FROM A VICTIM OF THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE TO A HEROINE OF FEMINIST DECONSTRUCTION: REVISITING SELECTED POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's poems mirror the ideological aspirations of its social context, and the construction of identity in her works falls under the impact of their specific contemporary historical context. The bulk of her aesthetic production reflects the ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement and its aim to elevate the cultural autonomy of American women. One of the major characteristics of this era roughly the 1960's and 1970's, is women's endeavor to break out from the dominant patriarchal appropriation.

This study purports to investigate some selected poems by Sylvia Plath and how these poems represented Plath as a relentless feminist writer and activist until her death. The study follows the development of the poet's identity from a helpless object into a fighter who tried to win all her wars against the male sex. A large number of Plath's poems deals with the feeling of women, treated as an object, a commodity, not allowed to be an independent person.

Keywords: Patriarchal, appropriation, misrepresentation, feminism, ideological aspirations

Introduction

The researcher relates Plath's poetry to her family, career, and gender, since it reflects a suppressed state that inspires a fervent desire for freedom, and mirrors her ideological aspirations. Plath's endeavors, to break out from the dominant Anglo-American appropriation and misrepresentation, are engaging because they relate to Plath not only on a personal, but also on a universal level: the impact of Plath's poems on women in general, and her personal and revolutionary messages often apply to a wide female audience, in a patriarchal Western society.

Sylvia plath's poems are part of a historically-exclusive context. The historical ambience of the 1960s has its impact, thematically and stylistically, on her collections. The emergence of minorities' call for rights in this era shapes the poems' thematic directions. The call for an independent political and cultural existence, the struggle to advance socio-economic situations, and the confrontational nature of such objectives mark the aesthetic women production of the era. American feminist writers, particularly Betty Freidan's "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), are the byproducts of such historical milieu. Their contemporary poems reflect the era's turbulent and confrontational tendencies prevalent among the oppressed not only in the United States but also all over the world.

The 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw many historical events that has shaped the world in almost every level. The same era saw the decline of the old colonial powers, and the struggle of the colonized against their hegemony. Revolutions erupted all over the world. Thus, a global sense of subversion and resistance triumphed in its impact on all the levels of human existence.

The domestic circumstances in the United States were also influenced by this global sense of subversion. This era saw the emergence of the United States as an imperial authority. Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa all witnessed the impact of the emergence of this new super power in the shape of puppet rulers, gigantic corporations, or civilian massacres. The Civil Rights Movement, moreover, had the profoundest impact on the rise of feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and a great many other contemporary writers.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most important revolutionary feminist iconic American poets of the twentieth century. Sylvia Plath was born in Jamaica plain, Massachusetts in 1932. Plath discovered very early that writing was her talent. By the time she was at Smith College in the early1950s, she published poems in newspapers and she wrote dozens of short stories, some of which won prizes from 'Ladies' magazines. At Smith College, she went on winning awards, but after a third year of active work, she broke down and attempted suicide. Six months in a private hospital set her on her feet again, but in reality she never recovered.

After her graduation from Smith in 1955, she went to Cambridge University on a Fulbright scholarship, and there she met the English poet Ted Hughes, where they were married in London in June 1956. Her first collection of poems "the Colossus" was published in1961, and the latter collection of poems "Ariel" was published in1965. During the summer of 1962, her marriage to Hughes began to ruin. In October, she asked her husband to leave for good. In December, 1962, she moved with her children from Devon to London. On a dark day, February 1963, a pretty young

mother of two children was found in a London flat with her head in the oven and the gas jets were wide open. The dead thirty years old woman was the American poet Sylvia Plath.

This study purports to investigate some selected poems by Sylvia Plath and how these poems represented Plath as an active writer, in which she represents herself as women's activist until her death. The study follows the development of the poet's identity from a helpless poor object into a fighter who tried to win all her wars against the male sex. A large number of Plath's poems deals with the feeling of women, treated as an object, a commodity, not allowed to be an independent person. In poems such as "Daddy "(12 October 1962), "Lady Lazarus" (23-29 1962), and her series of bee poems (3-7 October 1962), she shows the invisibility of social forces, and the overwhelming effect of that invisibility, especially on women.

In addition, it is the intention of the researcher to relate some of Plath's poetry to Plath's family, career, and gender, since it does not only reflect a suppressed state that inspires a fervent desire for freedom, but also mirrors her ideological aspirations which govern the bulk of her poetic production. Plath's endeavors to break out from the dominant Anglo-American appropriation and misrepresentation are engaging because they relate to Plath on a personal level, yet can also be conceived on a universal level. I.e., the impact of Plath's poems on women in general, and her personal and revolutionary messages often apply to a wide female audience, in a patriarchal Western society in which she lived. Therefore, Plath's personal life is consequential to this study; it will concentrate on Plath's lifetime including the people and events that impacted the themes of confinement, discrimination and subjection of woman vis-à-vis self-determination, independence and equality with men, discovered within her poetry.

Plath recognized the social constructs of the late fifties and early sixties through poems in which the female is secondary to the male. Helen McNeil validates the dilemma women writers faced, stating, "Plath saw herself entering a society in which marriage and childbearing were irreconcilable with a career. Yet she wanted both" (476). McNeil's remark reveals Plath's determination to move beyond the expected lifestyle. A retaliatory effect becomes apparent in many of her poems, which depict a world in which the female is superior to the male, where the tension between a subjugated female position and her attempts to free herself from such constraints is evident.

Plath's poetry acts as a mechanism, allowing her to portray society's prescribed notions, then, attempting to break down such social barriers. It is not only the act of writing in which Plath finds salvation, but also in the devices she employs within the poems that attempt to reconnect her with a

world outside the prescribed domestic sphere. In a clear and worth noting statement, Ted Hughes observes that “at this time she was trying to break down the tyranny, the fixed focus, and public persona which descriptive and discursive poems take as a norm.” [191] A good example of this is "The Applicant", written in 1962 and published posthumously by her husband Ted Hughes in the collection of poems "Ariel" in 1965,and later in The collected poems of Sylvia Plath, he edited and published in 1981. In this poem, the woman is kept in a closet and sold like an item of clothing. In "The Applicant" the female persona' is rendered obscenely "nude". She becomes a pure surface without voice. In this poem, the wife is literally a piece of property, a "living doll", "that", or "it", as she is referred to, a "guaranteed", completely obedient slave, ready for purchase by the male customer: “It works, there is nothing wrong with it. You have a hole, it's a poultice. You have an eye, it's an image.” [221]

The parallelism of these lines sets up the male as her object. The potential wife does not control her actions. In “The Applicant,” Plath expresses not only her dissatisfaction with her marital life, but also her revolt against and anger towards the clearly defined gender roles prevalent in the 1960's. In addition, the poem objectifies marriage. There are three characters in this poem: the addressee [a male], a silent woman, and the speaker. Plath uses dramatic monologue in this poem. The poem takes the form of a one - sided speech interview where the overbearing speaker interviews a sorrowful male whose utmost goal is finding a wife. The speaker, who assumes the role of a dealer or a salesman speech of modern commerce, addresses the male figure throughout the poem and provides him with the qualities of his potential wife (treated as a product or commodity). Christel C. Russman, in his Imprisonment and Escape in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry, argues that, “Plath and the speaker are conflated in this poem as the position allows Plath to step outside of the marriage plot. Her authoritative voice guides the poem with an understanding of marriage as an institution.” (10)

The first two stanzas represent the male as the applicant and reveal that his application is for a wife. The wife is literally a piece of property, a "living doll", "that", or "it", as she is referred to, a "guaranteed", completely obedient slave, ready for purchase by the male customer. To expose society's de-humanising expectations and depersonalization of woman, the speaker in the poem asks the customer or potential husband in a sarcastic tone:

First, are you our sort of person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch, [221]

Sylvia Plath is making a mockery out of the expectations of American women and men in the early 60s. In this inaugural quatrain, Plath ridicules such stereotyping of American women by ironically stereotyping women, including herself, exposing their disadvantaged condition and position.

All poems composed after 1961 mark a significant change in her relationship with nature, self, and others: "There is more outrage and satire and hysteria in some of her latter poems than there is steady thought, especially steady thought evinced in style" Vendler (12). Furthermore, overstatement is an essential part of Plath's technique. By taking Woman to an extreme or fulfillment, she displays a personality structure that demonstrates the inadequacy of the form, the unworkability of the fantasy. Her presentation of the feminine fails to run smoothly and becomes obscene, surreal and freakish. Moreover, as Susan Sontag argues, camp is at its best when "dead serious", unconscious, "unintentional" (282). Thus, the applicant is described as crippled and as dismembered and fragmented pieces of bodies in the above stanza of this poem. Thus, imagery of dehumanization begins the poem. Moreover, these pieces described here are not even flesh, but "a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch." Although her choice of “rubber breasts” seems strange in connection with a male figure, it serves Plath’s purpose adequately, as in the following lines:

Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand (221)

The sarcastic tone gets higher in the Second quatrain. This potential applicant is represented as an incomplete and deformed man. Plath purposely contributes”a false appendages to create an imperfect male. Middlebrook’s, in “What Was Confessional Poetry?”, describes Plath as attempting the construction of a poetics from within the woman’s position...it retrieves the female body, particularly the female breast, from objectification by the male gazes... Plath succeeds by forcing the male to be scrutinized in the beginning of this poem although his subjection will not last” (641).

The poem continues, revealing the man’s lack of false parts. He is depicted crying as he exposes that his hand is empty. The man’s tears are an odd attribute, as men are not supposed to cry. Again, Plath is turning the tables on the male figure, causing him to be at another’s mercy. It is his empty hands that provoke the dealer to offer him a “a thing” a doll: a wife, who will serve as his “last resort” in the poem. So, 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. [Britzolakis, 5-6]

Blending passive inactivity with devouring hostility, the poem presages the vengeful uprising of "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" while maintaining the innocent, expressionless appearance of paper, stone, mannequin, or doll.

Sylvia Plath is a great exemplification to show feminist ideas in the poems "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "The Applicant', "Kindness" and "Ariel". All these poems have an interrelation to express aspects of objectification of women, marriage dependency, women's creativity, revenge on men and women's independence. Plath notices the roles of subordinate women though she also competes for the desire to be a mother and a beloved, loving wife. In the two poems "Kindness" and "The Applicant", Plath reveals that women in Western society have little value. The sarcastic attitude and painful confidence manipulates her readers to see this creative view and the shamefulness men are conveyed in "Lady Lazarus". In "The Applicant", Plath attacks the expected society which women must conform to marriage, challenging the gender roles by satirizing the similar structure of marriage vows and she tries to withstand. It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof against fire and bombs through the roof.

Simultaneously, Plath's personal and painful life expressed in her poems has a deeper meaning reflecting contemporary cultural tendencies in the feminist criticisms of the 1960s. The fact dying can be creatively seen as a rebirth to a new overruling female culture: "Will you marry it? To thumb shut your eyes at the end and dissolve of sorrow. Dame Kindness, she is so nice!". For example, females are depersonalized as an extra domesticated hand in "The Applicant" and personified as a sweet housewife and mother in "Kindness". "Kindness" is the craving to be "Dame Kindness" (the sweet mother and woman), yet to create and feel at the same time:

A living doll, everywhere you look. It can sew, it can cook, It can talk, talk, talk.

The repetition of the word "talk" implicates the annoyance of women and they are only useful for domestic services for the dominating men and woman is treated as a living doll. The mocking- metaphoric tone is noticed in a theatrical mood whereas females are the performers with no authority but to please the aggressive males. (6-7)

Plath tries bravely to get outside her psychic borders in order to escape her imprisoning situation under the law of the father. However, she succumbs to a fascinating deadly maternal nature (Ghazi190). "The Applicant"explores the idea of dismembering, gazing and commoditizing of the woman / object. In "TheApplicant", Plathmakesacaustic, satirica lattackonthe institutionofm arriageby presenting what seems to be an

application formarriage, ormarria gearrangement througha combinationof an interview and a alespitch.The woman / man ne quin who is project edinthis poem is a commercial property of herowner , t be mani pulated to the advanta geof the seller (the immedia temalemember soft hefamily, relatives, malefriends, marriage contractor) and that of the buyer (suitor, prospector). Plathreliesonherf unctional knowledge, byconceptualizingher physical knowled geo fmarriage (having bothbe eninthema rriagemarket and beenmarried)and conveysitsmessagethroughtheuseofabstract.(Werth111)

In other situations, women are portrayed as being helpless and merely looked upon as objects, unable to shield themselves. Another form of helplessness and hopelessness can be recognized as in 'gigdo' where the woman claims to be the woman's body. She opens and shuts like a Swiss watch. In such poems, these women retain no personal qualities at all; therefore they turn to mere objects in order to be complete. At this point in the poem " The Applicant", Plath turns attention to the female figure, who assumes a stereotypical wife image. This potential wife is “an automaton”, living only to supply her husband’s needs. She is frequently referred to as “it,” most noticeably in the speaker’s repeated line directed toward the man, “Will you marry it?” Plath’s repetition of this line enforces the wife’s non-identity and reveals her imprisonment in a scripted role. The final line, “Will you marry it, marry it, marry it” is a question posed as a command. “This irony determines that the bride figure is doomed to this existence, without question.” The repetition of this phrase enforces this sense of enclosure throughout the poem. (Rusman 15.)

Both groom and bride are naked when first introduced: the man is “stark naked”, while the woman is “Naked as paper to start”. The man is immediately dressed in a black suit that is “waterproof, shatterproof, proof / Against fire and bombs through the roof” (221-22). The man’s suit is armor like, as he will be the stronger of the two. Once the man is dressed, he is no longer vulnerable and resumes a dominant male’s features. Implicit in “fire and bombs” is the reference to battle. Plath uses the war motif within several of the poems that will be discussed later. This poem’s battle reference to the London Blitz reminds us of the lasting impact of World War II. The battle image more importantly represents a gender conflict within the poem.

The continued use of “proof” shields the husband figure, confirming his strength opposed to the woman’s weakness. Meanwhile, the bride’s nudity is more fragile due to the comparison to paper. Using paper is also a connection to Plath’s role as writer. A sheet of blank paper signifies creative frustration as it pertains to Plath’s poetry. In this case, Plath speaks of the subjection of female writers as her perspective wavers between subject as speaker and object as wife. She has authority as the poem’s writer/speaker but loses her control as a wife. We do not discover the bride’s apparel

because this is inconsequential. She will be “A living doll” (222) operated by her owner/husband. The man will inscribe the naked page that symbolizes the bride.

The groom is promised that his bride will “do whatever you tell it”. He is is portrayed as a cure for his ailments. Even upon his death, her purpose will be to mourn his passing; “It is guaranteed / To thumb shut your eyes at the end / And dissolve of sorrow”. The latter line also reveals that her life ends with his, suggesting her pointlessness on her own. The poem confirms this with its next line; “We make new stock from the salt”. Another will replace her when her duties are over. The tears in the poem distinguish between the male and female. Tears connected to the man create discomfort as the speaker commands, “Stop crying”, before allowing him a wife. The wife’s tears are considered meaningless as “new stock” is made from the tear’s salt. The man’s tears are unexpected causing an immediate change, “while the woman’s tears are conventional and therefore recycled within the household’s economy”. (Russman 16)

In brief,Selvia Plath addresses the pressures on women to conform. However, her desire to escape from these pressures is strongly in evidence in “The Applicant”, "Daddy, and "Lady Lazarus", to name a few. She wrote in one of her 'letters home':

I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is a fully rejoicing woman, 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 [3].

The opening lines of the poem "Daddy" recapitulates the contrasts of black and white. The demonic father is associated with black and the daughter with white. The violence, the daughter unleashes to liberate herself, risks, paradoxically, destroying her. "I'm finally through" is a claim that she emphatically repeats at the end of the poem, a proud declaration of her independence;

“but the pronouncement also suggests its opposite -- that in being through his heart, through with him, through with her utterance, she is herself through, finished, at the end of her poem and of her life.” (Ramazani 280)

In spite of her effort to redirect rage outward, much of the poem betrays fierce self-contempt. She mocks her earlier attempt to live submissively in his shoe, to see his gigantic image as "a bag full of God" rather than a garbage or worse, to repeat futile prayers for his recovery, to search for his birthplace, to speak his "obscene was and menacing language, to play the victimized Jew or Gypsy of his oppression, to be yet another woman who adores a Fascist , to submit her heart to his destruction, to try even suicide that she might recover his dull bones, and in her last foolish act,

to make and marry a model of him. This chronicle of degrading self-deceptions ends only when she describes her present efforts at resolute self-assertion; cutting the phone-line, killing both original and surrogate, and orchasterating the ritual dance of the father's destruction.

A primary rhetorical figure for Plath's ambivalence toward her father is apostrophe. The trope summons up the dead man, fictively endowing him with the ability to hear , yet it animates him in order to kill him. Apostrophe is essential to the fiction of a combative voice in "Daddy,": "you" and "your" appear more than thirty times, with "you" often serving as an emphatic end rhyme. But the insistent apostrophe strengthens the illusion not only of a speaking daughter but also of a listening dead man. To empower her opponent; the repeated "you" animates each of two competing subject positions.

Daddy is the culmination of the development of the father figure in Plath's poetry. Meanwhile, the sea god in the earlier poems degenerates gradually in the subsequent poems until it reaches its ultimate metamorphosis into the devil himself in "Daddy." The poet's feelings undergo a similar transformation so that by the end of this poem feelings of frustration and self pity give way to an unprecedented pronouncement of anger and an overt revolt against the dead father. "Daddy" is the poet's final attempt to free herself from her infantile attachment to the father. But the need to get rid of the father image, necessary for the poet's autonomy, is hampered by her “Electral fixation upon him”. The poem depicts the transition from the daughter's image of her father “as god to her revised image of him as devil, as well as her own transforming image of herself from that of the victim to that of the avenger”, as the following lines indicate (Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning180):

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe, or Achoo.222

In the above lines, the daughter recalls her bondage and suffocation by the father, her living like a foot in his black shoe, suggesting her submissiveness and entrapment, incapable of the slightest manifestation of her existence.

As the poem develops, this image of the father as a god is conceived as an obstacle against the daughter's fulfillment of her autonomy. Depicting the father as demon is necessary step for the successful exorcism of his image.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue, with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

As the above lines flagrantly indicate, the father becomes a "panzer-man," "a swastika," "a Fascist," "a brute." "a devil," and the man in black. He is the archetype of oppression and authority which combines the father, the husband, and any kind of repressive authority. Accordingly, the poem is about the writer's attempt to defend her identity in the face of the inexorable oppressive authorities, "the boot in the face," which threatens to obliterate her individuality like "the roller/Of wars, wars, wars."

The poem dramatizes the "I – you" struggle between the poet's self and the father's encroachment by the significant repetition of the words "I," "you" and the "oo" sound throughout the poem. The poet is struggling to assert her existence, her "I," or "ich." But she is alienated from her real self, from her own language, by the father's predominant identity. She is unable to express her true self and remains imprisoned in the father's foreign and "obscene" language (Ramazani Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy, 1142-56).

In emphatic terms, The poem manifests Plath’s total rejection of family and society, and recounts the change in her attitude towards the father, from yearning to join him in the grave, to her determination to revenge herself on him by abdicating the husband, whose image is confused with the father’s. The father becomes the husband, "the vampire," and absolute torturer. Getting rid of the husband becomes analogous to exorcising the father who stifled her true voice and encouraged the growth of her false self. At this point, Plath utilizes Frazer's concept of sympathetic magic in "The Golden Bough", from which she drives, straniously the idea of affecting a person at a distance by working on a representation or a model of him; destroying the model, a picture or a doll, causes the destruction of its prototype (124-26). At last the daughter can declare her triumph upon the father and to pronounce her assumption of her freedom and independence from imprisonment in the false identity which he imposed upon her:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (223)

Instead of the objectivity, the natural scenery and the nature imagery of Plath's earlier poems, the subject matter in the Ariel poems becomes more autobiographical, the voice more confessional, eager, vengeful, and violent,

and the imagery more historical and political. "Daddy" also illustrates the development in Plath's art from the mannered, well crafted and formal technical control of her early work to the rapidity and emotional intensity of the late poems. The extreme feelings hitherto hid behind a shield of technical intricacies find free expression in the late poetry. The poet's emotional excitement is echoed by the verse velocity, the short lines, and the sound devices.

The effect of "Daddy" largely depends on its oral quality. Word repetition, for instance, a recurrent feature of Plath's late work, reflects here a sense of tension and urgency. The poet successfully communicates her intense angry feelings towards her father by means of emphatic word repetition, "You do not do, you do not do," "wars, wars, wars," "Panzer man, panzer man," "the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you," "Ich, ich, ich, ich/I could hardly speak," "An engine, an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew" and "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you"(223). Significant words as "Daddy," "Jew," "you" and "your" are also repeated all over the poem. Instead of the elaborate rhyme schemes of The Colossus poems and her preference for the terza rima in particular, the stanzas here do not have a regular rhyming pattern. The rhyme does not coincide with the stanza form. Although Plath uses slant rhyme in "Ariel" as well as in her early poetry, the rhyme here is obvious and highly effective. The insistent rhyming on one word, "you" conveys the poem's immense emotional charge against the father" (Nims 52). The same sound may run on from stanza to stanza, with almost the same rhyme. "Lady Lazarus" is printed in units of three lines, but the rhyme is not in her favorite terzarima pattern. Six of the first ten lines end in an n-sound, followed by a sequence in long e, which occurs in about half of the next twenty-two lines. Then, after six more a's, we have l's ending eleven of fourteen lines, and then several r's, leading into the six or more air rhymes that conclude the sequence.

Plath's interest in the sound of words continues throughout her career. But unlike her earlier excessive use of sound devices which do not always contribute effectively to the meaning, sound effects in her late work are more apt and intensely effective. The "oo" sound echoing throughout the whole poem indicates the poet's agony, and, at the end of the poem, the sense of anger and rancor, and also her final breakthrough. Plath also uses consonance, internal rhyme and assonance as in "i was *ten *when they buried you./At twenty I *tried to *die," and "The *Boot in the face, the *brute." The incantatory effect of these devices is that of a "ritualistic act of exorcism", a magic spell to expel the father's memory. In contrast to the elegant literary language of the early poems, in "Ariel",for example, Plath tries to approximate the language of real speech. "Thus, the poem is full of such casual slang phrases" (Nims 53).

Plath's endeavour to set herself free from the baneful influence of her parents was a part of her search for her true identity and her autonomous self. In "daddy" and "Medusa" the poet claims that she is able to surmount her harmful fusion with her mother and to get rid of her destructive attachment to her dead father. This exorcism of her parents is, however, one way of defending her independent self and poetic voice against oppressive authority in all its different facets, social, literary and familial. Plath's anger at the male language reaches its utmost in "Daddy," in which she speaks about her father's language as a snare, inhibiting her own voice: "I never could talk to you./ the tongue stuck in my jaw./It stuck in a barb wire snare". (222) She is scared of his unintelligible jargon, "gobbledygoo." Furthermore, the speaker regards her father as symbol of cruel behaviour and generalises him through a historical event and patriarchal language is imagined as a means of persecution, "An engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off.

Furthermore, Sylvia Plath has depicted far more images of men's betrayal in a patriarchal and male-dominated society in "Lady Lazarus". It is an excellent example of a poem which can be read as a representation of different images of a marginalized and oppressed woman. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" has been scrutinised and read through different angles to reveal its autobiographical peculiarity, domestic roles, psychological conflicts, and masculine entrapment. The origin of the poem's title foreshadows" Lady Lazarus" in its biblical reference. Jesus had resurrected Lazarus in the New Testament, Gospel of John, in which he restores Lazarus to life after being proclaimed dead for four days. The revived Lazarus from the Bible, has been read as a reference to a woman who has survived several suicide attempts. In addition, the poem features a speaker who addresses her doktor. The end of the poem is controversial: the closing declaration of the woman's ability to "eat men like air" reflects a note of defiance and revenge against the male figure, whereas the I speaker identifies as her "Enemy. She has become free from his influence: it is now she who dominates, as suggested by some critics. "It is a successful act of revenge" not only "against the male ego" (Phillips 201), but also the system of patriarchal society at large.

At the same time, other critics see the last scene of devouring as a failure. For example, Alicia Suskin Ostriker views it as "hollow because the reader realizes that the speaker is powerless". (102) She refers to Plath as one of those women writers whose "work is filled with body images"! (92) Ostriker goes further to add, "One of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken some kind of liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves, in spite of her remark that Plath is among a "large number of women poets, since the 1960s, [who] appear to view the body as a source essentially of pain, not pleasure" (98-99). Kathleen Margaret Lant

also sees nothing positive in Plath's display of body, and regards the speaker of the poem as vulnerable, as she points out:

> “She has displayed herself not in an assertive way but in a sexually provocative and seductive way, and - at the very end - she resorts to descriptions of her appearance - her red hair - but not delineations of her reality - her anger. She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous, for she must offer the female body as an object rather than assert it as a weapon”. (654)

For Lant, the poem shows the speaker‘s susceptibility as “too feminine and submissive”. (653) As a result of this failure, submissiveness, powerlessness, and vulnerability, I would argue, Plath's female characters are often tempted to desiring their confinement. Such women are “constrained not by iron chains, but by the chains of their own ideas” As Foucault's argues in his description of the "ideal" modern convict.(130) In this respect, Simone de Beauvoir points out:

> "Woman has been free only in becoming a captive; she renounces this human privilege in.--order to regain her power as a natural object. (188)
>
> It is clear from Plath’s writing that the female gender is an incarcerating feature, evident in her poems. At this point Ostriker argues:
>
> One of the ways we recognize a poetess--which is to say a woman poet locked into sentimentality by her inhibitions--is that she steers clear of the anatomical references. As womanly inhibition declines, we grow aware-of its-sources in dualistic ideology, gender polarization, and the dread of female sexuality (92).

Various critics have made similar observations. Janice Markey writes on "Daddy": "Plath makes it clear in this poem that the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is in part due to women's compliance in the sado-masochism involved" (16). Pamela Annas also suggests that "one feels in reading “The Applicant” that “Plath sees herself and her imaged personae as not merely caught in victims of--this situation, but in some sense culpable as well" (105).

On the other hand, Susan Van Dyne, suggests that Plath was able to take revenge on her husband, and to “appropriate his male powers to herself”. (55) Although the power of the erotic act may sound masculine, it has its reverse side of dissolving and merger with the mother. Hence the devouring act at the end of the poem could be seen as both a triumph and a threat to the speaker's identity simultaneously, it is not either/or. It is triumphant as it helps transform the subject and defy the law, even if that defiance is only temporary. For this reason Christina Britzolakis's suggestion that “the attack on patriarchy is undercut by the illusionistic character of this

apotheosis which purports to transform, at a stroke, a degraded and catastrophic reality is incorrect". (155-56) The stroke that Britzolakis complains of at the end of the poem recurs in many others'. Death in this sense is therefore a temporary solution repeated after every masochistic encounter between I and the other. However, it is not a monotonous repetition, for transformation brings a new level of meaning each time. (237)

At the conclusion of both poems, Plath finds solace in her death by avenging both her husband, father, and the male population as a whole. After her suicide she "melts into shriek/I turn and burn… [turning into] ash, ash". Plath warns her enemies to "beware, beware" (Plath 9). Like Lazarus, Plath rises "out of the ash" but also "[eats] men like air," and implying that like smoke, she grasps at anything she touches to accentuate her newfound power (245). The gradual intensification of physical pain and of psychic suffering reaches its final point in which the fierceness of words menaces and forbids any possible future:

Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air (246).

Despite these arguments, Sylvia Plath remains a great exemplification to show feminist ideas in the poems "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "The Applicant", "Kindness" and "Ariel". All these poems have an interrelation to express aspects of objectification of women, marriage dependency, women's creativity, revenge on men, and women's independence. In a bitter tone she delineates the constraining nature of this social scene for American women in a man's world. She states in her "Journals":

> Why should [women] be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man? Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries … …; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity (77.) Plath's journal clarifies her gender envy, for she continues in a sorrowful tone:

Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars -- to be a part of a scene, anonomous, listening, recording -- all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. (77)

Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poet and a radical feminist, has the same complaint. She writes that she "became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950's. (45)

In the same Vein, Demaris Wehr, a scholar of the psychology of religion, observes: “Patriarchal women are tacitly and explicitly discouraged from gratifying their own needs or seeking fulfillment of their own desires” (101.) Such institutionalized deprivation, furthered by psychologies and misunderstanding of theologies, was the main impetus for the development of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book “The Feminine Mystique.” It was a very specific cry of rage about the way intelligent, well-educated women, who were kept out of the mainstream of American professional life and regarded as little more than a set of reproductive organs in heels. With the publication of this book, Friedan had struck a nerve. It became a manifesto for a movement: a new wave of women's rights activism that built on the women's suffrage activism of the 1950s and early 1960s.

One of the consequences of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the United States was a reevaluation of the role of literature in rupturing the Western history of subordination and exploitation of racial and minority groups. The literature of the oppressed offered an alternative space that subverted the dominant society’s ethos. Sylvia Plath’s poems were published in the contemporary cultural context of subversion and resistance. The ideological tenets of the era that emphasized the independence of the oppressed from the oppressors’ hegemonic objectification infiltrated the aesthetic domain of poetic expression, i.e. her poetic expressions reflect the ideological and sociopolitical inclinations prevalent in the era of the Civil Rights Movement. Hence, her poetic production has played a major role in constructing an independent female subjectivity, But it is also true that the connections created an ideological space that helps shape the Self. In other words, the poems of her two main collections, "The Colossus and Other Poems" (1961) and "Ariel" (1965) are based solidly on what Marx calls, in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, “man’s real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”. (476)

The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, however, in the 1960’s provided women and other minority groups with a societal opportunity as well as an ideological framework to struggle for independence. As an attempt to fragment Western hegemony, the Civil Rights Movement aimed to rupture the Western hegemonic discourse. By providing women with the ideological tools to depart from the patriarchal superego hegemonic control, the women’s movement triggered a cultural chain reaction that aimed to subjectify the Other. Thus, in this culturally active context, Sylvia Plath and other women writers have written their poetry. Her poems should be read as part of women contribution to the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement in America. These poems are, to some extent, a reflection of a political utopian perception in Western society. In addition, such poems should be considered as modern rather than postmodern poetic

manifestos on the nature of Western hegemony and the power relations that govern the oppressor and the oppressed: man - woman relationship.

Thus, if American women's literary production is produced within the tenets of modernism, the epistemological feminine space of Plath's poems is produced within modernism's concerns of building subjectivity and creating independent consciousness. However, Christopher Beach, in the `ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition (1992), places Plath among those "experimental" writers who were opposed to the romantic tradition, or New Critical ideals. (45) Furthermore, Plath's late poetry is indeed a rejection of New Critical ideals of poetry, as well as the ego-centred romanticism that many feminist poets, critics, and revolutionaries ironically perpetuate. Toni Saldivar draws his peer critics' attention to the form of women's writing favored by feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: "This [feminist writing] is the creed of ego-centred romanticism that asserts its essential rightness by breaking old forms and making new ones as acts of self-generated identity". (148)

However, the postmodern dispositions of unbelonging and excess of existence do not affect those literary productions. This reflects American woman's dissatisfaction with the mystique of feminine fulfillment, which became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture, and her awareness of the politico-historical context in which the women's movement appears. Such context demands the creation of an origin and a new cultural reference point. The cultural and economic excruciating ambience of the 1960's does not offer the American woman the postmodernist intellectual luxury of deconstruction. Derrida, Foucault, or Lacan, for example, who are luxuriously coached within the political and cultural metanarratives of Western civilization, can revoke this subjectivity. Contrariwise, a woman toiling under the calls of traditional claims and of Freudian sophistication that she could desire no greater destiny than to glory in her own femininity, as portrayed in those poems, has to construct a subjectivity to prevent her cultural annihilation. It is no longer possible to ignore her voice or to dismiss the desperation of so many American women.

In this context, the researcher would like to emphasize that postmodernism is interconnected to modernism's episteme. In this case, an objectified gender cannot epistemologically jump to another space that attempts to deconstruct subjectivity. Such a cultural jump would mean an enhancement of the sense of loss and objectivity. First, American women writers had to have subjectivity, a self, an essence precedent to any claim to postmodernism. Nonetheless, the researcher would assert here that though prominent feminist poets', such as Maya Angelou, Adrienne Rich, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Marge Piercy, Sarojini Naidu, and Muriel Rukeyser, objectives, at this stage, are to

construct a feminine essence. This essence is not based on similar patriarchal grand narratives and reflects a contradictory nature of a fixed cultural core.

This essence, as a cultural origin, indicates an ideological goal to construct a cultural and political point of reference. This modernist objective to produce an imaginative essence enables the American women writers to identify their cultural sense of belonging as a subject. On the other hand, this essence is poetic and its core derives its cultural legitimacy from poetic imagination.

This claim does not mean that Plath's contemporary poetry is devoid of political objectives. On the contrary, her two collections are, first and foremost, political and social comments. Nevertheless, their political vision could not have been created without the help of poetic imagination. However, this nature is transformed into an aesthetic and imaginative feminine trait rather than a solely socio-political constraint, yet, without rejecting political agendas. Sylvia Plath attempts to develop this essence through one of her most aesthetic devices; poetry. It is not a mere coincidence that major feminist themes have been developed in aesthetic production more than in political polemics or manifestos. Poetry assumes a locus of the feminine essence, at least in those collections. In the early 1960's until recent times poetry has become the cultural locus for constructing a distinctive feminine subjectivity. Plath's two main collections, "The Colossus and Other Poems", and "Ariel" emphasize this role by inventing imaginative and poetic realities through which female awareness can be realized. Yet, it was this conflict of reality, with the widely publicized image of the happy American housewife which caused Selvia Plath to break the hypnosis of the Mystique in her own life, letalone the life of her contemporaries and after.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that my reading of these poems by Sylvia Plath is only a reading, but not the reading. These selections, in particular, and Plath's poetry in general, reject any concealed and final interpretation. I.E., those poems open a space for multiple readings as they reflect a confluence of historical, social, personal, and ideological crossroads. Therefore, the aesthetic nature of these poems amalgamates a myriad of conflictive and contradictory discourses that compete for dominance. This process generates an infinite horizon of interpretations and readings. This poetic struggle to identify feminist subjectivity, I believe, is the most valuable and important trait of these collections.

Certainly, the emphasis on the social context of these poems, does not aim at rebuilding the historical or social events. Nonetheless, this engrossing endeavor for breaking out from the dominant patriarchal appropriation is an ephemeral attempt to build an imaginative community. This attempt will later be deconstructed in order to establish this origin as a

poetic construct, not as a real one. Finally, Feminine subjectivity is not to be anchored to historical, linguistic, or ethic essentialism. Such fixations will undermine any attempt to achieve women's subjectivity. Thus, these poems cannot be interpreted according to a certain ideology or critical methods whether structuralism, Marxism, postmodernism, or even postcolonialism. Rather, they represent a battleground of ideologies and critical approaches.

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