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The Rise of the Phoenix: The Feministic Voice in the Poems of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The present research paper, "The Rise of the Phoenix: The Feministic Voice in the poems of Sylvia Plath" examines and analyze the poetic world of the poetess concerned through confessional poetry. It depicts the poetic concerns from a female perspective with the purpose of identifying and comparing the poetess's strategy of response to the forces of oppression that exist in a gendered society. The paper aims to investigate the personal predilections, thebiographical details and the social factors of the poets concerned through their poems,critical works, interviews, and discourses, if possible. The methodology adopted in the present paper is the intensive study of the texts**.** It further attempts to review Plath's poetry in the context of feminism. It looks at ideas popularized by critics like Lacan, Kristeva and Mary Daly, the changing notions of the feminine, how culture constructs ideas of what is feminine and what is femininity and then examines the poems of Sylvia Plath to come to the conclusion that Plath was a feminist writer.

Keywords:

Feministic Voice;
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Introduction

The advent of the women's movement and the accompanying growth in women's consciousness of themselves has stimulated the creative energies of a great many women poets. The tradition of feminist writing is dominated by the struggle for freedom from all forms of oppression and by the personal odyssey to realize the full potential of one's complex identity as a woman and as a writer. A prototypical journey that derives its consciousness from the group experience of woman, it begins in physical and psychological bondage and ends in some ambiguous form of deliverance or vision of a new world of mutual respect and justice. Its encoded messages subtly yet forcefully decry oppression and reflect the evolving socio- cultural, socio- psychological duality of woman writers whose humanity and strengths have been institutionally devalued and marginalized by an androcentric order. Impelled by personal resistance to sexual dominance women writers turned primarily to their kinship network for survival strategies. As members of an oppressed group, feminist writers developed their personal and gender identities within the distinctive pattern of values, orientations of life and shred ancestral memories they acquired from and contributed to.

To salvage herself, to find out who she is and what she has lost, it becomes imperative that she should redeem and reinstate her experience as a woman, within which alone she can acquire autonomy over her being. This realization triggers off a journey into the recesses of her being and like a phoenix she is reborn. It is this struggle for self-realization that becomes the text of most women writers. Poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, in their explorative journeys to the center of being, traverse new grounds of literary and subjective experience to confront and come to terms with the changing notions of the feminine.

The girl child grows up under the supervision of the agents of patriarchy, working through domestic, social, and cultural institutions, including the immediate family. Thus, an ideological structure is built up around the growing child imprisoning her forever in a protective and regressive enclosure. The reason for the abundance of images of circumscription and enclosure in women's writing, is not far to seek. Plath's 'bell jar,' Sexton's 'inverted bowl,' and Rich's 'ring' show how three major images of enclosure convey their creator's individualized reactions to a collectively suffered social malaise. Mary Daly traces this to certain processes, embedded within the culture, and imposing their silent will on the growing girl. She terms sex role socialization, "… a conditioning process which begins the moment we are born, and which is enforced by most institutions. Parents, friends, teachers, text book authors and illustrators, advertisers, those who control the mass media, toy and cloth manufacturers, professionals such as doctors and psychologists- all contribute to the socialization process. This happens through dynamics that are largely uncalculated and unconscious, yet which reinforce the assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements of a sexually hierarchical society." [1]

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan bases his theory of language on the phallus. According to him, "language and culture are dominated by the law of the phallus, which causes woman's negative entry into the 'symbolic order' of finding an authentic language for her experiences as mother."[2] Femininity, according to Julia Kristeva, is that which is marginalized by the patriarchal order. In the patriarchal set- up

women are seen to be outside the 'order', occupying uncertain spaces, often merging with chaos. They are allowed a place within the order only when they fall into conventional roles of wife or mother, which do not threaten the position of the male in anyway.

Women's writing in the twentieth century, beginning from this premise, re-views the position assigned to women in the given socio-cultural milieu. It seeks to restructure and redefine women's roles in a mere realistic, more balanced manner, presenting women neither as goddesses nor whores but as individuals who nurture in their hearts the hopes and desires common to all human beings.

Earlier women were deprived of their rights, their individuality, and even their voice to ask for their privileges in the mistaken belief that their male protectors knew what was best for them, and that what was good for the male must be at least equally beneficial for the female. Women's economic dependence on the male head of the family, their ignorance and lack of education ensured that they remained lost in the labyrinths of gloominess, silence and unprotestingly. They saw no light at the end of the tunnel so they remained the subdued section of society: in other words, they remained "women," not "born" women, but socially conditioned to "become" women.

Nevertheless, the twentieth century, as we are aware, has witnessed a change in the affairs of women. The feminist movement of the first few decades and its revival in the second half of the century has been partly responsible for women's increasing awareness regarding their status in society. In this transition from ignorance to awareness, one may possibly chart three distinct stages. The first stage of pre-awareness was that of silent submission when women quietly accepted their subservient role in society. The next stage came with the gradual building up of resentment when the female mind started questioning male supremacy and social custom that dictated to them their duties towards home and the hearth. And the final phase was that of rebellion, when protested against all male oppression. This is how Elaine Showalter divides the struggle for female liberation in to corresponding stages- the feminine, the feminist, and the female.[3] The twentieth century, thus has been a witness to the change in the social status of women and the recognition of their individual identities, capabilities and powers. At present female poet has to grapple with an age old male tradition, she has to find her bearings despite all oppression, and assert herself against all odds.

Confessional poetry by women is of absorbing interest to feminist readers. For confessional poetry renders personal experience or emotion as it actually is, regardless of social conventions. Moreover, Confessional poetry expresses truth and experience so painful that most people would suppress them. If, therefore, a woman resents her children, or feels victimized by a patriarchal society or is revengeful towards it, the confessional mode enables her to express such emotions directly, and, for readers, they have a documentary value. At this level the confession of women's experience reveals, at least as feminist readers interpret it, emotions that have persisted throughout history but have not hitherto been acknowledged. Once they are articulated, other women recognize them in themselves, and thus confessional poetry tends to promote psychological liberation, purgation or cathartic effect, the liberation that comes in freely seeing and talking about what had previously been repressed. Moreover, in all such confession there is an additional

revolutionary impulse. The confessor is in effect including what she confesses within the realm of human nature. She is challenging moral or social assumptions by widening our notion of the "normal."

Women's poetry in the twentieth century is essentially "revisionist." The idea of writing as revision has been explained by Adrienne Rich as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." [4] Most feminist critics who have attempted to analyze the reaction of women to victimization have arrived at situations where the woman is inevitably the loser. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, describes the emotion related to such a situation as: "Frustration and the bewilderment born out from the conflict between believing what one is told about one's nature and destiny as a woman and desiring yet resenting the prerogative assumed by men." [5]

Sylvia Plath as a Feminist Writer

The present paper depicts the personal experiences of Sylvia Plath as female writer. In an attempt to emancipate literature from male dominated conventions she adopted the confessional style without any sensor of experience. It was a silent by product of the female reaction, a natural one, to the dictatorial relationship imposed on women by a society dominated by men. Religion and politics had failed to liberate women and even literature could not rescue them from their pitiable plight. Caged and battered they remained helpless for centuries. Constrained by the 'fear of flying' they made an occasional flutter, till a few of them in 20th century, burst the cage open to sail into the regions from which, some- times, a return seems to be impossible.

The society which surrounded Sylvia Plath's growing mind was almost exclusively female, having lost her father at the age of eight. As a result of absence of a situation of confrontation between the male and the female in her immediate environment, she started in complete ignorance of the women's sense of inferiority and victimhood. This unique situation supplemented by her mother's effort to project her unrealized ambitions on to her daughter gave an added twist to Plath's ideal of feminity by seeing nothing wrong to the patriarchal definitions of the feminine. In fact, her whole life seems like a prolonged attempt to prove to herself that she could be God if she willed so. In her march towards divinity she picked up every prize that came by, including the most promising young poet of the age for her husband. There was perfection in whatever she did.

The ideal of perfection she cherished for her essential self-included the feminine ideal upheld by her mother as well as the American society of fifties. The feminine ideal was an inalienable part of what she would make of her life or any other woman's and not a superimposition. Marriage and having children was part of it. So was the subordinate status of the woman within the family framework. Plath's vision was probably of a perfect fusion of intellectually independent being with the socially confirming woman, towards the creation of a super achiever. She found no need for the so called masculine questions associated with the creative intellect to push out the feminine. Both existed in her person together, one complementing the other.

Sylvia Plath has long been hailed as a feminist writer of great significance. In her book *Literary Women (1976),* Ellen Moers writes, "No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement" (qtd. in

Wagner 5), and still today, at a time when the idea of equality for women isn't so radically revolutionary as it had been earlier in the century, Plath is a literary symbol of the Women's Rights Movement. Roberta Mazzenti quotes that there is "little feminist consciousness" in Plath's work, and goes on to explain that because "Plath's work [is] being read... by readers searching for political sustenance,"[6] feminist sentiment that the author never held can easily be attributed to her writing. This kind of misguided attribution is illustrated in the opinions of critics like Sheryl Meyering, who states that "Sylvia Plath's intense desire to be accepted by men and to eventually marry and have children was purely a product of the constrictive 1950s social mentality during which the author came to womanhood."[7]

A thorough examination of the Plath oeuvre paints a different picture. Although Plath's awareness of and distaste for the submissive and insubstantial role, a woman in the 1950s was expected to play is apparent from her early journals to the poems completed in the last month of her life, that same body of work also makes plain that she had accepted some of that roles for herself on her own terms: a common theme throughout the writing is the author's intense desire to be a beloved and loving wife and, perhaps even more stronger, her desire to become a mother--as long as she could still speak from within her "deeper self" through her writing. In 1953, at age 20, Plath wrote in her journal

I must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual, and while comradely, I must admire him: respect and admiration must equate with the object of my love (that is where the remnants of paternal, godlike qualities come in. [8]

Here, the reader finds no hint of misandrist resistance to the idea of a strong attachment to a mate. Indeed, it seems obvious that Plath was searching for an equal to accompany her through all the aspects of a multifaceted life. To her, complete devotion was not only no betrayal of herself as a woman, it would make her whole as a person. The one provision was that this potential mate be the one special one who would not bind her into a woman she did not want to be: she would be a wife, and she would write as well.

Plath gives the subject of her divided female selves and opposing aspirations treatment in her 1956 poem "Two Sisters of Persephone" (*Collected Poems*, p. 31-32). The piece paints a portrait of two sisters, different as dark and light. The first is a logical, mathematical, intellectual, indoors sort whose "rat-shrewd squint eyes" and "root-pale meager frame" serve to make her seem hardly a woman at all, not in the feminine sense of womanhood. The second sister is a vibrant, nature-connected woman whose setting clearly makes her a symbol of fertile womanhood: she lounges luxuriantly in the yard, "bronzed as earth", taking in the vivid "red silk flare of petaled blood" of a nearby "bed of poppies". The first of Plath's sisters goes to her grave a virgin, "with flesh laid waste, / Worm-husbanded, yet no woman", while the second becomes the "sun's bride" and "grows quick with seed". To a reader familiar with a bit of the author's background, the poem is quite obviously a self-portrait, wherein Plath sees in herself the potential for a dry, spinsterish life of intellect and little else, alongside the conflicting looming vision of herself as a vital and sparkling woman made complete in motherhood, nature's most lavish gift.

Pamela J. Annas perceptively brought to perceptive light, Plath's use of imagers of paper in this stanza is revealing, in the light of the fact that throughout many of her poems, paper is a symbol of an empty soul.[9] We see the shadow of a woman who appears to have suffered some great catastrophe in "A Life" (*CP,* 149) the unfeeling and unknowingly cruel "cardboard" co-workers of the secretary who has miscarried her baby in "Three Women" (*CP*, 176), an unmarried girl in "The Applicant" (*CP,* 221), and others--which is used also in "Widow's first stanza: "Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire". The inference here is that without her husband, the poem's title character suffers an internal death of her own.

Plath's desire to bring her own life cycle to fruition in motherhood is also strongly evident from the time of her earlier work, only growing more securely rooted as her writing progressed along with maturation. Writes Katha Pollitt, "the feminists, too, will have to come to terms with the tenderness and purity of Plath's maternal feelings, as displayed in 'Brasilia', 'Child', 'For a Fatherless Son', and her radio verse play "Three Women"." [10] These are but four of the pieces which appear in Plath's *Collected Poems* which depicts first a woman at times almost desperate to have a child, and then a doting, reverent mother. Although certainly the power to create a brand-new human being is far and away the highest earth-bound potential a woman has, housewifedom and the lovingly raising of one's children. Sylvia Plath's values were just the opposite of these: a year of teaching convinced her that the professional world would only detract from her personal priorities, and thereafter stayed at home, creating her babies and the best poems of her life.

In several poems, the reader finds imagery of the baby as a God, where for the most part religious imagery is not central to Plath's work. In the tellingly-titled "I Want, I Want" (*CP*, 106), written by the author in 1956 at a time she feared that she was sterile, the baby/god is a demanding and controlling force of nature, demanding that his mother feed him of her "dry volcanoes cracked and split", a metaphor suggesting that the mother is caught in the grip of an imaginary, as-yet unborn baby who needs for her to somehow renew her life-giving volcanic potential, for the very sake of the baby's life. The poem's opening lines, "Open-mouthed, the baby god / Immense, bald, though baby-headed, / Cried out for the mother's dug", convey that sense of the baby as God, the baby as destiny, a tyrannical force insisting that he be given proper due. In the later "Nick and the Candlestick" *(CP*, 240-42), written after Plath had borne two children, the image of the speaker's infant son is a much more benevolent and blessed one: the poem begins with images of a hard, cold, aged, unfeeling world, using the metaphor of a cave ("The earthen womb / Exudes from its dead boredom.") which the speaker tries to soften and make livable for her baby, hanging the "cave with roses, / With soft rugs". In the end, the speaker's efforts at making her and her baby's portion of the world less harsh fail, and the baby itself is the one thing that sanctifies and makes bearable the mother's perceived sharp and unforgiving existence. The last line-"You are the baby in the barn"-is an allegorical reference to the Christ child. A poem written a few weeks after "Nick and the Candlestick", "Mary's Song" *(CP*, 257), sets up much the same Madonna-and-child metaphor, this time with a more direct and ominous warning to her innocent baby about the dangers of life in modern society: "O golden child the world will kill and eat".

Plath's realization of her lifelong fearful yet awed and enthralled desire for children made her complete in a way, apartfrom the biological or the domestic as well. She felt, again as documented in her earlier journals, that the experience of childbirth would be a vastly revelatory experience for her. Much as she

looked upon the burden of the physical rigors of childbirth with a kind of horrified wonder, she felt that once she had survived the experience, she would be in a deep and symbolic way more of a person, and thus, in keeping with her belief that the stuff of poetry had to come from real life, more of a poet. Two quotes from the journals illustrate Plath's view of the creation of poetry and the creation of children as a kind of yin-and-yang, mutually enriched and enriching force: "I must first conquer my writing and experience, and then will deserve to conquer childbirth" (*Letters Home*, 240) and "I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children, and speak still deeper" (Letters *Home*,166). Is it mere coincidence, lack of chronological progression that has Plath breaking through into what is critically acclaimed to be that unique voice of her own deep self, captured in the *Ariel* poems, not long after she had become a mother. She correlates the writing of poetry and giving birth to a child or motherhood. She feels frustrated when she finds that her poetry, like a stillborn baby, seem lifeless and limp and dead, in spite of the fact that the poem's "toes and fingers"-phrases, lines, stanzas-all appear to be normally, even admirably formed.

After her split with her husband, Sylvia Plath did not vengefully shake off the trappings of domestic life and reinvent herself as a new and different woman, nor did she sink into herself and become an overburdened mother with no time and no energy for her art. She found the balance between the responsibilities of single motherhood and the demands and desires of her art: the poet began to write between 4 and 8 a.m., before her babies were awakened for the day. The poems of this period are the ones universally hailed as the strongest, the deepest, the most profound of all her work, and she began to churn them out with astonishing speed. At the same time balancing, the domestic thread. Poignant pieces like "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Mary's" portrays the poet's pain and distress. There is no hateful bitterness towards the father who betrayed his family and moved away in this poem: only the melancholy knowledge that the innocence of her youthful baby will not last: "You will be aware of an absence, presently, / Growing beside you, like a tree". A poem with such a title might easily be written as a spiteful lashing out of a mother's misdirected, uncontrollable rage at her son for her philandering husband's betrayals, but Plath chose to focus instead on the sad truth of one more sad truth which her son would grow up carrying on his back.

The "Munich Mannequins" is a portrait of mannequins in snow-drifted shop windows who represent artificial women whose perfection in beauty is companied by sterility and barrenness, "Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose." Pamela Annas writes, "For Sylvia Plath, stasis and perfection are always associated with sterility" (137) and we see this metaphor prominent in "The Munich Mannequins". Also, in "Lesbos" (*CP*, 227), the speaker of the poem who goes to visit a "sad hag" who resents her husband and her child and urges the speaker to wear racy clothes and pick up men. The speaker, a married mother of two, cannot understand the cheap, bitter mentality of the woman she visits: "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet." Margaret Dickie writes of this selection, "Despite her own emotional difficulties, the speaker presents herself as a responsible mother, a life nurturer, identified strongly with the domesticity that the woman she visits scorns"[11]

For Plath, the most important things were always those she created: her poems, her children. Even in the aftermath of a disintegrated marriage, this must have been for her the terrible crushing of a long-cherished dream, she retained the determination to be, not only the great poet she'd so long dreamed of becoming, but

also a responsible mother beyond reproach. Writes Lucy Rosenthal, "Miss Plath doesn't claim to 'speak for' any time or anyone-and yet she does, because she speaks so accurately."[12]This seems to be at the very crux of claiming of Sylvia Plath by the feminist establishment: that the author was painfully aware that to become all she wanted to become would be to break the binds of stereotype and sexual double standard, and that society would not make it easy for her. But her writing speaks of her inner dualities, and sometimes even to extreme resentment and jealousy of men for what they had and she did not. It also speaks of a woman who wanted to feel whole or complete woman, in many contrasting senses of the word. To claim as hers some of the very things that so many women who call themselves feminists have rejected in their own searches for completion: love of a man, the raising of children, the creation of what she could create to leave her dual stamps of Womanhood and of Wit.

After a long search for a suitable life partner when she met English poet Ted Hughes, she wrote to her mother on April 29,1956 “I am using every fiber of my being to love him even so, I am true to essence of myself and I know who that self is… and will live with her through sorrow and pain, singing all the way, even in anguish and grief, the triumph of life over death, sickness and war, and all the flaws of any dead world.” [13] It is said that for a man marriage is part of life but for women it is her whole life. The poet admits “I shall be one of the few women not a bitter or frustrated or warped man imitator, which ruins most of them in the end. I am a woman and glad of it and my songs will be of fertility and the earth and people in it through waste, sorrow and death. I shall be a woman singer, and Ted and I shall make a fine life together…” [14] The zeal with which she plunged into the making of a happy home for her family is matched by her despair when she was faced with the possibility of never having children. “Everything has gone barren. I am part of world’s ash, something from which nothing can grow; nothing can flower or come to fruit,” she wrote in her journal on June 20.” [15]

Plath’s early poems are so totally free from the disturbing presence of her father and later of her husband that the early and later works look as if they were written by two different poets. Her earlier poems where mere exercises in poetic diction and traditional stanza forms with complex metrical schemes. Ted Hughes throws light upon the preoccupations of Plath’s apprentice poems when he reports, “she wrote her early poems very slowly, thesauruses open on her knee.” [16] Sylvia Plath’s growth from innocence to awareness of the reality of oppression was yet to come. Blind to the great device that separates the male and female worlds, the young Plath tried to grasp the power she had momentarily glimpsed from her father by a relentless pursuit after excellence, within a framework, prescribed by her, of the feminine ideal.

She crosses over the threshold into a new world to watch the forces in operation in a context of interaction between the self and the society: to impose her will upon them and to recover a self she can claim for herself, an ideal she would like to transform herself into. Plath’s poetry is as obsessed with the physical self as Sexton’s is and analyses interpersonal relationships within the family and the society. Ted Hughes’s examination of the Journals brings him to the same conclusion: “Many passages in this present book show the deliberate –almost frantic –effort with which she tried to extend her writing, to turn it towards the world and other people, to stretch it over more of outer reality…But the hidden workshop, the tangle of roots, the crucible, controlled everything. Everything became another image of itself, another lens into itself. ”[17]

Plath's preoccupation with the woman in isolation releases her from the restraints of time and space. Her eyes are set on an ideal of womanhood unattended by social requirements from which springs her final vision of the ideal poet. In all feminist endeavours, the starting point is the asymmetric relationship between the male and the female on which the phallocentric society survives. But Sylvia Plath's approach to the problem appears to be a striking deviation from the normal direction of feminist pursuits. She detects within the binary opposition, two sets of opposing forces, one within the male and other within the female. Her mission is not to balance the power within the male/female opposition; she is rather after the power which could be had from a fusion of positive forces within two sets.

For the most clear-cut and vibrant definition of the androgynous ideal one turns to the images Plath uses in her poetry for the growth of the self towards her ideal, a striking example of which is offered by the developing relationship between the images of the rider and the horse in Plath's poem "Ariel." The rider and the horse start the ride as separate entities, but as Ariel speeds through a nightmare landscape, leaving behind "Nigger-eye/ berries" that "cast dark/ Hooks" they become one. The passive rider and the dynamic horse are fused to form into a new being, perfect in itself and moving to become part of a perfect world. The ecstasy of this oneness within is expressed in the lines:

God's lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees! *CP*., 239.

"Unpeeling" of "dead hand, dead stringencies" follow the appropriation of power which transforms the fused rider and horse, symbolic of the uncorrupted masculine and the purely feminine, into a being emanating power, "God's lioness," or the "White/ Godiva" (*CP*, p.239). Images of fusion of the male and the female lie scattered throughout the *Collected poems* (1981) starting with the transitional poem "All the Dead Dears," in which we find the father being recognized as symbolically enclosed within the maternal matrix, "as an image looms under the fishpond surface/ Where the daft father went down" (CP, p.71).

Internalization by women of the derogatory and constraining image of themselves is the very thing Plath wanted to erase from the female self. Plath finds if to be a force which has already invaded her mother's life and is now threatening to overwhelm her too. In "Stings," the persona equates herself with the most creative member of the hive yet cannot totally separate herself from others:

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women, Honey-drudgers.

I am no drudge

Though for years I have eaten dust

And dried plates with my dense hair. *CP*, "Stings," 214.

But life's events bring her to the recognition of the dichotomy within her. The conflicting demands of submission and assertion, conformity and individuality almost tear her apart like the soft-fisted mushrooms in the poem, "Mushrooms," where the mother's weakness generates a fearsome animus. In the poem "Maenad," the speaker assumes the character of a maenadic woman, frenzied and raging throughout the seven-poem sequence. The cause of the speaker's present condition is attributed largely to maternal disregard:

The mother of mouths didn't love me.

Mother keep out of my barnyard,

I am becoming another. *CP*, "Maenad," 123.

In another poem "The Shadow" the mother is blamed for her victimization by the patriarchal forces. Her civilized, feminized ideals of justice and goodness, "her sermon about 'winning' but not fighting back," do not protect the girl from the real world's forces of war, hate and injustice." [18]

For the image of self-effacing woman, the poet did not have to go far since her mother was the living example. In her she found the mediocrity of woman's existence within the 'bell jar' of social protection and patriarchal condescension. She represented many women who, in spite of their intelligence and education shrunk into a will-less existence. To individualize her suffering, which threatens to overwhelm her, Plath converts the sufferer into a symbol. The archetypal mother of Plath's poetry embodies her deepest sense of purposelessness as does her image of the moon. The images of moon and mother are almost identical in Plath, with their gift for "making stone out of everything." "The Rival," which begins with the line, "If the moon smiled, she would resemble you" gives many points of similarities between the two. "The Moon and the Yew tree" states, "the moon is my mother… she is bold and wild." "Barren Woman" closes with the lines:

The moon lays a hand on my forehead,

Blank -faced and mum as a nurse. *CP*, "Barren Woman", 157.

The moon as well as mother hence stands for oppression, despair, insensitivity and barrenness.

The voluntary rejection of life by female psyche is represented in Plath's poems by a number of images like enclosures. Enclosures have a fearful attractiveness as means of escape from contradicting pressures and responsibilities. Plath's image of the bell jar belongs to this category, which acquires the sense of horrifying engulfment, rejection of life, isolation, on- being and extinction. Hospital is an important image of enclosure in "Face Lift," "In Plaster" and "Tulips" which takes place explicitly in hospital surroundings.

The woman's physical confinement to house or kitchen, marriage and motherhood as death to the self, and mother identification as a curse, are all related themes of Plath. In "Tulips" the claims of husband and children, described as "smiling hooks" are identified with the woman's life within society. Plath's poem "The Applicant" describes the dehumanization of women involved in marriage. The bride is described as:

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk. *CP*, "The Applicant", 222.

Throughout the poem, people are talked about as fragments, as parts and surfaces. The man in the poem is finally defined by the black suit he puts on. While the man is a junk heap of miscellaneous parts given shape by a suit of clothes, the woman is a wind- up toy, a puppet of that black suit. The only thing that gives woman form is the institution of marriage. She does not exist before it and dissolves back into nothingness after it.

Another poem "Cut" describes the self-image of the poet as paper:

O my

Homunculus, I am ill.

I have taken a pill to kill

The thin papery feeling. *CP*, "Cut," 235.

The 'the thin papery feeling' stands for her emotional dissociation from the world. It indicates the mental condition of women which the enclosures create in the victim. Othello's question "Was this fair paper, this most goodly blank, made to write 'whore' upon as an instance" where the image of the paper is used to indicate the featurelessness men demand from the women.

In "A Life," "A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle/ about a bold hospital saucer/ It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper/ And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg." In "Tulips" the speaker describes herself as "flat, ridiculous, a cut- paper shadow/ Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips." The loss of woman's identity in a patriarchal world is conveyed by several other images as in "Death and Co," where the speaker is reduced till she feels "I am red meat." Likewise, the patient in "paralytic" thinks of herself as merely a "Dead egg." And in "Stones," the speaker feels that she is treated as if she were a piece of machinery being prepared, or a gem being chiseled by a cutter. The dumbness and numbness of totally insensate beings is conveyed by the image of stone.

Dolls and mannequins, with which the woman is identified, suggest that while retaining her appearance, the woman has travelled far from her original human condition to become the construct of man.

In “The Munich Mannequins,” the prostitutes are described as mannequins, old- fashioned dummies with head, neck, and arms, but with steel rods instead of bodies, “Orange pollies on silver sticks,” waiting to be moved about, dressed and undressed by men who purchase them. In “Amnesiac” the woman is called “The little toy wife” and in “Witch Burning,” as a voodoo doll, she becomes both a doll and a sacrificial victim.

Plath fulfills Cixous demand that woman must “Kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman,”[19] makes woman’s body highly adaptable. Frequently the nakedness revealed in Plath’s poems is ugly and horrific, an attempt to break out of that prison of ideals constructed by male idolatry of woman’s body. Thus in “Lady Lazarus,” instead of the usual sexual performance with stripped away scarves, Plath displays a stark cadaver; instead of titillating revelation of flesh, only ‘skin and bone’ and ‘eye pits’ (*CP*, p.244). As Christina Britzolakis has argued that “the striptease artist becomes a parody of the performing poet, of the staging of autobiography; and the appearance of femininity is exposed as part of the masculine literary tradition to be confronted with sexual difference. “[20]As in *The Bell Jar,* Plathrejects the traditional role of femininity, refusing to keep up appearances and to anoint, decorate or worship the feminine body, similarly in “Lady Lazarus” the body may become something to shock and horrify:

> Out of the ash
>
> I rise with my red hair
>
> And I eat men like air. *CP*., 247.

Metamorphosed by rage, the female form becomes the ‘lion-red body’ of ‘stings,’ a ‘red/ scar in the sky, red comet’ (*CP*, p.215) the harem wife in ‘Purdah’ revealing herself as Clytemnestra to her unsuspecting husband, the plaster of concealment ripped away, the body escaping from ‘the wax house,’ the bell jar, the cellar, the ‘mausoleum’ (*CP*, p.215). So, Plath’s own body frequently seems to become the starting point for her imaginative autonomy. Hence “woman’s body can become a new agent of apocalypse and revelation. Plath remodels her body endlessly in a continuous play of appearances with performance and intoxication feeding off each other.” [21]

From being the object of male gazes, representations and fears, woman’s body is re-appropriated as a subject, rediscovered in its female specificity as source or feature of discursive practice in a reversal of that traditional mind/ body dichotomy. Plath’s re-presentations of the body overcome traditional received notions of feminity, flesh out freer texts, and give body to a new body of women’s writing. There is a marked hostility towards other women in the poems of Plath. In the poem “Lesbos” she expresses her personal antipathy for women: “Every woman’s a whore. / I can’t communicate.” She identifies herself with trees and envies them their freedom from the woman’s fate of “copulation, abortion and bitchery.” Her selves are “old petticoats” and she seeks liberation from them in “Winter Trees.”

The character of the poem “Purdah” is newly created like the characters of the Genesis story. The ritual murder of the bridegroom in the poem and the emergence of the woman as its conclusion, signal the

end of male domination. The closing allusion, "The lioness, / the shriek in the bath, / the cloak of holes" functions by raising the action of the poem to the level of ritual drama. The assassination of a male for his sacrificial abuse of the female establishes the final motif of Plath's poem.

Merely murdering the powerful man responsible for the female persona's state is not enough. Instead, Plath used the metaphor of 'Lazarus' returning from the dead in "Lady Lazarus," changing him into a woman so as to reverse the gender. She is under the command of her own superior will. The persona can even out – do her competition in killing herself. She does this without personality change; "I am the same, identical woman." From the pile of ash, she becomes the uncontained and mystic phoenix, rising from the carnage that men have created for her, and of her. Her final act, always phrased is to "eat men like air."

Winter Trees, presents a moving picture of a woman and her sorrows- the woman who loves, corresponds, and yearns for relationship, but is ultimately despaired at not being reciprocated. She shows her compassion for a fatherless son and childless woman:

But right now, you are dumb.

And I love your stupidity,

The blind mirror of it. I look in

And find no face but my own,

and you think

That's funny. *WT*,33.

The next phase in the poets' growth towards maturity is marked by her recognition of man's contribution towards creating this nightmarish world. Plath sees men as having desire to change and control the world around them. In "Munich Mannequins" man has finally transformed woman into puppet, a mannequin, something that reflects both his disgust with and his fear of women. The daughter in "The Colossus" watches in horror as the father becomes one with those forces which lurk in the features of the surrounding landscape. The masculine does not die but takes new birth to become the "Lucifer" in a later poem. The man then transforms into a monster.

Then in the period of four months preceding the poet's death there is another change in the manner of her poems, indicative of the utter clarity of her final vision of the masculine and feminine contribution towards the making of the oppressor, how to liberate herself from the oppressor and achieve transcendence from the pervasive social evils. "Ariel" is the only poem which traces the process of the transformation of the woman to her ideal, the woman poet and further. The rider and the horse, feminine and masculine principles and separate entities, melt into one another as they move forward as in the poem, "How one we grow."

For Plath, the woman, as well as the poet, perfection had no limit. If there was one, its image for her was nothing less than Godhead. In Sylvia Plath's poems it is a female character that speaks out, voicing the views of the poet. She talks about pregnancy, giving birth, or the relationship of the mother with the infant in her poems; also, there are poems which demonstrate the daughter/ father relationship, a widow etc. and imagery from feminine sources. Plath was strikingly original and fertile in imaginative invention, in metaphors and fables, and her lyrics, brief though they set many metaphors going at once. In "Purdah" the speaker compares herself to a woman in India hidden behind Purdah screens, to jade statue, to an "enigmatical" image of the Buddha, to the moon, and to a small jeweled doll. The overlapping metaphors suggest that herself is suppressed, that she merely reflects whatever light shines on her, and that she is a costly, glittering object in the possession of her "bridegroom… Lord of the mirrors!" In the course of her poem herself- or another self- emerges as a powerful, queenly figure intent on destruction. In the final lines she imagines herself as Clytemnestra, murdering Agamemnon in his bath by throwing a cloak over him and stabbing through it.

Conclusion

Most critics have acknowledged that Plath's poems display an accomplished technical acumen and a brilliant, yet stark insight into severe psychological disintegration and harrowing existential anxiety. Many have also asserted that despite its overall gravity, her poetry exhibits an appealing undercurrent of irony and dark humor in its treatment of morbid themes. However, some commentators have objected to what they perceive as Plath's histrionic display of emotion, inaccessible personal allusions, and nihilistic obsession with death. These critics have further averred that her use of horrific events as metaphors for personal anguish might be considered gratuitous and inappropriate.

Feminist scholars have championed the poet for her pioneering efforts to expose the absurdity of conventional feminine models and her attempts to establish equal footing for women writers in a male-dominated publishing industry. In this context, Oates has characterized Plath's poems as "regressive fantasies" that speak of a separate self rather than a universal one. Most feminist critics have affirmed, however, that insurmountable masculine oppression is what led to Plath's obsessive preoccupation with alienation. Kathleen Margaret Lant has asserted that "Ariel" serves as an analogy for Plath's role as a woman poet and argues that the female speaker's attempt to transform herself into a more masculine figure ultimately proven futile. Similarly, other scholars have discussed "Lady Lazarus" in the context of this struggle, with Maureen Curley contending that the poem serves as a commentary on the difficulties faced by women writers concluding that the speaker's conflict with "Herr Doktor" represents a struggle against male dominance that ultimately ends in defeat. Christina Britzolakis has extended this gender conflict to society as a whole, arguing that Plath addresses a much larger issue than mere feelings of alienation and futility in the face of male domination. According to Britzolakis, Plath's poetry can be seen as an exhibition of ironic self-reflection in response to the widespread cultural objectification of women as mere commodities for mass consumption.

Notes

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3. Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
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5. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, "A Common Language: The American Woman Poet," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays onWomen Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 197) 274.
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14. Ibid., 256.
15. Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough Eds. (New York: Dial, 1982) 311.
16. Ted Hughes "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," *The Art of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Newman, 188.
17. Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough Eds. (New York: Dial, 1982)156.
18. Sylvia Plath, *Johnny panic and the Bible of Dreams*: *Short Stories, Prose and* Diary Excerpts, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1977) 330-339.
19. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron Isabelle eds., *New French Feminisms* (Helmel Hempstead: Harvester, 1981) 250.
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