

Redefining Femininity: The Unique Voice of Sylvia Plath

Yajnaseni Mukherjee

Lecturer, School of Humanities
KIIT University, Patia, Orissa, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper would like to focus on a reinterpretation of Sylvia Plath's poetry from the feminist perspective. As a woman, she was unique-seeking approval of the menfolk yet at the same time subtly striving to prove her superiority and excellence. Insecure she might have been in her personal domain but she did not put up a façade for the world at large. Though her poems reflect her inner turmoils yet she was a trendsetter who cannot be confined to a particular age. Somewhere in the innermost recesses of her heart, however, she was lonely – still, the small girl betrayed and hurt by her father's untimely death. Her unique brand of feminism presents a novel way of looking at her and her works – virulent yet seeking completion in her works and her children. Both her children and her poems are expressions of the Woman and Wit combined in her persona. It is often the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities that restrict Women, not the state of being male or female in its entirety.

KEYWORDS

Femininity; Sylvia Plath; Feminist perspectives.

The semiotic blurs the compartmentalized ideas of masculine and feminine and deconstructs all the scrupulous binary oppositions giving rise to a "bisexual" form of writing. Whether there is a specifically feminine mode of writing or as Adrienne Rich suggested that women must invent their own "common language" (Vendler 33) remains open to discussion because it can be deduced that Kristeva's 'semiotic' is not, inherently feminine; her discussions essentially revolve around 'male' writers. The symbolic order has an internal limit or borderline and the semiotic can be cited as an example of this and in this sense, the 'feminine' could equally be seen as existing on such a border. Borders generate hybridity and thus the woman is both 'inside' and 'outside' male society.

The woman is both a "romantically idealized member of it and a victimized outcast" (Jackson 91). Standing between man and chaos, she is sometimes the embodiment of chaos itself. Troubling the neat categories of such a regime, the feminine also blurs its well-defined boundaries. The feminine also signifies a force within society which opposes it. Actually, the feminine is a mode of being and discourse not necessarily identical with women.

The pattern of Sylvia Plath's association with men shows her instinctive attraction to men like Eddie Cohen, Richard Sasso and Ted Hughes, all individualists with none of Sylvia's need constantly to conform. Sylvia worried about her sex and suffered from an obsession for escape from herself by

'eating' other people. She feels precisely this power when she lyrically asserts in "Lady Lazarus" (*The Collected Poems* 244): "Beware... I eat men like air"

She assumes an androgynous nature with her voracious appetite and searches for an enigmatic imagery which could express unresolved power. Her devouring image makes Sylvia Plath one of the forerunners of the feminist movement. Ellen Moers writes, "No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement." (Wagner 84)

"The Zoo Keeper's Wife" (*The Collected Poems* 154) presents the picture of a woman 'digesting' her sisters—a good image of the acid treatment certain disapproved of women got from Sylvia: "Look, they are melting like coins in the powerful juices--"

This brings out a virulent feminism. The menstrual imagery used in this poem with the use of the word 'juices' brings out the deep and symbolic way in which she exerted her feminist consciousness. This appears to be probably a disguised hit at the "Adam-like" (Stevenson 44) image of Ted too. "Magi" (*The Collected Poems* 148) mistrusts all male ideas and "Face Lift" (*The Collected Poems* 155) happens to be a disguised hit at Dido.

...I roll to an anteroom where a
kind man.

Fists my fingers for me. He makes
me feel something
precious.

Is leaking from the finger-vents. At
the count of two

Darkness wipes me out like chalk
on a blackboard...

I don't know a thing.

For five days I lie in secret,

Tapped like a cask, the years
draining into my
pillow.

Even my best friend thinks I'm in
the country.

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels
away easy as paper."

("Face Lift" The Collected
Poems 155)

In this poem, mocking, spiteful, not a little masochistic, Sylvia was already rehearsing the hatred later to find expression in "Medusa", "Lesbos", "The Tour and Eavesdropper" --- all curiously, poems about women written in 1962. (*The Collected Poems* 224,227,237 and 260)

Sylvia Plath portrayed a unique feminism. To her, complete devotion was not only any betrayal of herself as a woman, it would make her whole as a person. For Plath, the most important things were always those she created: her poems, her children. After her split with her husband, 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 over harried mother with no time and energy for her art. It's been commented upon time and again of how she found the balance between the responsibilities of single motherhood and the demands and desires of her art. Perhaps it is in the witness of the struggle to do both and to do both well that feminists, women in search of their sole identities and in search of a liberated independence, see a kindred spirit at work. Writes Lucy Rosenthal, "Miss Plath doesn't claim to 'speak for' any time or anyone and yet she does, because she speaks so accurately" (Rosenthal 134)

Michelle Kinsey-Clinton makes an interesting point when she writes—

But where her writing speaks of her inner dualities, and sometimes even to extreme resentment and jealousy of men for what they had that she did not, it also speaks of a woman who did not want to be a woman in many contrasting senses of the word, and 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 Woman and of Wit in indelible imprint on her world. (Kinsey-Clinton)

In "Widow" (*The Collected Poems* 164) she refers to the woman deprived of the 'moth-face of her husband' as a 'great, vacant estate'. The man who makes a woman whole is conspicuous by his absence:

A second time, to have him near
again—
A paper image to lay against her
heart
The way she laid his letters, till
they grew warm
And seemed to give her warmth,
like a live skin
But it is she who is paper now,
warmed by no one".

Her inherent fear of infertility threatened her equilibrium in Boston (July 1959), when everything had "gone barren" (Stevenson 74); she was "part of the world's ash, something from which nothing can grow, nothing can flower or come to fruit" (Stevenson 89). Fear of losing Ted if proved a barren woman incapacitated her and drove her to the brink of disaster.

Later "The Munich Mannequins" (*The Collected Poems* 262) personifies her hatred of barrenness and its chill perfections in the mannequins,

"Naked and bald in their furs...
Intolerable, without mind."

The poem begins with the almost
harsh, certainly
critical line—

"Perfection is terrible, it cannot
have children".

The poem is a portrait of mannequins in snow-drifted shop windows who represent artificial women whose perfection in beauty is accompanied by

sterility and barrenness, "Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose".

Thus, acceptance of the female body, as well as the wealth of her mind, finds importance in her expression. For her, the female persona is a voice not to be relegated to the back shelves. Even her womb needs to find expression as stated earlier through her children. "Childless Woman" (*The Collected Poems* 259) speaks scornfully of the barren woman's life-denying narcissism, were

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with
nowhere to go.

"The Disquieting Muses" (*The Collected Poems* 74) one of her earlier poems expresses her deep ambivalence towards her maternal 'inheritance'. Plath reverts to the Italian artist Chirico's image of a woman with a featureless head like an egg. She is the epitome of a woman without origins or issue because she is organless and fabricated. This reiterated image appears as the image of the schizoid body in Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "schizophrenia" (Deleuze 59)

Mother, mother, what ill-bred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that
she
Sent these ladies in her stead.
With heads like darning-eggs to
nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

"The growing consciousness is a danger and a disease" opines Nietzsche (www.nietzsche.edu.com). And Guattari identifies the clinical term with a form of Nietzschean revolt. The body is removed from its role of production in the family tree. Death becomes its salvation. However, the egg-woman assumes the

form of a hermaphrodite being 'organless' and therefore without issue and at the same time being fabricated. She is 'bisexual' relishing the 'devouring' of men and 'digesting' her sisters at the same time.

Plath's preoccupation, however, lay with her 'outer' self—a brilliant, jovial, tense presence and the 'inner' woman fraught with fears and aggression. Plath gives the subject of her divided female selves and opposing aspirations, treatment, in her poem "Two Sisters of Persephone" (*The Collected Poems* 31). The piece paints a portrait of two sisters, different as dark and light. The first is a logical, mathematical, intellectual, indoorsy sort whose 'rat-shrewd squint eyes' and 'root-pale meagre 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 go 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.

Plath's desire to bring her own life cycle to complete fruition in motherhood is also strongly evinced from the time of her earlier work, only growing more securely rooted as her writing progressed along with maturation. Plath's maternal feelings are expressed in poems like "Brasilia" (*The Collected Poems* 258),

"Child" (*The Collected Poems* 265). "For a Fatherless Son" (*The Collected Poems* 205) and also her verse plays *Three Women* (*The Collected Poems* 176). These poems depict first a woman at times almost desperate to have a child, and then a doting, reverend mother.

Yours clear eye is the one
absolutely beautiful
thing

I want to fill it with color and
ducks,

The zoo of the new
Whose names you meditate---
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little

Stalk without wrinkle
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.
(*"Child" The Collected Poems* 265)

However, her ambivalent reactions to her female identity are reflected in her collection of poems "The Colossus".

It was not easy for her to accept this identity as is depicted in "All the Dead Dears" (*The Collected Poems* 70). She disowns her relation with the female skeleton.

How they grip us through thin and
thick,
These barnacles dead!
This lady here's no kin
Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
Blood and whistle my marrow
clean

To prove it...

She took pride for most of her life, in giving men the first place. To put it simply, Plath put the man on a pedestal and then sought his approval, daughter-style, not woman-style. She allotted fixed roles to the men in her life in "psychic economy" (Stevenson 124). Even in the aftermath of a disintegrated marriage, which must have

been for her the terrible crushing of a long-cherished dream, she churned out poems which are the ones universally hailed as the strongest, the deepest and the most profoundly Plath of all her works.

Her contempt for sisterhood, her loathing of female celibacy, childlessness, ageing often form the themes of her various poems. Yet using symbols of the moon, blood, menstrual imagery she corroborates Rich's argument for a female language. Thus, there is a force within her which opposes the presentation she makes on paper quite akin to the feminine force—a force within society which opposes it.

Thus, Plath proves instrumental in providing a unique perspective of feminism to the later poets. It was as if her persona was subjected to a contrary pull.

She wanted fulfilment as a woman but she wanted a replacement of an authoritative father figure in her life who would also be complementary to her artistic self. She never wanted to be classified, but somehow later critics and scholars developed the tendency to qualify the position—be it 'confessional' or 'feminist'. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that though her brand of feminism contrasted with the prevalent credos of feminism yet her poems and imageries are too feminist in approach to be ignored completely.

Her desire to conform, yet stand out and excel, her wariness about other females, her possessiveness, her desire to unite both her selves surely testify to the fact that "woman—the most unselflike perception of man is a major incident in a man's life" (Jackson 62).

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