CHAPTER FOUR

AESTHETICS OF CONFESSION
Confessional literature emerges from a tradition associated with Christianity. Robert Lowell remarks that his poetry stems from a tradition rather than an innovation (Phillips 2). Confessional literature is often identified with autobiography. Roy Pascal observes that autobiography, "a creation of European civilization," indeed "begins with Augustine's Confessions" (21). Though the "confessional mode" is a comparatively recent phenomenon, some of its salient features can be seen in ancient literature. Some Old Testament Psalms, Song of Songs and many books of the Apocrypha are confessional in tone. Sappho and Catullus in the pre-Christian era wrote poems which are explicitly confessional. Rousseau's Confessions, Wordsworth's The Prelude, Byron's Don Juan, Lamb's Essays of Elia and Whitman's Leaves of Grass are strikingly confessional. Confessional literature thus has been in circulation ever since man began to give expression to his subjective feelings, though Confessional poetry as it is understood today partakes of other important qualities too.

Confessional poetry is highly subjective. It is a poetic technique adopted to reveal and even dramatize the poet's life. The autobiographical impulses and elements in poetry are the result of a selective accommodation of poetic materials. Northrop Frye considers confession a form of autobiographical fiction or fictional
autobiography (365). Poetry takes over the traditional functions and tones of fiction. The term "confessional" overstates the notion of the poem as instant communication. The poem itself is an act, a part of the life it describes. It creates an environment where the poet leads a life of struggle, improvisation and resistance. Personal experience includes the fantasies of the poet's inner life. Poetry absorbs the data of private events, fears and desires as well as materials of intimate confession and historical imagination. Confessional poetry thus translates autobiographical facts into epic narratives. Kamala Das, for example, concludes "Of Calcutta" with a sense of anguish and despair (C P S 56-60):

When you sat before me my book between your hands,
I thought your hands the tamest seen,
like a father's,
When handling his first born, and when you raised your eyes,
Your surma-stained eyes, I thought I saw my future within,
Yes, I thought I saw my future within your eyes.

Anne Sexton, in an identical vein, expresses a woman's feeling of guilt about her suicide-attempts and illness in
"The Double Image" (C P S 35-42):

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head.

Confessional poetry is an expression of personality
and never an escape from it. In this regard these poets
follow the Romantics and break with the Eliotic aesthetic
on the impersonal nature of poetry. The poets do not
obliterate their personalities in their poems: their lives
seldom remain invisible in their works. They break the
Eliotic reticence about the poet's biography and
deliberately parade the details of their life in poetry.
They reveal to the readers what a Christian reserves for
the Father Confessor or a patient reserves for the analyst.
In this process the aesthetic distance between the man who
suffers and the mind that creates vanishes and the poet
becomes the victim. Ultimately, poetry evolves out of
victimization. That is the reason why Confessional poetry
is often called "the poetry of suffering" (Rosenthal 130).
Psychological conditions like breakdown and paranoia make
the suffering unbearable. A heightened sensitivity to the
human predicament leads to a sharper sense of the pain of
existence. A "sense of eternal torture" is a motive behind Confessional poetry (Phillips 63). Kamala Das, for instance, expresses a woman's yearning for unadulterated love in "Morning at Appeoie Pier" (B K D 80-81):

... But, hold me, hold me once again,
kiss the words to death in my mouth, plunder memories. I hide my defeat in your wearying blood, and all my fears and shame.
You are the poem to end all poems
a poem, absolute as the tomb.
Your flawed beauty is my only refuge

Her moods alternate between frenzy and pain, the need for love and the thought of death. In a state of subjective reality the poet equates love with death, compares a lover to a poem and finds in poetry an alternative to love-making. Anne Sexton expresses her love-hate relationship with her mother in "For the Year of the Insane" (C P S 131-33):

I have this fear of coughing
but I do not speak,
a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
who comes riding into my mouth.
The glass tilts in on its own
and I am on fire.
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.
I see myself as one would see another.
I have been cut in two.

Confessional poetry has a therapeutic value. In the preface to My Story, Kamala Das describes how she began writing the book as a reprieve from the thought of imminent death. She finds fiction an alternative to reality and story an equivalent to life. Like Sheherzade of The Thousand and One Nights, the narrator of My Story gets an extension of life through story telling. This means that the analysis of a confessional poem will yield the same result as the analysis of a dream in the treatment of a patient. Anne Sexton's poetic career begins as a therapeutic exercise. In one of her interviews she remarks:

"Sometimes, my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself, while I revealing it to the readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of (N E S 85)."

Lowell's Life Studies too was written as self-therapy, and its influence on other confessional poets is profound.
Das's "The Anamalai Poems" and most poems in Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back are examples of self-therapy exercises. They take to poetry to destroy dragonish dreams and experiences. Das describes her experience (BK D 153):

There were nights when I heard
my own voice call me out
of dreams, gifting such rude
awakenings, and then
expelling me from warm
human love, unaccustomed
fare for one such as I,
a misfit when awake.

Sexton recalls her experience at Martin Orne's clinic in "Music Swims Back to Me" (CP S 6-7):

It was the strangled cold of November;
even the stars were strapped in the sky
and that moon too bright
forking through the bars to stick me
with a singing in the head
I have forgotten all the rest.

Confessional poetry is woven round the poetic self as the chief symbol. The personal mythology which the poet creates has the poet as the focal point. The truth expressed by the poem is not literal but poetic. Kamala Das speaks of imaginary lovers like Carlo and Gino in her poems
and My Story. Anne Sexton tells us of an imaginary brother and an imaginary child abandoned by her in her poems. The mystified truth, nevertheless, has some significance for the poet's life. Each poem declares guilt, anguish and suffering. Each poem, as Robert Phillips observes, is "egocentred," though not "egocentric" and is aimed at "self-therapy" and "purgation" (8). Das declares in one of her "Anamalai Poems" (B K D 154):

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.

Sexton also speaks of the chronic loneliness she feels as an artist in a patriarchal society. She confesses in "Flee on Your Donkey" (C P S 97-105):

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

The poetic self is at the centre stage of the events that find expression in poetry. A Confessional poet finds no hurdles between his self and the direct expression of that
self despite the pain, anguish and difficulty involved in that kind of expression. The adoption of a persona is not necessary for a Confessional poet to express his emotion. Even when there is a persona, the poetic self explicitly identifies itself with the persona. The confessional poets do not accept any symbol or formula for an emotion and give direct, personal expression to emotions. As Confessional poetry is an expression of personality, one finds only subjective correlates corresponding to subjective confessions.

The impulse behind Confessional poetry is the urge to see and know the truth about oneself, however painful and embarrassing it may be. The poet plunges into the unconscious, dives beneath the level of rational discourse, ransacks the darker side of the self with subliminal imagery and the logic of association. The poet dramatizes the personal, explores the discovery of the external truth by the self, portrays the self's reaction to this discovery and incorporates personal history into poems. The poet's frequent attention to the objective narration disguises an obsessive inwardness which is realised as a ferocious preoccupation with the subjective. Even poems that are apparently not about the poet turn out to be subjective. Kamala Das's "Ghanashyam," for example, though apparently about Radha and Krishna, is actually about herself and her
lover. Anne Sexton similarly concludes "The Farmer's Wife" by switching the focus from farmer and wife to the poet and her lover. When the narrative mask is dropped, the tone can be painfully raw and open. Das's "A Requiem for My Father" and Sexton's "All My Pretty Ones" are alike in that they are addressed to the poet's father. The contrast between the passion and intimacy of the address and the rigidity of the measure exacerbates the situation and intensifies the feeling of the poem. The half-yielding, half-rebellious mood of the poets symbolizes their paternal inheritance as well as their love-hate relationships with their fathers. They are confronted with the pain of being daughters, wives, mothers and lovers. Long before it became fashionable, both Kamala Das and Anne Sexton wrote in praise of their distinctive identities as Indian and American female poets.

Confessional poetry is pre-occupied with the evolution and identity of the self. It is concerned with the frontiers of existence, and the ultimate, and inchoate sources of being. The need to confess springs from a strong belief that her story must be told. The poet encounters a painful awareness of the self; her anxiety springs from a world corrupted by egotism. The poet's story of life becomes true tale for humanity at large. The poet fabricates larger, historical meanings and imaginary myths
out of the personal horror. The banal horrors of personal and general history are rendered in terms of fairy tales or folk songs. Kamala Das's "Krishna poems" and Anne Sexton's Transformations, for instance, describe personal horrors in terms of folk songs and fairy tales. Das's "Ghanashyam," to take an example, speaks of the love between the poet and an aged lover in terms of the Radha-Krishna myth (C P D 93-95):

We played once a husk-game, my lover and I
His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don't you want me any longer,
don't you want me

Sexton similarly talks about assumed incest through the fairy tale of "Briar Rose" (C P S 290-95):

Each night I am nailed into place
and I forget who I am.
Daddy?
That's another kind of prison.
It's not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish.

Private and taboo subjects are often explored in confessional poetry. The self discovers itself partly through the energy it acquires by its insights into reality and partly through the sensuous excitement created by the reality of experience. Confessional poetry revolves round the individual as victim who fights relentlessly for true self-realization. The poet accepts the implicit role of an artist and liberates herself from the domination of the literal. Poetry is often a political and cultural criticism, a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis. The private life of the poet under the stress of psychological crisis, sex, family life, private humiliations, self-doubt and confusion is an expression exposing the vulnerability characteristic of the poetic statement. The confessional poet is involved in a more radical act than to speak of things that have been considered taboo. The self participates in a world of flux from which it can no longer separate itself. The confessional self appears psychotic and flirts with a dangerously dark, unrecognised encounter with experience.

So, the relationship between the psychological state of the poet and her poetry is a major critical concern in this
kind of poetry. The expansion of the boundaries of self involves the risk of sanity, if not the risk of life itself. Sylvia Plath and John Berryman committed suicide. Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke spent a period of their lives in mental hospitals. Bedlam was a second home for Anne Sexton, who finally committed suicide. Kamala Das suffered mental breakdown several times as My Story and some poems reveal. Confessional poetry is a combination of the art of reconciliation and the art of resistance. While some confessionals find a therapeutic release in poetry, others find poetry pushing them towards the edge.

The unconscious exercises some force on the conscious self. As inaccessible to voluntary investigation, the unconscious is often perceived as an alien power. Motivation by the unconscious comes to mean motivation by an external power. The interpenetration between the conscious and the unconscious makes their boundaries flexible. Confessional poetry erases the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious. It is built on the relation between objective experience and the materials previously repressed. This leads to a rethinking of the merit of the poetry of madness. The tradition of the poet as madman goes back to the ancient Greeks. Shakespeare places the poet, the lover and the lunatic on the same plane of imagination. Romanticism introduces madness as a
source of inspiration. Symbolism and surrealism significantly reduce the distance between the voice of the poet and that of the madman. But madness does not find acceptance as the means and subject matter of poetry until the advent of the Confessional school, which secularizes as well as deromanticizes madness. Confessional poetry evolves a new theory of the poetry of madness to justify its insights and to support its distinguishability.

What is found in Confessional poetry, then, is madness stripped of nobility, though Theodore Roethke claims otherwise in "In a Dark Time": "What's madness but nobility of soul / at odds with circumstance?" (Roethke 239). The mad poet has a special insight into the human condition. His knowledge has painfully human origins. In spite of the distortions or aberrations implicit in his situation, he can see things more clearly than normal man. Sanity becomes a screen that separates the individual from his self and its relation to the rest of the being. The act of repression reduces the range of experiences that should be available to consciousness and calls for a new definition of consciousness. Poetry is means to cope with madness or to purge it. Poetic process is an act of ridding the psyche of garbage; confession of ugliness is a way of cleansing.

Madness as a theme and point of view shaping poetic technique is the hallmark of Confessional poetry. The
adaptation of madness as poetic material which reveals a wide range of experiences and responses is felt in the individual voices of the poet and his personae who are at once familiar and strange to the poet. Confessional poetry reflects contemporary cultural attitude towards the unconscious mind. Madness is not merely a destructive product of the corrupt values and heartlessness of society but is also a defence against these evils and a means to combat them. Madness is a means of self-realisation. Allen Ginsberg's Howl begins with a shocking utterance: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness." Madness is not only the voice of poetry but also a reduction of the poet to silence. Madness is also manifested in poetry through fantasies and memories of attempted suicide that enacts the persona's most intense experiences of being and creating. A narrative mask or a persona helps to filter the intimate experiences peculiar to madness through a consciousness detached from its emotional immediacy. The persona externalizes dreams, fantasies and memories as conscious acts of daily existence.

Susan Sontag observes that madness symbolizes the predicament of a modern writer: "In the twentieth century, the repellent, harrowing disease that is made the index of a superior sensitivity, the vehicle of 'spiritual' feelings
and 'critical' discontent, is insanity" (35). Just as Romantic temperament can be represented by the metaphor of tuberculosis, the confessional temperament is best represented by the metaphor of madness. Tuberculosis and madness reduce patients to exiles. The metaphor of the psychic voyage, an extension of the romantic notion of travel associated with tuberculosis, can be applied to insanity also. The romantic view that illness embitters consciousness holds equally good for the Confessionals. The notion of the poet-victim as a reckless creature extremely sensitive to the horrors of vulgar everyday life is the hallmark of Confessional poetry. The Confessional poet has neither any serious religious faith nor any substantial sense of the self. Analysis in this context provides the poet with a "way of sublimating his suffering" (Ramakrishnan 18). The disorientation of the poet's mind finds acceptability in a society which values irrational experience for its own sake. Each individual has an element of uniqueness in his personality which must be realized irrespective of his mental condition.

The desire to seek fulfilment through self-expression is a confessional urge. An obsession with the self has a liberating influence on the sensibility of the Confessional poet. The new concept of the self as a field of possibilities, according to E.V. Ramakrishnan, underlines
the quest for authenticity and fidelity in literature (19). Authenticity, like psychoanalysis, is closely linked to "the irrational and the unconscious" (Ramakrishnan 19). The Confessional poet's treatment of madness as an essential element in contemporary culture is significant. He has an absurdist vision of the world. Confessional poetry demands a subtle change of reality by incorporating into its world the neurosis and psychosis of contemporary history. The Confessional poet depersonalizes the contemporary society which has lost its sensitivity. The poet's sense of herself as a victim, as E.V. Ramakrishnan observes, may be traced to the artist's over-exposure to a society which has internalized psychological violence in the system (20). The Confessional poet explores the domain of experience where the self is confronted in a destructive landscape of passion and paranoia. Madness is only a metaphor with wide possibilities for that which is felt to be socially or morally wrong.

The increasing sense of aloneness in an indifferent society is symbolically transformed into visions of assault on the notion of an autonomous self in Confessional poetry. The conception of madness as a revelation of mind or an expansion of consciousness is a poetic technique for the Confessionals. Confessional poetry marks a continuous
interest in the psychic experiences of the poet as part of the flux that is history. R.D. Laing considers madness as a struggle for liberation from false attitudes and values, an encounter with primary feelings and impulses which help to evolve a true self. He believes that "authentic aspects of the self can be conveyed in madness" (Feder 281). The Freudian concept of madness as a malign and malevolent psychic disorder no longer holds true. The psychic disorder of the author gets reflected in the narrative pattern or symbols or metaphors in the poem.

Neurosis, however, is something that artists share with other members of the society. A poet's genius lies not in the intensity of his neurosis but in his skill to successfully objectify it. The nervous breakdowns Kamala Das claims she suffered might be just ordinary events by American standards. The narrator of My Story describes two instances of severe nervous bouts she suffered. Disillusioned by the homosexuality of her husband, the narrator went to the terrace of her home on a moon-lit night. She was tempted to fling herself down. She saw a mad beggar dancing under a street-lamp. The rhythm of his grotesque dance fascinated her. She felt like the last human being dancing on the most desolate pinnacle. Somehow she managed to return to her room. She transmuted her experience into a poem (104-05). She suffered a second
breakdown after the birth of her second son. She was put on bromide and was advised to take rest and sleep. The narrator claims that her breakdown was a blessing in disguise as there developed an intimacy between herself and her husband.

In the poem "Bromides," one of the tragic signs of madness is that the speaker's words become "disembodied" (S C 37). As "fattened on bromides / They ought to bounce." But they become burdensome and what they do is simply to "flail their limbs / And fly." The poem "Herons" portrays the ephemeral gaiety obtained through sedatives (B K D 52). The speaker now becomes more lovable to her husband. There is a tinge of sadness about this remark. Her speech is pleasantly relaxed, free from the oppression of domestic routine and conscious thought. By transferring the impressions to the memory of the speaker's husband, she transforms the precariousness of her swooning into a state of reality. In "Peripuerperal Insanity" the speaker describes a similar state of mind (C P D 10).

"Madness is a Country" is a poem about madness. The poet compares madness to a country where "their only rule is freedom" (Nandy, ed., Indian Poetry in English Today 88). Some of Das's "hospital poems" can also be remembered in this context.

It is not entirely correct to say that nervous breakdown is the cause of Sexton's poetry. Breakdown indeed
is one of the impulses of her poetry. Breakdown provides not only a structure for individual poems but also a pattern for sequences. For Sexton neurosis forms a part of the conception of the poet's existence. In one of her interviews she declares: "in the first book, I was giving the experiences of madness; in the second book, the causes of madness" (McClatchy 13). She accepts her status as a mad woman. In "Ringing the Bells" she writes (C P S 28-29):

we are the circle of the crazy ladies
who sit in the lounge of the mental house
and smile at the smiling woman

Someone who experiences madness like this is not really mad. She is determined to play mad, and to accept her role of a mad woman as a kind of solution. This may sound a facile generalization. But poem after poem pushes one to the same conclusion. "You Doctor Martin" is an instance (C P S 3-4):

... We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner.

There is a tension between the sense of freedom and the sense of actual captivity in the poem. It appears that Sexton nursed the feeling that she had nothing to offer by way of poetry if she were not "mad" or "depressed." Her
world is confined to the mad house, to neurosis. She offers images of paranoia to play upon the uncertainties connected with sanity. Sexton laments in "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" (C P S 27-28):

The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.

_The world is full of enemies_

She needs human company to reject them, she describes her return to the madhouse in "Flee on Your Donkey" (C P S 97-105):

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.
I have lost the trick of it!

........................................................................

This is madness
but a kind of hunger.

The utterances of the psychodrama may be effective or reductive. But the simple spoken prose suggests that Sexton's career submerged in the history of her past and her madness imposes upon her talent a commitment to survive at the expense of artifice.

Sexton's over-exposure to psychoanalysis yields the book _Transformations_ which is a psychoanalytical
interpretation of fairy tales. These tales, as Susan Juhaz observes, attempt "to create the truth by bridging the gap between the present of adult experience and the potential madness underlying the everyday" (127). In the concluding poem "Briar Rose," Sexton forgets the fairy tale and indulges in sick jokes (C P S 290-95):

She married the prince
and all went well
except for the fear -
the fear of sleep.
Briar Rose
was an insomniac . . .
She could not nap
or lie in sleep.
Briar Rose woke up on being kissed by Daddy. The book ends with the description of the speaker's Daddy:

It's not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish

Sexton's world view seems to be formed by the exasperating doctrines of Freud. She regards herself as a victim who expects to be humoured as a victim without any
responsibility. She persists in acknowledging that she and the mad woman are one and grasps madness as an opportunity for rebirth.

Confessional poetry is a classic illustration of the fact that poetry balances the unconscious and the conscious. The source of poetry is the unconscious; the control is provided by the conscious. On the strength of the poetic ego the poet visualises a point at which the two meet. The Confessional poets express an urge to court the disasters, to plumb for the dark mysteries of life and death. They long to feel the thrill and chill of death in their pulses in an irresistible temptation by death. Confessional art is a direct outcome of the disintegration of the poetic psyche. A desire for psychic wholeness and integration counters the disintegration and strives for psychic stability. The poet takes the extreme step of self-sacrifice to find psychic reintegration and stability. In the very process of self-extinction the poet finds a new identity.

Self-destructiveness is a way to normalize oneself in certain cases. It helps one endure threatening crises and neutralize overwhelming forces. It is achieved through the twin processes of transposition of opposites and transmutation of objectives. Destruction promises both relief and fulfilment. The Confessional poets discover
their affinity with death; they are driven by a desire to
create their own versions of death. They eroticize pain,
anxiety or guilt and look to suicide as a form of
resolution of the conflict. This is effected by changing an
intolerable reality into an idealized state expected in
life or anticipated in death. Death and life are so
ambiguous for these poets that they libidinize reality and
turn death into an idealized existence (Shneidman 281-93).
Alvarez says that the "act of formal expression" of the
poetic self makes the "dredged up" self more "readily
available" to the poet (38).

The hypothesis that extremist poetry produces the side
effects of madness or suicide seems reasonable. A
Confessional poet's life is tormented by his psychic
disturbance. Poetic creation is destructive or curative; a
poem proposed a new model of the self, not as a distortion,
but as a complete and honest confrontation with reality.
The reader's response to Confessional poetry is based on
the willingness to see the individual not as an isolated
being, but as part of the universe and his isolation as a
temporary situation.

As Confessional poets, Kamala Das and Anne Sexton are
haunted by suicide. Kamala Das's "Nani" is a popular poem
about suicide (B K D 19-20). Like Berryman, who was haunted
by the suicide of his father, Das is haunted by the suicide
of the pregnant maid who hanged herself in the privy while the poet was a child. The children who see the hanging body think "that Nani/ was doing to delight us, a comic/ dance" like a "clumsy puppet." Time passes and the abandoned privy becomes an alter: "a lonely shrine/for a goddess who was dead." Though her grandmother makes light of the incident, the poet is still haunted by the macabre death.

The form of self-destruction that seems to appeal to Das most is by drowning in the sea. The narrator confesses in My Story: "Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness... I have wanted to find rest in the sea..." (215). The contemplated suicide does not take place due to her inability to choose between physical death and spiritual death. This is a serious problem which artists confront in their life and art. Kafka committed artistic suicide when tuberculosis failed to provide him natural death. Beckett's characters survive suicide and lead posthumous, immobile lives as seems to be unsure and uncertain as she says in "The Suicide" (B K D 27-31):

I have enough courage to die,
But not enough.
Not enough to disobey him
Who said, do not die
The thought of suicide takes her to life and the necessity
of having to play happy roles. The vortex of the sea which refuses the body and accepts only the soul reflects the poet's tortured psyche. The poet contemplates alternatives:

I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead.

What distinguishes life and death is love; bereft of love, life is death. The poet transforms her urge for drowning to a desire for swimming. She nostalgically returns to her grandmother and her white lover in an assertion of life.

Kamala Das's fascination for drowning reappears in "Composition" (BK D 76-85). The poem expresses very diverse moods as passionate attachment, agonising guilt, repulsive disgust and inhuman bitterness. She describes her sufferings and tries to provide a social context to some of her experiences. The poem begins with the poet's encounter with the sea: "Ultimately, / I have come face to face with the sea." After talking about her sufferings, the poet expresses her urgent need to confess: "I also know that by confessing,/ by peeling off my layers / I reach closer to the soul." She confesses her failures and uselessness and finally desires to find rest at the depth of the sea:

All I want now
Is to take a long walk
into the sea
and lie there, resting,
completely uninvolved.
But she fails to carry out the plan and miserably hangs on
to her existence:
    I must linger on,
trapped in immortality,
my only freedom being
the freedom to
discompose.
The poem "The Invitation" is conceived as a form of
dialogue between the speaker and the sea (D 14-15). The
conflicting desires for life and death constitute the
tension of the poem casting its tortuous spell on the
speaker's self. The speaker is torn between the haunting
pains of despair and disillusionment and the fondling
memories of the occasional visits of the lover:
    . . . You are diseased
With remembering,
The man is gone for good. It would indeed
Be silly to wait for his returning.
The sea serves as a kind of temper, inviting the speaker to
end her troubles by submerging herself in the sea. The sea
offers a kind of empathetic companionship to the self:
... Think of yourself
Lying on a funeral pyre
With a burning head.
The "funeral pyre" and the "burning head" are contrasted with the comfortable death offered by the sea:
... Bathe cool,
Stretch your limbs on cool
Secret sands, ...

In his analysis of the poem Devindra Kohli observes that "while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she cannot disobey offers another, metaphorical death" (90). Though the image of heat describes the intensity and passion of the speaker's sexual encounter, there is, as Vrinda Nabar remarks, nothing that suggests that the "funeral pyre" is metaphorical death (49). The two kinds of death the poet conceives are total, one, physical offered by the sea and the other, death-in-life offered by the lover. The sexual ecstasy and subsequent agony caused by the desertion of the lover is a death-in-life situation. Das's preference for the latter, as Kohli also observes, is emblematic of an "unconscious" desire (90). But it is also, as Nabar remarks, a "modification of a perfectly normal perception" (49). The speaker rejects all temptation in the fond memories of the moments of sexual love:
All through that summer's afternoons we lay
On beds, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing suns. The heat had
Blotted our thoughts
This is an acceptance of life and love indicated especially through the presence of organic images:

. . . I am still young
And I need that man for construction and
Destruction.
The consummated joy of existence gives way to temptation.
"[H]ow long can one resist" the temptation of the sea, the temptation to commit suicide.

Anne Sexton fights against her self-destructive urge and finally gives in to its fatal charm, having failed to resolve the confrontation between her selves and the conditions of her existence. God to Sexton appears as the greatest obstacle to come to terms with. For her God does not signify a prevailing force, but an identifiable self. As she struggles to liberate her self, she has to confront God. She cannot believe in God's benevolence or omnipotence. Sexton's "The Fury of Gods Goodbye" describes God in mock-heroic phrases (C P S 374-75):

One day He
tipped His top hat
and walked
out of the room,
ending the argument.
He stomped off
saying:
I don't give guarantees.
The speaker is ignorant of and deprived of God. She
desperately seeks substitutes:
I rolled up
my sweater,
up into a ball,
and took it
to bed with me,
a kind of stand-in
for God.
The speaker's predicament is miserable. In spite of her
victory she loses herself in the wilderness:
I'd won the world
but like a
forsaken explorer,
I'd lost
my map.
God takes leave and Sexton is left suspended with no trust
in God, with no strength to call useless. Despite her
disbelief she knows that she is lost without him like an
explorer who has lost his map. Her demand for guarantees
expresses her frustration. The self is tangled up with its contestant who refuses any kind of positive or negative resolution of the problem. So the self gets smothered in the entanglement it brought to itself. The self confronts God who remains elusive and unresponsive. She tries to set herself free from this oppressive humiliation by intentionally spurning life. In this, the self performs its final and most desperate assault against God. When the self defies God, she reveals that the self is the most trusted, central part of her existence; the self is the condition of her identity. The poet's motives for suicide are rooted in her desire to keep her identity intact. The agonies caused by self-doubts fragment the self, which in turn begins to threaten the poet's identity. In order to overcome the inner struggle and retrieve the identity the poet regards suicide as the ultimate form of the defiance of God. As a willed act suicide has the power to unite all faculties together. By a strange paradox self-destruction liberates the self in its full strength. Suicide is an extreme solution to the self's struggle to remain identifiable when liberated from conditions of existence (Lento 17-27). It is the self's attempt to triumph over the forces of fragmentation.

Anne Sexton has written at least twenty poems on suicide. They were written during the interim period of
seventeen years between her first suicide attempt and her final successful act. These poems are hymns to suicide or, in the phrase Lynne Salop, "suisongs." They translate the language of suicide into understandable idiom. They are identically, but variously, successful in rendering understandable the suicidal impulse. They are excellent both poetically and polemically. The least successful of these poems is "Sylvia's Death" (CPS 126-28). It is a pathetic "competition" between suicides, one accomplished and the other potential. The speaker at once expresses her regret at Sylvia Plath's death and shows understanding of it. Sexton views Plath's suicide as untimely. The speaker feels betrayed and deserted by a suicide which is a breach of an earlier pact:

Thief!
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew,

The accusatory "Thief" magnifies the feeling of anger against the dead which is the element of grief expressed economically. This poem is essentially cast in the form of a love poem of jealousy and betrayal:

And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
that ride home
with our boy.

The poem takes additional emotional power from the public knowledge of the death of both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The poem ends in regret and the poet seems reluctant to define the meaning of suicide.

The finest single poem on suicide is "Wanting to Die" in which the poet tries to evolve the ultimate meaning of suicide (C P S 142-43). The poem begins like a dramatic monologue. The speaker answers a question outside the frame of the poem. Introducing "Wanting to Die," Sexton wrote:

We talked death and this was life for us. . . . I know that such fascination with death sounds strange . . . and that people cannot understand. They keep . . . asking me why, why? So here is the why - poem, for both of us . . . I do feel somehow that it's the same answer that Sylvia would have given (Newman 175).

Sexton explains the reasons for the suicide of Sylvia Plath in the poem. It begins in a detached tone. The first two lines are distant, detached, calm, open and frank. The third line shifts abruptly to the desire for death. The
...the tone is detached and assertive:

But suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build.

The speaker asserts her desire for death in a metaphorical language. She is forced to overturn the structure of the hearer's language. It is definitive of a suicide that he should find a way to die as the carpenter should find a way to build. For the suicide killing oneself is a kind of building, a type of creating. The simile makes the suicidal speaker reasonable:

Twice I have so simply declared myself,

have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,

have taken on his craft, his magic.

The speaker declares her two previous suicide attempts as integrated declarations of self. Sexton's "Double Image" also mentions the speaker's suicide attempts (C P S 39-42):

I missed your babyhood,

tried a second suicide,

tried the sealed hotel a second year

The suicide attempts have parallels in the poet's life. In the special language of the suicide everything has a paradoxical meaning. There is a reversal of values and an abandoning of logic.
To trust all that life under your tongue!
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.

To gain control over life death becomes a passion:
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,
and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

The reader identifies with the questioner. The old wound stands for previous suicide attempts. Death waits there to release the breath by opening the wound:

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

The poem is now entirely in the "special language" of the suicide. There is total breakdown of the relationships between the human and the natural. There is total alienation except for the accidental meetings between suicides. The poem is balanced between intelligibility and incoherence. The process of translation fails in the formal sense. The speaker turns inward to other suicides and away from the listener:

Leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

The speaker becomes part of the recollected experience. She
disappears from the world of the listener. The poem itself becomes a kind of suicide. Sexton celebrates her own attempts at suicide and displays its form in her special language.

The poem "Flee on Your Donkey" is based on an actual experience at the mental hospital where she rode a donkey (C P S 97-105):

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,
ride out on some hairy beast,
gallop backward pressing
your buttocks to his withers,
She rides the same beast out of life into madness. The formal framework of the poem is artifice. It is a deliberate re-creation of a state of mind. The form is an artful ruse to check the poem's intensely emotional content.

These poems represent a depersonalized excision of self. Sexton revised these poems many times. The revisions of the poem point to a peculiar quality of her craftsmanship - a compulsive need to perfection. No wonder she commits a perfect suicide. Dressed in her favourite red she went inside her red Limousine and embraced a very romantic death in a uniquely new way. She transformed everything about her into art, especially her madness and death. She modelled for her own death.
In the freezing moments of her life Sexton is visited by hallucinating creativity. She is both the heroine and the author: when the curtain goes down one finds her dead body on the stage sacrificed to her plot. There is no schizophrenic vagueness about her life and her character. Death, in poetry, is an action, a possibility, complete in itself, unmotivated, unexamined. There is a sensual distortion about her mind; she seeks pain as much as death, contemplates the mutilation of the soul and the flesh. Her self-destructive actions are the culmination of an unbearable depression; they bring with them a feeling of unworthiness and hopelessness, a despair that cannot imagine recovery. Her suicide is a performance. She describes her suicide as an exhilarating act of contempt. The oddity of celebrating suicide as the waiting denouement of life is inexhaustible. The sensuality and drama of self-destruction and the perversion of other's attempts constitute a distortion of her psyche. The death wish, is an instinctual complement to the vast and intricate efforts to survive. Sexton appears a death-monger, morbidly narrating suicide as if she is telling an anecdote in fear of interruption. Her literally irresistible poems on suicide shock as well as thrill the readers. The tension in these poems is a conflict between the claims of the feminine and of the work of art. To
imagine one's suicide as a way of completing, fulfilling, explaining the highest work of one's life may appear impudent and insulting to death. Artists have been cruel to others for what they imagine to be advantageous to their work. Cruelty to oneself, as the completion of creation, is far from unimaginable, especially to a spirit tempted throughout life to self-destruction.

Kamala Das's search for Ghanashyam in the poem of that title symbolises her eagerness to discover the self (C P D 93-95). The "I" here refers not only to the individual experiences of the speaker but to the general lack of courage to plumb beneath the surface level of reality. Das's experiences only reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. In "The Freaks," the self assumes the mask of a freak, flaunting "a grand, flamyoyant lust" (B K D 42). "Composition" is another poem that expresses the poet's concern for the self (B K D 76-85). The poem is a confessional narrative which is built on the central metaphors of the sea and the house. Saturated with autobiographical material, the poem progresses from "the composite state of innocence and childhood to the state of self-consciousness and age" (Nair 30). The poem may appear as unstructured and formless. It can be divided into seven sections. The first section is a recollection of the speaker's childhood. The childhood memories are erased by
growth which replaces love with guilt. The images of femaleness are predominant in this section which expresses the conflict between the child self and the woman self. The child's growth into a woman is visualised as evil: "The tragedy of life / is not death but growth." The second section deals with the speaker's loss of intimacy with the sea, though seascape survives in her dreams. The third section pictures the shadow of marriage that brings tragedy to the adult speaker's life. The dance imagery conjures up freedom whereas the imagery of sexuality reveals the uncertainty and the sense of crisis that threatens her identity. The fourth section presents a mature woman who desires tenderness more than love. In order to find emotional security she passes from one sexual contest into another. As normal relationships do not endure, she wants to be abnormal:

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography.

The lines underline the confessional urge of the speaker. Her concern with the body's hunger leads to a meditation on the body and the soul. The fifth section brings the reader back to the speaker's grandmother. It recalls an event in the speaker's life that happened thirteen years ago. She could not spend a night with her grandmother, though the
The burden of guilt and loss makes her confess and

... by confessing

by peeling off layers

I reach closer to the soul

The need to confess her guilt leads the speaker closer to her soul. The sixth section is a stoic acceptance of the trials of the speaker's life. In the final section she confesses her failure: "I feel my age and my / uselessness." The speaker wishes to attain the tranquil state of detachment. What sustains her life is the thought of the immortality of the soul.

The poet loses her grip over the materials. This makes the lines transparent. Das, as Devindra Kohli points out, is concerned with "the discrepancy between what one wishes to have and what one has" (87). Her sense of discrepancy is personal and is not supported by any clear vision of human destiny. The title of the poem is deceptive: it evokes the structured pattern of a musical composition. There is no organised development of the poetic materials in the poem. The poem begins with the dominant image of the sea which, however, is subordinated at the end when the speaker wishes to meet her final rest at the sea. Though the tone of the poem is largely confessional, its substance is a persistent theme in her poetry. Her inability to laugh at herself
makes her confession weary:

I asked my husband,
am I hetero
am I lesbian
Or am I just plain frigid?
He only laughed.

The reader's response is also the same. The confession without the metaphoric or imagistic sharpness often deteriorates into self-pity. The poem is a kind of self-criticism, though Eunice de Souza considers it a "totally formless stream of unhappy consciousness" (Shahane and Sivaramakrishna 46). The speaker's ultimate discovery is that the only freedom available to her is the freedom to "discompose." This last word, as Vrinda Nabar also remarks, is an "intensely evocative word" that hints at the "sources of her disquiet" (53). The poem begins with the central burden and leads to a plunge into the essential crisis the poet faces.

"The Fear of the Year" is yet another poem that presents the anxiety of modern man under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust (B K D 11). Modern man lives from moment to moment under the urgency of this anxiety. He has, therefore, no time for "slow desires" and "fond smiles." Fear deprives man even of the freedom to dream. This anxiety about an all-destructive holocaust is a common
characteristic of all Confessional poets. "Too Early the Autumn Sights" describes the fear of ageing (S C 26). The speaker's aloneness makes the confrontation with the terror inevitable. She cannot escape the panic created by the dance of dead leaves:

. . . the fallen
Leaves do not rest, but raise themselves
Like ghosts to perform
A blind and ugly dance.

The ghostly dance of the fallen autumn leaves would remind one of the "vacant ecstasy" of the eunuch's dance (B K D 60). The conflict in the poem is between the youthful physical self and the aging, intellectual self. A related poem is "The End of Spring" which describes the speaker's "fear of change" (B K D 26). It is a dialogue between the physical self that responds emotionally to the external world and the intellectual self that evaluates situations rationally. The conversation centres round "you," identified as the speaker's lover and "me," the speaker herself. She spurns the love that induces fear in the lovers:

. . . What is the use
Of love, all this love, if all it gives is
Fear, you the fear of storms asleep in you,
And me the fear of hurting you?
Sexton recognizes that the self/body dichotomy symbolizes the psychic fragmentation of her cultural and religious heritage. Her poems are as equivocal on the unification of the self and body as on their alienation. But her vision of unification is more projected than achieved. The fragmentation of the self and the quest for a self which is a psychic whole is, perhaps, best reflected in "The Double Image" (CPS 35-42). Addressed to her daughter, the poem describes the speaker's desire to see herself in the double of her mother and her daughter.

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.

Unable to establish her identity, the poet tries to judge herself in the light of the twin images of mother and daughter, achieving only partial success as the two rely on her for their identity as much as she depends on them. In the succession of similarities, the speaker resembles her mother even as her daughter takes after her:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.

There is no special God to refer to:
The speaker, as daughter and as mother, has a basic and intrinsic identity. The double image she perceives is of herself and her self's self, the latter being her real
identity different from that of mother or of daughter. Maternal bond, like mother's cancer, results in the speaker's emotional breakdown and attempted suicide. The speaker's identity renders the relationship with her mother broken, partial and awkward:

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
In the same perspective the speaker's daughter is an unwanted being:

You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.

The alienation of the selves is sharply brought out by the careful use of language. The speaker's insecure relationship with her mother is described in the language of uncertainty while her new relationship with her daughter is narrated with unqualified precision. Her confessions about the two most intimate relationships are aesthetically contrasted by the sharp distinction between a well defined present and a vaguely realised past.

The idea of a fragmented image of the mother becoming the image of fragmentation and wholeness for the persona is further explored in "The Division of Parts." (C P S 42-46). Sexton identifies herself with her mother's body when she becomes a mother herself. There are two kinds of
inheritances: the physical inheritance represented by her
dead mother and the cultural inheritance symbolized by
Christ:

... I imitate

a memory of belief

that I do not own.

The speaker comes to terms with both mother and Christ and
asserts her adulthood in defiance. She identifies herself
with her sick mother and the crucified Christ:

And Christ still waits. I have tried
to exercise the memory of each event
and remain still, a mixed child,
heavy with cloths of you.

Many poems of Sexton deal with the theme of the
alienation of the self expressed through the disturbing,
terrifying beauty of the female body. In "The Operation"
for instance, the disintegration of the self coincides with
the surgery of the body (C P S 56-59). The speaker
identifies with her mother through the female body, through
cancer. Sexton organises the incoherent images of
meaningless suffering into a coherent image of
disintegration. The poem presents fragmentation of self as
a possibility of life. The operation is an experience of
the speaker's physical self-alienation.

Sexton gives a mythic dimension to the theme of the
fragmentation of the self in some of the poems. The Sexton persona can be likened to a female Oedipus who identifies with the male Other rather than with the female Double. In "The Legend of the One Eyed Man" the poet identifies with the narrator, the one-eyed man who is a combination of Judas Iscariot and Oedipus Rex and who not only betrayed his God but also outraged the modesty of his mother (CPS 112-15): "The story of his life/is the story of mine." The disintegration of the self works at different levels: the betrayer of God, the slayer of the parent of the same sex and the seducer of the parent of the opposite sex.

Sexton's "father poems" develop potential selves, mostly feminine, which cultivate unconventional relationship with the male Other. In "The Moss of His Skin," the girl who decays beside her father in a final embrace, which is familial as well as sexual, hides it from her mother, sisters, and God as she apprehends that the female Double is a potential rival in her relationship with the male Other (CPS 96-97). In "All My Pretty Ones" the speaker gives birth to her father by mothering him (CPS 49-51). Sexton's personas are infantilized by an idolatrously loving father. This prevents them from being independent women and compels them to remain as daughters and children. Sexton's Briar Rose, for instance, wakes up
crying "Daddy! Daddy! (C P S 294). She closes "Briar Rose" substituting herself for Briar Rose and articulating the unpleasant truths usually confined to a nightmare (C P S 290-95). The sequence "The Death of Fathers" at once works on the fragmentation of the self of the daughter-speaker and unification of the self of the woman-poet (C P S 322-32). The initiation rite which is central to the meaning of the sequence symbolizes many events. In "Oysters," it conveys the death of the father and the emergence of a lover after the rite while the speaker replaces her mother and emerges as her rival: "the child was defeated. The woman won." This idea is further developed in other poems of the sequence. In "How we Danced," the young speaker dances with her father as man and wife on the occasion of a family wedding. The scene of action is noted for the absence of the mother whose position is usurped by the daughter. They danced "like two birds on fire," in an obvious parody of the wedding. The poem also signifies the figurative death of the father and his rebirth as a lover. In "Santa" the speaker's father plays grandfather to her children. She recalls how he was kissed and hugged by her mother when the speaker was a child. Now the speaker replaces her mother; they become "conspirators / secret actors." In "Friends" the speaker's self undergoes fragmentation and alienation due to the violation of her
faith by her father's improper response to her. The speaker reenacts a situation as a protection against the complex dimension of her self: her "legs crossed themselves like Christ's." The father-lover motif leads to the fragmentation of the self in "The Death of the Fathers."

The techniques of substitution and identification recur in Sexton's poems on married life. The poem "The Farmer's Wife" begins with the tale of a rural housewife and her farmer husband (CPS 19-20). But as the poem closes the setting changes to Boston where the speaker finds a barren domestic life under the infections influence of her husband. The same pattern is followed in "Man and Wife" where Sexton introduces the couple who are like "strangers in a two-seater outhouse" (CPS 116-13). The speaker suggests that the same fate haunts herself and her husband: "Like them / we can only hang on." In "The Wife-Beater" and "Hornet" also Sexton, at first, narrates the tales of a wife or a woman and then replaces her with the speaker. The theme of the alienation of the self is also brought out through generally acclaimed hostile relations like that between the Jewish wife and the Nazi husband as in "Loving the Killer" or the man-eating Nazi in "After Auschwitz."

In many of Sexton's love poems the speaker is one of the women in love with a man. The multiplicity of
relationships with its legal and moral hazards work towards the alienation of the self of the speaker. The poem "The Break" reflects the explosive nature of the destructive violence involved in romantic love (CPS 190-93). The disintegration of the self is conveyed through the broken hip of the speaker whose lover broke away from her. In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," the speaker places herself in the relatively unimportant position of the "Other woman" with respect to the man in love (CPS 188-90). The complete and irreversible nature of the fragmentation of the self is expressed through the object-like existence of the speaker who washes off like "a watercolor." Woman experiences isolation as an existential condition and further isolation that is unique to the female gender which Beauvoir calls "Otherness" (16). Besides the split between the Self and the Other due to alienation and marginality, woman poet experiences splitting of the self due to her personal predicament. Isolation in women's poetry, according to Deborah Pope, manifested in four forms: victimisation, personalisation, split-self and validation (10-12). They are in the progressive order towards the healing of the selves into a unified whole.

Victimisation is a mode of manifestation of comprehensive isolation in women's poetry, especially
feminist Confessional poetry. The speaker perceives her femaleness as a flaw and her existence as an unchangeable condition. As physical self is the most visible aspect of gender, the poems express the speaker's feeling of alienation from the sexual body. The speakers of "Victimisation poems" are women who passively accept social role-models. Their inner lives appear too weak to change the course with confidence or purpose. They, therefore, express the most negative sense of isolation. The embattled female inner self constantly struggles against the physical self. This aspect is, sometimes, aesthetically embodied as alienation from nature or from vital human emotions. The poems represent a hopeless world cut off from nature, time, others and the self.

Kamala Das's poems like "The Stone Age," "The Old Playhouse" and "Of Calcutta" present the speakers as victims of alienation and marginalization. She describes the victimised speaker and her hopeless world through barren images. Her "victimisation poems" are peopled by selfless mothers, submissive wives/lovers or dutiful daughters. In "The Stone Age," the speaker is "a bird of stone, a granite dove" (B K D 97-98). In "The Old Playhouse" the speaker is a tamed "swallow" who "ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf" (B K D 100-01). Her "mind is an old playhouse with all its lights put out" and she is fed on
"love in lethal doses." In "Of Calcutta" the speaker stoops to canine status, becoming "a trained circus dog / Jumping . . . routine hoops each day" (C P D 56-60). She lives like a "nodding / Doll," a "walkie talkie one to / Warm bed." The speaker places herself as a victim in the social and historical context of her gender.

Anne Sexton's poems like "The Farmer's Wife," "The Wife-Beater," "The Break" and "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" describe the inescapably miserable predicament of the speakers. Their victimhood is expressed through images of dreary landscapes. The speaker's position is the all-important factor in these poems; what makes her situation abrasive is her sense of self in relation to the world. In "The Farmer's Wife," the rural housewife lives her life of "country lust" with the farmer for whom "she has been his habit" (C P S 19-20). She lives, "apart from him," "her own self in her own words." She feels that "there / must be more to living / than . . . the raucous bed" or "the slow braille touch of him." In "Man and Wife" the couple live like "strangers in a two-seater outhouse" (C P S 115-116). They are "exiles / soiled by the same sweat," "two asthmatics / whose breath sobs in and out." In "The Wife-Beater," Sexton gives expression to the pathetic domestic life of a woman and her daughter who live under the constant terror of the man who is both a wife...
beater and a child-beater (CPS 307-08). In "The Break" the speaker whose heart is broken at the breaking away of her lover falls and breaks her hip (CPS 190-93). She enacts the trauma of a broken hip which is emblematic of the broken heart that will not heal. In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," the speaker who is the "Other woman" in the life of the man washes herself off like a "watercolor" (CPS 188-90). The poem "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" describes the object-like existence of the speaker whom the man repudiates after he had his enjoyment (CPS 196): "when it is over he places her, /like a phone, back on the hook." The idea of the woman as victim looms large in many such poems.

The alienation and trauma associated with the role-models and the inability to form a satisfactory relationship with male sexuality are the sources of isolation for "personalization poems." The isolation in this case is localized. The speakers turn to nature as a solatum for broken human ties. They adopt the roles of muted survivors whose situations form a logically tested personal history. The female self shapes the contextual and personal aspects of gender. The poems are concerned with threatening forces of disintegration and omnipresence of death. The common heritage and the shared context of gender offers a sense of sisterhood. The disorder and pain of
human existence punctuate the poems. The poems express a consciousness of human helplessness. Action becomes irrelevant in a world of fixed co-ordinates. The quest for identity need not necessarily lead to any meaningful impact on the speaker's life or her world.

Kamala Das's poems like "My Grandmother's House," "A Man is a Season," "Cat in the Gutter," "Gino," "The Testing of the Sirens" are examples of "personalization poems." The poem "My Grandmother's House" exemplifies the speaker's nostalgia for love and security (B K D 21). Her grandmother is a symbol of unalloyed love and uninhibited security. But the speaker has lost her grandmother and all the attendant support to her life. She has lost her way and "beg now at stranger's doors / to receive love, at least in small change." The speaker sings her lonely solo in "A Man is a Season" (C P D 80). Her husband lets her toss her youth "like coins / Into various hands" and "Seek ecstasy in other's arms." In "Cat in the Gutter" the speaker feels like "a high bred kitten / Rolling for fun in the gutter (C P D 99). In "The Sunshine Cat," the speaker slides "from the pegs of sanity into / A bed made soft with her tears" (T 22). In "Gino" the speaker fears that she will perish from the kiss of her Indian lover (B K D 56-57). She compares the lover's kiss to a krait-bite "that fills / the blood stream with its accursed essence." In the
poem "Testing of the Sirens," love comes to the speaker "like pain" repeatedly (B K D 58-59). Love as a stab and the act of love as a murder are recurring images in both Kamala Das and Anne Sexton.

Sexton's poem "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" describes the plight of an unwed mother forsaken by the man she loved (C P S 24-25). She is a "shelter of lies" whose silence harms her infant. She hands off the child whom she considers the living form of her sin. "The Double Image" also narrates the agony of a mother separated from her child (C P S 35-42). The speaker here can hardly preserve essential human bonds, nor can she cultivate new ties. The poem "The Operation" describes how the speaker identifies with her mother through the traumatic experiences of an operation (C P S 56-59). In "Those Times" the speaker is unsure of her roles as mother and daughter (C P S 118-21):

I did not know the woman I would be

... ... ...

nor that children,
two monuments,
would break from between my legs
two stampeded girls breathing carelessly,

... ... ...

I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother's like a truck
She discovers that the vacuum in her heart helps her to "hear / the unsaid more clearly." In "Praying on a 707," the speaker is annoyed at her mother's interference in everything she does (C P S 378-80): "If I write a poem / you give a treasurer's report." In "Hurry up Please It's Time," the speaker's mother depends on her for her own identity (C P S 384-95):

My kitchen is a heart.
I must feed it oxygen once in a while
and mother the mother.

The speaker lives under the shadow of the cannibalistic love which her lover offers in "Loving the Killer" (C P S 185-88). She is tied to him with an "intricate lock" she cannot open. Yet, she succumbs to the desperate need:

I will eat you slowly with kisses
even though the killer in you
has gotten out.

The woman who is eternally wedded to her daddy tries to divorce him in "Divorce, Thy Name is Woman" (C P S 545-46):

Daddy and his whiskey breath
made a long midnight visit
in a dream that is not a dream

This unusual relationship compels her to divorce her Daddy:

I have been divorcing him ever since,
going into court with Mother as my witness
Sexton's poems work out emotional estrangement of varying degrees in different human relationships.

In feminist poetry, especially of the confessional variety, isolation is also manifested in the split between the socially acceptable woman and the marginal female artist. Isolation emerges as a symptom of, and as a means to, the mystery and power associated with the artist's realm. The persona has the awareness of the duality between the external, socially acceptable, integrated, feminine, woman and the internal, socially unacceptable, rebellious, unfeminine, isolated artist. The two selves are in varying degrees at tension with each other. The woman and the artist seem to be necessarily estranged. It was Florence Howe who established the significance of the term "split-self" in women's poetry (75-78). The term denotes the opposition between essential aspects of the self, between the social concepts of gender, between the definitions of self and between being and becoming a woman. The speaker of the "split-self poems" identifies the two selves with the domestic gender role(s) and the role of the artist. The domestic self occupies a safe position, gets acceptance and approval of society in general and of males in particular. The artistic self occupies an unsafe world of independence and power at once stimulating and threatening. The artist makes uncertain choices and confronts unfamiliar
experiences and environments. The masculine patriarchal world firmly supports the persuasive cultural power of gender roles enacted by the self. The dilemma of the two selves involves a conflict. The domestic self's eagerness for cultural acceptance silences the powerful voice of the artistic self. The central division of the self makes the choice limited: be true either to the self or to others; to be true to the self is to be potentially dangerous for others. A woman poet becomes a social outcast as her behaviour does not confirm to that of domestic woman. A woman poet is a single woman divided against herself. When the self is split into opposing factions, fragmentation begins leading to the creation of a set of dichotomies which ultimately result in the destruction of the self. The poet moves from split selves to a healed self through acceptance and integration. The success of the woman poet rests with her power to heal the diverging selves into a concept of wholeness that accepts a woman poet as both woman and poet with no unnatural polarization between them.

Kamala Das's poem "The Loud Posters" is built on the central division between the domestic self and the artistic self (B K D 39):

... I have stretched my two dimensional nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I have put
my private voice away, adopted
the typewriter's click as my one speech,
The display of nudity, which figuratively stands for the
confession of intimate privacies is a kind of sacrifice.
The speaker forsakes her private domestic voice and adopts
the voice of the typewriter which metaphorically represents
the artistic voice. "Moring at Apollo Pier" develops the
conflict between the physical self and the spiritual self,
life and death, domestic routine and poetic art. The flawed
beauty and the diminishing love of the lover are the
impulses of her poetry. Her lover is her masterpiece (B K D 51):
You are the poem to end all poems
a poem, absolute as the tomb.
The poem "An Introduction" introduces the speaker as an
Indian poet and an Indian woman (B K D 12-13). She chooses
her own ways as a poet and as a woman. Das's Indian English
honestly "voices my longings, my hopes:" it is "human
speech." She spurns the advice of the critics, friends and
relatives. The speaker shocks her orthodox relatives and
the conventional society in unfeminine ways.: She "wore a
shirt / and a black sarong:" she cut her "hair short and
ignored all of / this womanliness." In this case also she
rejects the counsel of the categorizers. In this poem the
artistic self asserts itself over the domestic one. In
"Composition" the speaker expresses her desire to compose
her autobiography, to confess and to reach close to the soul (B K D 76-85). But she finds that her power rests with her "freedom to / discompose." The domestic self is kept in check by the artistic self.

The speakers of Sexton's "split-self poems" are fierce and ferocious females. Transformations begins with the introduction of the speaker as "a middle-aged witch" (C P S 233). In "Her Kind" and "The Black Art" Sexton's potential for poetic art manifests itself as witchery or black magic. In "Her Kind" the speaker deliberately asserts herself: "a possessed witch, / . . . braver at night; / dreaming evil." (C P S 15-16). Unfazed by an odd and evil environment, the speaker moves out in her ferocious form. She frequents the caves of the woods "rearranging the disaligned" relationships of the sexes that check the dominance of the artistic self. A woman who has the magic of language can strive for a life of imagination. Even if her witchery fails, the speaker is "not ashamed to die." She prefers death to the foolish state of being left in the lurch of domestic entanglements. In "The Black Art" the speaker, a woman-writer, thinks that she is "essentially a spy" (C P S 88-89). She revels in her world of artistic creation and surpasses the impediments of domesticity. The power of imagination makes woman a supernatural being.

The conflict between domestic duties and creative
endeavours, between the limitations of body and the demands of the mind is expressed in "The Ambition Bird" (C P S 299-300). The enigma of the speaker whose poetic power prevents her from submitting herself to mute domesticity is neatly portrayed in the poem. The speaker, like a witch, keeps awake all the night engaging herself in poetic creation. She identifies her creative talent with the power of a magician who restrained her from taking rest. The speaker of "The Witch's Life," tortured by her male partner, becomes nervous and crazy (C P S 423-24). She feels uneasy at her home. Her uneasiness corresponds to her apathy to familial burdens. But she feels at home in the world of poetic creation. At times, she feels like a recluse for want of stimulus. Deprived of opportunities, she becomes a witch with nightmares and visions:

... It is the witch's life,
climbing the primordial climb,
a dream within a dream,
then sitting here
holding a basket of fire.

This is the only choice open to an adroit woman. In "Fierceness of Female" Sexton glorifies the woman's poetic
talent which drives away her weakness and mildness" (C P S 546-47): "they invented a time table of tongues, / that take up all my attention." The world of creation is mysterious. As a necromancer calls up spirits, the poet drives meanings into her expression and derives enjoyment in the process.

Women's traditional isolation has a positive, liberating potential. A true feminist poet builds an affirmative vision of validation by her political and sexual synthesis. The victory of woman in every conventional and unconventional way leads to a healing of selves. Validation is a psychic state where the speaker triumphs both as a woman and as an artist. The creative potential of validation is two-fold: it is an unexhaustive source of inspiration for the artist as well as a curative source that makes the selves coherent. Woman can change her isolation and marginality into the foundation of a new world. The isolation from the male-centred culture itself is a means of freedom. Poetry bestows the personal benefit of release and recognition to the poet. Validation is the fully emergent aspect of isolation. The significance of validation as a form of isolation lies in its choice as a basis for an alternative world. The separateness of female gender brings forth a hope and a vision. Isolation is a choice that explores the possibilities of change. A woman
poet transmutes isolation, which is an enforced condition for other women, into poetry charged with possibilities of change and power. The speaker of the "validation poems" tries to be successful in every conventional and unconventional role. The conflict is between successful femininity and successful artistry. The speaker is haunted by the feeling that she cannot be a successful woman and a successful poet at the same time. A woman poet's personal struggles for identity and her anger against the limitations of creativity merge as guilt associated with her artistic self. She has to find a synthesis between the two aspects of the self— the artistic and the feminine, not necessarily the domestic—to express isolation in her poems. She confronts the need to confess the painful truth of her everyday experience as woman. She turns away from the despair engendered by the traditional isolation enforced by andro-centric culture to the prophecy and power associated with the isolation chosen by woman. Isolation is neither a marginality of self nor a separation from strength; isolation is a willed rejection of a destructive heritage. Woman's isolation from patriarchal culture sustains a poetry of new vision.

Kamala Das concludes her poem "Flotsam" with added emphasis on her loneliness (C P D 91):
I wondered if
I should have fought at all to save this dubious Asset, my aloneness, my terrible aloneness.
The speaker feels this terrible loneliness immediately after the departure of her lover, a kindred soul. Together they create an oasis of lust which proves to be a "mirage." This intense loneliness of the female persona is a recurring theme in Das's poetry. Loneliness is an emotional crisis evolved out of the speaker's inability to establish meaningful and abiding relations with the world. Das resolves this crisis either through poetry or through lust. The persona's lust is as much related to her loneliness as the poetry is to the loneliness of the poet.

The persona's urge to withdraw from the world of experiences, the essentially male-centred world, is central to Das's poetry. As the female persona engages herself in vigorous sexual conquests to make amends for her isolation, Das creates poems out of her isolation. The persona's urge to escape from the trivialities of everyday experiences is best expressed in Das's "love poems." The poet gives an unromantic or ironic twist to her "love poems," though they are cast in a mystical disguise or a deceptively mythical framework. In "Krishna" for instance, the speaker seems to be trapped in Krishna's "body" which is her "prison" and her world: his darkness "blinds" her and his "love words"
prevents her from growing worldly wise (B K D 54). In "The Prisoner" the speaker studies the trappings of her lover's body to "escape from its snare" (B K D 55). In "Love" the speaker, "curled like an old mongrel" lies content in her lover (B K D 55). In "The Blind Walk" the speaker expresses her "passion for symbols" (B K D 73). In "A New City" the speaker seeks a "blind date" (B K D 87). She comes "with hunger, with faith and a secret language" to "awake anew at the touch of a strange young" lover. In "Morning at Appollo Pier," the poet compares a lover to a "poem, absolute as the tomb" (B K D 50-51). Das says in one of her "Anamalai Poems" that with poetry she writes away her "loneliness" (B K D 154).

Poetry, for Kamala Das, is an alternative to love. Isolation is the motive behind the two experiences. The split between the feminine and the artistic selves in Kamala Das enhances the power of isolation. The conflict between the two selves increases the range and intensity of her poetry, which, as P.P.Raveendran observes, is "an extension of the body" (B K D xv). The celebration of the body is the expression of a "deep-seated urge to socialize" (B K D xv). Das expresses her anxiety about the decline of poetic faculties through images of old age and death. In "Words" the poet compares words to "a sea with paralysing waves" (S C 11). In "Without a Pause" the poet
describes "darkened rooms" where "the old sit thinking, filled with vaporous fear" (S C 10). The speaker is tired of a plethora of words harassing her. In "Words are Birds," the poet compares words to birds "gone to roost,/ Wings, tired" (B K D 137). The dusk which hides the wings of words plays upon the speaker's skin and hair revealing her old age. In "The Cart Horse," Das acknowledges the inadequacy of words to carry the burden of her nighmarish experiences (B K D 68). The central image of the poem, the tired horse, suggests not only physical weakness, but poetic failure also.

It may be that the monotonous experiences of love in all its intensity makes Kamala Das's personae inarticulate. In "Ferns" the poet expresses the fear that "a time will come / When words, while uttered, will fall thudding down / Like dismembered heads" (B K D 32). In "The Blind Walk" the poet visualises a tragic future when "the sea is full of writers' carcasses" and the poets "lose their way inside their own minds" (B K D 73). That Das's poetry bears an objective correlative to the physical body is evident from the organic nature of the imagery she frequently employs in her poetry. Because poetry is an extension of the body and verse-writing an alternative to love-making, there seems to be no conflict between the feminine and artistic selves. The feminine self stands for the
conventional feminine qualities. The conventionally successful feminine self is always at war with the unconventionally successful artistic self. The persona's anxiety that she cannot at once be a successful, conventional woman and an equally successful, unconventional poet is not misplaced. In "Ghanashyam" poetry alternates with love in the psyche of the persona (C P D 93-95):

With words I weave a raiment for you
With songs a sky
With such music I liberate in the oceans their fervid dances.

Poetry that the persona creates through her imagination is followed by the game of love she indulges in with her lover:

His body needing mine,
His ageing body in its pride meeting the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened
And he turned his back on me
In panic I asked don't you want me any longer.

The memory of the love that she enacted in the company of her lover brings with it feelings of intense loneliness, "like bleached bones cracking in the desert sun." The persona is awakened to the reality of domestic chores and
the lack of love in her relation with her husband. The persona is the mutilated self of the poet which manifests itself in poetry. The poem “Vrindavan” establishes the song of flute that lures woman to Vrindavan, which symbolises the world of poetry (B K D 48). The frolic at Vrindavan leaves a "brown aureola" at the speaker's breast. Though she tries to conceal it, she derives intense pleasure from the memories it brings.

Sexton's Love Poems and Transformations contain her "validation poems." The power of these poems springs from the split between the speaker and the poet. The narrator’s voice changes from poem to poem. Sexton creates varieties of persona like Snow White, Dame Sexton, the Other woman and the loving wife/husband. The poet seems to join the reader in observing and understanding all. Sexton establishes herself as a skilful artist through these poems. Her capacity to distance the speaker from the poet provides a powerful voice to her poems. Sexton is concerned with myths, fiction and character development in these poems. The central concern in these poems, however, is isolation. The enchanted world created by the poet lifts the character away from the society. The poems are impersonal rather than confessional. The relationships portrayed are observed outside the perceptions of the poet-confessor. The image of the lover as a creator or a builder
runs through *Love Poems*. In "The Touch" the lover is a "carpenter" (*C P S* 173-74). He is the "pure genius at works," "the composer" in "The Kiss" (*C P S* 174-75). In "The Breast," the lover is an "architect" (*C P S* 175-76). In "Mr. Mine," the lover "constructs" the speaker, he has "built" her up from "the glory of boards" (*C P S* 204). The poet equates love with creation, literary and otherwise, as does Kamala Das too. The concept of love as death or stab also recurs in some poems like "Again and Again and Again" and "Loving the Killer." Love can be death as well as rebirth: the lovers are born again. "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" expresses the contrast between the rejected mistress and the wife (*C P S* 198-99). The poem compares physical love to a feast.

Sexton's *Love Poems* anticipates the "catalyst" ideology of feminist literary criticism that helps, as Annette Kolodny observes, to "bridge the gap between the world as we [women] found it and the world we [women] wanted it to be" (*Showalter* 144). What characterises these poems is an urge to reduce the aesthetic distance between *being* a woman and *becoming* a woman. The poet's socialized self urges her to suppress her innate impulses and behave in a stereotypically feminine way. But her artistic self inspires her to write powerfully and flamboyantly. Sexton's *Love Poems* reveals the dilemma of a woman writer who is
forced by male-centred culture to express her truth in slanted forms. The conflict, as Alicia Ostriker remarks, is between the true writer and the true woman. "The true writer signifies assertion while the true woman signifies submission" (Showalter 315). Love Poems symbolizes Sexton's effort to harmonize the true writer and the true woman.

Sexton's Transformations also signifies the effort to heal the poetic and feminine selves into a whole. She has transformed Grimm's tales which perpetuate patriarchal and sexist values with the stamp of her feminine identity and the artistry of her language. The themes of Oedipal conflicts, sexual initiation and sexual jealousy are magnified in the poems. But the fairy tale promise of an emotionally mature, psychologically integrated, happy life remains unfulfilled in the poems. The witch-poet who portrays herself as different, as one who transforms ordinary domestic scenes into nightmarish episodes, bravely asserts her power. The witch-poet who shapes the Transformation poems declares in "Iron Hans" (CPS 249-55): "I am the mother of the insane./ Let me give you my children." One of the children is "a woman talking,/purging herself with rhymes." The speaker of "The Frog Prince" states (CPS 281-86): "My guilts are what / we catalogue." The tales, as Caroline King Bernard Hall argues, are "the means of transforming subconscious materials into conscious
ones" (105). Sexton offers no positive didactic model for the readers. She wants to remind them of the fact that the fairy-tale promise of wealth and automatic happiness is a delusion. Even marriage is less than blissful in Sexton's Transformations. The post-marriage life of fairy tale bliss is a doll-like existence.

Sexton uses the imagery of violence to connect love with torment. The witch-spinner of these modern fairy tales examines her own experience of the torment of love, personal anguish and suffering and emotional breakdown. She takes the position that the fairy tale characters are sometimes elevated to positions as important as the speaker's own. As all characters and events are projections of the speaker's psyche, all poetic materials point to the author-speaker herself. The speaker's voice controls the poems by an intimacy of revelation. The characters of the Transformation poems fail to emerge whole, caught as they are in the nightmares of eternity; they are mutilated physically or psychologically. Unrelieved monotony or dehumanised captivity is the fate that awaits them. Sexton honestly attempts to unify the truly feminine and the truly artistic selves. She transforms what is not truly feminine in the tales and combines them with the truly poetic elements. The characters, in the process, emerge dehumanised, diminished, mutilated and fragmented. Sexton
transforms Grimm's world of andro-centric culture through her own world of gyno-centric thoughts. Her task involves the transformation of the patriarchal world of fixed coordinates by the female world of varying coordinates represented by femininity and artistry. She accomplishes the task through her language and diction which involve tortuous phrases and violent images. Sexton transforms the fairy-tales into her own tales by her craft. This upholds the dominance of the artistic self over the domestic self. Transformations dissects the grotesque and the absurd in the roles of poet and woman and scrutinizes the Oedipal guilts in Sexton's adaptation of the tales.

The sacramental aesthetics of the confessional mode is crucial to a specific rhetorical process of self-disclosure. It establishes a universal and aesthetically appealing framework of meaning in the poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton. The structural patterns of their poetry concretize a well-defined process of repentence and reconciliation experienced by their personae. Their poetry is a rhetoric of rebirth and regeneration that celebrates the human cycle of guilt-purification-redemption. The basic tension in their poetry is manifested in the conflict between the potential of self-awareness for regeneration and the normal impossibility of escaping physical and emotional bonds for its achievement. Their poetic process
uncovers the perversities that operate at different levels - psychic, familial and artistic. Family life is the primary source of inspiration for regeneration that is specifically noted as religious redemption. The tentative achievement of regeneration and redemption dissolves the memories of pain, guilt and loss, the very traumas explored in their poetry.

A detailed analysis of the poetry of Kamala Das and Anne Sexton helps to identify at least five penitential attitudes. They are mortification, "victimage" or scapegoating, contrition or apologia, mock lyric or self-parody, and edification. Kay Ellen Merriman Capo classifies the attitudes in the case of Anne Sexton (4589). The same categories are identifiable in the case of Kamala Das also. Their poems maintain a rhetorical distance from emotionally charged experiences that get regular treatment in their poetry. The experiences include intimate family relations, romantic love, identity crisis, creativity, death and spiritual quest. The potentially guilty acts evolve as forms of mortification. The guilt-conscious personae work to find out a means to re-establish their innocence. The misery and suffering the personae undergo due to surgery, insomnia, madness, grief, suicide attempts, breakdowns and fear of death can alienate them from the loved ones, from motherhood and even from womanhood. The personae's attempts
to strike a reconciliation bridge the estranged relations. A successful attempt at reconciliation brings forth the possibilities of redemption. Das's "Luminol," for instance, expresses the speaker's attempt to reconcile herself to a surrender to her husband (BK D 44). "The Tom-Tom" reveals the speaker's preparation to reconcile herself to continue physical relations with her partner (CP D 77). Sexton's "The Operation" works out the speaker's sincere and honest efforts in the direction of a reconciliation with her dead mother (CP S 56-59). "The Double Image" portrays the speaker's attempts to reconcile herself to the position of a daughter and a mother by identifying herself with the images of her dead mother and her daughter (CP S 35-42).

The framework of victimage or scape-goating is explored to alleviate the natural guilt feelings associated with sexual development and to assimilate personal tensions. The scape-goat figure need not necessarily be a family member always, though this is the usual case in the early poems. The object of victimisation becomes abstract or mythical especially in the later poems. This tendency shows the rhetorical and psychological development of the speakers. In Kamala Dash's "A Man is a Season," "The Sunshine Cat," "Of Calcutta" and "Cat in the Gutter" the rude husband of the premature wife is the scape-goat figure. In "An Apology for Gautama," the Gautama, who could
win the speaker's body and not her soul, is the scape-goat figure. *My Story* and "Of Calcutta" accuse the speaker's father for her personal misery. The mythical Krishna or an unidentified "you" is the scape-goat figure in Das's "Love poems." Sexton's "Some Foreign Letters" and "Anna Who Was Mad" portray Nana as the scape-goat of the speaker's sexual maturity. In "The Division of Parts" the speaker's mother is the scape-goat of the speaker's womanhood. The poetic sequence "The Death of the Fathers" describes the sexual initiation of the speaker and the metaphorical death of her father. The father is the scape-goat of the speaker's womanhood as he dies as the father and is reborn as the lover. "Briar Rose" closes with the description of the princess's nightmarish experiences with her father. In the poem "Baby" addressed to death the speaker states (C P S 357-59): "You have seen my father whip me. / You have seen me stroke my father's whip." These lines, like the play *Mercy Street*, portray the father as a seducer. "The Break" is a fine example of the personal tension caused by the lover's desertion (C P S 190-93). "The Legend of the One-Eyed Man" presents Judas/Oedipus as scape-goat figures, while in the poetic sequence "The Jesus Papers" the possessive infant is portrayed as a scape-goat.

The term contrition or apologia refers to a rhetorical strategy that appeals to the compassionate forgiveness or
rational approval which other persons can offer. The guilt-ridden or wrongly accused persona gets a redemptive chance to assert her innocence at the end. This poetic technique helps to remove the divisive ramparts that separate the persona from her parents, lovers and other relations. Ultimately, the persona tries to establish meaningful and abiding relationships with authorities of God and Death.

Kamala Das's "My Father's Death" and "A Requiem for My Father" describe the persona's belated attempts to seek forgiveness from her dying father. "Composition" describes the speaker's unfulfilled promise to spend a night with her grandmother at the ancestral home (BK D 76-85). This incident makes her replace love with guilt. The guilt-conscious speaker regrets her inability. In "The Testing of the Sirens," the persona regrets her inability to continue her affair with the gentle lover (BK D 58-59). She is afflicted by the unfulfilled love with its burden of pain. In "Gino" the speaker portrays her Indian and foreign lovers and expresses her pain about the varying quality of the two (BK D 56-57). She is troubled at the prospective disaster of her love with Gino, the foreign lover. She regrets at the non-fulfilment of this noble love. Sexton's "Elizabeth Gone" and "The Hex" describe the speaker's repentence at Nana's death. The speaker is confronted by the guilty feeling that she was the cause of Nana's dementia.
and subsequent death. "The Truth the Dead Know" and "All My Pretty Ones" portray the speaker's guilt and grief at the deaths of her parents. "The Moss of His Skin" describes the persona's guilty feeling at her father's death. She positions herself in a final embrace beside the grave of her father. "Christmas Eve" describes the speaker's thoughts of her dead mother. She celebrates Christmas Eve over "the Christmas brandy" recalling the memories of her dead mother and the Virgin. She concludes the poem as well as the celebration with the ritual enactment of the operation which her mother underwent for cancer before her death. "The Double Image" gives the picture of an indifferent mother separated from her daughter. The speaker regrets her inability to nurse the child and seeks forgiveness. The poem "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" also describes the anguish and guilt of a mother who is forced to forsake her babe. Das's "Morning Tree" compares death to a flower. She likens death to life in "Life's Obscure Parallel." Her quest for the eternal lover, the mythical Krishna, is expressed in her "Krishna poems" like "Ghanashyam," "A Phantom Lotus," "Krishna," "A Paper Moon" and "In Love." Sexton's "The Death Baby" visualises death as a child. She reminds the readers of the death wish which is present in all (CPS 358-59):

There is a death baby
for each of us.
We own him.  
His smell is our smell.  
Beware, Beware.  
There is a tenderness.  
There is a love  
for this dumb traveler  
waiting in his pink covers.

In "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open," death is personified as father/lover. It is a lover to whom Sexton attributes her drunkenness.

Sexton's poems express a central conflict between life and death. She resolves this conflict in "Live" (CPS 167-70):

Today life opened inside me like an egg  
and there inside  
after considerable digging  
I found the answer.

The above lines show a strong affirmation of life. The answer Sexton finds is quite significant:

I say Live, Live because of the sun,  
the dream, the excitable gift.

This is the central conflict of Live or Die.

Mock-lyric or self parody is another poetic device which helps to gain rhetorical distance from
autobiographical material. This gives rise to a balanced tension between the positive and negative aspects of the persona. The poets treat the otherwise distasteful topics like suicide and madness with an air of comic diminution to emphasize their universal aspects. Das's "The Suicide" and "The Invitation," though expressing the speaker's contemplations on suicide, lift the thoughts to universal dimensions. The poems "Bromide" and "Luminol" reveal the impersonal side of mental breakdowns along with the speaker's personal experiences. Sexton's "Wanting to Die" and "Suicide Note" describe every suicide's case rather than an intimately personal experience. Her "Ringing the Bells" and "Flee on Your Donkey," narrate the universal experiences of every woman rather than Sexton's personal experiences at Bedlam.

The phrase edification suggests an overall perspective on the autobiographical approach pursued by Kamala Das and Anne Sexton. Instead of providing a format to simulate the condition of psychoanalysis, Confessional poetry illuminates the universal quest for a favourable resolution of human guilt. Connecting their individual problems with general experiences, their personae gain aesthetic distance over their private anxieties and attain redemptive insights about the general character of all human experiences. The confessional label blurs the distinction between the
biographical details and personal truth. Their poetry represents not a revelation of the external or factual, but of the internal and imaginative. The personal mythology they create shocks the readers into psychic order. Anne Sexton concentrates on the complexities of womanhood to depict woman as a passive victim and martyr. A schizophrenic polarisation permeates the personal myth and makes the poetic consciousness out of a series of fluctuations. In this context biography becomes subservient to archetypical imagery and form is subordinated to content.

Kamala Das and Anne Sexton break superficial identities to experience a larger identity as an extension of other selves, both real and archetypal. Their quest for self-understanding involves exploration of multiple selves. The exploration of the self ranges from a delineation of the thwarting of their native spontaneity and affections to an imaginative and expansive merger with the sea, which symbolizes archetypal womanhood. The woman self is potentially redemptive when she experiences the vitality of woman's body and escapes the limitations of gender to arrive at a distinctive and complete self. Their poetic self, the most promising and expansive self, is achieved through poetic language which helps them to find the truth underlying the roles and to celebrate many selves which are
connected with their identities. Imagination transforms the selves to recognisable transcendent dimension.

Literary confession is concerned with the affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity. This attempted emancipation of the self exposes a self-defeating dialectic in which the history of confession returns to new forms. The self is a social product. Any attempt to assert its privileged autonomy underlines its dependence on the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constructed. The act of confession exacerbates rather than alleviates problems of identity, engendering a dialectic in which writing as a means to define a centre of meaning serves to underscore the alienation of the subject which it seeks to overcome. In feminist confession, the interpretation of the subjective within the social and ideological framework can be done at a number of levels. The social constitution of the self manifests itself in the self image of women writers. This reveals the psychological systems by which gender ideologies are internalized.

Autobiographical writing by women as the oppressed gender is prone to conflicts and tensions. The depiction of the life and experiences of women, on the one hand, is a liberating process in so far as it expresses a public self-acceptance and a celebration of difference. On the other hand, the internalised cultural values which define
specific identities as marginal come to the surface in the feelings of anxiety and guilt. This strongly negative self-image is a problem for women whose socialization endows them with feelings of inadequacy. The negative pattern in which attempted self-affirmation reverts to anxiety and self-castigation is a recurring example in feminist confession. In this context, feminism, as Rita Felski observes, ironically accentuates the guilt rather than resolve it "by providing an ideal of autonomy which the author is unable to emulate" (105). If the insights gained through the act of confession are not translated into action, they generate increased feelings of guilt in the author at the extent of her own failings. The very objective of feminist confession is to confront unpalatable aspects of female experience as general problems and not to present idealized images of women as positive models. A feminist confessional writer is engaged in a tight-robe walking between critical insight and obsessive self-castigation. The act of confession can expose a female subjectivity only within the symbolic order. The female self is marked by contradictions and tensions related to a problematic subjectivity and conditions of marginalization and powerlessness.

Feminist confession caters to the specific needs arising from its social functions in the context of women's
cultural and political struggles and articulates the specific problems experienced by women in the process of identity formation and cultural critique. The tension between a focus on objectivity and the construction of an identity that is communal rather than individualistic is a feature of feminist confession. The production and reception of feminist literature has acquired a political dimension recently. Feminism links the personal and psychological dimensions of experiences to the institutionalised nature of sexual oppression. The basic principle of feminist confession, as Rita Felski remarks, is "the recognition that women's problems are not private but communal" (115). The politicization of feminist confession is a significant issue. Confession is less concerned with any explicit political questions than with the cathartic release associated with self-disclosure. The strength of confession as a genre lies in the ability to communicate the conflicting and contradictory aspects of subjectivity and the tensions between personal feelings and ideological convictions.

The existence of a feminist readership provides a context for a politicized interpretation of feminist confession. Contemporary responses to feminist confession indicate the existence of a significant readership which contextualizes its social meanings. The political value
of self-disclosure is explicitly asserted by feminist writers. Feminist confession indicates that the process of self-examination is a necessary, politically significant act in relation to the community of female readers. The division between a repressive stereotype and a symbolic cultural identity is a narrow one. The creation and affirmation of symbolic identities constitute a recurring need for the female sex. This fulfils a desire for self-validation in the face of the hostility of the dominant patriarchal culture. The focus on sexuality as a determinant of cultural identity is a recent historical phenomenon. Feminism denotes a range of cultural and political affiliations rather than a preference for a form of sexuality. It relies on a critique of patriarchal culture for its construction of an oppositional female identity, which is not a destiny but a choice. This oppositional identity articulates experiences of the alienation, exclusion and suffering of women. The socially constructed identity does not undermine its political functions.

Feminist confession is not a self-generating discourse to be judged in its abstraction from prevailing social conditions. On the contrary, it exemplifies a "simultaneous interrogation and affirmation of gendered subjectivity," in the context of the communal identity of the female created
by social movements (Felski 121). Feminist literature creates an oppositional identity in terms of gender to unite all human beings. Confessional literature depicts the struggle to discover a female self, a struggle that is a necessary moment in the self-definition of an oppositional identity of the female as a community. New parameters of aesthetics have to be defined to express this struggle and new coordinates of ethics have to be determined to evaluate it.