

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Study in Poetics and Politics**

**A Thesis**

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fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in  
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**By**

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## General Introduction

### 1.1. Life and Works of Sylvia Plath

A poet, essayist, short fiction writer, and a novelist, Sylvia Plath was the eldest child of a well-educated Boston parents, Otto and Aurelia Schober Plath. She was born on 27 October, 1932 as the only daughter of her parents. Of Germanic descent, Otto was apparently demanding and rigorous and a lover of order. Since the society had undergone patriarchal order, the family lived under Otto Plath's domination until his death. Outwardly, she lived an exemplary life, attending Smith College on scholarship graduating first in her class, and winning a Fulbright grant to Cambridge University in England. But her personal life was full of dissatisfaction and torture.

A truly outstanding student, Plath remained a model of academic career. After she graduated from high school, she received a scholarship from Smith College; while she was studying there her creative abilities won her a trip to New York to spend the summer as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* Magazine. On a Fulbright grant she studied in England at Cambridge University, where in June of 1956, she secretly became the wife of the young Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes. After Plath finished her second year at Cambridge, the couple moved to America where she taught freshmen English at Smith for a year. Then they moved to Boston where both concentrated on writing with Sylvia taking the part-time secretarial jobs.

During the early-married years, she put together collection after collection of poems, but she never found a publisher for the book. Although her story was already published in the magazine *Seventeen* in her high school days, she was able to publish collection of poems only in 1960. Regarding her publication of the first collection, Stanly Plumly says:

After a stay at Yaddo, the writers' colony, during the fall of 1959, Sylvia made important changes in her voice as poet, and the collection she assembled after being at Yaddo was published in 1960 as *The Colossus and other Poems*. (813)

*The Bell Jar* (1963) is Plath's only novel which speaks for a number of women's concerns in a manner still vital after nearly thirty years. With reference to the novel Janet McCann writes:

Her thinly disguised novel *The Bell Jar* [. . .] provides some insights into her psychological state. Describing her breakdown after the New York trip and her treatment for mental illness that followed the book shows her extremely fragile sense of self and her inability to accept any of the few possibilities she saw open to her. (565)

But quite contrary to this idea, Nina Byams argues that *The Bell Jar* is not only the expression of psychological state but the expression of situation of the women of that time. She says:

*The Bell Jar* has nothing of the brilliance of her poems, but it effectively dramatizes the stereotyping of women's roles in the 1950s and the turmoil of a young woman only partly aware that her gifts and ambitions greatly exceed the options available to her. (2743)

In fact, the novel *The Bell Jar* seems to be the expression of her personal experiences of pain and torture. But within this personal confession there is the voice of women in general. The voice is voice of the exploited women in society led by patriarchal values. *Three Women* is a radio play written by Plath which is about women giving birth in a hospital, using effectively the subject matter, language, and insight that only

a woman could convey. Talking about the novel and the radio play Plumly says "she had found a wry, comic, sometimes macabre tone and diction that seemed better to express contemporary women's life as she saw it" (813).

After Plath and Hughes separated in 1962, she moved to London with her children. But in London her situation was much more wretched. In London she was plagued by financial worries, uncomfortable living conditions and ill health. Her last work written in the year after she separated from Ted Hughes consists of poems of intense sufferings in which the pain of her life is translated to the page. *Ariel* which was published posthumously brought her international acclaim.

*The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1965) is another work of Plath which includes her prose pieces dating from 1950 through 1959. The articles in the journal include "the either . . . or mentality of the 1940s and 1950s which plagued Plath obsessively" (Wagner, 521). Wagner further writes:

Entries [. . .] obsessively announce the cultural pressure on an unmarried, bright, attractive woman. Suddenly, everyone else is very married and happy, and one is very alone, and bitter about eating a boiled tasteless egg by oneself every morning and painting on a red mouth to smile oh-so-sweetly at the world with. (521)

In short, whether it is poem, play or novel, none of it is away from the expression of the time she was living in. In her work there is a strong protest against oppressive patriarchal norms and values which deprive the women of their natural rights.

*The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (1981) is the collection of all poems by Plath which she wrote during the years 1956-63. The collection, which was edited by Ted Hughes, also includes some previously unpublished poems which Plath wrote

before 1956. In the collection all the poems represent each phase of her writing career. As Hughes writes in the introduction of the book “The first phase might be called her juvenilia” (15). This phase dates before 1956. Similarly, “The second phase of Sylvia Plath’s writing falls between early 1956 and late 1960” (16). Hughes further writes “The third and final phase of her work, from the editorial point of view, dates from about September 1960” (17). So the collection allows the readers to trace how Plath’s work changed as she grew and to trace the different sources she used in the development of her personal myth.

*The Colossus* and *Ariel* are other collections of Plath’s poems. The former one is her first book which describes her obsession with her long-dead father. In the poem like “The Colossus” her love to her father that is mostly hate and her desire that is death wish is expressed. In this regard Pamela A. Smith writes:

Even in the formidably plotted poems of *The Colossus* she dredges up Electra complex, death wish, a menagerie of irrationally terrifying animals—sow, goats, moles, snakes—and the universally awful, all-absorbing, morbid color black. (330)

Similarly, Plath is credited with some of the most powerful poems in her collection *Ariel*. According to Patrica Stanly “In certain of the *Ariel* poems, written shortly before her death, Plath utilizes imagery related to her own suicide attempts to express empathy for Holocaust-related suicide” (403). Regarding Plath’s *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, Jon Rosenblatt says that in these collections “Plath rushes into sun, sky, or water in order to be reborn” (35).



## 1.2. Review of Criticism on Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Sylvia Plath, a widely read poet, has been the central figure among the female writers in America. She is also at the center of the sometimes controversial movement that has been called "confessional movement". Her poems have been criticized diversely by different critics in various ways. Quoting the psycho-biographical critic like Erica Jong, Gina Wisker says:

These were deeply felt perceptions of a consummate artist who had made a journey into her own personal hell and was bringing back the truth that only a voyager of genius into the nether regions of the communal unconscious can retrieve. (104)

Her poems are interpreted as the confession of her psychological fragmentations and inner conflicts. Wisker further interprets Plath's poems as the expression of her developing self and writes:

Family oriented poems enable Plath to express her sense of developing self however constrained, oppressed, conditioned. In poems for the father she explores contradictory tensions of love and hate, the overwhelming sense of being married to a shadow dominating her life. (108)

Similarly, McCann associates Plath's poems with what J. M. Rosenthal called 'confessional poetry'. In this regard, he finds most of confessional elements in Plath's poems. Quoting Robert Phillips, he further writes "Robert Phillips' description of this kind of poetry could be based on her works; it dominates nearly all of the sixteen characteristics of confessional verse [ . . . ]." (565). According to him, the confessional features like subjective, therapeutic, open in form, personal, expressive

of self, ironically detached, narrative and anti-establishment are clearly present in her poems.

These criticisms highlight the ability of Plath to express her personal subject matters in poems. This means to say that she is able to reveal so clearly, so grotesquely, the forms of fantasy, of psychic and sexual investment, that can be involved in the constitution of literature itself.

Similarly, quoting Ted Hughes, Kathleen Margaret Lant argues that Plath shared with Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, classified along with Plath as confessional poets, "the central experience of a shattering of the self, and the labor of fitting it together again or finding a new one" (623). In the same way, Plath herself has asserted that she is moved by those writers for whom poetry is an expression of their very personal essence "Those poets I delight in are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own dealing" (65). But in this regard Steven K. Hoffaman's ideas are a bit different from that of Hughes. For Hoffman, Plath is:

[. . .] the most consistently stylized and elaborately masked of the confessionals, whose theatrical repertoire ranges from the downtrodden little girls of "Daddy" to the long suffering Christ of "Fever 103°", the avenging bitch goddess of "Lazy Lazarus" and the distant regal queen of the bee poems. (696)

In the same way, Lant says that Plath's poems are not self-revealing. Rather "Plath's poetry seems grounded in the life experiences of some denizen of the twentieth century" (623). This means to say that her poems express the common experiences of women in the twentieth century: the oppression and suppression done upon women, social and political injustice, marginalization and victimization, and so on.

Anita Helle, disagreeing with the idea of confession of single self, speaks for the expression of multiple selves of the speaker i.e. the common experience of every woman who is the victim of patriarchal domination. Helle further writes:

Where Plath is concerned, the distribution of multiple subject positions in a poem such as "Lazy Lazarus" works against a more literal reading of the poem as confession of a singular life. In Plath's poems, the speaker's mock striptease, punctuated by making invitations to gaze on her body as a public spectacle, can be taken as a figure for Plath's ambivalent relationship of the writer to mass spectacle. (649)

In fact, Plath has used metaphors in a brilliant way. Her metaphors "terrible as they can be, form new, agonizingly exact identities" (Smith 325). Smith further writes "In the poetry of Sylvia Plath, the metaphors are unexpected, startling, often upsetting, but always dead right" (324). The metaphors are so powerful that everything can become anything else. In the poem "The Disquieting Muses" the "Flowers and bluebirds that never were/never, never, found anywhere," became "Like a soap bubble as you called [. . .]" (76). In the poem "Lazy Lazarus" Plath demonstrates a much more versatile handling of language and metaphor.

Regarding her poetry Plumly states that Plath is a conscious woman who has a sense of her own voice which we can't find in poetry before her time. Plumly states:

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 defiance, contrasted at times with a rarer joy and a deep understanding of women's various roles. (813)

In the same way, Smith views Plath's poetry as part of the self discovery. She further says that it was through poetry that Plath got "the gradual realization of the unconscious intrusions and manifestations in the composition she wanted to be so terribly conscious" (330).

Hence, for such critics the main purpose of creating literature for Plath was to get self realization and the sense of her own ness. But her purpose is wider than that for the critics like Steven Gould Axelrod. He does not believe in the single dimension of the confessional poets that the poems are all psychological. Rather the other dimension of the crisis embodied by the confessional poem is social. He further states:

The confessional poets turn their world outside-into their minds. They internalize the moral and political disturbances of our times, and undergo them personally. The madness that destroys the confessional poet's mind is as much society's as her/his own. For this reason Plath identifies herself as both Jew and Man-killer, Hiroshima Victim and kamikaze pilot. (6)

In "Liberty Bells and Founding Fathers: Sylvia Plath's *The Colossus*", Rees Jones Deryn notes "femininity preoccupied throughout her life" (276). This means to say that she was concerned with what femininity is and its construction in relation to a writing self. Throughout her writing career Plath's anxieties about writing: "[. . .] are intricately bound up with issues concerning not only the ways in which to write, but about how to combine the roles of woman and wife with the precarious role of writer" (Deryn, 276).

Stanley in "When Scriptotherapy Fails: The Life and Death of Sylvia Plath and Adelheid Duvanel" finds "Parental figures" occupying "a prominent place" in the

works of Sylvia Plath (400). In her view more than mother, father figure dominates the foreground in Plath's poetry.

Al Strangeways studies about the inclusion of references to the Holocaust in Plath's poems. He says that in Plath's poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" there is "Straightforward condemnation" of the Holocaust (370). But he doesn't find only strict expression of Holocaust in her poems. Her poems are not strictly about the Holocaust only, nor are they the pure expression of her psyche as they are said to be. In his view "the appearance of the Holocaust in her later poems stems from a complex of reasons concerning her divided view about the use of poetry and the related conflict she explores between history and myth" (371). The poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" and "Fever 103°" incorporate historical material into initiatory and imagistic patterns.

Stanley interprets the Holocaust imagery in quite a different way. Here he links her own suicide imagery and Holocaust. He further writes:

In certain of the *Arial* poems written 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)

Thus, Strangeway concludes that Plath combines her myth and history and psychology and history relating Nazi persecution of Jews. In the poem "Daddy" he finds the speaker and daddy's connection to Nazism (as Jews and Fascist). In the same way, in the same poem he finds the similar point, though gendered, in the following controversial points:

Every woman adores a Fascist.

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the back board, daddy. (Plath, 222)

Argues that through these lines Plath asserts the archetypal male figure appearing in the rest of the poem. Even in the poem "Lazy Lazarus" we can find a more complex treatment of myth where the lady of the poem is a quasi-mythological figure, a parodic version of the biblical Lazarus whom Christ raised from the dead. In the poem the speaker says: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air" (Plath 244).

Unlike Strangeways, Malin Walther Pereira studies Plath's "bees poems" in relation to Africans. In the bee poems Malin Walther Pereira parallels the "image of the bees" to "Africans sold to the slave trade" (529). This parallelism "draws on the horrors of the Middle Passage and ultimately appropriates it as a metaphor for female colonization throughout the bee poems" (529). This imagery of the bees seems racially stereotypical in its representation of African hands as "Swarmy" and the echoes of "Shrunken heads" (529). In the second poem of the series "The Arrival of the Bee Box" Plath moves beyond simple color imagery to specifically introduce race:

It is dark, dark

With the swarmy feeling of African hands

Minute and Shrunken for export

Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?

It is the noise that appalls me most of all,

The unintelligible syllables. (213)

Rosenblatt criticizes Plath's poems having "a dramatic conflict between opposed external forces on the field of the poet's body and self" (21). This conflict is achieved through the confessional outpouring of self-pity and grief. In Plath's poetic world there are two "tangible powers" operating equally all the time: Life and Death. However, these powers appear as "dramatic agents embodied in people, trees, houses, colors, and animals" (21). According to Rosenblatt there is also a dramatic conflict between universal agencies in which the self must use ritual and magical methods in order to free self" (22). His indication is that death is not regarded here as a suicidal end of life but it is transformation of life into another freer life.

Some of the poems like "the Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box", "Stings" "The Swarm" and "Wandering" are dealt with the issues of power. Quoting one of the feminist critics Sandra Gilbert, for example, Lant reads the bee sequence "as the narrative of Plath's release through art" (636).

All these criticisms prove that the problems Plath expresses in her poetry are not only her personal but they have arisen from repressive 1950s attitude towards women. It was the assumed attitude that women should not show anger or ambitiously pursue a career, instead should find fulfillment in tending their husbands and children. So her voice is against such repressive patriarchal discourse prevailing during that period. Therefore, Plath's poems represent a poetic current that is central to the cultural identity of the first phase of women's movement. Hence, Plath's own personal confession functions to expose the excruciating pain and endless suffering of all

women of the time, so it is the confession of the universal feeling of the women and her attempt to find a niche for her own and there lies Plath's politics in writing poetry.

### **1.3. Significance of the Thesis**

The main objective of this thesis is to show how Sylvia Plath has used poetics, as a location for staging rebellion against oppressive patriarchal values and for asserting voices of nonconformity.

The time Plath lived in was the time when American patriarchy was attempting to counteract the war time freedom of women who took on the jobs and family responsibilities of their absent men by re-establishing the belief that (good) 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 and enhanced male domination. In a sentence, the discourse had allowed male to exercise their power over women. At the same time anti-patriarchal sentiment was also rising in various ways. The sentiment, later on, took the form of women's movement speaking for women's liberation.

In this content Plath's poems also advocate the voice of women staging rebellion against oppressive patriarchal discourse. Being aware of the limitations placed on women, Plath chose writing as a discourse to assert her creative identity. Although she wrote at the time when the major feminist statements were beginning to be made, she did not identify with the dawning movement. The tragic situation that the women were undergoing during that period can be clearly understood from Plath's own assertion "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was



conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum"  
(*Journals* 30).

Therefore, Plath's poems are not only the emotional outpouring of personal pain and tragedy. Rather within her individual confession there is the expression of the angry voice of female against patriarchal discourse. Plath is speaking against the discourse that women are incapable of containing and embodying male energy. She is also speaking against the cruelties exercised upon the Jews by Nazis and also upon the black Africans. This research attempts to prove this hypothesis in this thesis.

## Methodology

Application of any theoretical modality enables us to understand a text from a certain point of view. A text can be studied from diverse perspectives and interpretation also becomes multiple and plural. Such use of a theoretical tool deepens our understanding about any one of the aspects of the text. Plath's poems have also been interpreted from various perspectives. But here the researcher is going to study some of Plath's famous poems inserting them into the framework of feminism and new historicism. On the other hand, the research will show how Plath's poems have successfully circulated a discourse to reject the other discourses. Here the fact which is going to be proved is that Plath is using anti-patriarchal ideology to assert her own identity. In this connection she has herself circulated discourse through writing. Plath's poems embody two conflicting discourses present in her own culture: patriarchal discourse and anti-patriarchal discourse. The poems' anti-patriarchal theme, which seems to be the primary focus of the text, can be seen in the representation of women as rebellious, brave and violent. So, her poems are both shaped by and have shaped the modern debate between these two ideologies. Her poems reflect the ideological conflicts of their culture. This study will be enhanced by new historicism whereas her voice against patriarchy will be critically evaluated from feminist perspective. By combining the two perspectives the following poems will be discussed in the research:

“The Applicant”, “The Munich Mannequins”, “Purdah”, “The Jailer”, “Ariel”, “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Fever 103°”, “Tulips”.

## 2.1. Feminism

Feminism is a political movement inaugurated in the late 1960s dealing with the marginalization of all women with their being relegated to a secondary position. For the women's movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy. The movement strongly revolted against the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voice, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral. Feminist literary criticism has mostly developed since the beginning of the contemporary women's movement with Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Betty Freidan. In a sense, the movement itself was literary from the start because it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature. In this sense, feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot from feminism.

Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature, as well as other cultural productions, reinforces or undermines the economic political, social and psychological oppression of women. Feminists have observed that the belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of position of economic, political and social power. Thus, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. According to Simone de Beauvoir woman is not woman by birth but it is our society that makes her woman by providing her feminine qualities like passivity, dependence, meekness and so on. This clearly shows that the feminists assert that patriarchy is by definition sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. The feminists, thus, stage rebellion against the patriarchal belief in the inborn inferiority of women that is called "biological essentialism" (Louis Tyson, 84). To be clearer, women are against the stereotypical definition of

women on the basis of biology that males are strong and females are feeble. These women regard gender as cultural construct. So, feminine weakness and masculine strength are also the construction of the society which is patriarchal structured. Therefore, women are protesting against such essentialist notion.

The reason why feminists raise their voice against patriarchy is their claim that patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self effacing and submissive. Realizing this fact the feminist scholars came to conclusion that the canon taught in schools was overwhelmingly male. Therefore, during and before the 1960s, to be a woman graduate student was to hear recognizably male points of view. As Helen E. Longino puts "women in almost every culture are subordinated to men and are responsible for domestic life" (25). Knowing the fact how patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance, the feminists raise their voice so as to change the world by promoting gender equality and change the society through political activity.

Although feminism reached at its peak during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it took about two centuries to recognize women's cultural roles and achievements and to get women's social and political rights. The books like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Her Own* (1929), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*(1845),and so on marked the beginning of the recognition of women's identity.

Virginia Woolf, an important precursor of feminism, has vividly presented the situation of women writers throughout modern history in her best known feminist

writings *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. In these works she has tussled with some of the problems specific to the woman writer. Her main concerns about female were man's anger at women, misunderstandings between the sexes, and above all the "psychological conditions under which women--and men--were brought up" (Adams, 817). She argues that the lack of a 'room of one's own' and the kind of financial and social independence it represented put a brake on women's ambitions in literature. Adams further writes:

Woolf addresses the question of why a sister of Shakespeare would not likely have been able to write anything, let alone a play. She would have had none of the material resources--breadth of human experience, money time--to do so. She would have been discouraged by everyone. (817)

Regarding female issues, Woolf has imagined a society in which men and women would come together in purpose and desire.

Another feminist who severely attacks the prejudiced social condition of patriarchy is Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's attack is directed upon the ways in which female characters are presented in the sentimental novels of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her emphasis is on the importance of impression that the women of the time have after reading the novels. When women are given inferior and petty roles in the novels, such novels have bad impression upon the women readers. That's why she has studied about the influence of the depiction of women in novels on women's intellectual development. Citing Mary Wollstonecraft, Adams writes:

Society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistress, denies them

economic independence and encourages them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else. (394)

She strongly protests the trend of novel writing of the time which presents women as beautiful, passive, docile, meek and lacking intellectual faculty. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft says “False notion of beauty and delicacy stops the growth of their limbs and produce a sickly soreness, rather than delicacy of organs [ . . . ]” (395). Simone de Beauvoir is another feminist who found the origin of female subservience to men not in any natural inferiority but in the age-old dominance of men. She argues that the masculine is regarded as the very type of humanity and woman is seen as relative to man. Associating men with humanity, more generally, relegates women to an inferior position in society. Quoting Beauvoir, Harry Blamires writes:

Women are so moulded and indoctrinated by tradition that they are prevented from assuming the status of being with liberty. Meanwhile a conspiracy is kept alive which implies that women by nature lack creative genius. (374)

Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is a seminal book which offered historical, biological, and psychological perspectives on women. She is the one who, refusing the notion of a female essence prior to individual existence, has attacked the patriarchal myths of woman that presume the false essence of women. She has also argued that gender is social or cultural construction. Elaine Showalter, another feminist critic, shifted her focus of attention from woman as reader to woman as writer. She herself divided feminist criticism into two types- concerned with woman as readers and woman as writer. The criticism which is concerned with woman as writer has been labeled as “gynocritics”. Gynocriticism means the types of literary criticism which studies the

writing of women who produced a literature of their own in her book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists* (1977). Gynocritics eschews the inevitability of male models and theories and seeks a female model. In Showalter's words:

The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop a new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. (1227)

Showalter further argues that to interpret the themes and structures of women's literature we need to understand the framework of the female subculture. In this way, she has also shown the relevance of gynocriticism.

In *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (1979), Showalter has identified three phases of modern women's literary developments: Feminine, Feminist and Female. The first phase is dated from 1840 to 1880. In this phase women imitated a masculine tradition. It is also in the feminine phase that women tried to match the intellectual achievements of male culture. Women in this phase represented their properly assumed womanly role. Similarly, in the second phase, which Showalter dated from 1880 to 1920, they became more and more conscious about their position in the society. In this phase they asserted themselves in determined efforts for political and social equality. They protested against the unjust treatment of themselves through literature. However, even in that protest, female writers had to depend upon the predominant masculine aesthetics. The third and the final phase is female phase which starts from 1920 to the present. In this phase women advocated their own autonomous female perspective. Here, dependency is replaced by the rediscovery of women's text.

Among the aforementioned feminist critics, French feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, suggested that women not only have different life experiences than men but also write differently. This led the feminist critics to develop a feminine language. Likewise, North American feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s shared with French critics both an interest in and a cautious distrust of the concept of feminine writing. But British feminist critics regarded their own critical practice as more political than that of North American feminists. British feminist critics rejected the universalizing and essentializing tendencies of much North American practice and most French theory. Nevertheless, there are some common grounds where all of them can stand.

The first shared assumption of almost all the feminist critics is the constructed character of gender. They argue that the prevailing concepts of gender are largely cultural constructs that were generated by the previous patriarchal basis of our civilization. Another common point is that the whole western civilization is pervasively patriarchal. It is largely male-centered and male-controlled. It is organized in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains. Currently, the often-asserted goal of feminist critics has been to enlarge and reorder, or in radical instances entirely to displace the literary canon. Such attempts have raised the status of many female authors like Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning etc. The collaboration of the two contemporary feminists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar has been extremely influential in the advancement of both the study of women writers and literary theory. Regarding their contribution Adams says:

Their well known work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) traces a female literary tradition and thus combats what they term women's



‘anxiety of authorship’. They seek also to speak to Elaine Showalter’s call for a feminine poetics. As a part of the former program, their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) rescues many women from the obscurity caused by their exclusion from male-dominated anthologies. (1234)

Their aim is to locate place where women’s writing is heard. They argue that since the writer’s creativity has been identified virtually completely with men, it is necessary to separate the feminine paradigm.

Now I would like to explain about modern radical feminism which will later be applied in the thesis to a larger extent. Before that it would be better to discuss about liberal feminism in short. It is a sector of feminism. The liberal feminists concentrate on supporting women in their traditional role rather than challenging their remaining inequalities. Liberal feminism is based upon the idea that women are individuals possessed of reason. They further argue that since women are entitled to full human rights, they should, therefore, be free to choose their role in life and explore their full potential in equal competition with men. So, the goal of liberal feminists is to protest against the failure of society to deliver to women the promises of fulfillment. They reject any attack on conventional morality and family life. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* encapsulates the arguments and assumptions of the liberal feminism. In the book she has criticized the concept of feminine mystique which displaced earlier feminist dreams of education and independence. She has also criticized the post-World War II American concept that the fulfillment of women’s rights lay in domesticity.

On the other hand, contrary to this, modern radical feminism is essentially “a theory of, by and for women” (Valerie Bryson, 181). This theory began to be

developed systematically during the 1960s. Especially, women's experiences in the Civil Rights Movement and Student Movement gave impetus towards the development of modern radical feminism. These shared experiences of women became the base of a new theory and strategy for women's liberation. So, based on the premise that women's problems were shared and that they could only be ended by collective political action, first radical women's groups were formed in America in 1967.

For them the state is but one manifestation of patriarchal power. Since the institutions of state have been made by men, they embody men's interests rather than those of women. Quoting Kate Millet, Bryson writes:

She argues that in all known societies the relationship between the sexes has been based on power, and that they are, therefore, political. This power takes the form of male domination over women in all areas of life. Sexual domination is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears natural and hence becomes invisible. (185)

In such an environment instead of independence for women the state provision of welfare services may involve new forms of subordination. This shows the state as an arena of conflict which is systematically biased against women. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Eva Fige's *Patriarchal Attitudes* reflect the radical feminists' feminist ideas. Among these texts Millet's *Sexual Politics* has provided a starting-point from which many of the central concerns of radical feminist thoughts developed.

In this way, various critics have various goals. French feminist critics, British feminist critics and North American feminist critics are different from each other in

some ways. Similarly, the liberal feminist critics and radical feminist critics also have their own perspectives in looking at patriarchy and society. However, this research will employ the ideas of modern radical feminists like Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir as a part of tool to study Plath's selected poems. Relevant ideas from other feminist critics will also be used to assist the research itself. Besides, New Historicism is another part of tool which is discussed in the next chapter.

## **2.2 New Historicism**

Adopted in 1980s by Stephen Greenblatt, new historicism is a diverse literary, cultural and theoretical movement appeared in America. It reads literary and non-literary texts with equal weight in relation to socio-economic, politico-cultural circumstances out of which it was produced. It eradicates the distinction between literature and history arguing that each partakes of the other and that both participate in social network. It regards both the literary texts and non literary texts as the product of ideological construction. The new historicists say that texts of all kinds are vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formations. So, new historicism involves the parallel study of literary and non-literary texts. Adopting the trans-disciplinary approach they reject the independent existence of each genre. They also challenge the idea of literature as a sphere of autonomous aesthetic forms kept away from other kinds of cultural practice. Therefore, they talk of historicity of text and textuality of history. As they read literary texts as material products of specific historical conditions, the new historicists tend to reduce literature to a footnote of history. In this respect Joseph Childers and Gary Hentiz write, "New historicism has attempted to eradicate distinctions between literature and history" (207).

Regarding historicity of text, Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle have said, “literary texts are bound up with other discourses and rhetorical structures: they are part of history that is in the process of being written” (110). Regarding the same issue Hans Bertens writes:

The literary text is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social, and economic dispensation. Far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly involved in history. (177)

By reducing literature to a footnote of history the new historical critics engage in describing and analyzing literary texts through a consideration of historical dimensions of literary studies. The new historicists are said to be “rediscovering the value of history in literature” (Murfin and Ray, 239).

This criticism considers the ways in which literary texts are thought about in historical terms. Defining new historicism Bennet and Royal say:

It may be defined as a recognition of the extent to which history is textual and as a rejection of the autonomy of the literary text and of the objectivity of interpretation in general [. . .] No absolute distinction can be made between literary texts and other cultural practices. (112)

This definition also indicates that new historicism subverts the generic boundaries. It not only subverts the generic boundaries but also blurs the distinction between binary opposition like high and low, centre and margin, and so on. In this way, new historicism challenges the canonicity of texts, writers and subjects and their unequal distinction.

New historicist critics are different from the practitioners of traditional historians. The first difference is that the new historicist critics regard literature being embedded within history. In other words, the new historicists give equal weighting to literary materials whereas the traditional historians are much more pre-occupied with the separate identity of various genres like literature, history, science, etc. The traditional critics had viewed literature as a reflection of the worldview characteristic of a period. They had taken social and intellectual history as a background against which they set a work of literature as independent or autonomous entity. But new historicists conceive of a literary text as situated within the institutions, social practices and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and space as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes. Similarly, the new historicists search for interpretations of the historical events and happenings whereas the traditional historicists want to know facts of events, as Tyson says:

Traditional historians ask, “What happened?” and “What does the event tell us about history?” In contrast, new historicists ask “How has the event been interpreted?” and “What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?”(278)

This means to say that the traditional historians want to find out a series of events that have a linear and casual relationship whereas the new historicists, who are also influenced by Foucault’s discourse and discontinuity, didn’t believe in linearity of events in history nor do they believe if a presentation of facts. Rather they argue that there is only interpretation. They argue that reliable interpretations are difficult to produce.

According to the new historians, an individual is a construct of social and historical circumstances. He can never be an autonomous agent of historical change.

So, we cannot find anything essential in human nature. This means to say that every one has to undergo a process of subjectification. This process places us in social networks. Regarding this issue Childers and Hentiz write:

Since each individual's way of thinking is shaped by this process the historian is also a product of subjectification, which is always partly informed by the past [. . .] Instead of a body of indisputable, retrievable facts, history becomes textualized. (207)

When the existing ideology entangles an individual, he/she cannot do away with the dominant ideology so he/she is also affected by it unconsciously. This means to say that everyone internalizes the ideologies first by criticizing one and then by supporting the other. Therefore, no one can present events objectively. He/she is guided by that ideology. Hence, objective history is an impossibility. This proves that the traditional relation of history to literature gets changed radically with the ideas of new historicism. Now, history no longer acts as background to literary texts. Instead, the literary texts themselves become the record of the interpretation of historical facts. According to Bertens, every literary text is a "[. . .] time-and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or the other political. Because it is inevitably involved with discourse or an ideology it can't help being a vehicle for power" (177).

In such a situation the difference that is assumed to be between literature and other texts, no matter whether these are religious, political, and historical or products of marginal subcultures, gets eradicated. The new historicists blur distinctions,

[. . .] not only between history and the other social sciences but also between background and foreground, political and poetical events.

They have erased the line dividing historical and literary materials.

(Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, 240)

Then, a literary text gets directly involved in history.

Regarding an individual the new historicists argue that our individual identity is not the product of our society and the time we are living. Nor is it the product of our own individual will and desire. Rather it is both shaped by and shapes the socio-cultural milieu. So “the author’s role is also, to a large extent, determined by historical circumstances” (Bertens, 176). This clearly indicates that new historicism rejects both the autonomy of literary work and sees literary texts as absolutely inseparable from their historical context. Citing Louis Althusser’s ideas, M.H. Abrams says “[. . .] ideology manifests itself in different ways in the discourse of each of the semi-autonomous institutions of an era, including literature” (184). So, it sees the literary texts not as somehow unique but as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourse—religious, political, economic, aesthetic and so on—which both shape it and, in their turn are shaped by it. Hence, the historians are also not exception to this. Since they cannot remain outside the network of socio-cultural milieu, they cannot be objective in presenting historical facts. In this regard, Tyson writes:

Like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture. Historians may believe they are being objective but their own views [. . .] will strongly influence the ways in which they interpret history. (279)

Michael Foucault's influence upon the critical ideas of new historicism should be acknowledged. He regarded discourse as the central human activity. For him "power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times" (Tyson, 281). The channel through which the power circulates is discourse itself. Every culture produces discourses and the exchange of ideas occurs through these discourses. Defining discourse, Tyson further says "A discourse is a social language created by particular way of understanding human experience" (281). The new historicists use the notion of Foucauldian discourse and analyze a text. These critics read literature as a discourse.

The production of a literary text cannot be away from the influence of the existing ideology of the time. Either consciously or unconsciously, the writer is guided by the prevailing ideology. In the conflict of the various discourses, a writer happens to support any one of them and his writing is also affected by the discourse. In this regard George Levine, citing J. Hillis Miller, writes "Politically, Miller argues, oppositional writers turn out to be complicit with the ruling ideology" (150). In the same way, M.R.A. Habib writes:

[. . .] many new historicists [. . .] have been profoundly concerned not only within power structure, but also with seeing them as crucially participating in conflict of power between various forms of social and political authority.(762)

By adopting the idea of discourse from Foucault, new historicists focus upon how the interplay among the dominant discourses have been circulated through any text, be it political, religious or literary. They try to find out the ideological and social practices to particular works of literature. In this regard Tyson says "Literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social



meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written” (288). From this study, they can also find about the relationship between individual identity and society. In this way, by searching for ideological and social practices in a text, the new historicists try to “deconstruct the traditional opposition between history (traditionally thought of as factual) and literature (traditionally thought of as fictional)” (Tyson, 283). By deconstructing the opposition, the new historicists interpret history in the same way as literary critics interpret literary text.

Representation is another important concept linked with new historicism. The new historicists conceive history not to be a set of fixed and objective facts. Rather subjectification is important even in history. History, like literature, is a text. Being a text, it can not be away from dominant discourse of the time. In a sense, a text is itself a discourse which acts to circulate the dominant ideology of the time. Seemingly, the text reflects the external reality but at the deeper level it consists of the situation which is the ideological product of the historical conditions specific to an era. This process of presenting the cultural constructs is known as representation.

In short, the abovementioned tools will be utilized throughout this research in order to find historicity of text in Plath’s selected poems. The researcher will try to find out how Plath’s poems have become a discourse which encompasses the interplay of ideologies during the 1950s America. In other words, this research will attempt to show how Plath’s poems have incorporated anti-patriarchal discourse so as to resist the oppressive patriarchal ideology. In this regard both feminism and new historicism are significant tools to prove the hypothesis of this research.

## Textual Analysis

### 3.1. Politics in Poetics: Ideology in Plath's Poems

One of the most controversial 20<sup>th</sup> century American poets Sylvia Plath is mostly interpreted as a confessional poet whose poems are the expression of her personal anguish and fragmentation. But this research attempts to prove that within her expression of personal experiences, there is the interplay of dominant discourses of her time and her own personal confession incorporates the age-long excruciating pain and endless suffering of all women of her time. So, her poems are the platform where she stands to raise the voice of resistance against the oppressive patriarchy.

Plath's poems are the voice of marginalized women. They are the voice of sidelined, marginalized and oppressed group during the 1950s in America. As a writer Plath cannot be exception to the new historicists' idea that she is, in one way or the other, influenced by the dominant ideology. According to the new historicists we are unknowingly influenced by the dominant ideology of the time we are living in. Then both our thinking and writing are influenced. In one or the other we express our perception of the ideology whether we criticize or support. According to the new historicists we are unknowingly influenced by the dominant ideology of the time we are living in. Then both our thinking and writing are influenced. In one way or the other we express our perception of the ideology whether we criticize or support. At that time, patriarchal ideology was dominantly circulated through various discourses like art, literature, music media etc. The age-old male domination needed to be justified in order to continue it. Males wanted to prove their suppression and subordination over women and their own superiority in the binary opposition: male/female, strong/feeble so on. In the social hierarchy the males were in the superior position and it was to be continued to exercise power over women. So, to fulfill all of

these needs male had circulated the patriarchal ideology through various medium. According to this ideology, women are always defined as weak, docile, submissive and passive. The revolutionary spirit like Plath could not bear any type of domination from males. Therefore, as a medium to circulate the anti- patriarchal ideology, Plath chose poetry. The poetic devices themselves are loaded with political power. As a result, Plath's thirst for controlling over socio-political forces can be vividly seen in her poems.

In such a situation the purpose of resisting the patriarchal ideology is to assert her feminine identity. By staging rebellion against patriarchal norms and values, Plath is in quest of socio-economic power. Her poems speak not only for her own freedom but they are the voice of all women to acquire equal social, economic and political power as men have. This quest clearly shows her politics of writing poetry. In a sense, these poems are the voice of dissatisfied, neglected and marginalized group – women - rising to have equal sharing over all of the socio-economic and politico- cultural forces. Here lies real politics of Plath beyond her personal confession. Hence her poems are both influenced by and influence the social circumstances of the period she was living in. Even in her poetics there is politics. The poetic devices like image, symbol, metaphor, allusion, etc. are highly loaded with political force. For instance, in the poem "Ariel", Plath has brought references of Godiva who is the symbol of rebellion. Plath says, "White/ Godiva, I unpeel - / Dead hands, dead stringencies" (239). Here the phrases "dead hands" and "dead stringencies" refer to the oppressive patriarchal rules. After all, it can be concluded that Plath's poems, exposing the interplay of the then dominant ideology, speak for equal freedom for women as men.

### 3.1.1 "Ariel"

The title poem of Plath's well received collection of poems *Ariel*, "Ariel" is one of the powerful feminist protest poems which clearly exposes the conflict of ideologies of the time when it was written. Since the poem is loaded with the images and symbols with rebellious spirit, Plath's politics can be explicitly seen. The title itself has various connotations. It was the name of the horse Plath used to ride as a girl. On the other hand, Ariel connotes the city of Jerusalem in the Bible. The city is both cursed and sanctioned since it is the chosen land by god. However, these connotations seem to be less important to evoke meaning of the poem. The third connotation of "Ariel" as the name of a sexless spirit in Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest* carries the potential meaning of the poem. The spirit here serves king Prospero and it is always seeking liberation. Similarly, the horse can also be interpreted as symbolizing the rebellious spirit that the female speaker of the poem aspires to be. While looking from new historicist perspective, what is more important in the poem is the movement of the horse as well as that of the speaker. In the beginning both of them are in static position as the speaker says, "stasis in darkness" (239). The situation is dark. But slowly and gradually the horse starts running. Then at the end both of them are in the morning environment. This movement symbolizes many other kinds of movements. Allegorically, it is the movement from stasis to action and darkness to light. It is also the movement from void and meaninglessness to meaning and understanding, unconscious to conscious and childhood ignorance to adulthood awakening. After moving away from darkness and stasis the speaker will reach light and activity, and then she will be aware of her real self, independent feminine identity. On the other hand the poem itself imparts the seeds of consciousness in the mind of women. So it is the movement towards feminist

awakening. In this movement the speaker/ the rider becomes one with the horse's speed. This speed away from the darkness is symbolically the speed away from patriarchal oppressive rules and regulations. So, it is a kind of movement of the speaker from non-existence to existence, identity crisis to assertion of identity and this identity is none other than the feminine identity. In this regard Robin Korman writes:

As the pace of the poem and the galloping of the horse pick up speed, wheat fields appear in her field of vision like waves of sea welling up into view. The cry of a child is heard, then the vision becomes a final pure experience of self uniting with sensation as she feels that she and the horse are a single arrow shot into the eye of the sun, dissolving there, as dew dissolves in the morning light. (2)

Here, the “eye” towards which the female speaker is shooting the arrow is the symbol of patriarchy as Lant, citing Gilbert, writes:

Placing Ariel in a feminist context, Sandra Gilbert argues that the “Eye” toward which this poem moves is the eye of the father, the patriarchal superego which destroys and devours with a single glance. (657)

Hence, the motionless situation in the beginning of the poem is the culmination of male domination of which the victim is the whole female race. The patriarchy defines women as helpless, powerless, and passive creature whose job is just to feed and rear children. In such a situation Plath bursts into anger against patriarchy. Her urge for control over socio-economic power can be evidently seen when she wishes to reincarnate as Godiva—a rebellious spirit:

White  
Godiva, I unpeel—

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I

Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas. (239)

Pointing out to the rebellious spirit, Axelrod has criticized that “By unpeeling an outer self of ‘dead hands’ and ‘dead stringencies’, she sought to unveil and give voice to an inner ‘queen’ or ‘white Godiva’, a spirit of rebellious experiences”(265). Here she wishes to break away the dead patriarchal controls and dominations which always squeeze women and dominate them. Similarly, the first line of the second stanza “God’s lioness” also bears the same sense of rebelliousness. As Robin Korman says, “Actually, ‘god’s lioness’ is a literal translation of the Hebrew word Ariel” (2).

Other some of the dominant aspects of the poem are the use of images and symbols. These poetic devices are used fully for political purpose. The images of galloping horse and an arrow shooting into the red eye explicitly expose Plath’s rebellion against patriarchal ideology and by resisting this ideology forcefully, her anti-patriarchal ideology is circulated. In the similar manner, the symbols like ariel and god’s lioness and the allusions of white Godiva function as the vibrantly rebellious spirit of Plath herself. The poem, as a whole, criticizes the social structure based upon patriarchal definition of women as sub-human. By criticizing the male ideology through the poem, Plath is trying to empower feminist ideology. This display of ideologies is at the center of the poem. Therefore, the poem “Ariel” serves as a discourse to circulate anti-patriarchal ideology.

### **3.1.2 “Daddy”**

Plath’s one of the most criticized poems “Daddy” seems to be a good selection for the purpose of showing ideological circulation in her poetry. To justify Plath’s

politics in writing poetry, this poem vividly shows how her poems function as the discourse which whole-heartedly supports the feminist ideology. Even the literary devices used here like symbols, images, metaphors, etc, are linked with this ideology and show the speaker's spitting contempt against males and her urge for power in the society. The poem includes some personal subject matters of the writer but through it Plath has reframed the private in terms of a public discourse, framing personal, family conflicts within larger cultural process.

One of the most important elements in the poem regarding the issue raised in this research is the Nazi-Jew allegory. By bringing the reference of the Holocaust imagery, Plath identifies the father with the Nazis and herself with the Jews. In this regard, Lisa Nabeshumber in the essay "The Poetics of Torture: Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry" writes "She identifies herself with persecuted Jews, the marginalized and hidden" (193). Similarly, Irving Howe also says "In Daddy, Plath identifies the father with the Nazis" (1211). This identification is not only the personal identification but it implies a general one. This means to say that Plath's identification of herself with the Nazis is the identification of female with the Nazis and the males with Germans. This parallel identification clearly exposes the domination and subordination. This Holocaust and Jewish victims here become metaphor for suffering. Thus, in this poem, Plath's landscape is moved from the mythic and natural to one with political boundaries. Indeed, her personal hatred to her father remarks her hatred towards the authoritative masculinist forces. This overt Nazi-Jew allegory can be studied throughout the poem. For Plath, the Holocaust and the patriarchy's silencing of women were linked outcomes of the masculinist interpretation of the world. In this poem the speaker finds her voice and motive by identifying herself as antithetical to her fascist father. It is more clearly stated when she says "I thought

every German was you. / I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew” (223). This parallelism also hints at the identification between Nazis suffering to that of women. Indeed “Daddy” uses Nazi imagery to make the same accusation about objectification brought against men as oppressors. By showing this oppressive patriarchal behavior, Plath has invited the readers to resist such behavior. And her wish to provide politico-cultural power to women as a whole is embodied in her urge for anger and protest against patriarchy. So, the then existing anti-patriarchal ideology has worked in shaping her poems and on the other hand, her poems have equally influenced the feminist movement till now.

From the very beginning, the poem has successfully analyzed the then existing patriarchal culture. The first stanza visibly mirrors the abovementioned authoritative masculine forces. Plath writes:

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

The suffocative environment within the shoe where the speaker spent thirty years is symbolic to the suffocative situation of women in patriarchal society. In the society dominated by male-constructed rules and laws, women are first defined as inferior sub-human and then they are treated badly. They are deprived of their rights of life, liberty and equality. This is clarified by the lines “I never could talk to you. /The tongue stuck in my jaw. / [ . . . ] I have always been scared of you” (223). Here, the speaker ‘I’ represents females and ‘you’ represents males. Women are always scared



of patriarchal exploitation. So, the situation of the speaker in the shoe represents women's situation in the society. Nabeshumber rightly criticized that the poem like "Daddy", "practically explodes from the stress imposed on the female selves. This strangling objectification makes their silence that much more painful" (194). By speaking not only "the language obscene" but also the actual German language (Itch, itch, itch) the personae demonstrates that even as she attempts to escape her oppressor's (male) language it makes heavy claims on her. This fixed "itch" can also be seen to mirror the shuttering repetition of the oppressor's language. As Plath herself describes, certain styles of discourse violate body and soul more than others. This idea applies in her poems, too. In fact, it is the patriarchal discourse that has violated and shattered not only the soul and body but also the independent identity of females. On the other hand, anti-patriarchal discourse appears against patriarchy to ascertain power for female. This socio-political tension of ideologies is vividly exposed through "Daddy".

### **3.1.3 "Lady Lazarus"**

"Lady Lazarus" is one of Plath's poems which bears a poignant expression of her resentment, even a vengeance, against the male-dominated society. The oppressed woman of the poem, who is herself the speaker, embodies all the oppression upon women and also many kinds of violence for which man is responsible. By reversing the traditionally appointed roles of women and men, Plath has invited the readers to criticize the age-old oppressive patriarchal society. Hence, in this poem, by analyzing the literary devices like allusion and image and by studying their implications we can see how Plath was influenced by the anti-patriarchal ideology and how this ideology is circulated through the poem.

First of all, the title itself is suggestive of the fact how Plath has reversed the traditional roles of male and female and how she empowers women to fight against female victimization in patriarchal society whether it is done by daddy or doctor or even by God. In this regard, Plath has presented the female speaker as a strong and rebellious-spirited woman who dares to “eat men like air” (247). By asking a rhetorical question as “Do I terrify?” the speaker shows how brave she is. Similarly, she has directly addressed the male as “Herr Doktor”, “Her Lucifer”, and “my enemy”. Here, the female speaker is quite reversed to the traditional passive and weak woman. When she says “Out of the ashes/ I rise with my red hair”, it shows that a new and vibrantly brave woman is being born to fight against all traditions including social, political, cultural and literary which have not only tortured but destroyed the female identity. She is born as a capable enemy of the male traditions after the oppression and destructive physical, political, cultural, artistic, psychological and all sorts of tortures. As Narneshumber writes, “in poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’, Plath presents selves in revolt, resisting assimilation to patriarchal ideals” (185). In this way, the poem bears the theme of universal female protest in the modern world. This feminist discourse is clearly circulated through the poem.

Likewise, the title itself refers to the female power. Lazarus refers to the biblical story in which Jesus Christ brought Lazarus back from the dead. However, here it is a woman who comes back from the dead without the help of a male/God figure. A woman is herself capable in doing the things which were done by the males in the past. Indeed there is the connection between Lazy Lazarus and the Bible’s Lazarus. In the Bible Christ miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead possibly out of his desire to advertise his own power—representative of male ego. Here, this desire parallels Herr Doktor’s talent for bringing Lazy Lazarus back from the dead. He

resurrects her in front of a crowd, so that his “opus” can be admired and his power acknowledged. By showing this utter futility of male domination and objectification of women, Plath has criticized the patriarchal ideology through poetry. At last, she threatens the male to eat them even rising out of ash. Here, her reincarnation as Lady Lazarus is the direct threat and challenge to the speaker’s audience which is made up entirely of men (Herr God, Herr Lucifer, and Herr Doktor)

Her God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And eat men like air. (246-47)

This threatening seems to be the foreshadowing of victory, in the restoration of the true self and the annihilation of its detractors. Here lies Plath’s feminist agenda of protesting against oppressive patriarchal domination.

Another important issue is the Nazi analogy/Holocaust imagery. As in *Daddy*, Plath has identified the male with the cruel Germans and females’ pathetic situation with that of Jews in the concentration camp. Through this analogy Plath has shown how women have been made the objects of saleable commodity. She says that her “skin” is for bright “lampshade”, “My right foot” “a paperweight” etc. So this imagery serves to magnify the controller/controlled and male / female relationship and ultimately shows female victimization in patriarchal society. By doing so she has

been able to expose hollowness and meaninglessness of patriarchal discourse. Thus Plath's poems are full of rebellious feminist voice which directly challenges the male authority in patriarchal society.

### 3.1.4 "Fever 103"

One of Plath's most aggressive poems "Fever 103" is a bitter criticism of patriarchal ideology. Attacking the whole patriarchal language, culture and custom, Plath imagines to establish such a society where male/female dichotomy will not exist and it will be like "Paradise" (Plath, 232). In the very beginning of the poem Plath is so furious against patriarchal ideology that she sarcastically asks whether the masculinist languages are pure or not:

Pure? What does it mean?

The tongues of hell

Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus

Who wheezes at the gate. (231)

This rhetorical question clearly criticizes the then prevailing patriarchal ideology which always undermined capacities in women. Moreover, it tries to define women as weak, passive and dependent creatures. Nor can masculinist language capture female essence. Therefore, she asks how such language can be pure. This language is "dull" in itself (231). So, such handicapped language can't do justice to women. In such society women are always guided by patriarchal ideology. So, she criticizes this ideology and wishes to establish domination-free society like paradise.

Plath's aggressive nature reaches its zenith when she says "Devilish leopard!" to the patriarchal ideology. For her, patriarchy itself is devilish in nature. It devours women's potentiality and capacity of creating something new. Above all, it devours their identity. Women's independent identity is always enshadowed by male domination in all fields. Like the victims in "Hiroshima", women's existence is threatened by the masculinist behavior. She also calls it "The sin. The sin"(231). The body of patriarchal ideology severely hurts females and to justify this ideology the males use various discourses like art and literature. Through this poem Plath is circulating the anti-patriarchal ideology which strengthens feminist ideology. In this regard, she imagines herself as "a pure acetylene" who wants to cut through the patriarchal discourses and dismiss it so as to establish dichotomy-free state(232). She is hopeful of the fact that one day there will be established a society where male will not be able to subordinate women. She says:

All by myself I am a huge camellia

Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush

I think I am going up

I think I may rise -

[ . . . ]

To Paradise. (232)

In this paradise males will have no power to dominate and subordinate females. "Not you, nor him/Not him, nor him" will be superior to women because in such a state males won't have dull language (232). There will be the subversion of male/female dichotomy. As a result, it will be a society with no domination and suppression.

In this way, “Fever 103°” is a politically loaded poem that expresses the females’ outcry of redefinition of traditional masculine power. It castigates the mentality of those who accept the ideology of patriarchy. The sole cause of all types of dominations in the society is the patriarchal ideology. Plath’s main purpose in these poems is to expose all sorts of evils found in such society and criticize them. Even the literary devices like metaphor and image support this feminist ideology. Plath’s comparison of patriarchy with “Devilish leopard” criticizes this ideology whereas her comparison of “acetylene” with herself circulates feminist ideology (232). Females are emotionally excited to fight for their freedom and liberty. In a sense, these poems are Plath’s appeal to all women for their participation in the protest against patriarchy. Thus, it can be concluded that Plath’s poems are full of political issues and her feminist ideas.

### **3.1.5. “The Applicant”**

“The Applicant” is Plath’s another powerful poem which vehemently criticizes the patriarchal ideology which entirely reduces women to nothing more than commodities robbed of their humanity. By exposing the very suppressive nature of males, she has invited the readers to criticize it. The speaker of the poem calls a woman addressing “it”. In patriarchal society women are treated as if they are the objects that we can use for our own purpose. Plath says, “How can we give you a thing?” Paralleling women to objects or things shows the cruel treatment of women in male dominated society. Here, women are regarded as if they have no feelings and emotions. Like machines, they “do whatever you tell it” (Plath, 221). In the poem the potential wife is characterized fully as a manufactured commodity. She is presented as so passive that she can do nothing more than satisfying male thirst and hunger. Even she doesn’t have control over her own body and mind. She is “A living doll” which

“can sew” and “cook” “talk and talk” (221-22). This shows how patriarchy undermines females and their roles in the society. So, through this poem Plath has exposed the emptiness in the current role of wife who is reduced to an inanimate “it”:

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook.

It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.

My boy it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it marry it. (221-22)

A wife, in this poem, is literally a piece of property (a living doll) “that” or “it”, a guaranteed, completely obedient slave. It awaits purchase by the male costumers. Such commodification of women is the basic feature of patriarchal society. Males think that women should be silent, passive and dependent upon them. Males' wishes are to use women as they use goods bought from the market. They must be “guaranteed” and “obedient” so that no threat would come against patriarchal ideology. By understanding this biased ideology of patriarchal discourse, Plath has attempted to go against such practices and empower women to their fullest. In this process she is taking help from feminist discourse.

Similarly, by exposing the emptiness in the current role of wife and their being objectified in patriarchal society, she is indirectly showing the hollowness of age-old

patriarchy. Since the society we are living in is guided by such handicapped rules and regulations, women are deprived of their basic human instincts like expression of emotions and feelings. Such ideas add impetus to feminist discourse which aspires to enable women to do things on their own. In this sense “The Applicant” is Plath’s urge for empowerment of women. This purpose has been supported fully by the literary devices like symbols and metaphors. The most striking metaphors are “doll” and “thing”. These metaphors are used to be compared with women and thereby to show hypocrisy of males and patriarchal system above all. Comparison between the activities of women and those of dolls is a striking point in the poem. This shows how females are deprived of any kind of response, emotion and feeling in their life. So, this poem, by exposing the conflict of ideologies of the time she lived in, circulates the voice of women which has been sidelined and marginalized for ages. To unearth the age-long suppressed voice of women and make it heard to the public is Plath’s main purpose in the poem.

### **3.1.6 “Purdah”**

“Purdah” is another poem by Plath which exposes her rage against male-dominated mainstream society. This is the poem through which Plath is attempting to assert her feminine identity by the means of undressing. The title itself refers to the restrictions and bondages imposed upon women in the patriarchal society. “Purdah” is the custom, found in some Muslim countries, of women not allowing their faces to be seen by male strangers, either by staying in a special part of the house or by wearing a veil. Symbolically, this custom of covering the whole body along with the face is the extremity of suppression. In fact, patriarchal society is so suffocative for women that it makes them cover not only their faces but their inner feelings and emotions.

Women are fed with the values which seem meaningful for them but in reality these



customs are also the discourses which circulate patriarchal ideology. Plath, in this poem, is critical of such patriarchal discourse which carries out the male ideology.

The female speaker in the poem has been clothed in males' ideology. She finds her every activities "Enigmatical" in this oppressive society (Plath, 242). All her "clarities" are shifted and she becomes a mysterious creature in front of all males (242). She has to hide her understanding and "visibilities" and gleams "like a mirror" (242). As a mirror, everyone finds himself in her. This means to say that she has no her own identity. When she lives in the way as the society expects, then she has to kill her identity. On the other hand, when she lives in her own, the society isolates her and criticizes. Patriarchy has devoured their identity and hid them in a corner. Everywhere males become the controller as Plath says "It is himself he guides/In among these silk/Screens, these rustling appurtenances" (242-43). The "mouth veil" and the "eye veil" are symbolic to the veil of patriarchy which doesn't allow women to expose their real self and independent identity (243). Therefore, by exposing the harsh reality of this society Plath is criticizing patriarchal ideology.

In the same way, the patriarchal tendency of regarding women as their own property has also been criticized throughout the poem. Plath has invited the readers to criticize this tendency when she says:

I am his

Even in his

Absence, I

Revolve in my

Sheath of impossibles, (243)

The patriarchal ideology is so powerful that it makes the women accept their role as appointed by the males. So, the speaker in the poem accepts that she is his even when he is absent. Plath, being aware of this power, goes against this system and mocks at it so as to justify female ideology. Therefore, her poems supply the interplay of ideologies of the time she lived in.

Similarly, “Purdah” further reveals Plath’s conviction that undressing has become for her a powerful poetic gesture, and in this poem it is the female speaker who finally disrobes and here she attempts to appropriate the power of nakedness for herself. She does so in an attempt to make herself mighty and challenge patriarchal ideology. At the end her threatening to the males is directly exposed:

Attendants!

And at his next step

I shall unloose

I shall unloose -

From the small jeweled

Doll he guards like a heart -

The lioness, (243-44)

Here, the clothed and hidden speaker claims that she is “Even in his /Absence” but she becomes increasingly threatening (243). “Priceless and quiet”, the speaker begins to unloose her power in a sort of undressing: first “one feather”, then “one note” until finally she becomes more and more dangerous (243). Hence, this poem appropriately

circulates the feminist ideology which is full of voices of women who have been forgotten till now by the biased patriarchy.

### **3.1.7. “The Munich Mannequins”**

Like the poem “The Applicant”, “The Munich Mannequins” criticizes the evil practices of treating women as mere commodities. Through this poem Plath has attempted to discourage the patriarchal practice of undermining women’s role in the society. This ideology, circulated through various discourses like literature and art, media and education, etc., is rooted in the society for a long time and by using such discourse, the males have marginalized the females all the time. Plath is able here to depict such issues and expose to the public. Plath has shown “increased awareness of early conventions” and she has also “resisted ‘ladylike’ writing” (Roland and Brad, 404). Regarding political issues in Plath’s poems, Ruland and Bard further say that Plath “[. . .] reflects the political concerns of her time by insisting on, and fashioning a distinctive feminine voice in American poetry, enriching it with all that is available to an other-than- male vision” (404).

In the poem Plath has compared women with the mannequins to show how patriarchal society is functioning. The patriarchal society has robbed off women’s humanity and reduced them to the statues of the model of a human being which is used to show clothes in the window of a shop. This comparison shows what roles the women are appointed in the society. Plath wants to say that women can’t experience anything that a common human being does. She has been made an instrument of snow and pleasure. In the article “The Poetics of Torture: The spectacle of Sylvia Plath’s Poetry”, Narbeshumber writes:

In “The Munich Mannequins” Plath takes the image of ‘tailored’ woman to its extreme conclusion. The metaphorical mannequins experience no pleasure; they appear only for the pleasure of others - for the tailor who takes apart, dresses, and assembles “her” and for the consumers, who watches “her”. (193)

Like the living doll in “The Applicant”, the mannequins are passionless, emotionless and after all, lifeless objects for show. Such comparison of women with the thing inanimate heightens the degree of satire against male ego. It also encourages females by making them conscious enough to realize their slow decay due to these stereotypical roles. These manufactured women appear only for show and they have no role in any sector of social life. Their voice is sidelined and so they can neither speak nor act. Plath says:

And the black phones on hooks

Glittering

Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice. (263)

Indeed, patriarchy has silenced female voice. Like the mannequins they are only glittering in the show case. They are so weak and fragile that they are not expected to do any difficult job. They are said to have no mind of their own:

These mannequins lean tonight

In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,

Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind. (263)

In this way, Plath's poems are loaded with feminist ideologies. Political subject matters like the space of women in the society, freedom and liberty, etc., are circulated through poetry. Poetic devices like image, symbol, metaphor, etc. further help in dramatizing the issues. This poem is also a platform for Plath to attack against the biased patriarchal ideology. Here lies Plath's politics in writing poetry. In fact, the faculty of creativity has been used to gain political and social rights and live a meaningful life sharing everything in the society. The purpose of writing is to gain her own independent identity and social authority. For that the roots of male domination needs to be uprooted. This is possible only through rebellion against such practices. This politics of rebellion for rights compelled Plath to write poems. Here, politics does not refer to the other issues than female issues. The neglected issues related with females like their freedom and liberty have been foregrounded in Plath's poems. Hence Plath's poems abound in feminist ideas.

### **3.1.8 "Tulips"**

Plath's criticism of patriarchal discourse is vividly presented in her famous poem "Tulips". It is the bitter criticism against patriarchal practice of marginalizing women by silencing their voice and appointing them very minor domestic roles like cooking, taking care of children and cleaning. In the male-dominated society females are expected to be docile, meek, passive and dependent. Women are taken as merely an object of pleasure that is like the object produced from industries. Because of this

tendency Plath has expressed her frustration against patriarchy. The very title of the poem itself is symbolic. Tulip is the name of a flower. Here the female speaker of the poem is treated as flowers which are merely means of decoration for males. This is the way how male-dominated society treats women.

In the beginning of the poem the speaker satirizes the patriarchal practice of silencing women. The speaker accepts that she is “learning peacefulness” (160). This means to say that patriarchal norms and values expect women to be calm and quiet. It is almost prohibited for women to speak and laugh louder. This is no more than the loss of identity for women. They are “nobody” and they “have nothing to do with” any type of problem (160). In this poem the speaker has given her name to the anesthetist and her body to surgeons. Most of the anesthetists and surgeons are males. So, the speaker has surrendered everything to the males. This is the plight of women in the society. She plays the role of mother and wife in her family. She doesn't have any other vital role anywhere else. Therefore, the speaker says “My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water / Tends to the pebbles” (160). In the hands of males, women are just like plaything. When women can't do anything on their own, their self gets lost.

In patriarchal society females are moved by males. The speaker directly confesses “They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep/ Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage -” (160). It is the hegemony of males that devours the independent identity of females. Individuality and freedom, liberty and equality are kept away from their access. Females are entangled within the limited territory of family. Care of children and other members of the house entangle them. Plath further writes “their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks” (160). Such familial factors are no more than the chains for women. In the name of fulfilling these

roles, women lose their identity. Instead of becoming themselves, they become wives and mothers for others. As a result, they lose their own face as the speaker says:

And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut- paper shadow

Between the eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips,

And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.

The vivid tulips eat my oxygen. (161)

Here, the woman who sees her as a cut-paper shadow feels that she is silently suffocating. It is because of the oppressive patriarchal discourse. In the poem Plath's rage gets an outlet with support of feminist discourse. Her urge for feminist identity is vividly presented when she says "[. . .] I only wanted/To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty./How free it is, you have no idea how free - " (161). This freedom is the freedom from patriarchal restrictions and her empty hands are the symbol of nothingness from where her quest for identity just starts. On the other hand, these empty hands are free of patriarchal restriction. The so called peacefulness where she is compelled to live in is "so big it dozes you" (161). In this peacefulness women really feel confused. In this way, Plath's poems are the medium through which the criticism of one discourse and assertion of other discourse is presented. So, "Plath appears as a more politically radical and experimental" as Helle points out (664). Her radical standpoint does not go beyond the issues of female empowerment. By allegorizing the story of suffering of all the women of her time, Plath has shown the universal desire of rebellion of entire women in the world. In this way Plath's poems are concerned with feminist issues.

### 3.1.9 “The Jailer”

“The Jailer” also raises the issues related with female identity. It is concerned with the exploration of female space within the narrow minded patriarchal society. The criticizes the ideology circulated through patriarchal discourse. This discourse defines women as a creature to be acted upon and as an object to be treated with. In this discourse all the inferiorities are linked with women. By defining them in this way the discourse helps males to continue their domination and exploitation over women. In this poem Plath has shown how women are exploited in the society that is guided by patriarchal hegemony. The female speaker of the poem expresses her experiences of suppression, pain and torture in the society. The addressee “he” represents the whole male race which is responsible for all kinds of domination in the society. The speaker directly says “I have been drugged and raped” (226). Without the speaker’s interest, the males use females to fulfill their interest. This shows that women are treated as objects of pleasure. Emotions and passions of women are not counted at all. This is no more than the objectification of women in patriarchal society.

When women are surrounded by patriarchal norms and values, their roles are so limited that their situation is no better than that of foetus in the womb. The speaker says “[. . .] I relax, foetus or cat” (226). In such a situation they can neither speak for their rights nor express their emotions. Men want women to be innocent, obedient, silent and immanent in the role of wife, mother and daughter. Within the kitchen they are like the foetus. This comparison between the foetus and women is appropriate in this context. In the same way, the speaker compares herself with a negress which heightens the degree of domination. Male’s monstrous behavior can be seen in the following lines “He has been burning me with cigarettes, / Pretending I am a negress



with pink paws” (226). This domination of women in the society represses the potentiality of women and makes them handicapped and helpless. Being conscious about this miserable situation of women, Plath stages rebellion against this ideology of domination.

Patriarchal discourse always tries to justify the domination upon women. To do so males feed women false norms and values. When females are fed with lies, they are expected to follow the ideology without any inquiries and questions. The speaker asks herself and answers “...What have I eaten? /Lies and smiles” (226). Males praise them and keep them under the patriarchal grip so that females don’t question their behaviors. The line “Surely the sky is not that color.” connotes the reality of patriarchy (226). What males do to justify their oppression is not the reality. The reality is bitter which is hidden. In this way, Plath questions the legitimacy of patriarchal discourse. She is trying to falsify the discourse. The lesson that we get from patriarchal discourse is not the real thing. Reality never comes out of males’ grip. To know this she takes help from feminist discourse. Here, Plath attempts to subvert the present structure of society which is based upon patriarchal domination. The culmination of the patriarchal domination is shown through the expression of the speaker “I die with variety/Hung, starved, burned, hooked” (227). By the speaker’s saying “I wish him dead or away”, Plath means to say that she has a wish for the society where males’ superiority won’t exist. Only in such society women will get freedom. In such a society male and female will co-operate each-other to run the social roles. Man without woman and woman without man will be incapable of doing anything. Plath says “What would he do/Do, do, do, without me?” (227). In such a society both males and females have their independent identity but one needs the help from others to live the life happily.

In this way, Plath's poems have very implicitly circulated the feminist ideology by criticizing the patriarchal ideology. Plath's poems, thus, are linked with politics directly. These poems fully support the purpose of feminist movement—providing females with socio-economic and politico-cultural rights. These poems raise the issues like the need of independent identity of women, enough space for women in the society, freedom, liberty, equality and so on. The purpose of all of these issues is to empower women for all sorts of responsibilities in the society.

## Conclusion

Literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. A literary text is itself part of the interplay of discourses. The context creates the text and the text influences the context. This means to say that literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

Here, main concern of the research is not to analyze how faithful Plath's poems are to the historical realities of the 1950s America. Nor is it to expose the social reality of the time. Rather the new historical analysis of Plath's poems is to examine the ways in which Plath's poems embody two conflicting discourses present in her time: patriarchy and feminism. Plath's anti-patriarchal theme is made clearer by the use of various literary devices like image, metaphor, allusion, symbol, etc. Whether Plath's threat "to eat men like air" or her threat to reincarnate as "White Godiva" and raise the voice of protest against patriarchy, are appropriate evidences to prove that there is politics within Plath's poetics. Plath's identification of women with the persecuted Jews and men with Germans is no more than showing meaninglessness of patriarchal values.

The main point in this research is to study how Plath criticizes one discourse and how she circulates another one. In another way, it is the interpretation of the history it represents. Plath's poems are the outcome of the 1950s repressive American society which tried to define women as sub-human, inferior, mysterious, uncertain, and other. On the other hand, this display of discourses has still shaped the modern debate between two conflicting views of patriarchy and anti-patriarchy.

Therefore, Plath's goal in writing poetry is not only to express her personal anguish and frustrations but to achieve freedom, equality, and independent feminine identity. The tortured and exploited speakers in her various poems like "the Applicant", "The Jailer", "the Munich Mannequins", and so on, embody the series of injustices acted upon the whole female race by the males. They expose us the suffocating world of females. Plath, revolting against patriarchy, wants to establish a utopian world where domination and subordination based upon sex won't exist. This utopian world is described as 'Paradise' in the poem "Fever 103". She wants to subvert the social structure which is founded upon the base of patriarchal norms and values. For her, exploitation starts from stereotypical role appointed to women by patriarchy. Then to justify this role males create various discourses and circulate the patriarchal ideology. Through her poems Plath criticizes this very discourse with the help from feminist discourse.

Hence, with Plath's focus upon protest against female marginalization and exclusion, political theme is related. This theme is further enhanced by literary devices like image and symbol, metaphor and simile, etc. For example, the image of 'White Godiva' protesting publicly, the image of 'Lazy Lazarus' eating men like air clarify the theme of politics. Plath's ability to incorporate public and political issues in her expression of personal experiences has enabled us to study her poems from another perspective and know the conflicting ideologies working in her time.

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