

Tribhuvan University

Female Masculinity in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

A Thesis Submitted to Central Department of English
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in English

By

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March 2009

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my most respected thesis supervisor, Mr. Bal Bahadur Thapa who not only provided me with outstanding guidance but also gave constructive suggestions while preparing my thesis. Without his inspiration and intellectual stimulation, this research would have never been completed.

Most respectfully, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Krishna Chandra Sharma, Head of the Central Department of English, Kirtipur. Similarly, my special thanks go to Mr. Jiva Nath Lamsal, Asst. Lecturer, Central Department of English Tribhuvan University Kirtipur Kathmanu, Nepal for his invaluable suggestions.

I am thankful to Uttam Poudel, Mohan Kumar Chaudhary, Kumar Jamakatel and Kailash Shrestha for their constant encouragement and co-operation to accomplish this research work.

I extend my gratitude to my parents Badri Prasad Dahit and Jogani Dahit for their economical support and love. Likewise, I'd like to thank my brother, Haridwar Dahit for his continuous support. My special thanks go to my wife, Sumitra Dahit and my nephew, Pankaj Dahit for their inspiration and encouragement to carry out this research as well.

Finally I like to express my deep sense of gratefulness to all the valued teachers of English Central Department, Tribhuvan University, Kitipur.

Abstract

The present dissertation explores female masculinity in Sylvia Plath's poetry. As Plath is angry with patriarchy for driving women to neurosis by inflicting injustice and exploitation on them, she attributes masculinist traits to her female speakers so as to subvert the patriarchal notions of looking at women. Sylvia Plath's poems are pregnant with the idea of liberation of women from the limited territory of patriarchal sap. In her poetry, she poignantly expresses and exposes the age-old repression of women and allows a gust of rebellion to avert the male domination. In the patriarchally constructed society, most women have already internalized the stereotypical roles that mark their own marginalization. They are pretty complacent with their submissive roles, motherliness and domesticated, dull as well as nullified existence. They simply comply with what patriarchy wishes them to do. This is what Plath wants to subvert in her poetry.

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I. Introduction and Critical Review

This thesis primarily strives to focus on the fact that Sylvia Plath's poems are pregnant with the idea of liberation of women from the limited territory of patriarchal sap. In her poetry, she poignantly expresses and exposes the age-old repression of women and allows a gust of rebellion to avert the male domination. In the patriarchally constructed society, most women have already internalized the stereotypical roles that mark their own marginalization. They are pretty complacent with their submissive roles, motherliness and domesticated, dull as well as nullified existence. They simply comply with what patriarchy wishes them to do. This is what Plath wants to subvert in her poetry.

Plath is conscious enough to realize her slow decay due to these stereotypical roles. She is aware of her poetic talent as bright, young middle-class woman. Therefore, she furiously writes about her own mental illness caused by nausea-like domestic confinement, her unhappy childhood, marriage experience and her repressed guilty desires. Fueled by anger towards her husband and father, she vehemently attacks patriarchy. The time when Plath lived was the time when American patriarchy was attempting to counteract the war time freedom of women, who took jobs and family responsibilities of their absent men by reestablishing the belief that women's place is in the home. Especially 1940s and 1950s was the time strongly dominated by the patriarchal discourse, which exercised power over female. This discourse undermined the power and capacity of women and supported male domination. In short, the discourse had allowed men to exercise their power over women. However, Sylvia Plath, as the present study unravels, appropriates masculinity so as to present her female speakers with masculine attributes so as to challenge patriarchy. In other words, she resorts to female masculinity to challenge the masculinist patriarchy.

Male domination can be heavily seen in many cultural systems of the world. It is very easy for males in male dominated societies to keep females under pressure and take advantage of their dominated position. In the male dominated cultures, females suffer heavily in different forms of relations like as a mother, wife, daughter or sister.

The importance of men and their superiority has been a part and parcel of social mores for generations in many societies. Women have always been the less important individuals. When a woman lives in a male dominated society, she obviously undergoes many hardships. It is a wretched condition of women in our society when she has no husband in her life she is not worthy of respect. The society finds faults with anyone who does not adhere to its laws. In other words, they are the transgressors of society. In a male dominated society, a woman's role is hence viewed through a magnifying glass, and she is always watched by others, especially if she does not follow the rules established by the males. In this situation, a woman is not born but made by the society. In her seminal text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determine the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (25).

Thus patriarchal practices which reduce women's status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the very fabric of society. Patriarchy has promoted two images: woman as the sexual property of man, and woman as chaste mothers of their children. Even though man is a civilized being now, there is still the savageness of primitive man in him. With savage selfishness, he treats woman as an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort. Man has subjugated woman

to his will, used her as means to promote his selfish gratification, to fulfil his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but he has never desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind.

Thus, denied the freedom to act and choose on their own, women remained solely inside the field of vision, mere illusion to be dreamt and cherished. A woman has been turned into a 'man's shadow-self', 'an appendage', 'an auxiliary' and the 'unwanted and neglected other'. A woman is held to represent the 'otherness' of man, his negative.

Simone de Beauvoir finds man-woman nexus quite unsymmetrical and uncomplimentary for as "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined criteria, without reciprocity"(9).

A woman is never regarded an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position in our society. It is an appalling condition of women that they cannot live without men in our social set-up. As they are considered to be physically weaker, they need protection from males. This is the root cause of women's plight in our society. Beauvoir claims:

Man can think of himself without woman. She can not think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees [...] she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex [...] absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental the inessential as opposed to the essential. (10)

The passage above makes it pretty clear that the woman always need the support of the man to have her identity. Without man, she has no trace at all.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932, as the eldest child of Otto Emil and Aurelia Plath, Sylvia Plath is widely considered one of the most emotionally evocative and compelling American poets of the postwar period. Although Plath gained only modest critical success during her lifetime, after her suicide at the age of thirty and the subsequent publication of *Ariel* (1965), a collection of poems, she achieved widespread acclaim as a poet.

This status was affirmed when Plath's posthumously published *Collected Poems* (1981) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1982. Plath also wrote a semi-autobiographical novel titled *The Bell Jar* (1963), which, like her poetry, reveals an intensely personal struggle with self-consciousness, bold metaphors for death and sexuality, and a pioneering examination of societal limitations experienced by women. A complicated literary personality whose biography is nearly impossible to be disentangled from her writing, Plath has often been regarded as a confessional poet, though her deeply personal lamentations often achieve universality through mythic allusion and archetypal symbolism. Viewed as a cathartic response to her divided persona as an artist, mother, and wife, Plath's works have been hailed by feminist critics for illuminating the personal and professional obstacles faced by women in the mid-twentieth

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Regarding the poetry of Plath, Patricia Meyer Spacks says, "Plath's literary oeuvre is remarkable for its unrestrained emotional intensity and its ubiquitous incorporation of personal detail inspired by the author's own life experiences" (76). Once again, Spacks relates Plath to her personal life. Laying emphasis on the same,

McCann associates Plath's poems with what J.M. Rosenthal called 'confessional poetry'. In this regard, he finds most of the confessional elements in her poems. Quoting Robert Phillips, he further argues that "Robert Phillips' description of this kind of poetry could be based on her works; it dominates nearly all of the sixteenth characteristics of confessional verse ..." (565).

Robert Diyanni, in his book *Approaches to Fiction, Poetry and Drama*, observes:

Plath's poetry displays an overriding preoccupation with estrangement, motherhood, and fragmentation within contemporary society. Many have further asserted that the collection demonstrates Plath's mastery of traditional literary forms while bearing the influence of confessional poets such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. (814)

Diyanni points out both the literary as well as personal aspects of Plath's poetry. Loise Tyson, however, claims, "There is histrionic display of emotion, inaccessible personal allusions, and nihilistic obsession with death in Plath's poetry" (50).

Patricia Stanley observes the holocaust imagery in Plath's poetry: "In certain of the Ariel poems published shortly after her death, Plath utilizes imagery related to her own suicide attempts to express empathy for Holocaust related suicides. "Lady Lazarus", "Getting There", and "Daddy" are the most vivid and disturbing" (403). Hence, Stanley concludes that Plath combines her personal experience with history and psychology, and history relating Nazi persecution of Jews. In the poem, "Daddy" he finds the speaker and daddy's connection to Nazism. Similarly the same ethos can be seen in her other poems such as, "Lady Lazarus", "Getting There" and the likes. Regarding her poetry, Plumly states that Plath is a conscious woman who has a sense of her own voice: "Plath's poems show a steadily developing sense of her own

voice, speaking of subjects that—before the 1960s—were considered inappropriate for poetry: anger, grotesque humor, sorrow,, and dance , contrasted at times with a rarer joy and a deep understanding of women’s various roles" (813). In a way, Plumly considers Plath an iconoclastic poet. Likewise, Christina Bitzolkais says, “Sylvia Plath's writing is typically associated with images of death and suicide; however her works reflect much more meaningful and socially relevant ideas” (153).

Most critics have acknowledged that Plath's poems display an accomplished technical acumen and a brilliant, yet stark insight into severe psychological disintegration and harrowing existential anxiety. Many have also asserted that despite its overall gravity, her poetry exhibits an appealing undercurrent of irony and dark humor in its treatment of morbid themes. However, some commentators have objected to what they perceive as Plath's histrionic display of emotion, inaccessible personal allusions, and nihilistic obsession with death. These critics have further averred that her use of horrific events as metaphors for personal anguish might be considered gratuitous and inappropriate. Regardless of the critical debate about the merit of Plath's themes and motifs, feminist scholars have championed the poet for her pioneering efforts to expose the absurdity of conventional feminine models and her attempts to establish equal footing for women writers in a male-dominated publishing industry. In this manner, Plath's poems have been read and studied from different perspectives. The present research aspires to explore how Plath, in her poems, attribute masculinity to her female personas so as to subvert masculinist patriarchy, which inflicts injustice and exploitation on women.

The dissertation has been divided into four chapters. Chapter I is an introductory chapter. It will introduce the intended issue, bring in reviews on Plath's poems, establish the hypothesis and provide a skeleton of the whole study. Chapter II

witnesses a discussion on the theoretical insights required to undertake the analysis of the text. Chapter III will analyze the text deriving the theoretical insights from Chapter II. Chapter IV concludes the whole study, and thus proves the hypothesis established in the Chapter I.

Considering the time and resource factors, only five poems by Plath will be selected for the textual analysis.

II. Gender Studies, Gender Construction and Female Masculinity

It is a field of interdisciplinary study which analyzes the phenomenon of gender. Gender studies is sometimes related to studies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and location. Gender is a term referred to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity. The socially constructed aspect of differences between women and men are the concerns of gender studies. Gender studies deal mainly with the social differences between men and women created by the society, which is learned, is changeable over time and varies within and between cultures. Gender studies not only concerned to the individual and personality differences but as the symbolic level to cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and at the structural level to sexual division of labor in institution and organization. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (*The Second Sex* 13). In gender studies the term "gender" is used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities. It does not refer to biological difference, but rather cultural difference. As a constructivist endeavor, gender studies examine how gender is less determined by nature than it is by culture.

Religion explains that in the very beginning of human history, there existed two sexes- Male and female, who were biologically different but were partners in every activities. They are called *Parkrity* and *Purus* among the Hindus and *Adam* and *Eve* among the Christians and it is understood differently in each culture and religion. The history of the creation of male and female is explained as necessary to continue the human species. But the evolutionist theorists explain in terms of Darwin's theory of origin of the species. They explain societies and cultures as developed form of the primitive to modern stage- from hunting and gathering to the modern industrialized societies. This explanation does not provide a satisfactory reason for gender

construction. Taking examples of various types of family and society still existing, it is difficult to point out specific period when, where, and how gender role segregation started. Anthropologist believes that *Adam* and *Eve* would have done same type of work when there was no gender role assignment. Initially “it was believed that it was the physical appearance and strength that distinguished between male and female and the strength of masculinity was the cause to control over women. But Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* disclosed the myth and reality of the universal understanding of masculinity/femininity depicted mostly by male sociologists\

Anthropologists argues in her ground breaking book that in pastoral and nomadic period men and women had same work, mostly hunting, gathering and fishing. Both of them had no desire of children, as they were burden for both to carry around and no specific place to protect from wild animals. Then most of the children were either killed or left to survive on their own. Only those who were strong survived. When human beings thought the need of fixed settlement and a house then only the concept of family and protection of children were given importance. When they entered in to agricultural period, they realized the need of children, family and community by which they could yield more and more support each other in various ways. Beauvoir believes that in the beginning of the agricultural period women had a very high position as the people used to work in the field and the woman was seen as miracle of reproduction. Most of the societies at this stage were matrilineal. Children were given mother’s title. Mother had more power and rights; she could mate with anybody and bore all the responsibilities of the children. Later on, men’s nature to take risk and show physical strength began to conquer individuals and groups. Because of this nature of risk taking he conquered nature, started constructing and innovating new tools and technologies. Dr. Samira Luitel says:

Women as bearer and rearer of children mostly worked inside household and were kept away from his inventions. Her outside activities was constrained die to her physical nature and also man's reluctance to involve her in his private business. With the advancement agricultural and small scale industries, woman was still limited to her own housestead. (13)

The female autonomy within the household was also gradually taken away with the establishment of modern industries mostly based on patriarchal values. The role of women was seen most important as mother and caretaker than the manager of household. Men, with the development of civilization thus, enslaved women as it advanced. This example “applies most prominently in the industrialized societies than the small preliterate society” (Luitel 13).

Thus, in the due course of time in order to fulfill their vested interests males began to subordinate females for which, according to feminists, there are several factors such as economic, farming force and violence and others. Yet feminists believe that non- gender societies are possible. They strongly pose the argument about the existence of non- gender societies and insist “they have existed and will exist again” (P).

Gender difference is a distinction of biological and/or physiological characteristics typically associated with either males or females of a species in general. In the study of humans, socio-political issues arise in classifying whether a sex difference results from the biology of gender. For example, men are taller than women on average, but an individual woman may be taller than an individual man.

The existence of a gender difference does not necessarily identify whether the trait is due to nature or environment. Some traits are obviously innate (for example,

reproductive organs), others obviously environmental (for example, given names), while for others the relationship is either multi-cause or unknown.

Daniel Dennett contends that “modern humans have inherited natural traits that were adaptive in a prehistoric environment; including traits that had different advantages for males versus females” (110). Evolutionary theory of sex considers gender differences as a result of distinct specialization of the sexes, performing relationship with preceding generations and with the environment. Theory explains ethological and psychological sexual dimorphism, more efficient "education" or "training" of females during the course of ontogenetic adaptation as well as greater conformism of females well known to psychologists. Gender role theory and Alice Eagly claims that “boys and girls learn the appropriate behavior and attitudes from the family and overall culture they grow up with, and so non-physical gender differences are a product of socialization” (90). These are not all mutually exclusive theories: it is possible that gender differences are partially innate but are then reinforced and exaggerated by the environment. Some feminists see gender differences as caused by patriarchy or discrimination, although difference feminism argues for an acceptance of gender differences. Conservative masculists tend to see gender differences as inherent in human nature, while liberal masculists see gender differences as caused by matriarchy or discrimination.

Gender identity is a person's own sense of identification as male or female. The term is intended to distinguish this psychological association, from physiological and sociological aspects of gender. Gender identity is “how one personally identifies is or her gender regardless of his or her sex characteristics” (Luitel, 25). It does not have to be either man or woman, but can be a combination of feminine, masculine and androgynous feelings. However, it is now thought that the innate gender identity,

although powerfully influenced by the sex of the genitalia and the gender of rearing, is not determined by these factors. There is evidence that “sex differentiation of the brain may be inconsistent with other sex characteristics, resulting in individuals dressing and/or behaving in a way which is perceived by others as being outside cultural gender norms; these gender expressions may be described as gender variant” (Luitel, 33). Gender Identity does not refer to the placing of a person into one of the categories male or female; but without including the concept of interaction with society at large the term has no meaning. As social beings there should be reciprocal relationship between the sexes, which has become the immediate demand of feminists today. Females today are striving and aspiring to get their identity and self-esteem.

A stereotype is a preconceived idea that attributes certain characteristics (in general) to all the members of class or set. The term is often used with a negative connotation when referring to an oversimplified, exaggerated, or demeaning assumption that a particular individual possesses the characteristics associated with the class due to his or her membership in it. Stereotypes can be used to deny individuals respect or legitimacy based on their membership in that group.

Stereotypes often form the basis of prejudice and are usually employed to explain real or imaginary differences due to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic class, disability, occupation, etc. A stereotype can be a conventional and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image based on the belief that there are attitudes, appearances, or behaviors shared by all members of a group. Stereotypes are “forms of social consensus rather than individual judgments” (Tyson 87). Stereotypes are sometimes formed by a previous illusory correlation, a false association between two variables that are loosely correlated if correlated at all. Stereotypes may be occasionally positive. As in the case of male- dominated society, women’s are

assigned to fulfill only household- chores and are often called “kitchen creature.” Submissive, delicate, fragile, emotional, docile, half of men, virginal, angelic, subordinate, inferior are some of the feminine stereotypes constructed by the society whereas assertive, bold, adventurous, intellectual are generally used as stereotypes for males. Above-mentioned stereotypes for females constructed by the patriarch in order to fulfill its vested interest are the matter of great objection from the parts of females.

Masculinity is manly character. It specifically describes men and boys, that is, personal and human, unlike male which can also be used to describe animals, or masculine which can also be used to describe noun classes. When masculine is used to describe men, it can have degrees of comparison—more masculine, most masculine. The opposite can be expressed by terms such as unmanly, epicene or effeminate. A typical near-synonym of masculinity is virility and the usual complement is femininity. This is simply a repressive ideology which says its belief as something natural but its intention is immensely guided by the vested interest of patriarch.

Femininity is also called womanliness or it refers to qualities and behaviors judged by a particular culture to be ideally associated with or especially appropriate to women and girls. Distinct from femaleness, which is a biological and physiological classification concerned with the reproductive system, femininity principally refers to secondary sex characteristics and other behaviors and features generally regarded as being more prevalent and better suited to women, whether inborn or socialized. In “traditional Western culture, such features include submissiveness, gentleness, patience, and kindness” (Tyson 115). These are often perceived as being associated with personality traits such as nurturing, life-giving qualities, creativity, and openness, or yielding, to other people. The modern social stereotype of a woman is perceived as

the complementary opposite of a man. A feminine woman may have physical attributes different from those of a masculine male. These attributes result from the relationship between an individual's biology and the socialization she receives as a result of that biology. However, theories of femininity explored in the field of Gender Studies propose that femininity and masculinity are essentially constructed or 'performed' through a process of social construction.

Gender discrimination refers to the prejudicial treatment of an individual based on biological sex. It is a gender stereotype model, also referred to as sexism or sexual discrimination. Such practices have shown favoritism to a particular child and many cases it has resulted to the negligence or disregard to the female sex. Preferences of male child, opportunities and choices for the male child are some of the examples of gender discrimination

Liberation means individual freedom from exploitation or slavery. This concept of liberation came out of the feeling of domination and oppression existing in the society due its hierarchical system, - class, caste, races and sex etc. The socialist thinker in their theories of class struggle explains that the dominant group dominates the oppressed group and exploits them. They regard that “these oppressed group must me liberated for an egalitarian\ socialist society. (Samira Luitel 212). In the feminist theory liberation means freedom from male domination. Women’s Liberation Movement, during the late 1960s were targeted towards elimination of all forms of domination, some of them were the nature of family and private property.

Emancipation means freedom from political, legal and moral restraint. Women’s emancipation means freedom from the restrictions from the community or society and obtaining all the rights and opportunities with respect to men. Most of the critical thinkers advocate for emancipation by arousing critical consciousness.

Women's consciousness raising group in Women's Liberation Movement deemed for women's emancipation by freeing them from all bondage \ obligations even from the family.

Almost all societies follow gender based social values and identities. These values are maintained from the social institutions like family, community, state and their mechanisms. In the gender- oriented societies, women and men are assigned specific roles which itself signifies the sex of the individual. Such roles and responsibilities limit the boundaries of men and women which can privilege or constrain the progress\ development of individual. The most common pattern of gender role assignment in every society is that men are engaged in work outside home while women are engaged inside the household. Because of the belief that women are supposed to do the reproductive works and men are supposed to earn the living for the family. "This division of labor, which was felt necessary in the agricultural societies, has been changed due to industrialization when women started to join the outside jobs" (Luitel, 19). But the sexual division of labor is continued in the market place also where women are mostly found in their traditional jobs, the works women are engaged are mostly low while men are found in more technological and powerful jobs. "An assessment of gender roles and the position of individual in the social institutions can reveal how they support the maintenance of prevailing gender values in society" (Luitel, 19). Traditional gender role caste men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive while they caste women as emotional (m irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have simply been used to show men's supremacy over women. From these so-called gender roles, women have been excluded from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (in the family, as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world). Paying men higher

wages (salary) than women for doing the same jobs and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as “mathematics and engineering male dominated society puts women in low position” (Lois Tyson, 85). Low position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally produced. For example, it is patriarchal assumption that more women rather than men suffer from hysteria as it is socially defined as a woman’s problem. But hysterical behavior in men won’t be diagnosed as such. Women are really oppressed by the traditional gender roles which undermines her self-confidence and assertiveness. Even in literature, female characters are stereotyped either as “good girls” (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or “bad girls” (violent, aggressive, defiled, monstrous etc). Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender roles, she is a “good girl”, if she doesn’t she is a “bad girl”. These two roles also refer to as “madona”, and “whore” (prostitute) or “angel” and “bitch”. Ironically, men sleep with “bad girls”, but they don’t marry them. “Bad girls” are discarded because they don’t deserve better. They are not good enough to bear a man’s name or his legitimate children. The “good girls” on the other hand, is rewarded for her submissive behavior in the society. The repressive attitude towards women’s sexuality is still visible in our language today. For example, we use negative word “slut” to describe a woman who sleeps with a number of men while we use the positive word “stud” to describe a man who sleeps with a number of women. Same is the case in the world of fashion too.

Hence, traditional gender roles have made women “subordinate”, “inferior”, “marginalized” and “other” in various social platforms (Tyson 86).

Female masculinity came in to being in direct opposition to a more generalized discussion of masculinity within cultural studies that seems intent on

insisting that masculinity remains the property of male bodies. It is a full attack on the idea that masculinity is exclusively or even primarily the property of men. On the contrary, women have been practicing their own, alternative, masculinities for at least two hundred years. Female Masculinity aims to help restore a sense of butch pride, and to validate the entitlement of women to their own masculinity. There is so much to debate and disagree within female masculinity. While talking about female masculinity, rebellious attitude of women who openly dare to challenge the monolithically charged patriarchy and its material effects in the life of women by dismantling the so-called traditional roles assigned to women. They not only pour their wrath against the patriarchy but also carry out such activities which were exclusively regarded as of males. In *Female Masculinity* Judith Halberstam takes aim at the protected status of male masculinity and shows that female masculinity has offered a distinct alternative to it for well over two hundred years. Providing the first full-length study on this subject, Halberstam catalogues the diversity of gender expressions among masculine women from nineteenth-century pre-lesbian practices to contemporary drag king performances. Through detailed textual readings as well as empirical research, Halberstam uncovers a hidden history of female masculinities while arguing for a more nuanced understanding of gender categories that would incorporate rather than pathologize them. She rereads Anne Lister's diaries and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* as foundational assertions of "female masculine identity" (Judith Halberstam 13). She considers the enigma of the stone butch and the politics surrounding butch/femme roles within lesbian communities. She also explores issues of transsexuality among "transgender dykes"-lesbians who pass as men-and female-to-male transsexuals who may find the label of "lesbian" a

temporary refuge. Halberstam also tackles such topics as women and boxing, butches in Hollywood and independent cinema, and the phenomenon of male impersonators. Female masculinity signals a new understanding of masculine behaviors and identities, and a new direction in interdisciplinary queer scholarship. Illustrated with nearly forty photographs, including portraits, film stills, and drag king performance shots, this book provides an extensive record of the wide range of female masculinities. And as Halberstam clearly “demonstrates, female masculinity is not some bad imitation of virility, but a lively and dramatic staging of hybrid and minority genders” (17).

Halberstam makes a compelling argument for a more flexible taxonomy of masculinity, including not only men, who have historically held the power in society, but also women who embody qualities that are usually associated with maleness, such as strength, authority, and independence. Fleshing out her argument by drawing on a variety of sources--fiction, films, court documents, and diaries--Halberstam calls for society to acknowledge masculine lesbian women and value them.

Female masculinity strives and aspires to subvert the monolithic male masculinity. As subversion refers to an attempt to overthrow structures of authority, as in the case of feminists, it is an overturning or uprooting the power structure of patriarchy. As feminist writers have prescribed a very broad form of subversion which is not, directly, the governing realm which should be subverted in their view, but the predominant cultural forces, such as patriarchy, and male masculinity.

Of course, there have been changes in gender power relations in recent years. But given that men still overwhelmingly control society, these power shifts between men and women, while hopeful, have hardly been significant enough to warrant the pronouncement of patriarchy's demise. Feminists have realized that women should be

able to fulfill work and family expectations without marriage, which batters women. Yet at the same time, they gloss over the fact that these goals are massively obstructed and must be fought for the liberation and emancipation of who have been hibernated with chilling terror of patriarchy in the society.

Sylvia Plath's poems too is pregnant with a same view to subvert age-old domination of so-called male masculinity. The speakers of most of Plath's poetry raise the same voice and at times they can go to such an extent that they can not stop showing their feminine masculinity in order to challenge the patriarchy. In a way, we can argue that Plath presents her female speakers with masculine attributes so as to subvert masculinist patriarchy.

III. Female Masculinity in Plath's Poetry

Sylvia Plath's poetry is well known for it is deeply personal and emotional subject matter. Suffering is one theme that is found throughout Plath's poetry. Plath's poetry portrays a negative image of both men and marriage. Most of the latter poems show a woman who is trapped within a family situation or is trying to get away from one. In most of her poems Plath has vehemently criticized the patriarchy thereby showing her wrath towards it. In this process, she attributes her female speakers with masculinist traits so as to subvert patriarchy. The study will undertake the textual analysis of five poems by Plath: "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", "Purdah", "Ariel" and "Fever 103."

"Lady Lazarus" is a total threat towards the male construct of society. Lazarus regained his life (mentioned in New Testament) for the blessing of Jesus Christ. Christ loved Lazarus who was ill and when he was dead the Jews were mourning. Jesus came and gave him back his life and he came out of the tomb. Lazarus was a victim of illness and Sylvia is the victim of male chauvinism. Lazarus resurrected as a phoenix among the Jews and Plath reincarnated as a Jew among the Nazis. This 'Nazi' represents the oppression of male dominated society. It can also refer to Ted Hughes, the British poet and her husband (who was accused of stealing Plath's poetry). She understands the problem lying behind this society, the custom of manipulation done by men towards women. And, certainly, an ambitious poet like Plath cannot stand this subjugation of women in the society. So, she rises. Like the red feather of Phoenix, she rises from ash with red hair. This rise is the rise of woman intellect. It is a revolt against male domination. Here, she has the strength to deny men's manipulative strategies and rise beyond them. The ash represents her experience that becomes her inspiration to fight. This experience gave her the sight to know men's weakness and

thus she becomes stronger. She 'eats them like air': she eliminates their pride; she even threatens to eradicate their existence. At the end of the poem, Plath celebrates and elevates the vigor and potency of women.

There is also a confessional approach; Plath is expressing her real life suicidal attitude at the beginning of the poem. But she also relates this tendency with the theme of regeneration of women with greater power and ambition.

Extremely aggressive and intensely emotional poem "Lady Lazarus" is Plath's one of the striking poems in which she had darted her pungent criticism with a view to generating critical consciousness among women who are fated to live pathetically in male-ordained society. In the poem she identifies herself with innocent Jews. Through her powerful and chilling indication of her distraught in the form of thrice attempted suicide and her rebellion of Godiva-like desperate bravado, she shows her extreme form of anger against male-dominated society. By the application of self-negation in the dark death that ultimately turns out to be a life-giving force or rebirth, Plath explicitly explores the psychological repression that most women accept silently throughout their life. But the marginalization becomes so unbearable to Plath that she challenges to "eat men like air". Such direct threatening is the dramatization of her struggle for existence. The image of phoenix is so powerful that reinforces the fact that despite the pain in femininity, she is triumphant to shatter the foundation of patriarchy. Plath's androgyny and contempt against male oriented world is pretty clear from the title of the poem itself. The title ironically identifies a female Lazarus, while the original; Lazarus was male. Jesus raised Lazarus from death. The speaker in this poem identifies herself with Lazarus but with different sex, behavior and every thing. By changing the sex of Lazarus Plath aspires to subvert the tradition that utterly tortures the woman. The speaker does not conform to the society's traditional idea of

lady-like behavior. She is angry and wants to avenge the society in every way possible. Even through self –destruction and self –immolation. Finding men her enemy she goes: "Peel off the napkin/Oh my enemy/I do I terrify" (*Selected Poems* 50).

Here, she means to say that every male are her enemy as she has been victimized by them through out her life .the speaker in the poem is a big stripe tease for the peanut crunching male audience . Her body is exposed for the sexual favor of the so-called sincere men. These people do not sympathize Lady Lazarus. Instead they are enjoying her and sexual vulnerability and acceptability. The male psyche is so suppressive that women are crushed to nothingness. Yet Plath is never calm and silent. For her dying is an art which she does extraordinarily well. This is where Plath is quite different from other women who are oblivious to their individual freedom and self –esteem. They are satisfied with nullified existence while Plath choice is resistance. Though dying feels like hell, it allows her extreme freedom. So her preference is freedom, nothing else. Hence, Plath's artistic craft of choosing self-annihilation leads towards her victory in the form of rebirth.

As a heart core feminist, Plath hates a beautiful and obedient woman. Instead, her choice is minstrel image such as monster that eats men like air. Normally conscious women considered monster in male-ordained society. Plath is conscious that death is not the extinction but recreation. The suicidal ending of Plath turns out to be transformed identity. It remarks the resistance followed by victory. She seems to be optimistic to construct a feminine domain. the transformation of socially and politically exploited woman in to the re-born queen itself is the manifestation of her victory that dismantles the patriarchal foundation.

Similarly, in the poem female victimization is represented by the chilling horror and terror of holocaust. There are surrealistic images indicating the torture of innocent Jews by the German during The WWII. She compares her skin with lampshade, a product out of the Jews skin ; her right foot with a paper weight made up of Jew bone , her face with featureless fine Jews linen. The marginalization of women in the patriarchal society is so intolerable that Plath finds it comparable with the slaughter of innocent Jews. She sarcastically says that male- domination has commercialized the freedom of women. The man's faithlessness and gross inhumanity is pervasive, therefore, she mocks by saying she is "opus" for the doctor, a "corpse" for scavenger to find the gold, "a cake of shop" for dentist. Her mockery is against the maladies of patriarchy.

Sylvia Plath uses her poem “Daddy” to express intense emotions towards her father’s life and death and her disastrous relationship with her husband. The speaker in this poem is Sylvia Plath who has lost her father at age ten, at a time when she still adored him unconditionally. Then she gradually realizes the oppressing dominance of her father, and compares him to a Nazi, a devil, and a vampire. Later, the conflict of this relationship continues with her husband which led to a short and painful marriage. In “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath, illustrates her feelings of anger and resentment towards her father and husband along with being oppressed for most of her life through her poetic devices of vivid metaphor, imagery, rhyme, tone, and simile.

Metaphor plays a major role in this poem because strong metaphors are conveyed throughout the poem though shoes and feet are a recurrent image in this poem; they take on different nuances of meaning as the poem proceeds. In line two, the speaker compares herself to a foot that “lives” in a shoe, the shoe is her father. Analyzing this metaphor on an abstract level is much less helpful than visualizing it.

Then the metaphor evokes various helpful associations: Commonly, a shoe protects the foot and keeps it warm, in this poem. However, the shoe is a trap, smothering the foot. The adjective “black” suggests the idea of death, and since the shoe is fitting tightly around the foot, one might think of a corpse in a coffin. Plath thus feels at the same time protected and smothered by her father. Later, the black shoe emerges as a military “boot” (line 49) when the father is called a Nazi.

The image of the poem helps the reader to relate to Plath’s harsh life. An example of this is when the devil is introduced with: "A cleft in your chin instead of your foot/But no less a devil for that" (*P Selected Poems*). Again, there is the reference to the foot, this one being suspicious just like the origins of the father. The cleft in the foot, the devil’s hooves, is compared to the cleft in the father’s chin. This is developed further with the images of the father and the husband who is like the father being a “vampire” (72)—a bloodsucking zombie who still haunts her long after his death. Likewise, Plath describes how her life was being drained away as the result of a marriage, similar to that of how a vampire drinks the blood of its victims.

The poem seems to have an irregularity in rhyme. “Daddy” is not a free flowing poem because it is able to split it up into three separate parts. The rhyming of the ‘oo’ sound is evident throughout the poem. However, there is no regular pattern of which lines rhyme. These irregularities reinforce the life that Plath lived without her father, one that could speak at happiness and then plummet to sadness in a short period of time. Also the poem is written in stanzas of five short lines. These lines are like a Mike Tyson jab, short but extremely powerful as an example of this: "If I’ve killed one man I’ve killed two—/The vampire who said he was you" (*62 Selected Poems*). The tone of this poem is an adult engulfed in outrage. This outrage, at times, slips into the sobs of a child. This is evident by Plath’s continued use of the word

daddy and the childlike repetition “You do not do, you do not do” (1) and “Daddy, daddy, you bastard” (80). Fear from her childhood moves her in directions that will take her far from herself. She also brings us starkly into the world of a child’s fear. She uses words that sound like the words of a child staring out at behind “a barb wire snare” (26) saying “I have always been scared of you” (41). The tone then changes toward the end of the poem from fear of a child to a strong woman. She states, “So daddy, I’m finally through”(73). “And I knew what to do” (63). And in the last two stanzas she demonstrates an attitude of power. Plath has overcome her powers; she has killed all the self-doubt inside of her, and she is illustrating how she now has power over the memories of her father. She is confident enough to speak directly to her adversary. The tone in these lines also gives more power to the poem. “Daddy, daddy, you bastard” (80) has more effect on an audience than “Daddy was a bastard.”

In the poem, Plath uses several similes in the seventh stanza. “An engine, an engine Chuffing me off like a Jew. A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. I begin to talk like a Jew. I think I may well be a Jew” (31-35). The similes within this stanza position the reader to see the great degree of suffering the speaker went through, as it is compared to the torment and anguish millions went through during World War II and in turn, sympathy is drawn from the reader as everyone deserves to grow up with two living parents. When Plath describes her father is like Hitler. “I have always been scared of you, with your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook and your neat mustache. And your Aryan eye, bright blue”(41-44). By comparing her father to Hitler, Plath create a parallel in that Hitler was responsible for the lives of so many Jews. In parallel, her father is like Hitler and she is like Jew.

As Hitler killed millions of Jews so her father who is a symbolic of patriarchy that failed to understand her true sentiment and killed her freedom.

“Purdah” is another striking poem of Sylvia Plath through which she has accentuated the latent desire of females—to get identity in the, male-ordained society. The word 'Purdah' means a 'curtain' or 'screen'. The Purdah system is practiced especially by keeping women in seclusion. Speaking symbolically, women have to keep themselves within the limited territory of domesticity thereby not showing their face in the open platform of society. In other words, male oriented society has veiled the true self of women in such a way that they are simply leading their lives with great suffocation. In the sense of truth, patriarchal society is so suffocative for women that it not only makes them cover their faces but also their underlying feelings and emotions. Plath, in this poem is utterly critical of patriarchal discourse which carries out merely male ideology.

The furious female speaker in the poem is in the guise of male ideology in which she finds her every activity pretty enigmatic in the oppressive society. She becomes mysterious creature in front of all males. She tries to hide her sense of understanding and visibilities and, gleam like a mirror. As a mirror, everyone finds himself in her. In a sense, she takes recourse to feminine masculinity in order to give a terrible blow to the society which has failed to understand females. Since the society easily controls and dominates feminine qualities Plath says, a sort of feminine masculinity is absolutely necessary to counterattack the society of males. Patriarchy has devoured their identity and put them aside. Everywhere males become the controller. As the poem goes: "It is himself he guides,/In among these screen,/These rustling appurtenances (*Selected Poems* 47)

Here, “screen” is symbolic form of the veil of patriarchy which does not allow women to expose their underlying potentialities. Hence, by revealing the bitter realities of the male supremacy Plath is critical against patriarchal social set up.

In the similar fashion, Plath is pungently critical to the society which regards women not other than their property. She seems to be inviting the readers to openly criticize this evil tendency. As the poem goes:

I am his
 Even in his
 Absence, I
 Revolve in my
 Sheath of impossible (*Selected Poems* 49)

Here, the speaker accepts the fact that she is his even if he is far from her. Plath, being aware of this power goes against and pokes fun of it with a view to justifying female ideology. The poem, "Purdah" also reveals the conviction of Sylvia Plath that undressing for her is not other than artistic gesture through which she is attempting to make herself mighty and challenge the patriarchal ideology. Her great threat to the male- dominated society is clearly visible in the below-mentioned lines:

Attendants!
 And at his next step
 I shall unloose
 I shall unloose—
 From the small jeweled
 Doll he guards like a heart
 The lioness. (*Selected Poems* 67)

Here, the clothed and hidden speaker starts unloosing her dress in the wild position and finally she becomes more and more dangerous to swallow the society where there is male authority. Plath, in this poem, at first shows the harsh realities of women in the society and at last she comes up with extraordinary power to dismantle the

patriarchal social structure. The image of “lioness” reminds us of Blake’s tiger which was emerged against all sort of social injustices. By giving the image of “lioness” she is trying to bring home the critical consciousness in women regarding the every odds and obstacles brought out by male- dominated society against the entire women.

In “Ariel”, the rebellious spirit of female speaker is clearly seen. And this poem has terribly slapped in the face of patriarchy. The name “Ariel” comes from Shakespeare’s drama *The Tempest* in which Ariel is a sexless spirit that serves the king (colonizer) Prospero always seeking liberation. Here, Ariel becomes much more rebellious than the loyal spirit in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and at the same time it is the symbolic form of absolute liberty. Ariel is the name of horse that Plat used to ride as girl. Here, the horse can be taken as symbolizing the rebellious spirit that the female speaker of the poem aspires to be. It symbolizes the transcendence she achieves after the traumatic experience. She equates it with suicidal attempt, life, and the experience of growing up. Simply put, the poem allegorizes the experience of a horse speeding with a frightened child clinging to it in many ways. Allegorically, it is a movement from darkness to light, from stasis to activity, from void to meaning, from indirection to direction, from anxiety to confidence of identity, and from confusion to consciousness. The poem can also be seen as moving from childhood innocence to orgasmic experience of adolescence. We can also sense certain suggestion about the feminine consciousness brought about by the forced dragging of the horse. As the poem goes:

Stasis in darkness.

Then the substance less blue

Pour of tor and distances

God’s lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees—The furrow (*Selected Poems* 69)

The above-mentioned lines show the speed of journey which is so quick and rapid that almost everything seems to be moving, this swiftness remarks the urgency for complete change. The marginalization of women is so tremendous and painful that she can not tolerate it anymore. The change is the most now. The word “darkness” shows the dark life of women in the patriarchal charged society. In the length and breadth of the poem, we find several such images that have played an antagonistic role in the life of women such as “hooks”, “shadow,” “dead hands”, “dead stringencies”, “nigger –eye”, “berries” “other” and the like. All these words evoke something negative, hopeless and hapless. In other words, these words reinforce the chauvinistic society where women are merely regarded as subordinate ones or as the “other” of men. Men become dominating authority and women the women only a shadow of the powerful men. Alas! Women remain satisfied in the patriarchal framework, losing their independence and individuality. But, if one like the speaker of this poem hankers transgressing the traditionally drawn boundary of patriarchy she is hurled through the air. But Plath will not lose her heart; she will constantly hanker against it so that she could bring absolute freedom in life.

Ironically speaking, in stead of surrendering herself with the patriarchal ideology she is reincarnated as “White Godiva.” As the lines go: "White—/Godiva I unpeel— /Dead hands, dead stringencies" (*Selected Poems* 59). Here, Godiva is a symbolic form of rebelliousness. According to Irish legend, “lady Godiva has ridden naked through the street of Coventry in order to persuade her husband to lower the taxes. Like pure Godiva Plath want to purify herself from dead patriarchal hand hat controls her. In that process, she dissolves in the form. As the lines go:

And now I
 Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
 The child's cry
 Melts in the wall
 And I
 Am the arrow (*Selected Poems* 65)

In the above-mentioned lines the word "child cry" is a symbol of hope. She becomes arrow, the phallic symbol that shows masculine power. Again she transforms in to dew, a symbol of impermanence and transitoriness. The flight is driven towards the sun, symbol of male tradition against which she aggressively protests and intends to avenge. Her drive into red cauldron of the morning suggests her suicide. The red is a blood color of the life and death. In this point of arrival, redness refers to the fusion of the birth and death. In other words, the complete dissolution itself is the herald of the rebirth. The actual dawn has just begun after her suicide. patriarchy binds every dimension. Only after death she is free to do whatever she likes to do. She then becomes the maker of her own identity. At last the poem goes: "The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/In to the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning" (*Selected Poems* 68).

Actually, the dissolution is not extinction, rather a rebirth or salvation of the protesting woman. Apparently the "Eye" is the tyrannical eye of the male hegemony, but ironically it is herself "I", her own true identity or her own selfhood. It means that after death, she gets her own independent identity and existence. Hence, Plath seems to triumph to overturn the male-dominated society through the means of self-destruction and self-immolation to get true liberation from the grip of male-ordained society. Through this poem she is attempting to challenge the men's hostile

world which does not give spacious room for women. Here the word “red eye” can also be taken as a symbol of revolution against male supremacy. Anyway in the poem she seems to be androgynous (man hater) for the sake of her freedom and selfhood. It is through her extreme anger she is trying to aware the women of her time to think about the so-called male supremacy and act accordingly so as to create their own platform where there could be high respect of their intellect and sentiment.

Exceptionally outrageous and outrageously exceptional along with panicky feverish and feverishly panic Sylvia Plath, in “Fever 103” unravels the need for redefinition of conventional masculine values that have veiled the sublime creativity of women for ages, feminine masculinity of Plath is pretty clear when she proceeds to avert the “otherness” and malignity of patriarchy thereby clearing away the old whore petticoat. In the poem she is imagining a sort off paradise wherein there will be no spacious room for contaminated and hellish tongue of patriarchy, which can not understand the in-depth sentiment of females. She projects that virginity will govern that paradise. In other words, femeles will, one day rule the society keeping all the relics of males at bay. Patriarchal society not only subordinates women but also defines them as “vile”, “impure”, and “mysterious”. Bit in this poem Plath has disqualified the male language condemning its harshness very bitterly. As the poem goes: "Pure? What dies it mean?/The tongues of hell/Are dull, dull as the triple/Tongues of hell" (*Selected Poems* 71). Plath is of opinion that the phallogocentric word is inadequate to express the female psyche. She calls patriarchal language outdated and dull as having no charm at all. She thinks that it only carries itself exclusively conventional male values and norms which are hostile to the creatively charged famine language. Actually, traditional male language does not welcome challenges and novelty. The lack of freedom in expression and her paranoid

feeling at the perennial masculine propensity leave her at helpless and hapless position, therefore, she realizes herself as “aged”, “weak”, and “meek”. In such a situation, she addresses her male enemy as “devilish leopard”. Normally, innocent women simply surrender themselves; however, Plath’s rage is beyond her control that kills the man like air. As the poem goes:

Of a snuffed candle [...]
 Such yellow sullen smokes...
 Radiation turned it white
 And killed it in an hour
 I am lantern—
 My head moon (*Selected Poems* 72)

These above- mentioned lines express and expose the destructive attitude of the so-called co patriarchy. She pours her wrath against the marginalization of women. The souvenir of trial, trouble and tribulation that women have got from patriarchy is comparable for Plath to mass annihilation in Holocaust during WWII. She feels great shock at the innocent victimization of women as that of mass slaughter of innocent Jews.

The smoky exploitation in the form of love, kisses, admiration and roses appear disastrous to Plath as theses are the deceptive behaviors of males just to fulfill their petty sexual desires. They are simply hypocrats. Her harsh accusation “not you, nor him\ not him, nor him (*75 Selected Poem*) posits the fact that a man can never understand the true sentiment of women. According to Plath, only in the new paradise created by creative and conscious endeavor of women, it will be possible. To cut the matter short, in this poem Plath envisages a sort of female utopia where everything related to males will be revised and the creative voice of females will

resound everywhere. In order to get that every female should be conscious enough regarding the contaminated germs of patriarchy and should come up with new vigor so as to attack the patriarchal social structure. The word “lantern” can be taken as a symbol of revolution against the masculinist patriarchy.

In this manner, the scrupulous analysis of the selected poems has made it pretty clear that Plath is angry with the masculinist patriarchy for all the injustice, confinement and oppression it has inflicted on women and thus driven them crazy. And she thinks that the women's plight will come to an end by subverting and destroying this masculinist patriarchy. Therefore, she, as the analysis demonstrates, has attributed her female personas the masculinist traits so as to subvert and destroy the patriarchy.

IV. Conclusion

It is almost impossible to arrive at a conclusion in any literary work in general and widely acclaimed works like the poetry of Sylvia Plath in particular. The power of Sylvia Plath's poetry lies in the fact that they have drawn the critical attention of a number of readers and critics from the very outset of their publications. Though there are several readings of her poetry, the present study has drawn a distinct conclusion through the application of gender studies and female masculinity.

Not only has Plath explored the trauma of being a female in male-ordained society in her poems but also has openly challenged the male perpetrators by portraying women with masculinist attributes. Patriarchy is so pervasive that there is suppression of women in every nook and corner of the society. Their marginalization into social, political, religious, cultural and economic domains has really marred their immense potentialities and capabilities. Their suffocative confinement in the ghostly chamber of patriarchy has reduced them into helpless, hapless and restless creatures. This suffocation even sometimes leads them to maniac depression and nervous breakdown. But Sylvia Plath is not a pacific conformist. Instead, she is an angry rebellion. Neither can she accept the male domination, nor can she be quite apathetic to the marginalization.

She wants to demolish the suffocative patriarchal mansion modeled on male psyche. In most of her poems, Plath appears utterly furious and excessively turbulent so as to shatter and challenge the patriarchal foundation. For this purpose, she attributes her female characters with masculinist traits so as to subvert patriarchy. At times, her persona goes to the extent of self-sacrifice for her existence as she does in her ground breaking poem "Ariel" by making a direct flight in the sun, or by dramatizing the theatrical death in "Lady Lazarus". But for her, death is not the final

or ultimate female destination. The ultimate death transforms into the immediate rebirth—a triumph. As dead soul rises as Phoenix, a legendary bird, as it happens in “Lady Lazarus.” The self-immolation in her poems becomes a symbol of rejuvenating life. Putting it in other words, the self-destruction is the replica of the death, destruction and devastation of male-centered world and her rejuvenation is the reconstruction of the world conducted by female potentialities and possibilities, which is also the theme of her sensational poem “Fever 103.” Plath’s poems further unravel the fact that the end of age-long patriarchal social construction will bring the new dawn for women. Only then, the pathetic plight, excruciating pain and ceaseless suffering of agonized women will come to an end. And she, in order to subvert and destroy this masculinist patriarchy, appropriates masculinity and thus arms her female speakers with masculinist traits. After all, iron cuts iron.

Finally, it is quite obvious why Plath presents her speakers her female speakers with masculinist traits. She is furious at patriarchy for driving women to neurosis and depression by inflicting oppression and injustice on them. She believes that the women's plight will come to an end at the end of masculinist patriarchy. In most her poems including the ones analyzed in the present study, Plath, therefore, has attributed her female personas to with masculinist traits to subvert and destroy patriarchy.

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