CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

WRITING THE FEMALE
Kamala Das and Anne Sexton have often been hailed as poet-laureates of housewives. But they have not received the critical scrutiny they deserve as is evident from the limited number of books published on their poetry. This is partly due to their outspokenness and partly due to the kind of themes that they choose to write about. The present study is an attempt to compare Kamala Das and Anne Sexton as feminists and confessionalists who react almost identically to virtually dissimilar native contexts. The many points of intersection between their poetic trajectories are examined here by placing them critically parallel to each other on conspicuous planes of similarities. They are seen as writing amazingly identical poems using common poetic materials and almost similar poetic techniques. The study shows how the two poets, even as they express themselves creatively in the traditional sense, also "write" the culture and history of their own gender in ways that are specific to their respective national communities. This concern with writing the history and culture of their gender places them in the large and distinctive body of women's writing, which is one of the important areas of contemporary scholarship. Women's writing now constitutes a powerful articulation of the gender-specific concerns of women, whose explicit self-identification as an oppressed group qualifies this branch of writing for analysis as a
separate category. The conceptual framework of women's writing uses the historical experience of women in the patriarchy wherein gender relations assume a political dimension. Everything, including the seemingly apolitical, in this conceptual framework, is political. Even the personal, in this view, is political, and it is this view that inspires Wilhelm Reich to term gender relations "sexual politics." Women's literature is deeply inscribed with this politics, and it will be profitable to analyse the nature of such inscriptions by examining the work of two important women poets of our period.

Women's literature, which has evolved out of women's identity struggles, creates a new awareness in men and women. This has to be distinguished from feminist literature which expresses the shared experiences of women's oppression. Feminist literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women, the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender. As it aims at improving the situation of women, feminist literature is invariably aligned with political interests. By exhorting women to political action and by helping in consciousness-raising, feminist literature seeks to influence public opinion in order to change women's situation. Feminist literature is gynocentric: its emphasis is on the ideology rather than on the
literariness of the text. Women's literature need not be overtly ideological; its stress can be on the literary merit of the text.

Feminist literature assists women's political movement for liberation. An ideal feminist work, as Mary Eagleton observes, serves a five-fold function (169-74). Firstly, literature serves as a medium for honest self-expression for women: women find literature the most expressive form of art which is true to women's experiences. Secondly, literature emerging out of female impulses helps to achieve cultural androgyny. It attempts to create a new social order founded on humanistic values. Thirdly, it provides role-models which instil a positive sense of feminine identity. Literature that depicts female characters involved in activities which are traditionally not feminine hastens the dissolution of rigid sex roles. Fourthly, it provides a new sense of community, a sisterhood, fostered on female-female relationships. Lastly, it helps in consciousness-raising. Literature achieves this by providing realistic insights into the female world and into the psychological and physical consequences of sexual politics. Feminist literature, which appeals to the common feelings of insignificance and alienation of women, offers solutions to women's problems.

The phrase "writing the female" subsumes these and
related ideas pertinent to the expression of female consciousness in literature. The stamp of femaleness is conspicuous both in the context and form of women's literature. The literary text created by a female writer has a distinct tension: the conflict between an unconventional content and the persistent need for the rigour and control of form. This tension is the externalization of the conflict the protagonist undergoes: the conflict between psychic disintegration and the desperate need for psychic wholeness. This, then, is a tension that is latent in the writer's psyche. The atmosphere or locale, the imagery, the rhythm or rhyme, the mode of narration and characterisation, all have a peculiarly female touch. A woman writer is unique both in the selection of theme and in its formal rendering. This uniqueness is the outcome of the conflicting processes to which she is subjected: the processes of being and becoming a woman.

Women's literature is expressively different from general literature. Early feminists like Margaret Homans refused to see this difference, as is indicated by her remark that sexual identity alone does not determine the nature of a literary work (30). Virginia Woolf too made this mistake when she endorsed Coleridge's theory that a great mind is androgynous (Woolf 157). She thought that
the conjugation of the male and female attitudes created a literary text, which also gave a sense of fulfilment to the writer irrespective of the gender. These indeed are examples of critical attempts to underestimate women's literature. As Sandra M.Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe, literature is conditioned by a paternity theory of art which even women writers and critics endorse (6-7). A writer is adored as an aesthetic patriarch. As an author of an enduring text, he demands the attention of the posterity. But this is seldom the case with a woman writer. She is often ignored and her creative talents are never recognized.

It is customary for the male-centred aesthetic to consider artistic creation as an act analogous to biological creation. An art work in this view is the product of the interaction between the male writer and the external world which is regarded as feminine. The glorification of the author as the father-figure is only an extension of this view. Literary history itself has been viewed as made up largely of male writers. Woman as a historical being has been denied any role in this. If artistic creativity is compared to biological creativity, "the terror of inspiration for women," as Susan Gubar observes, "is experienced quite literally as the terror of being ravished" (256). Woman feels artistic creation as a
form of violation resulting in the destruction of the female body. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that "these phenomena of interiorization mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition" (50). It would seem that the female body is the real force behind women's writing. Women's writing constantly reminds us of the sacrificial nature of female body beautified as art. Christina Rossetti offers her song as "a virginal blood sacrifice" (Gubar 253). In her vision of the woman poet as a suffering victim, Rossetti identifies bleeding with story-telling, and marriage with martyrdom (Gubar 253-54). Gubar considers Scheherazade's art of story-telling a surrogate female body that saves herself and other girls from death (254). Mary Swenson's "Cut" and Merge Piercy's "I Still Feel You" portray the desecrated female body that, like the wounded self of the poet, bleeds into print (Segnitz and Rainey 187-88). The writer is frightened by her sense of victimization. Writers like Sylvia Plath entertain the anxiety that poetry comes out of the state of being possessed and wounded (Gubar 256). Plath escapes the dread that she has been created as an object by self-inflicted violence. A sense of helplessness pervades her voice. Her poetry is created with "jolting words snapped out by electric discharges" (Gubar 257). The shock of her art is self-destructive. She accepts her role as a heroine
in the tragedy that is her art as well as her life. Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, like Sexton's "The Silence," emphasizes the significance of silence in the feminine culture. Women's voices go unheard in the literary world. Women writers are symbolically represented in a patriarchy by a blank page and by silence, by absence and by negation. The feminine has been constructed as absence, silence, incoherence, even madness.

As a woman is defined by her gender, a female writer has a sense of marginality. A woman writer finds it difficult to exert any meaningful impact on the world, a situation which is emblematic of all women. She is, as Deborah Pope remarks, plagued by the problems of language and style, questions of power and survival, and the task of contact with herself (2-3). Women writers do not find any models among women to follow on the questions of language and style. Early women writers blindly followed male writers on this. One can hardly distinguish between their language and style from that of the male writers of the period. This is because writers, irrespective of their genders, employ the male-centred language for literary creation. This can prove fatal for women writers. Women writers' choice of the phallogocentric language finds a parallel in the colonial situation where the colonised uses the language of the coloniser. The expression the "fourth
world" used with reference to women points to this reality of sexual colonialism. Terms like "visceral colonialism," "phallic imperialism" and "penile tyranny" also point to the same situation (Ruthven 30). Women's silent approval of the male-oriented language is construed as a sign of their meek submission to the dominant sex, as a mark of their acceptance of their subordination and marginalisation. Feminist writers are, therefore, confronted by the immediate necessity of evolving a language that is different from the male-centred language and which can truly represent their thoughts and emotions.

The construction of such a language is related to the question of the writer's quest for identity. Woman's quest for identity is complicated by her sense of loneliness and isolation. A woman writer remains anxious to reveal the truth about her womanly experiences and writes about her deepest responses. What women writers share in general is the female sensibility. Patricia Meyer Spacks stresses this identity when she observes that "the experience of women has long been the same, that female likenesses are more fundamental than female differences" (5). The female writers think and feel alike the world over. They depict and offer solutions to the problems of life from a female point of view. There is, as Mary Eagleton observes, an "imaginative continuum" in women's literature like "the
recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images" (12). The belief that woman's life is different, separate and divided unifies the styles and concerns of women's literature.

There is a calculated myth in circulation that women's literary and biological creativities are in conflict with each other. This view, misleading as well as corrupting, is untrue. Maternal instincts sustain the spirit of a woman, endow it with subtlety, sympathy and passion which are fundamentally conducive to literary expression. The birth of a child and the creation of a text are analogous symbols of life and growth, which send signals of subjectivity to the mother-writer's bosom. Kamala Das's "Jaisurya," Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song" and Anne Sexton's "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" are poems linking and uniting the experiences of nature, motherhood and writing. A woman writer, like an acrobat, is involved in a complex, precarious act of balancing. She has to strike a poise between an apparent conformity to certain patriarchal, literary standards and a trenchant critique of the same. If she is unassertive and uncertain, she loses her identity and recognition. If, on the other hand, she is dogmatic, she may be isolated. A woman writer faces the challenge, whichever way she opts. The incongruity leads her to isolation, emotional breakdown, alcoholism, neurosis and
even suicide. Writing proves to be a fatal infirmity to many. The Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell and Christina Rossetti withdrew to cloistered life. Virginia Woolf found that a talented woman would be tortured and pulled asunder by her contrary instincts (86). Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton committed suicide as they could not withstand the schizophrenic split of the self. Many female writers, who are victims of neurosis and psychosis, save themselves from madness and suicide through literary accomplishments.

The mystique of a feminine fulfilment emanating from wifehood and womanhood remains a threat to the female writer who strives to express her true self. A woman writer has to fulfil the cultural expectations of womanhood as well as her own aspirations to become a writer (Pope 3). The dominant conflict in the writer's psyche is between the domestic woman and the creative artist. This conflict is the most productive source of disturbance which inspires her writing. The value system created by the patriarchal culture recognizes male sovereignty on the basis of physical strength. Kate Millet observes: "Male supremacy, like other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological" (27). Talents cannot be determined on the basis of sex or gender. No man is totally masculine
and no woman fully feminine. This awareness prompts Simone de Beauvoir to remark that every female human being need not necessarily be a woman. This is also relevant to literary creation. John Fowles voices his concern about the ambiguity of an author's gender in a literary text. He asserts that the feminine elements in the personality of a male writer contribute to his greatness as a writer: "There is Adam-women and Eve-men: singularly few of the world's great progressive artists and thinkers have not belonged to the latter category" (Qtd in Eagleton 83). However, he is silent about the influence of the masculine aspects of a female writer on her literary creation.

The historical significance of women's literature is great. At the microcosmic level, as many feminists have pointed out, "history" is a disguised version of "his story." This is due to the influence of patriarchy in all fields of learning including history and literature. Women's literature, which is mostly autobiographical and confessional, is an alternate history. Women writers rewrite "history" into "her story." This is necessitated by woman's contradictory position vis-a-vis history. She is symbolically significant, yet materially invisible in history. Her predicament is best expressed by Virginia Woolf:

"Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She
pervades poetry from cover to cover. She is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of anybody whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband (45-46).

Patriarchy stifles woman's voice and censors her words. And woman, in turn, creates a fantasy to subvert patriarchy.

The art of a woman writer arises from romance, real or imaginary. She becomes her own heroine. She acts the diabolical role of a witch and risks a figurative death. Her personality undergoes a metaphoric extinction in her construction of an artful mask. She is conscious of herself as a subject, a speaker, assertive and authoritative, and radiant with powerful feelings. In women's literature there is an identification of the writer as the protagonist and as the oppressed female. In the case of many women writers their writings have the status of an autobiography in which the female speaker is the authoritative subject and usually the author in disguise. This rules out the possibility of much displacement of emotions. The woman writer compensates
for the lack of displacement by mystifying the poetic process. The mystification can be achieved through the construction of a persona or other categories of speakers on the one hand and through revisionist myth-making on the other. A woman writer often exploits a mystical framework as a deceptive cover or a disguise to portray emotional alliances. The various processes of mystification indicate how the meanings of a text are constructed, altered or even manipulated to suit the needs of the female artist. Writers like Kamala Das and Anne Sexton successfully explore all the processes of mystification. The female writer portrays specific problems inherent in the history of women as writers. There is, as Mary Eagleton observes, a "celebration of retrieved sexuality" in women's literature (127). The woman writer underlines the rejection of woman as an object of desire and her transformation into a subject of sexuality.

Most existing myths tend to disregard the female experience. Women writers reimage the female characters of folktales, legends and myths to envision prototypes rather than to revitalize archetypes and stereotypes. They try to rewrite and reinterpret these figures. The narrative of women's literature revolves round the protagonist's experience of isolation in life. Women's literature as imaginative writing is far from conscious, coherent and
controllable. Its independent female characters provide role-models; individual women find their identity in them. Women's literature, vital and experimentative, is bristling with optimism for the potential and fulfilment of human life. Roy Harvey Pearce observed:

A poet is ours to the degree that he is gifted with that kind of sensibility which will let him push to their farthest implications such possibilities (and impossibilities) for the life of the spirit as are latent in the culture of his - and our - community, past and present (10).

In their new visions of human experiences and new meanings for humanity, women writers exemplify a commitment to the ideal Pearce proposes. Women's literature marches toward new ways of understanding and realizing human dignity. Women's literature heralds a new sense of community.

It is the female imagination which makes the inevitable difference between the male and the female ways of perception. There is always an intrinsic element in the female experience, an element that stands in contrast with the experience of man. Certain symbols, metaphors, images, styles or tones may recur in women's literature. This repetition of distinctive elements is a standard by which the social and historical position of women can be judged. There is a marked sexual difference in writing which
operates at the levels of stylistic unity, thematic selection and construction of plots and events. A tremendous unity exists in women's literature among different styles, periods and concerns. The belief that woman's life is distinctively unique unifies women's literature. The anxiety that woman's creative potential is underdeveloped and her necessary fulfilment is unrealized pervades women's literature. This frustration itself acts as a creative impulse in women's literature.

Feminists point out that language has been formed to suit the needs of men which include the necessity to dominate women. They observe that it is a disservice for women to use the male-oriented language for feminist discourse. The cognitive experiences differ between the sexes and this is reflected in literature. Discourse of men, which is linear, always ends with a definite conclusion while feminine discourse, wide-ranging as it is, ends on a diffused note. Julia Kristeva believes that there are many oppositions between masculine and feminine writings. Male writing is based on reason, logic, linearity and chronology while female writing is based on associative, antilogical, non-chronological and non-linear forms. The masculine and feminine styles can be differentiated from each other. The masculine style is bold, forceful, clear, vigorous, objective, universal, and
accurate while the feminine style is vague, weak, tremulous, pasted, personal, confessional, narcissitic and neurotic (Eagleton 75). A woman-writer is often segregated with the implicit anticipation that she has to find a definition, or an identity against the wider context of man.

There are three thinkers of great historic significance whose writings have influenced women's literature and feminist criticism. They are Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet. These seminal thinkers refute and disprove the theories of Freud and throw fresh light on the question of woman's sexuality. The subservient position of woman is best reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's words:

She [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other (16).

The classic conception of bisexuality, the fantasy of a total being, is designed to allay the male fear of the Other. Beauvoir views Otherness as a fundamental human thought originating from the primordial duality of the Self and the Other (16). The Self and the Other make a pair in which the Other is always subordinated. Beauvoir starts
from the assumption that man is the Self and woman the Other; the Self treats the Other as a supplement. Beauvoir's binary analysis provides an excellent basis for the view that woman is constituted negatively in a patriarchy. This fact is abundantly expressed in the writing of men of diversified talents and views. Women writers have to erase the negative images the male writers have etched in the social psyche. They have to be innovative in their craftsmanship to reimage themselves anew. In this context women's literature is a re-vision and a re-thinking. The mission and responsibility of women writers rest with their eagerness to create a new literature that suits the new world they have envisioned.

Friedan's notions of the feminine mystique calls attention to the maddening confusion inherent in women who limit themselves ultimately to the role-models imposed on them by the patriarchal society. Women forsake career ambitions and intellectual achievements to become mere wives and mothers. The word 'mystique' in this context connotes the mysterious dilemma or the anomalous condition of modern women who, in spite of their potential, gravitate towards age-old sexual myths and perverted patriarchal traditions. The feminine mystique is a retarding element in the growth of a woman who drains her of her talents in the barren atmosphere of domesticity. The mystique considers
the fulfilment of femininity the only commitment for women and this can be achieved through sexual passivity, male domination and maternal love (Mystique 37-38). The mystique sees woman only in her sexual role and degrades woman to the twin roles of her husband's wife and children's mother (Mystique 54). The feminine mystique encourages woman to ignore the question of her identity and misinterprets women's problem as a "role crisis." Friedan underlines that the crisis central to woman is not sexual; it is the crisis of identity. Woman finds it difficult to fulfil her potential as this need is not defined by her sexual role (Mystique 68). The identity crisis in a woman's life is the crisis of growing up; a woman progresses from immaturity, which is euphemistically phrased as femininity to full human identity (Mystique 70). Women continue to suffer this crisis of identity in their perennial struggle to become fully human.

The expression of female consciousness has undergone a sea change in the West since the 60's. This transformation has later spread to other parts of the world. The perception of the female now progresses from the feminine mystique and reaches what Friedan calls a "second stage." Equality becomes a reality and personhood an experience. Extremist feminist rhetoric denies the profound human reality of relationships between men and women and
shakes the basic structure of family. Denial of woman's sexuality leads to a conflict over motherhood which is dubbed as a hangover from the past. But the conflict is partly real as motherhood is still dear to women; the choice of motherhood is fundamental to the identity of woman. Personal choices and political strategies are often twisted in the case of women. Women's needs for power, identity and security through work are denied by the advocates of the feminine mystique, while their needs for love, identity and security through marriage are discouraged by the supporters of the feminist mystique (Friedan, The Second Stage 27-95). A new image of woman emerges: the image of woman as a person, as a heroine. The traditional image of woman, woman as wife and mother, woman as a dependent sexual object, must merge with the new image of woman. The need of the hour is to harmonize the traditional roles of marriage, motherhood and home-making with the emerging roles of professional women with individuality and decision-making power. It will make woman fully free and confident and help her to move forward to break the mystique in the minds of her less advanturous neighbours (Friedan, It Changed My Life 63). This enables women to achieve identity as fully human in order to create a new image of woman. Women writers must prevent ordinary women from being carried away by the deceptive fascinations
of feminine mystique. They must also protect family and familial values from the onslaught of extremist feminism. The ideal woman writer has to accomplish the task of achieving the golden mean between the feminine mystique and feminist mystique. Contemporary women’s literature, therefore, portrays the intricate and arduous task of attaining this harmony in the art and literature of a society which is threatened by the conflicting forces of patriarchy and feminism.

Woman does not display a virile myth and project herself as subject. Having no literature of her own she, as Beauvoir remarks, dreams through the fantasy created by men (174). Her personality is evolved along the stereotyped lines of sex categories constructed to suit the needs of men. This is due to socialization of the sexes in a patriarchy. The limited sex roles of woman degrades her life to the animal level. All activities distinctly human are, as Kate Millet observes, labelled as masculine (26). The categorization of gender is first made manifest in the sexual myth unilaterally imposed on the social psyche. To be a woman is a unique and strange experience which can be fully expressed only by a woman. The interiorization of patriarchal ideology continually places woman under surveillance. This leads to infantilization of women even in intellectual matters. Man takes pride in his sexuality
which he employs as a means to appropriate woman, the
other. Women's image created by man suits his needs
springing from the fear of her Otherness. So, the artistic
image of woman is always distorted and manipulated.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory has been an obstacle to
an honest understanding of the representation of women in
literature. The reactionary forces against the emancipation
of women have perpetuated the notions of "penis-envy" and
"catration-complex" to denigrate woman. Freud argues that a
woman has the feeling of being an *homme manque*, a man with
something missing. Her feeling that she is a "mutilated
man" lowers her image in her own eyes and leads her to wish
for the male organ (Beauvoir 71-73). This wish is
psychologically expressed through her eagerness to be like a
man. As it is physically impossible to attain the status of
a man, she strives to achieve his intellectual status. She
is, thus, led to seek an intellectual career which can be
recognised as a sublimated modification of her repressed
wish. Freud's theories are based on the assumption that
woman is inferior to man. Freud saw woman exclusively in
terms of sexuality, though the sexual is only one dimension
of human potential (Friedan, *Mystique* 105). Helene
Deutsch equates, "femininity" with passivity and
"masculinity" with activity. Woman's fascination for
action-oriented life called "masculinity-complex" stems
from female "castration-complex." The deficient female anatomy and the society work together to create femininity (Friedan, Mystique 108). Beauvoir condemns the theory of "penis-envy" as an anomaly which fails to distinguish emotion from sexuality (304-07). Ashley Montagu refutes Freud's charge and holds that it is men who feel jealous of women's ability to menstruate and procreate (33). Kate Millet observes that to be born a female in a masculine dominated culture is a tragic experience (179-80). New literary standards and norms have to be evolved on the basis of the new psychology framed on the equality of women and perception of woman as an autonomous human being capable of versatile activities. Only a new aesthetic and a modified ethic can pave the way for honest representation of the female in literature.

The new aesthetic or the new ethic cannot evolve by itself. The mystiques perpetuated by patriarchy is indelible in the social psyche. Every mystique depends on sophisticated means to propagate its hold. The new aesthetic or the new ethic will not find easy acceptance in society not only because they are opposed by the patriarchal forces but also because they are viewed with suspicion. It is, therefore, the responsibility of women to postulate and popularise new critical theories and new psychology on the one hand and to represent women on the
basis of the new psychology and new critical theories on the other. For the unhindered development of women's literature women have to create a congenial atmosphere in every branch of learning so that it will not smother the progress of women's literature as a distinct genre.