



Embodiment of the Female from the Viewpoint of Cixous's L'écriture Feminine in Sylvia Plath's Poetry – A Study

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ABSTRACT:

Lacan's phallogocentric structure of language challenges the function of language as a neutral mirror of objective reality and rather refers to the privileging of masculine in construction of meaning throughout the patriarchal history which allowed no place for feminine writing. Thus, opposing phallogocentric discourse, poststructuralist feminists exhort to what Cixous terms as "écriture feminine" as the inscription of female body and female difference in language and text. Accordingly, viewing women's sexual difference as a *source* rather than a point of inferiority to men, Sylvia Plath rediscovers female experiences in her poems through using "écriture feminine" and thus exhibits the productivity of women's language. Hence, looking from the perspective of Cixous's "écriture feminine," the current study aims at analyzing the female modes of writing in Plath's poems. The main finding of the research is that, through using genuine female forms of expression, Plath brings into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, illustrating the oppressive forces that obstruct female expression.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Helene Cixous, écriture feminine, phallogocentrism.

Due to the control of men over their territory, women have been confined to live in a narrow room where they have undergone an unconscious brainwash throughout the whole history. Once they learn their name, they are also taught that "their territory is black" because they are considered to be black. Women are taught that their "continent is dark" and dangerous. That is how women's horror of their "dark" places have been internalized and at some point, as it seemed to be, eternalized. Riveting women between two horrifying myths of the Medusa and the abyss, the patriarchal society has made them to believe that theirs is too dark a continent to be exploreable. (Cixous, 1975, p. 349)

That is why, as Cixous (1975) points out, there have been few writings by women that could be inscribed with "femininity;" the number of female writers has been surprisingly small and even among this small number of women writers, there are many whose works are in no way different from that of the male writings. In other words, many of these female writers produce "classic representations of women" as sensitive and dreamy. Thus, making them their own enemies and turning their strength against themselves, men have led women to hate their own generation and not only to kill but also to bury their own potentials. The phallogocentric society has made women the "repressed of culture" (p. 349).

However, there have been poets who tried their hands in experiences extremely at odds with the phallogocentric traditions, that restrict women, through giving voice to a woman that "hold[s] out against oppression and constitute[s] herself as a superb, equal, hence 'impossible' subject." Through breaking the codes that either negate or constrain her, such a woman poet brings about groundbreaking revolutions. But, Cixous (1975) asserts, it is only the realm of poetry that allows for the appearance of such harrowing personages. The reason is that poetry deals with gaining strength through the unconscious as a place "where the repressed manage to survive" (p. 350).

One of these personages who allows herself to use the realm of poetry in order to write about what Cixous (1975) calls "impossible subjects" is Sylvia Plath. Having been born in a male-governed family and brought up in male-dominated society where everything, even literary (modes of) production and

publication, is evaluated and judged from the point of view of the overpowering male, Plath starts writing revolutionary poems giving voice to her silenced body and femininity. In a society where language becomes an instrument in the hands of the males through which the male governs the forms of expression and thus silences the female for whom masculine forms of expression does not function to convey her real life experiences, Plath undergoes a risky project through which she evades the “discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system,” to use Cixous’s words. (p. 353) Plath starts writing poems which inscribe the feminine body and articulate female experiences which are considered to be taboos by the governing phallogocentric discourse. Therefore, many of her poems contain an expression of female experiences, such as maternity and pregnancy, and female body. The following is to analyze such aspects of Sylvia Plath’s poetry.

As a confessional poet, many of Sylvia Plath’s poems were written under the influence of her real life experiences. Due to her personal experiences with regard to her relationships with the male figures in her life, especially her father Otto Plath and her husband Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath always felt like a victim in the hands of the male. As a response to such feeling of victimhood in a patriarchal society where even the literary circles are controlled by male powers, her poetry expresses her sense of victimhood in such a society. As a revolutionary act, she steps on a path where the governing phallogocentric environment has forbidden her to undergo. She writes of her private female experiences and gives voice to the silenced female in her poems, a characteristic which differentiates her writing from that of all other women of her time who wrote under the constraints of male literary circle in order to win the approval of the male judges of the publishing houses. That is why many of her poems were published posthumously and it was twenty years only after her death that she won the Pulitzer Prize.

It is due to such characteristics that her poetry could not be easily categorized under one category. Critics have always confronted with difficulty in defining Plath’s poetry under one category. As Bassnett(2007) notes, many terms such as “a confessional poet, an extremist poet, a post-romantic poet, a pre-feminist poet, a suicidal poet” are used to define Plath’s poetry. (p. 207) But none of these terms can thoroughly explain and include all the characteristics of her writing. However, one of the main features of her writing that distinguishes her from all other (female) writers of her time is the female language of her poetry, as set against the dominant phallogocentric discourse, as well as her fascination with female experiences and female body which she bluntly portrays in her poetry. Plath uses what Cixous (1975) calls as “l’écriture féminine” or the “white ink” as an antithesis to masculine modes of writing fashioned merely for male purposes. (p. 353) This is exactly what Cixous (1975) finds in a real feminine piece of writing. She asserts that upon finding the occasion, the woman seizes the chance to speak and to transform “all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift.” It is “her libido” which will lead to much more radical changes in a phallogocentric system than some might like to think. Cixous(1975) believes that since a woman has not always had a voice of her own, she formulates her speech through her body and her writing on body. It is her flesh that speaks the truth, laying her *self* bare. Through such process, a woman materializes her thought. *Inscribing* what she is saying, she “signifies it with her body. It is with her body that the woman supports the logic of her writing” (pp. 352-3).

Accordingly, Plath’s poetry deals with private experiences of women, women either as women or as mothers. Writing on Plath’s poetry, Hughes asserts “the world of her poetry is one of [...] total biological and racial recall” (qtd. in Oberg, 1978, p. 129). Through these biological references to women’s body throughout her poetry, Plath tries to find her true self and her true voice as a woman in a patriarchal society which is governed by men and in which women must live under the “gaze” of men as the “object of the gaze” (Cixous, 1975, p. 353). Therefore, through visualizing and giving account of female body, Plath breaks the taboos of phallogocentric society and creates a feminine text. In “Lady Lazarus,” for instance, the persona bluntly portrays a woman as the “object of the gaze” of the patriarchal society; breaking the taboos of phallogocentric society, the woman gives account of her body organs trying to give voice to her real self. The striptease female artist in this poem tries to “locate what it was that hurt” (Oberg, 1978, p. 147). She shows how her inability to speak of her body and her inability to articulate her female experiences through the inadequate phallogocentric language hurts. Hence, as Britzolakis (2007) mentions, Plath here writes in a language “closer to body.” (p.177)

Having been brought up under the power of a male-dominated discourse, Plath did not have any chance to explore the so-called “dark continent” of female body and female issues, giving voice to the female within her. But now through her poems in *Ariel* she breaks through the demands of phallogocentric

society and articulates her experiences as a woman through a feminine mode of writing. As Cixous (1975) points out, women have to “stop listening to the Sirens,” that is the voices of men who prevent her from exploring her continent, and also to look at the laughing Medusa (in spite of the pictures given of her by the phallogocentric society), in order to be able to change the history. (pp. 354-5)

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, [...]; not about destiny but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. A woman's body with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor- once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction- will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. (Cixous, 1975, p. 355)

Cixous (1975) goes on to say that women, as the victims of the old dumb game, have been taught by the phallogocentric society to ignore their bodies and even to turn away from it. But she asserts that women “must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, rhetoric, regulations and codes.” Cixous (1975) believes that for women to find their own discourse of anti-“silence” and anti-“impossible,” they must dip into the old phallogocentric discourse, cut through and finally get beyond it. They must subvert the masculine text. (p. 355) This is what Plath does; cutting through the phallogocentric discourse which did not allow her to talk of her body, she finally gets beyond it and creates her own discourse through which she subverts the phallogocentric discourse and establishes an anti-silence discourse of her own as a female author.

Plath's text in “Lady Lazarus” is subversive in the phallogocentric literary environment of the time. This is so not only in the sense that Plath breaks the taboos by writing on women's body but also in the sense that through exposing a woman's body, Plath creates a feminine text that functions as a subversive text. As Strangeways (1996) asserts, Plath's text is subversive in the sense that she reverses the gaze of male readers and “peanut-crunching crowd” so that they become “overlooked in the act of overlooking.”

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (Plath, 1981, pp.156-7)

Through the process of portraying “Lady Lazarus” as “archetypal victim and archetypal object of the gaze,” Plath highlights the fact that such a role for women is constructed by the patriarchal society rather than being essential and that “compel[s] a reconsideration of the place and stability” of the position of woman as the inferior, the object of the gaze, and the one who must speak in the language of the oppressor. (p. 386)

Besides, in “Lady Lazarus” Plath subverts the masculine text and creates a feminine text from the very beginning of the poem, that is, the title. The title comes from the Biblical character whom Jesus resurrected from the dead. Plath subverts this masculine mythic figure into a feminine one who is not resurrected by the male power but who resurrects her own self through female power which was formerly lost in the patriarchal society. As Plath herself describes the persona of her poem, “the speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn [...] the only trouble is that she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, [and] resourceful woman” (qtd. in Kendall, 2007, p. 149). The persona “liberate[s] the New woman from the Old woman” helping her to return to her origins. (Cixous, 1975, p. 349) Such return of “the ‘repressed’ of their culture” to her origins, according to Cixous (1975), is an “utterly destructive” return the force of which is equal to the most hostile of suppressions which they have undergone throughout history. The return of the female figure in Plath's poem also contains such characteristic of destructiveness. The reason for such an explosive return is that throughout the whole history women have lived in their muted bodies, in their

silences, in their dreams and in their “aphonic revolts.” Thus, now they kill to “blow up the law [...] *in language*” (pp. 355-6).

Woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (Cixous, 1975, p. 356)

Ostriker (1986) goes with the same idea saying that “our customary literary language is systematically gendered in ways that influence what we approve and disapprove of,” making it extremely difficult for us to acknowledge specific kinds of originality and difference in women poets. (pp. 2-3). Therefore, feminist critics look at the body as a “source of imagery” (Showalter 188). Ostriker (1986) gives us the example of twentieth century American female poets who use a franker and more persistent biological imagery, than their male poets, subverting the phallogocentric texts which forbid women of using references to their bodies considering them as taboos. (p. 5)

Thus, a feminine text, according to Cixous (1975), is nothing less than “subversive” (p. 356). And Plath’s text in “Lady Lazarus” is emblematic of such subversiveness from its very title. Plath subverts the traditional masculine text, which epitomizes the legendary male power, into a feminine text with persistent blunt female body images overpowering the female and giving her a sense of developing self through the process of which the New Woman is born out of the Old Woman.

Even her family oriented poems provide such female imagery and female experiences including the experience of motherhood. Besides, they tend to express Plath’s sense of herself as a woman developing a new “Self,” even though that Self is “constrained, oppressed [and] conditioned” (Wisker, 2004, p. 108). In “Morning Song,” for instance, Plath gives account of the experience of the poet-persona as a woman experiencing motherhood. In the poem the persona differentiates her “Self” from the child she has given birth to.

In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety.
We stand round blankly as walls.
I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand. (Plath, 1981, pp. 156-7)

A melancholic tone pervades the whole atmosphere of the poem reflecting the interiors of a woman whose body has undergone the experience of childbirth and now is confronted with the responsibility of motherhood. Plath is in fact “mythicizing the domestic” trying to express the mother’s tendency towards developing a sense of her “self,” thus, these are “not terrifying but liberating, celebratory images” (Wisker, 2004, p. 108).

According to Cixous (1975), although phallic mystification has altered good relationships, a woman is never far from the concept of being a “mother,” outside her functions as the nonname mother known as the “source of goods.” As a matter of fact, in woman there is always an urge which derives her to make everything all right, an urge to nourish and “stand up against separation.” There is always a little of the mother’s milk that makes her to write “in white ink,” that is “l’écriture feminine.” Thus the text becomes her body and so “she mothers herself.” The body urges the woman to “inscribe in language” her woman’s style. (352)

The mother’s milk makes Plath to write, in what Cixous (1975) calls the “white ink” or “l’écriture feminine,” on such concept as pregnancy, motherhood, and bodily functions through the process of pregnancy, which are among the private bodily experiences of women which phallogocentric discourse discards but Cixous’s “l’écriture feminine” calls for. Such feminine concepts, including maternal body, frequently appear in many of Plath’s poems including “Metaphors,” “Tulips,” “A Life,” “Cut,” “Contusion” and “Three Women” (Britzolakis, 2006, p. 117). “Three Women,” for instance, gives voice to three women who are undergoing or have undergone the experience of motherhood. The first is the voice of one who gives birth to a male child, the second is one who undergoes a miscarriage and fails to become a mother, and the third one is the voice of an unmarried college student who gives birth to a baby girl but shuns the responsibility of parenting it. Plath in this poem portrays the experience of childbirth as an

“exclusively female rite of passage” which the male-dominated society would not have allowed to be articulated in the formerly phallogocentric discourse. The Third Voice is the strongest voice in the poem who is representative of those women who unwillingly undergo such bodily experiences and have to confront its social, emotional, and moral outcomes. She uses “short, assertive statements, repeating the cry: ‘I wasn’t ready.’” The birth of the baby for this woman is associated with horror; “it is a place of shrieks” and the cries of the newborn are like “hooks that catch and grate like cats,” they pierce mother’s side “like arrows;” (Plath, 2003, p. 46) further, when the mother leaves the hospital in “the clothes of a fat woman I do not know,” she has to undo her fingers “like bandages” (Bassnett, 2007, p. 215).

I am so Vulnerable suddenly,
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. (Plath, 2003, p. 46)

Outside the walls of the hospital, the mother is doomed to live with pain. Like the Third Voice, all the three women in this poem “learn about suffering through the birth of their children; once the actual pain of birth itself is over, they are left to deal with the pain of living as mothers.” The feeling of sorrow seems to be inseparable from the experience of motherhood for these women in Plath’s poem. (Bassnett, 2007, p. 216)

In another poem entitled as “Metaphors” Sylvia Plath again portrays the experience of pregnancy and motherhood from the point of view of a pregnant woman. The poem is about a woman “feeling insignificant in the midst of her pregnancy” (Keef 88). She feels as if her body is not her own; she considers herself as a means used for an end, that is, giving birth to children. Plath uses rich metaphors in the poem which compare the narrator with different objects so that she could thoroughly render her experience as a pregnant woman.

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples
Boarded the train there's no getting off.
(Plath, 1981, p. 45)

Plath represents “maternal body as repressed ground of figuration.” She articulates “a crisis in femininity” through using bodily metaphors which phallogocentric discourse forbade her to use. (Britzolakis, 2006, p. 115) Her writing is characterized as “l’écriture féminine” allowing the forbidden to be spoken of and thus portraying the plights of women through such language. Plath’s blunt portrayal of female biology is “an exercise of the artist’s power to reshape the nature given to her in free forms of energy and desire.” Through this process, Plath gives female body “to a new body of women’s writing” asserting independent female creative powers. (Stowers, 1997, pp.160-4)

Thus, in a patriarchal society where is an instrument in the hands of the males through which the male governs the forms of expression and thus silences the female, Plath evades the “discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.” (Cixous, 1975, p. 353) She writes poems which inscribe the feminine body and articulate female experiences including maternity and pregnancy, and female body which are considered to be taboos by the governing phallogocentric discourse. Through using such genuine female forms of expression, Plath brings into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, illustrating the oppressive forces that obstruct female expression.

Returning to the realm of semiotic and the language of body which exists before the symbolic, Plath challenges the phallogocentric symbolic order of language which prevents women from expressing themselves in writing thoroughly. It is through returning to her body and writing of her *self* that Plath as a woman finds the opportunity to return to her body, the space that has been turned to an uncanny and strange companion to the woman through the laws of phallogocentric society. Women have been forced, either consciously or unconsciously, through the patriarchal forces to censor their body leading to the censoring of their breath and speech as well. That is why Cixous (1975) encourages woman to write of

her “self:” “your body must be heard.”(p. 351) It is only through writing of body that “the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth,” allowing women to bring about revolution and ruling out the old rules of the game. To write will relate the woman to her sexuality and to “her womanly being,” giving her access to her native strength. Plath’s literary repossession of her body through a self-conscious process constitutes, what Cixous (1975) calls, “the starting point for her imaginative autonomy” (p. 351) as a female artist going back to her native strength as a woman in a masculine literary environment governed by phallogocentric literary traditions.

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