powerful and popular poetic modes of the contemporary period. In Britain, Thomas Hardy wrote something like confessional poetry in 1912-1913, which is full of the regrets of wasted life and lost opportunities.

In America, however, there is a little confusion regarding the real originator of the confessional mode in its present form. The credit is generally given to Robert Lowell. Nevertheless, according to Robert Lowell himself, the credit must go to W.D. Snodgrass. “He (Snodgrass) did these things before I did, though he’s younger than I am and had been my student. He may have influenced me, though people have suggested the opposite.” Anne Sexton also acknowledges her debt to W.D. Snodgrass, who showed her how to dare to be true. But there are some facts to suggest that the real progenitor was Anne Sexton. Before writing his Life Studies, Robert Lowell had the benefit of reading some of the poems of Sexton’s first Volume To Bedlam and Part Way Back, including “You, Doctor Martin,” and “Music Swims Back to Me.” It is on record that Sexton had sent these poems to Lowell for advice. Undoubtedly, by that time she had “almost finished” her first book To Bedlam and Part Way Back. Likewise she had also written half of her first book before reading W.D. Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle. She makes this fact quite clear in her interview with Patricia Marx, as she says:

I had written about half of my first book when I read that poem, and it moved me to such an extent – it’s about a child, and he has to give up his child, which seem to be one of my themes, and I didn’t have
my own daughter at that time – that I ran up to my mother-in-law’s where she was living and got her back. I could only keep her at that time for a week, but the poem moved me to action. It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my own poetry. At the time everyone said, “You can’t write this way. It’s too personal; it’s confessional: you can’t write this, Anne,” and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.17

From this statement, it is evident that she was writing in confessional mode before Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle and Robert Lowell’s Life Studies. Hence, the credit to start the confessional mode should rest with Anne Sexton. But it cannot be denied that she was influenced by a number of other confessional poets, including her great contemporaries. For instance she was influenced by Robert Lowell’s allusiveness, W.D. Snodgrass’s lyricism, and Sylvia Plath’s expressionism. Other American poets to influence her were mainly Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and William Carlos Williams. Among foreign poets, she was fascinated by Rilke, Rimabaud, Lawrence, and Pavlov Neruda.

Confessionalism seized the imagination of the contemporary poets. More and more poets came forwards to write in personal mode. Allen Ginsberg was already writing in the first person. He published Howl as early as 1956 or before. Theodore Roethke also switched over to the confessional mode. Later it was adopted by Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Karl Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell as well. These poets produced masterpieces, many of which won Pulitzer prizes and National Book Awards. With their presence on the poetic scene there was an unprecedented upsurge in poetic activity, so much so
that in only a decade extending from 1959 to 1966, we saw the publication of
many books which eventually became classics.

The contemporary confessional poetic mode is not without its distinctive
features. It is a mode which incorporates the best elements of poetry. It, like any
other poetic form, explores truth, works as an instrument of personal and social
good, and yields an aesthetic pleasure. Beyond the traditional norms, confessional
poetry has personal elements as its core, an element which it shares with other
contemporary forms which emerged as a reaction against the elements of
impersonality, anonymity, and rationality of the Modernists' art.

As the portraits of the erring and passionate selves, confessional poetry is a
poetry with a vision, distinctive themes, a common tone, and a common disclaimer
to veracity. It expresses without inhibition, its open emotions in a literary manner
and in an open language. However, in its anti-establishment mood, it creates a
sensational poetry which lacks both form and substance. But in its serious aspect,
it touches the heights of religious and mystic experience. To elaborate, in its most
distinctive form confessional poetry is an autobiography of the self in its
multifarious roles. Without putting barriers between self and self-expression, it
covers an untrammelled poetic ground, which is something unprecedented in the
aesthetic realm.

The confessional poets, in their mythologies of self, exhibit an openness of
emotions, which are their stock-in-trade of poetry, in a language, which is mostly
colloquial. However, their ordinary language is not without artifice, since it takes
recourse to poetic devices like irony and understatement.
Even though confessional poets pretend to tell us the naked truth of human life, they artfully enliven it with fanciful interludes. But surprisingly, even after successfully cultivating a common vision, common themes, a common tone, and a common disclaimer to veracity, they could not develop a common form. Nevertheless, even without a well defined structural form and elegant mode of expression, they developed the confessional mode into the most powerful medium capable of expressing the frustration of the contemporary world, including the experience of alienation. Exposing themselves to the perils of self-probing, and risking their sanity, the confessional poets penetrated to the heart of the inner darkness, achieving transcendence and universalism suffused with mystic experience. Their poetry which once seemed only the cries of an agonised heart assumed the form of revelations of the highest truth.

Obviously, self is the “sole poetic symbol”\(^{18}\) of confessional poetry. Although confessional poets are attentive to the multifarious roles of the self, their focal point is the unconscious part of it. Their “total mythology,” as Phillips writes, “is the lost self.”\(^{19}\) One can find the best specimens of this lost self in Roethke’s *The Lost Son* and Randall Jarrell’s *Losses* and *The Lost World*. However, the confessional poets are not concerned with all the aspects of the buried self. Their choice as well as their angle of vision is specific. According to M.L. Rosenthal, they place their “literal self more and more at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization.”\(^{20}\) Therefore only the intimate aspect of life and private experiences become central to confessional poetry. Viewed from the
personal angle, a confessional poem, as A.R. Jones writes, becomes a “a dramatic monologue in which the persona’s naked ego is involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences.”

However, these particular and private experiences narrated by confessional poets are not commonplace or ordinary. They are, as one would like to keep to oneself and will not expose to what Mills calls the “public sight.” Most of these experiences are related to subjects considered taboo and are forbidden in art. These include childhood guilt, anguish, suffering, facts of the female body, divorce, suicide attempts, mental breakdowns, mental diseases like paranoia, schizophrenia, and many ugly and repulsive experiences, which are not at all conducive to aesthetic pleasure.

Obviously, the exploration and expression of the experiences of the buried self involves embarrassment and a certain feeling of disgrace. Hence it requires a certain amount of exemplary courage on the part of the poet to ventilate them. It is neither pleasant nor convenient to milk one’s unconscious and to let the world know the filth of one’s life. Anne Sexton’s poetry embodies a lot of such filth, which includes “family skeletons out of the camphor balls – father’s alcoholic tendencies, mother’s inability to deal with her suicide attempts, great aunt in a straitjacket.” As Sexton confesses to Barbara Kelles that for voicing these painful facts she had to take “a certain courage.” Indeed, as Sexton told Patricia Marx, “[i]t’s very hard to reveal oneself.” But let us remember that the courage of Sexton and for that matter the confessional poet, is not the courage of an insane or neurotic person but of one whose heart vibrates with supreme self confidence.
Kamala Das's confessionalism runs parallel to Anne Sexton's. She also speaks about the callousness of a cruel, unsympathetic, and a money-minded husband, an unimaginative father, an indifferent mother, a loving grandmother, and the selfish lovers. Likewise, she tells us about her pain and embarrassment of self-disclosures. In the "Preface" of My Story she writes:

My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband. Why, I had even confessed that I was chronically falling in love with persons of flamboyant nature. When I went for a short vacation to my home state I received no warmth. In a hurry I escaped back to Bombay. This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not, for a moment, regret My Story has cost her fully dear but, as she says, she do not regret having written it.  

Even though My Story caused many ruffles in her family and was also disgraceful to her friends and relatives, she did not feel perturbed but rather happy, as she wrote:

I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of My Story has given me.  

This sort of exemplary courage and satisfaction generates a self-confidence and becomes one of the defining qualities of confessional poetry. It is evident from the statement of Allen Ginsberg:

Confessional poetry is born of self-confidence of someone who knows that he's really alive, and that his existence is just as good as any other subject matter.  

However, in their autobiographies of self, the male and the female confessional poets adopt different attitude in their approach. While the male poet, assuming the stance of Everyman, raises his individual experience to social, and
for that matter, to universal level, the female poet has no such advantage. Her voice remains confined only to herself and goes on to augment only her sense of alienation. Supporting this idea, Deborah Pope writes:

In modern confessional poetry, as an extension of the Adamic tradition, the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of his time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience, he is simultaneously relaying the social fabric of his world. Yet, for the female confessional poet; there is not the same extension. She is not Everyman, and is hardly Everywoman. Her experience only serves to reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. She cannot even believe in a solidarity or community with other woman. Although in a very real sense male confessional poets do bespeak trauma of their times, poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton remain individual “crazy women.”

Nevertheless, these “individual” crazy women also achieve a measure of universalism, especially when they dissect their physical bodies and probe the recesses of their souls and reveal truths open only to the great writers. By doing so, they achieve a greater self-understanding than their male counterparts. Anne Sexton tells us, in unambiguous terms, that the act of self-exposure, even though painful and embarrassing, is self-revealing:

It’s very embarrassing for someone to expose their body to you. You don’t learn anything from it. But if they expose their soul, you learn something that’s true of great writers. They expose their souls and then suddenly, I am moved and I understand my life better.

Obviously, confessional poetry is not an exercise in futility or a poetry without purpose. It is meaningful, since the exploration of the unconscious self has a specific aim, personal as well as social. Following Franz Kafka, confessional poets believe that poetry is an instrument of self-exploration which melts the
frozen sea within our psyche. In her interview with Barbara Kelvès, Sexton clearly states:

As Kafka said about prose, ‘A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.’ And that’s I want from a poem. A poem should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.31

The purpose of a confessional poem is to shock the senses and to hurt the self so that one may cultivate more awareness and become more alive to reality. A good poem cuts as an “ax.” It cuts the frozen sea that is within us in the form of the unconscious. It breaks the surface and plunges us into deep insides and digs out our obsessions to bring them to surface and finally purges them away. All confessional art, writes Robert Phillips, “whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed.”32 Viewed in this way, poetry is a therapy and an instrument of purgation. It assumes the role, previously reserved for the clergymen and the psychiatrists.

Kamala Das is also a poet with a purpose, individual as well as social. On the surface, her purpose is to shock Indians for their complacency and taboos, as she tells Iqbal Kaur: “I needed to disturb society out of its complacency. I found the complacence a very ugly state.”33 At bottom, it is purgation or catharsis, she candidly admits: “If I had not learnt to write how would I have written away my loneliness or grief? Garnering them within, my heart would have grown heavy as a vault, one that only death might open, a release then I would not be able to feel
or sense.” Elsewhere she writes: “I took up writing, hoping that it would help the volcano within to explode in a slow orderly way.”

As mentioned earlier, along with personal therapy: confessional poetry also aims at social therapy. It gives solace not only to the poet but also to the reader, especially to one who suffers from mental diseases. We can recall Dr. Martin’s prophetic statement to Sexton: “Your poems might mean something to someone else someday.” Kamala Das, as Niranjan Mohanti states, deals with “the longer issues of life lying beyond the cocooned self.” Another eminent scholar, S.D. Sharma, also underlines the cathartic effect of Kamala’s poetry, when he states that “the more poignant her confessional tone is, the more is her cathartic import.”

Interestingly, confessional poets write the autobiographies of their untrammelled but naked self in a new metaphor and in a new form, discarding the Eliotic convention of finding objective correlatives for mental states and adopting the technique of direct statement. “The language of the confessional poem is that of ordinary speech, whether in blank verse, rhymed or no.” It is colloquial language with which the poets get close to the realities of life. Nevertheless, in their quest for ordinary language they are not extremists like Ginsberg and Sappho who come perilously close to obscenity. Both Sexton and Das take recourse to the plain and ordinary idiom of colloquial language which is close to the realities of human life. They adopt the conversational tone of simple people, using a simple diction.

The openness of language enables confessional poets to cultivate openness of emotion. “Generations of poets had censored their feelings, filtering them
through screens of ‘tough’ language.” Many of them were afraid of giving vent to their emotion. Modernism stifled the emotional aspect of poetic sensibility. However, confessional poetry comes on to restore the emotional life of the protagonist, making it “their stock-in-trade.” Sexton too presents an unabashed picture of her emotional life, hiding nothing from her readers. Likewise Das gives a free and flowing expression to her feelings and emotions so much so that her poems appear as the outcries of her emotional life, manifest in her different roles as a woman.

However, confessional poetry of open language, open emotions, and direct or autobiographical statements is not as simple as it seems to be. It is complex and artful, as it skilfully uses a number of poetic devices. Confessional poets pretend to make simple and direct statements of facts from the unconscious just like a researcher or a reporter. Their renderings sound like the case history of a neurotic. However, this notion is far from truth. Confessional poets disguise art in their simple statements, as they make a subtle use of such poetic techniques as irony, selection, invention, imagery, rhythm, and understatement, to produce a poetic effect.

Interestingly, though pretending to make direct and factual statements, confessional poets press into service such creative faculties as fancy and imagination. Subsequently their poetry becomes a blending of fact and fiction, a blending of reality and imagination. Marjorie Perloff points out that “Confessional poetry fuses the romantic with the realistic mode.” Likewise, Robert Lowell finds the “[s]uperb manipulation of the realistic convention” in the confessional
craftsmanship involved in her confessional writing. For his manipulations, she goes on to call the poet even a "liar" and a "crook" because he shifts and distorts the facts of his own life and manipulates them in order to produce an emotional effect. She makes a difference between the literal truth and the factual truth. She invariably criticizes literal truth if it mars the emotional effect. Anne Sexton explains how she had manipulated facts in her poem "The Double Image."44

Like Sexton, Das also exploits literary devices like irony, selection, invention, imagery, rhythm, and understatement to create poetic effect. Indeed she excelled in the use of irony and understatement. "No other Indian English poet," writes Sharad Rajimwale, "employed irony to such devastating effect before Kamala Das – it is caustic, it is Virginian, it is profoundly demolishing. It evokes both pity and anger, sympathy and ire."45 Much in the same way, Das also blends facts with fancy in order to make her autobiography My Story interesting or rather sensational. Naturally Devindra Kohli believes that her Story is "partly contrived."46

Surprisingly, in spite of having common themes, a common vision, a common tone, and "a common disclaimer to veracity,"47 confessional poetry lacks a common form. In order to render their experience confessional poets use different forms. For instance, while delineating the theme of madness Robert Lowell uses free verse, whereas Anne Sexton prefers strict forms of the traditional poetics. Kunitz, Berryman, Roethke, Plath, Ginsberg, and Bogan – all cultivate different forms and measures to express their new expereince. In India Kamala Das also uses free verse and vigorous and sweepy expressions to write her
autobiography in prose as well as verse. In doing so she sometimes loses her balance for which she is severely criticized by Linda Hess.

However, even though lacking a common form, confessional poetry is most probably the best outlet to give vent to the experience of alienation, the most terrible mental malady of the modern times. In the States this form became popular, since the Americans required an effective mode which could ventilate their alienation that was not a fashion for them, as it was with Europeans, but in the phrase of Robert Phillips, “a prime American experience.” They found the mode capable of charting their personal alienation as well as that of their friends and relatives. A sense of acute alienation was also central to Kamala Das. In a male-dominated Indian society, she found herself extremely lonely and wrote poetry to give expression to her stranded self.

But as poetry of alienation, confessional form is fraught with many dangers. The expression of alienation requires self-probing. One has to delve deep into one’s oceanic unconscious full of filth and terrible mental monsters. These explorations, as mentioned earlier, can knock one’s self off balance and can push one in abnormal states of mind. It is on record that Roethke’s attempts to have a direct experience of manic states involved him in serious individual and social troubles. Sexton was also warned against milking her unconscious too much by her friends, including her teacher Holmes. In this connection, it is remarkable that many of the confessional poets were neurotic and some of them, including Sexton went on to commit suicide. Kamala Das’s case is not much
different. She also slipped into manic states and suffered from mental diseases, including suicidal tendencies.

Dangers of self-exploration notwithstanding, confessional poetry in its sensational form seems to lack in substance. For the matter which it poetizes is highly individualistic and as such it has no universal appeal. It does not achieve transcendence which is the real aim of all good poetry. However, a good confessional poem is never purely personal or individualistic. It is rather universal and beneficial to others. “I write very personal poems,” writes Sexton, “but I hope that they will become the central theme to some else’s private life...” A confessional poet writes about himself in order to make his reader aware of their own feelings and problems. “When I speak to you,” writes Victor Hugo, “I am speaking to you about yourself.” Kamala Das also rises above herself untiringly revealing the nature of psychological processes behind human nature in its feminine as well as masculine aspects. She displays a psychical interplay of emotions and passions in human consciousness. However, she concentrates more on the female experience than on the male. According to Arlene R.K. Zide, she attempts to poetize the “universal experience of women.”

Confessional poetry in its serious mood, is not content only with the portrayal of the psychic states of Everyman and Everywoman but goes to describe the experience of higher states like the religious and the mystic states. The poetry of Ginsberg, Roethke, Lowell, Plath, and Sexton ultimately goes on to create a world, which in all its essentials, can be defined only in the light of religion and mysticism. The poems which they wrote during the last phase of their careers, can
be interpreted only in religious and mystic terms. Interestingly confessional poets attached great value to their transcendental poetry. They considered it more significant than their earlier poetry. For instance, in her interview with Barbara Kelves, Sexton emphatically asserted that “[i]n time to come, people [would] be more shocked by [her] mystical poetry than by [her] so-called ‘confessional poetry.’”

Furthermore, Sexton found a way to equate her suffering with the suffering of Jesus Christ and to view her poetry as mystic poetry. For her, “Christ was the great confessor.” In this belief, Sexton found a ground for the identity of confessionalism with mysticism, and religion. At heart, Sexton was deeply religious. Some people thought that she was a lapsed Catholic. She admitted that in her early religious training, she was half Protestant and half Catholic. Her belief was reinforced by her religious experiences and visions of God, of Christ and of many saints. These visions lasted “for six months, six minutes, and six hours.” In her interview with Kevles, Sexton admitted that she never shared her “religious experiences with anyone, not a psychiatrist, not a friend, not a priest, not anyone.” She kept them to herself as well guarded secrets. These visions became the sources of solace and comfort for her. It is no wonder that these religious experiences surfaced in her poetry time and again.

Like Anne Sexton, Kamala Das also moved from naked or psychical confessionalism to religious confessionalism. As she came to discover that the pleasures of body are only ephemeral, she turned to the mythical and spiritual world of Radha and Krishna of Vrindavan. She was attached to Krishna since her
very childhood. In her poems, she talked of spiritual love and self-surrender. Spiritual love for her meant spirit love and complete merger of herself with the self of Krishna. She says:

I was entirely without lust. I hoped that some day as I lay with a man, somewhere beneath the bone, at a deadened spot, a contact would be made, and that afterwards each movement of my life became meaningful. I looked for the beauteous Krishna in very man; every Hindu girl is in reality wedded to Lord Krishna.⁵⁶

Thus the confessional poets who relish to unlock the mysteries of human body, ultimately come to reveal the mysteries of the life of spirit. Their poetry becomes the poetry of self-revelation, or a spiritual autobiography.

To recapitulate, both Anne Sexton and Kamala Das are the most eloquent exponents of confessional poetry which dominated the English poetic scene in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Both as a poetic form and social practice, confessionalism is an ancient mode of expression. As a literary form, it was used by Sappho, and Catullus and later by Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman, and countless others who followed them. As a social practice of confession of one’s guilt, it was used by the Church i.e. by the Father Confessor and subsequently the psychiatrist. It was also used by the Protestants in the form of keeping journals and writing diaries for marking their spiritual progress.

However, the confessional mode of literary expression in its modern form, originated in America as a reaction to the poetic conventions of Modernism. As a term, it was first used by M.L. Rosenthal, while reviewing Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959). Since then it was used to denote the poetic exploits of Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Karl
Shapiro, Denise Levertov, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Jerome Mazzaro, William Heyen, Kunitz, Barbara Harr, and Randall Jarrell as well as by Allen Ginsberg, and Theodore Roethke. Within a decade it produced such tremendous works as Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959), W.D. Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle (1959), Anne Sexton’s To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), All My Pretty Ones (1962), and Live or Die (1966), Theodore Roethke’s The Far Field (1964), John Berryman’s Dream Songs (1964), Sylvia Plath’s Ariel (1965), Kunitz’s The Testing Tree (1971), etc. Elsewhere in the Commonwealth countries, this mode produced Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Judith Wright, and Margaret Atwood, who wrote such remarkable books as Das’s Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), and The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Wright’s Five Senses (1963), and Atwood’s Power Politics (1971) etc.

According to scholarly consensus Robert Lowell was the father of confessional poetry with both W.D. Snodgrass and Anne Sexton as other close claimants for the title. All the three poets produced not the autobiographies but really the mythologies of their passionate and erring selves under various circumstances, physical exposures, mental stress, personal failures, and humiliations. Sexton and other female confessional poets introduced an element of sensationalism in the mode when they indulged to reveal the mysteries of the female body, hitherto considered a taboo in the cultured world. Confessional poets devised ways and means, and introduced new techniques to express the alienation of the generation and their existential needs physical as well as spiritual. They aim at not only their own therapy but the social therapy meant for all sufferers.
Confessional poetry of the modern era has some distinctive characteristics. First and foremost, it is autobiographical. Confessional poets have written tremendous biographies of their self, hiding nothing from the public view. Giving expression to their buried self, they put no barriers between their self and its complete exposure. While portraying the workings, internal as well external, of their untrammelled self they use ordinary or colloquial language. However, they do not express their open emotions without literary devices. They make an effective use of irony, understatement as well as of fancy to make their self-disclosures effective and aesthetic. Nevertheless, confessional poetry in its sensational form lacks form, and substance. It is fraught with the dangers of self-probing which frequently result in mental diseases like schizophrenia and manic depressions. But in its higher forms, it touches the heights of religious and mystic experience. Both Sexton and Das, in their poetic adventures, achieve religious and mystic states.
Chapter 1 – Notes


6Mills 8.


10Qtd. Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Bonton: Twayne, A Division of G.K. Hall and Company, 1989) 33: hereafter cited as Hall.


13 Phillips 10.


16 Sexton, William Packard, “Craft Interview with Anne Sexton,” McClatchy 44.


18 Phillips 7-8.

19 Phillips 8.


21 A.R. Jones, qtd. Hall 34.

22 Mills, qtd. Hall 34.


24 Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 6.

25 Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 34.


27 My Story

28 Ginsberg, qtd. Phillips XV.


30 Sexton, qtd. Phillips 75.
31 Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 28.

32 Phillips 2.


34 Kamala Das, qtd. Kaur, “Preparatory Note,” VIII: hereafter cited as “Note”

35 Kamala Das, “Note” 8.

36 Kevles, McClatchy 4.


40 Phillips 10.

41 Phillips 10.

42 Marjori Perloff, qtd. Hall 36.

43 Lowell, qtd. Hall 36.

44 Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 22.


47 Phillips 12.

48 Phillips 14.


52 Sexton, Kelves, McClatchy 26.

53 See Phillips 80.

54 Sexton, Kevles, McClatchy 24.

55 Sexton, Kevles 25.

56 Sexton, qtd. Sharma, Kaur 9.