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## Portrayal of Patriarchy in Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Feminist Study

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay looks at how patriarchal ideas are reflected in Sylvia Plath's poetry. The idea that the poetess wrote during a time period when women were still viewed as second-class citizens is examined in this study. Sylvia Plath depicts the women in her poems who wish to break free from the confines of the prevailing sexist culture and feel trapped in oppressive home obligations. After Plath's father's expiry and her distance from Ted Hughes, the poetess performed a thorough investigation of patriarchy. This study looks at how Plath's poetry, which downplays her experience as a housebound single mother, portrays patriarchy. The contention for the emancipation of women's rights at that time had a clear historical antecedent for Plath's experience of oppression. We learned that patriarchal society is to be blamed for all the embedded conflicts and miseries in Sylvia Plath's writing.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, society, oppression, suicide, confessional, pain

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### INTRODUCTION

In this article, I try to explain the patriarchal representations prevailing in the poems of Sylvia Plath with a particular reference to the 2nd wave of feminism. Betty Friedan's nonfiction work *The Feminine Mystique* pioneered the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism in which she revolted against the orthodox gender persona and she got this work printed in 1963, the same year, the poetess, Sylvia Plath died. This is why, in this particular research study, Plath's work is analyzed from the feminist second wave point of view. Her death was an enigma for the people because apparently strong personality of Sylvia and her controversial death opened up many questions relevant to her life and ideologies, strengths and weaknesses.

Sylvia Plath, regrettably, is best-known for her mental illness as much as she is admired for her poetic work. Her grief of her father's death in her tender age was aggravated by her husband's mistreatment towards her.

No doubt, Sylvia Plath's poetic work is more valuable than just taking it as a treaty of suffering of her mind. Her poetry is marked with unique symbols and metaphors that are alluring for the learners and researchers. Most of her work is related to children, where she has foregrounded the whims, mischievous acts and joyfulness of the young ones. Her school time art sketches, her childhood poems and her dolls made of paper all are still available in different archives. All these childhood memories display her love for life, independence and happiness. But all her happiness slipped from her life when her father died and her Electra complex did not vanish even after a long time. Owing to past miseries and present time disturbed, married life, she exhibited her oppressed mind in her poems.

The first wave feminism focused on its repercussion movement with respect to gender equality in case of voting and property rights while second wave feminism altered the debate to admit a bigger extent of female problems: forced sexuality, household life, domestic issues, workplace harassment, reproduction rights, and all social aspects which are in vogue. The second wave feminism and Plath's incorporation of illusions, metaphors, imagery, terse connotative and denotative associations in her poetic work are linked closely.

Second wave feminism was first disapproved by people in the beginning and Plath's work could also not attain much recognition. But Plath undauntedly wrote about the vulnerable and she addressed to the problems of race, color and gender. She created some space in the society for the less important, ugly and weak in the patriarchal and traditional world. At least, her work thrilled the people to polish over their false social idols and myths. She wrote in black tone and critics were spell bound by her exuberance. It was very difficult for the experts to discern the connotations and denotations from her work. It was not easy to separate her personality in two distinct roles of a woman and a writer. She received this seriousness and compactness as a human being and as a writer from her life experiences.

She was emotionally and psychologically disturbed and her poetry proved to be a source of her happiness. After identifying her talent of writing poetry Sylvia Plath was very happy. To better explain patriarchal and biased society, Sylvia Plath's personality, her diaries and literary works may provide a sufficient data to the researchers. She was a self defying personality as she wrote in a diary that she did not know herself. She wrote, she would like to call herself the girl who sought to be like Deity and then she disapproved her words by penning that she would never compass the flawlessness (Diary, age 17). All her childhood emotional disturbance was due to her father's untimely death. She could not accept the bitter realities of her life. She found solace in the concept of death and only due to her projection of death as a shelter from so-called world, she made many suicidal attempts. Her inclination to commit suicide was also because she realized that it was very difficult to change the mind sets of the society and of one's loved ones in one's favour.

Whatever she idealized, it got shattered by the bitter realities of life created by patriarchal set up. She was unable to create a comforting and soothing image of the world for her self. What she wrote to liberate others

from serfdom of the mythologized world could not provide her shelter from tormenting world. She made her own image for every situation and got hurt when nothing like that happened actually. As a female, she had a condense and a superimposed personality. Her multi-layered personality and her diversified works are perfect to be observed and scrutinized from feminist 2<sup>nd</sup> wave point of view.

Feminism is a French word. It was initially used about 1840. It was derived from the Latin linguistic unit “femina” which means woman. According to Oxford Dictionary, feminism is the study of the females’ rights, and it projects acceptance and intention that women should have the same equal rights and possibilities to flourish as men have. Feminism is a political theory and practice. It struggles to get freedom from all the restrictions which are made by men.

*The National American Woman Suffrage Association* (NAWSA) in 1920 passed the 19th “Rectification” that provided the females the opportunity of casting vote.

Her poems show the struggle against the "humiliating roles" prescribed by her close male counterparts. In America, women face "identity problem". So, the poems of Sylvia Plath are relevant to this problem (Friedan, 1990).

In the ensuing section, I will explain that how the feminine figures are considered inferior and how they achieved freedom from the male domination.

It is lucid and crystal clear from the poetic work of Plath that she considers women a mere source of reproduction and sexual pleasure. She does not like the concept of womanhood.

Her poem "Daddy" reflects her feelings of suppression she endured since her childhood and in young age. She faced many hardships from male dominated society including her father. The poem "*Daddy*" shows the male authority versus the females who are trying to be free from the cruelty of males. Females are just like puppets in the hands of males. In "*Daddy*" the speaker considers her father a fascist. She expresses:

**Every woman adores a Fascist,**

**The boot in the face, the brute**

**Brute heart of a brute like you. ("Daddy" 48-50)**

The vocabulary of the verses has powerful imagery that obsesses and attracts the readers to observe the final two stanzas of the literary composition “*Daddy*” which symbolize the actual impression of the weaker sex who live their lives under male domination.

**The vampire who said he was you**

**And drank my blood for a year,**

**Seven years, if you want to know.**

**Daddy, you can lie back now. ("Daddy" 71-76)**

The verses and lines mentioned above show that the poetess lived her life under the control of that man who only sucked her blood all time. Plath describes about her husband who hurt her by keeping affair with another lady whose name was Assia Wevill.

In the poem *Lady Lazarus*, the word Lazarus is a Biblical character taken from *New Testament*, who is fostered by the Redeemer (Jesus) from the deceased. In her poem, Plath elucidates about her previous two consecutive suicidal attempts which are committed only due to the suppression of male dominated society. And she wrote poem only to show herself *Lazarus* or may be *Phoenix* which who may rise from death to show herself brave, independent and strong as compare to men. Females are stronger than males and with that particular strength, they can even bear every cruelty and abuse of males as it can be perceived in the very last stanza:

**Out of the ash**

**I rise with my red hair**

**And I eat men like air. (Lines 82-84)**

Poem also describes the imagery of Holocaust to show the degradation and dehumanization of women like Jewish prisoners in concentration camps:

**A sort of walking miracle, my skin**

**Bright as a Nazi lampshade**

**My right food**

**A paperweight,**

**My face featureless, fine**

**A Jew linen. (4-9)**

The poetess considers herself a Jewish and Nazi to her father. She uses the words Nazi and Jewish as oppressor or oppressed respectively. She further means that women have no right to live their lives freely.

On the other hand, men can do everything whatever they want even brutality too.

Plath's poem *Mashrooms* written in 1959 also has the element of protesting against patriarchy and male domination. This poem includes the unity of women to defend themselves. This poem also encourages all women to show themselves unique. The first three stanzas of the poem describe that the women will get empowered, gain their strength and continue considering themselves strong and valuable:

**Nobody sees us,**

**Stops us, betrays us;**

**The small grains make room. (lines 7-9)**

The poetess records her compelling protest by expressing her genuine feelings about females limitless powers. She defies that females do not get apprehended and degraded, though they are treated as "Earless

*and eyeless/ perfectly voiceless"(15-16)* but soon, they will defend themselves. At the same time, they will combat the values and beliefs of the dominated patriarchal society. Further, this poem defines that the females do each and every household job but they demand nothing in reward:

**Diet on water,**

**On crumbs of shadow**

**Bland-mannerd, asking**

**Little or nothing.**

**Many of us!**

**Many of us! (22-24)**

These lines imply criticism against women that they should take steps to get their rights. They must be as much stronger as men are in taking their rights and defend themselves.

**Nudgers and shovers**

**In spite of ourselves.**

**Our kind multiplies:(lines 28-30)**

These culminating lines allude to the Bible, mainly to the Jesus' Address on the Mount, where Jesus says "*Blessed are the meek: for he will inherit the earth*" (**Constantakis 123**). Ladies are authorized to live their lives as men live. The whole poem is filled with powerful effects irrespective of the fact that females are linked to such usual objects like mushrooms.

**Literature Review:**

In literature, I am going to discuss the critics and writers. They read and criticized her poetry. They have given their own views on Sylvia Plath's poetry. Writers have scrutinized her poetry from a contrasting perspective as a manner of revealing subjugation of females in a male-controlled social set-up all through that time period and resisting the measures and principles of that society. Different authors explanations are autobiographical confessional appraisals of her work, regardless, they are suffragette or not, or place them in a cultural context or not. This study will elucidate chief work in which Sylvia Plath discussed her miseries. Alvarez has examined her poems with a psychoanalytical view and stated it as a "Confessional Poetry," and said about her life "the longest suicide note ever written" (Alvarez,1972).

Several critics accept and state Sylvia Plath to be the strong feminist precursor whose works testify to the bitter resentment felt by the women unable to free themselves from oppressive and oppressing roles" (Bassnett,1987).

Female's oppression in Plath's poems is discussed from the point of view of patriarchal structures. It is a leading and prevalent ideology without two equal competitors; it is plausible that no other system that may be favourable for the females has ever worked out such as an ample grip over its subjects (Millet, 1969).

In patriarchal set-up, the association among males and females is a signifier of political ascendance, an inventive pattern of implicated subjugation and colonial settlement (Ennis, 2007).

Gentry, D. S in her research endeavour *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath*, investigated how they committed suicide due to patriarchy and this is denoted as a reason and theme in *The Awakening* by Chopin, and *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, the collection of poems accomplished and published just after Sylvia Plath's own demise. Her poems such as "Daddy" reveals grief and trouble which she faced due to her father. Gentry says that all these female characters are motivated forward by their yearning for independence towards a wall of manacles and domination designed by society to clutch women in. These female characters would go an extra length to make any sacrifice for approaching to the other side". Gentry contends that through death Chopin and Plath bargain a way to transfer yonder the body, and they display suicide definitely in their works like a procedure of feminine self-distinctness (Gentry, D.S, 2006).

Bassnett clearly explains Sylvia Plath's work in a cultural context in her research work named as *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, while examining Plath's potentials as a writer . Nevertheless, the author shares a huge material of Plath's biography in this study. Likewise, in the final chapter, she contains Birthday Letters from 1998, written by Ted Hughes, Plath's husband, where he deciphers Plath's work, hereby adding even more emphasis to Sylvia Plath's private life, through his opinion. (Bassnett, Susan, 2005)

Many writers interpreted many of Sylvia Plath's literary works, particularly, the poems and out of them "Daddy" was their most favourite. A renowned Critic George Steiner delineates Plath's poem "Daddy" like "the Guernica of modern poetry", substantiating that this particular poem "achieves the classic art of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all"( Steiner, George, 2016).

Sylvia Plath's poem "*Daddy*," according to certain academics like Adam Kirsch, is self-mythologizing and should not be taken as a fully "confessional" autobiographical lyric about the author's real father. The poem, according to Sylvia Plath, is not autobiographical. A little before her suicidal attempt, Plath read out the lines from "Daddy" on BBC radio, speaking of herself as "a young lady with a severe Electra complex whose father passed away, while she still considered him as sacred. Her situation is more complicated than usual because her father was a Nazi and her mother was a Jew. The daughter marries both lines and is rendered helpless by them; in order to liberate herself, she must repeat this abhorrent metaphor. according to (Kirsch, Adam. 2005)

In her article "'This Holocaust I Walk In': Consuming Violence in Sylvia Plath's Poetry," Murphy inquires "Daddy" as an illustration of how an angry authoritarian's control ruined Plath's body. Murphy went on to say that the loss of power over many other people's bodies throughout history was also a part of the fall, in addition to Plath's body. In "Daddy," false bodies that represent compulsion are altered to represent the brutal

control of numerous women's bodies. The "Daddy" singer was forced to switch roles, going from victim to perpetrator. The Jews are portrayed as oppressors in "Daddy" because of their fury in the detention camps. The "maybe a little Jew" whose father was a Nazi said, "I had to murder you, Daddy." (Murphy, 1982)

Murphy emphasized that Plath made a distinction between oppression of oneself and that of others. The works of Sylvia Plath, according to Murphy, were a critique of the patriarchy's methods for maintaining its hold on authority and power. It is clear that the author intended for these power battles to be gender-based because the protagonist of "Daddy" is typically a woman standing up against males. In "Daddy," the struggle for control was frequently shown with dictatorial allusions. Murphy reports that the poetess, Sylvia Plath emphasized strength of the oppressed, the repressed body, since the poetess perceived the oppressor's complete dependence on the victim. Repressed and oppressed bodies were just as important as were the tyrants and oppressors, and they ended up being the time-tested source (Murphy, 1982).

Next, this research will outline the particular difficulties Plath encountered as a result of patriarchy via her poetry. The challenges women have faced as a result of patriarchy have been explored by commentators.

A subtle but significant impact of Kate Millett's use of the term "power politics" on the legal framework of marriage is the reduction of women to the level of basic utilitarian beings, objects for sexual pleasure, decorating, and custody. The woman is nothing more than a tool used by her husband to manipulate her into taking care of him, pleasing him, and following his instructions. A woman cannot live her life like Sylvia Plath did, achieving everything she wants. In Kate Millett's universe, man is shown as the dominant power. A woman has no value other than the purpose she fulfills for a man; she is only a robot for his consumption. She then fades away into nothingness. Specifically: "The Candidate" Sylvia Plath compares the feminine lead to a piece of paper.

**Naked as paper to start**

**But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,**

**In fifty, gold. ("The Applicant" 30-32).**

The pain, shame, and agony of being a woman in the 1960s are depicted in this poem by Sylvia Plath, along with the gender norms that were prevalent at the time. She fits nicely with the traditional roles of motherhood, domesticity, and needlework. Juliet Mitchell noted in a reflection on the plight of women, "The essential structures of women's predicament are productivity, reproduction, sexuality, and child socialization" (Mitchell, 1996).

Simone de Beauvoir contends that males may mystify women in her book *The Second Sex*. A key factor in the growth of patriarchy is mystification and generalization. Women are socialized from an early age to think and behave in ways that prevent them from taking part in many of society's most illustrious endeavours. The

line from Beauvoir's book that is arguably the most well-known is, "The change to femininity occurs after puberty, not before.(Beauvoir, 2010).

In every stage of woman's life, she has to face and follow the rules and customs of society. "In American society baby boys are outfitted in blue and baby girls in pink. Although, the backgrounds of this practice are not identified, most parents conform with this cultural habit" (Andersen, 1993).

After this Chafe enlightens, a girl child was forced to select girlish toys, and to be more unemotional, desk-bound, inaudible and immaculate as compared to her brothers"(Chafe, 1994).

### **Analysis**

Simone de Beauvoir was a French female rights activist, author and existentialist truth-seeker. Beauvoir's work "*The Second Sex*" in which she emphasized that women are liberal to do every activity as men do. She further says that women are equal to men in getting education, following customs and laws. Her feminism is based on the recognition that female's liberty was proved better. Then she further says that women are still living their lives under patriarchy.

Sylvia Plath shows her feelings of oppression in her poem "Daddy". She faced many hardships from childhood and in young age by male dominated society. She says "Every woman adores a Fascist / The brute in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you".

Simone de Beauvoir agrees with Sylvia Plath. She explains in "The Second Sex" women are always considered inferior to men. She says women are always defined as 'the other' by men. She defines in her Introduction that female is needless, unnecessary as against to the necessary. Man is the dominant, he is the perfect and woman is the other.

Plath compares herself with the Jew and her father Otto Plath with Nazi. There is an unequal relationship between Jew and Nazi. Both present themselves like oppressed and oppressor respectively.

Beauvoir says that there is an ambiguity between supremacy and transcendence, yet males have been blessed whereas females have been forced to do a lot of work. Thus, Beauvoir suggests to question and inquire that how this unequal type of behaviour has emerged and what are the matters and rules which maintain its social power.

Plath had lived all her life under male pressure. She was dissatisfied with her father. She could not bear her father's cruelty and subsequently, her husband had tyrannized her by keeping affair with another woman Assia Wevill. At last, she lost the courage and committed suicide because she could not bear the cruelties of male figures.

Beauvoir's decision of committing suicide contradicts her ideology. She showed dissatisfaction for this type of folly. She talks about women's freedom. She did not favour the act of committing suicide. Her views for women to fight for their rights clarify her power of nerves. She also talks about modern female figures. She



suggested women to have pride on their words, works, thoughts and creativity as men do. Particularly, she suggested this for those women who consider themselves equal to men. Beauvoir is not in favour of nuclear family because it can be harmful for both partners particularly woman.

Plath in her poems shows the protest against patriarchy. She describes the uniqueness of women. She says women are strong and will be strongest when they will consider themselves valuable. They cannot be degraded at all, as it is explained in her words, "The small grains make room (7-9 Mushrooms). They are innocent, emotional as well as strongest. They bear all calamities given by society or male figures.

Beauvoir in her Book 1 has described a myth of the "Eternal Feminine". This includes many myths inside for example: the mother, the motherland, nature, the celibate etc. She describes woman as a wife, mother, sister, daughter and not only as a caretaker of house but also describes how she bears the problems at the time of childbirth. This shows women's bravery that despite weakness she bears all manifold problems.

Plath's poetry shows that women are mere a source of sexual pleasure and reproduction. She had two children and despite being blessed with two kids she and her husband did not have happy relationship. Men use their wives only for sensuous pleasure. Females had no value in men's eyes.

Beauvoir is satisfied to claim women's definition as men's others. Women's otherness can be proved by noticing women's problems like pregnancy, menstruation, lactation etc., that are unknown to men. They can't feel the pain of women.

Plath committed suicide only to get rid of the miseries of life. Her suicide exhibits that she was that she was under patriarchy. She made herself inferior to men by committing suicide. Suicide, it is the exertion of weak people.

Simone de Beauvoir's view is that when females behave or act like other females they are considered and blamed for being inferior and when females follow the behaviour of human beings, their behaviour is considered like males.

Plath was under male domination. She lived all her life under the pressure of patriarchy. At last, she committed suicide out of frustration. She must have saved herself from this kind of action. She must have proved herself brave. She acted according what she internalized since her childhood about female decision making. So, she decided to commit suicide like contemporary weak women.

Beauvoir in her writing, *The Second Sex* says that society which consists of men, briefs to men that females are under males' heels, and they are inferior to men. She tried to inculcate in women that they can get rid of their inferiority only by eliminating the male dominance.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Sylvia Plath has discussed cruelty of her father and husband in her poetry. Her autobiographical references show that she was not offender or characterless but she confronted all the social catastrophes and hardships.

She narrated her worries only through writings. She mostly met with few male figures in her life and she clearly experienced the nature of males. She was dissatisfied with the nature of men. There is fraud, resentment and contempt in man's nature. She did not take solid steps to defend herself. At last, she saved herself from the cruel male figures by committing suicide. This shows that patriarchy was on its high peak at the time of Sylvia Plath. Males consistently misused their authorities and powers on women. Consequently, the feminist movement came into being to deal with the male publicized narrative. Women stood for themselves and raised their voices against patriarchal popularized structures in language and practice. They started to get an education equal to men. They are now considered equal to men.

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