

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Travails and Triumphs of Being Women:**

**Plath and Sexton as Confessional Poets**

**A Dissertation**

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**Letter of Approval**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “Travails and Triumph of Being Women: Plath and Sexton as Confessional poets,” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Sabita Nakarmi, has been approved by the research committee.

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## CONTENTS

	Pages
Acknowledgement	iv
<b>1. General Introduction</b>	<b>1-21</b>
1.1 Life and Time as Raw Material: An Introduction to the Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton	1
1.2 Biography of Sylvia Plath	2
1.3 Biography of Anne Sexton	4
1.4 A Comparison Between the Lives and Attitude of Plath and Sexton	6
1.5 Review of Criticism on Plath's Poetry	7
1.6 Review of Criticism on Sexton's Poetry	13
1.7 Comparison and Contrast Between the Reviews of the Poetry of Plath and Sexton	18
<b>2. Methodology: Poetics and Politic of Confessional Poetry</b>	<b>22-54</b>
2.1 Confessional Poetry	22
2.2 Psychoanalytical Theory	26
2.2.1 Psychoanalytic Perspectives in Plath's Poetry	30
2.2.2 Psychoanalytic undercurrents in Sexton's Poetry	33
2.3 Feminism	36
2.3.1 Feminism in Plath's Poetry	46
2.3.2 Feminism in Sexton's Poetry	50
<b>3. Textual Analysis</b>	<b>55-94</b>

3.1 Travails of Being a Woman: Dynamics of Death-Rebirth in Sylvia Plath	55
3.1.1 “Ariel”	56
3.1.2 “Lady Lazarus”	59
3.1.3 “Fever 103”	63
3.1.4 “Words”	65
3.1.5 “Daddy”	66
3.1.6 “Metaphors”	69
3.1.7 “The Colossus”	71
3.1.8 “The Tulips”	72
<b>3.2 Texture of Affirmation: Confessional Poems of Anne Sexton</b>	<b>76</b>
3.2.1 “The Truth the Dead Know”	77
3.2.2 “All My Pretty Ones”	79
3.2.3 “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward”	81
3.2.4 “The Starry Night”	83
3.2.5 “The Farmer’s Wife”	84
3.2.6 “The Touch”	86
3.2.7 “Wanting to Die”	87
3.2.8 “Housewife”	89
3.2.9 “Live”	90
<b>4. Conclusion: A Comparison Between Plath and Sexton’s Confessional Poetry</b>	<b>95-98</b>

## **5. Works Cited**

## ABSTRACT

The dissertation entitled “Travails and Triumphs of Being Women: Plath and Sexton as Confessional Poets” concerns the poetry by the confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Their poetry is about the rebellion against patriarchy in order to achieve freedom and identity of the women. Their confessional poems originate from their own wounds and the disheartening domestic experiences. They write poems about the feminist and psychoanalytical crises such as existential alienation, fragmented personality, and confusion about identities. Their poetry of pain allegorizes the story of suffering of all the women living in the 1950s and 60s. Their rebellion unveils the universal desire of rebellion of the entire women in the world. Their emphasis lies on the redefinition and the revisionary re-reading of the women and their facts. They strive for a world that is free of gender and racial discrimination.

However, the poetic presentation of these poets differs in that Sylvia Plath appears furiously rebellious and overwhelmingly nihilistic whereas Anne Sexton turns out to be a conformist apostle as she affirms life. The former aggressively hurtles towards demolishing the patriarchal construction and creating a new feminine paradigm through the dark means of self-annihilation. But the latter revolts against the patriarchal constraints with the continuation of a passive and complacent life as her poetry is more life affirming. Sexton’s defiance is embedded with the compliance of gender. While Plath is more radical and sarcastic, Sexton is more submissive and docile. Yet howsoever is the ways of presentation, both confessional poets write poetry to subvert the patriarchal propensity and to create a new feminine realm full of justice, equality and freedom.

## **1. General Introduction**

### **1.1 Life and Time as Raw Material: An Introduction to the Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.**

Confessional poetry designates a type of narrative and lyric verse given impetus by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). It reveals the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of poet's own life. It also deals with poet's private or clinical matters including sexual experiences, mental anguishes and illnesses, experimentations with drugs and suicidal impulses. John Drucy articulates two sides of argument of Confessional Poetry: "at best it 'explores previously forbidden subjects with honesty and directness' and at worst it 'wallows in emotional excess . . . in the guise of autobiography' " (qtd. in Taylor 136). Robert Phillip describes some characteristics such as:

Confessional poetry is therapeutic and / or purgative, displaying moral courage. Its personal narrative often portray unbalanced, afflicted or alienated protagonists, using irony and understatement . . . personal failure, mental illness and alienation are common themes that are generally anti-establishment. (136)

As a rebellion against the demand for impersonality of T.S. Eliot and New Critics, poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, George Starbuck etc. had attempted to "drift away from the public affairs and to make an introspection in the cult of personal" (137). Confessional poets, both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton have based their poetic sensitivity on feminist concerns. They express their own psychic anguishes and painful sufferings of life in their poetry.

As Confessional poets, both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton have based their poetic sensitivity on feminist concerns. They express their own inner conflict and afflictions of life

in their poetry. Coincidentally they are not only female confessional poets, but also they do share almost the same traumatic experiences, personal failures, mental illnesses, unhappy marriages, alienations, taboo subjects and inner conflicts. They transmute their psychic wounds into poetry of pain, which generally employs the fascination to self-destruction, stasis metaphors, darkness, death and rebirth imageries. Both use irony and understatement for detachment and to assert their identity as well as individuality. Both Plath and Sexton tend to pursue female spaces in the patriarchal society. Despite their similarities in the issue of female identity, they tend to differ in their presentation. While Plath is overwhelmingly nihilistic and feebly optimistic since she succeeds to transcend death, Anne Sexton is more life affirming even when she too flirts nihilism. Specifically the contrast can be drawn in terms of their technique: Plath is more surrealistic and ironic than Sexton in the intensification of psychological fragments.

## **1.2 Biography of Sylvia Plath**

Born on 27 October, 1932 in Jamaica district of Boston, Sylvia Plath was the only daughter of Otto Plath, a German immigrant university Professor and Aurelia Plath. Plath's household was patriarchal in nature in the traditional sense. The family lived under Otto Plath's domination until his death from diabetes after Sylvia's eighth birthday. For Plath, her childhood becomes a sea that is "beautiful, inaccessible, absolute, fine, white, flying" (Malmshemerz 539). Her experiences of the sea are "tied subjectively to her mother, father and grand mother" (540). Simultaneously there are feelings of "powerlessness, vulnerability, betrayal and loss as well as bright mirrors" (540). In a sense, the sea refers to the sea of patriarchy, which marginalizes the female spirits as "other" (541). Malmshemer strongly believes that Plath sought solace from the sea.



Plath's father used to take pride in her childhood accomplishment and Sylvia apparently idolized him. But in 1940 November, when he died, his death became her second loss. This became another major turning point in her life as an event textualized in "Lady Lazarus." Most of her poems, including the famous one "Daddy", present the father - daughter relationship. According to Plath, the death of her father had triggered the emotional difficulties she experienced as an adult.

Plath was really an outstanding student whose first poem was published in the Boston Sunday school magazine when she was just eight and half years old:

Hear the cricket chirping  
In the dewy grass.  
Bright little fire flies  
Twinkle as this pass. (535)

With this Plath began her apprenticeship in poetry. A magazine called *Seventeen* before she graduated from high school had accepted her story. For nearly twenty years, she worked at poetry developing and having a technique. Her voice in the poems is mature and unmistakably hers.

In terms of her academic career, she remained a model of brilliant success. She received a scholarship at Smith College. There she won many prizes and graduated with highest honours. She was known as a brilliant, energetic and highly motivated student. However, beneath her accomplished facade was a person with extreme rage and sufferings groaning under severe depression. Therefore she continued to write about her frustrations, anxieties and her psychological state.

While she was in college, she had her first mental breakdown that she chronicled in her novel *The Bell Jar*. Despite her emotional troubles, Plath won a Fulbright Fellowship to the

University of Cambridge in England. There she met and married a prominent English poet Ted Hughes in 1959. At first Plath and Hughes enjoyed a supportive relationship. In 1957, she returned to Smith College and taught there. In Boston, she attended Robert Lowell's poetry classes. She learned much from Lowell, Sexton, Snodgrass and George Starbuck. This company helped her to publish her first book, *The Colossus* which described her obsession with her father. But in 1963, her marriage with Ted Hughes began to crumble. They separated and Plath moved to London with her children. There she went deep into the state of despair.

In London, she was plagued by financial problems and poor health. But then she started to write more feverishly: She completed forty poems that were published posthumously in *Ariel*, which brought her international acclaim.

### **1.3 Biography of Anne Sexton**

Another lady poet of the similar international acclaim is Anne Sexton. Initially named as Anne Gray Harvey, she was born on November 9, 1928, in Newton Massachusetts. Her parents, Ralph Churchill Harvey and Mary Gray Harvey, were established New England family. Though born in a successful sophisticated family, her childhood was marked with an account of her father's alcoholism and her mother's indifference. That's why Sexton described herself as:

The unwanted, the mistake

The mother used to keep father

From his divorce. (qtd. in Paar 667)

Only her great aunt Anne Ladd Dingley was a figure of love and stability for her. Yet her aunt's eventual deafness senility, confinement to nursing home and finally her death as well became a fear of abandonment for Sexton.

During her schooling, Sexton was not a diligent student. However she wrote poetry despite her mother's accusation of plagiarism. Regarding her rebellious nature, Sexton's parents sent her to a boarding school in Massachusetts. She even attended a boarding school where she met Alfred Muller Sexton in 1948. At nineteen she dropped out junior college to marry Alfred, also called Kayo. Then she led a complete domestic life of housewife, of cooking and clothing, of caring husband and children. The role of femininity and of young and happy bride left her feeling most restless and bored.

In 1950, at the outbreak of Korean War, Kayo joined navy. When he was aboard ship in Korea, her stay with her family discovered her first manic depressions. The birth of her first two children, Linda Gray Sexton and Joyce Ladd Sexton, and the death of her dear aunt Anna Ladd Sexton became the causes of her severe depression and suicide attempts. It was her psychiatrist Dr. Orne who suggested her to write poetry. He said, "Do not kill yourself" (670). Moreover when she heard I.A. Richards' recitation of sonnet and its explanation, she discovered her buried self:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who did not know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper . . . I thought the night mares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down to lead a conventional life . . . but . . . the surface cracked one day. When I was about twenty-eight, I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself. (678)

Thus her poetic creativity is the result of the outbreak of her mental breakdown. It is not wrong to say that Sexton's poetry writing began as a therapy.

Later on, she developed connection with W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and George Starbuck. The friendship between Sexton and the latter two remarked as literary

history – taking classes, drinking martinis and talking of poetry and death. That's what is described in her "Sylvia's Death":

The death we said we both out grew  
The one we wore on our skinny breasts  
The one we talked of so often each time . . .  
The death we drank to,  
The motives and then the quiet deed. (680)

By 1959, Sexton achieved a great literary success along with the publication of a collection of poems *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. But her literary rise was marred by her personal tragedy. In the same year her mother died of breast cancer and her father of fatal cerebral hemorrhage. Hence despite her literary achievement, Sexton remained deeply troubled and which ultimately made her take her own life.

#### **1.4 A Comparison Between the Lives and Attitudes of Plath and Sexton**

Regarding the lives of Plath and Sexton, we can assert that both poets were tormented by unhappy childhood. Both of them sense the fear of abandonment. The love and hatred with father figure remains dominant in the life and poetry of each. Perhaps that is the reason Plath's most anthologized poem "Daddy" is modeled on Sexton's unknown poem "My friend, My Friend". "Daddy" borrows Sexton's words, rhyme pattern along with its autobiographical facts to portray sado-masochistic and mutually destructive relationship. Not only the fear and suffering, but also both were hospitalized due to mental illness because of the intolerable frustration in feminine roles. They created the best of their writing during the treatment of depression. Both Plath and Sexton suffered from unhappy marriage and took children as a hindrance in their life. More and more, they attempted suicide in order to get rid of the most painful and personal experiences. However, their ways of presentation differ in the sense that

Plath as a diligent student attempted her best to explore and to confess her unease with femininity through severe and ironical expression. But Anne Sexton began poetry writing as a therapy. She privately developed idioms to exactly suit her experiences of boredom. Sexton relied on childlike flattening ironies where Plath is known for her aesthetic transcendence. Plath made attempts to die and transcend death itself in order to assert her existence as we read in "Lady Lazarus".

Beware

Beware

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (Ferguson 2970)

For Plath, death is a means to assert her identity. Ever being nihilistic, she chooses to sustain. She is hopeful and victorious enough to reserve the tendency of marginalization of female world. On the contrary, Anne Sexton values art above death as she writes after Plath's suicide, "suicide is, after all, the opposite of poem" (Parr 700). Plath envisions the tension created in the victim and wishes for revenge and the fear of frustration whereas Sexton continues to live and love in human world among human relationship. Therefore, Plath is more pessimistic and slightly optimistic whereas Sexton is more life affirming.

### **1.5 Review of Criticism on Sylvia Plath's Poetry**

Sylvia Plath confesses her psychological fragmentation and inner conflicts in her poetic creation. Her poetic expression is so touching and moving that she has been successful enough to gather up a large number of criticisms. So brilliantly does she use the metaphors that are "unexpected, startling, often upsetting but always dead right" (Smith 324). Exploring the nightmarish recesses of her own unconscious, she has used " 'collective down for the

count', her entire life, self-knowledge, history, misanthropic vision, her art and death in her poetry" (338). She does all these so as to continue her own central experience of "shattering of the self, and laboring to fit it together again and finding a new one" (Hughes 1139).

Similarly literary critic, Jon Rosenblatt asserts that through the emotional outpouring of self-pity and grief, Sylvia Plath shows up a dramatic conflict between self and body. Life and death operate as tangible power in Plath's poetry. Her dramatic agents are people, trees, houses, colors and animals. She focuses on the dramatic conflict of life and death in the form of ritual and magical means to free her. Her ritual confrontation occurs with death or darkness. But Rosenblatt views that this death at once converges into the origin of life:

By willingly undergoing physical mutilation, symbolic dismemberment and symbolic death, the initiated passage [moves] through death on the way to rebirth and new life. The pattern of death symbolized through darkness and annihilation is in dispensation for the beginning of spiritual life. The images of darkness are inevitably connected with germination, with embryology; they already indicate new life in preparation. (22)

Thus the death is not perceived as suicidal ending but as the path to gain a transformed identity. Her suicidal ending and transformed self help her transcend death. By transcending death as a female, she is trying to assert the space for the women. In the dark face of patriarchy, death and annihilation has transformed her as a new changed, miraculous, triumphant and fearless self. Her efforts are geared towards attaining a secure identity.

It is clear that Plath has sought to give birth to a "creative" and "deep" self hidden in her (Axelrod 286). She unpeels her own self – "dead hands and deep stringencies" in order to unveil and give voice to "queen" or "White Godiva", a spirit of rebellious expressiveness (286). She brings about mirror images in order to the failures of deep self. Both mirror and

shadow stand for the insubstantiality of creative nonbeing. The feeling of insubstantiality stems from realization of living in the shadow of others, especially that of the dominating and repressive male figure, either father or husband. By revealing her repression Plath is actually speaking the voice of the whole women living in contemporary American society. Plath cannot see herself as a "knot of nerves, without identity" (Rosenblatt 30). Therefore she presents herself as a shadow unable to represent herself. Plath's shadow represents the ghost of creativity. It betokens the imaginative self perhaps the defeated deep self. Axelrod says in this regard:

Plath attributed her difficulties in achieving self-representation to her diminished sense of identity in a male-dominated and belated world, but her representation was also sabotaged by language itself, which contains its own treacherous holes. She was jailed in Nietzsche's 'prison house of language', which like Emerson's God, has a circumference that is everywhere and a center that is nowhere. (300)

That's why shadow creates the unbridgeable void between the word and the world. Shadow points to her poetic failure or incapacity. She means to state that her social, domestic and economic circumstances, her history and language itself are conspiring against her poetic creativity. In a sense she is trying her best to threaten the male dominated society by unveiling and mirroring the reality. For instance in "The Morning Song", the cloud "distills a mirror, reflected its own slow/effacement" at the hand of wind (Ferguson 2968). The child gets its existence only by diminishing the existence of mother. The child's creation is the mother's destruction or annihilation. And so, death and annihilation ate rampant in Plath's poetry.

In *Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic*, Gina Wisker notes that Plath exposes the duplicity of women's roles. There are paradoxes of fear and love, otherness and self in relation of marriage and mothering. Her poetry fundamentally connects to "sex, desire, sadism and masochism" (103). Plath brings a stuff of horror; haunted and terrible figures of shared fears; and the "tightrope of extremes such as spinster/whore, mother/poet and life/death" (104). Images of self-destruction, and split selves all do expose the story of gendered role of femininity. Plath sees death as something perfected and achieved. Her desire for death is her temptation to gain perfection, which is, never found in human world. Definitely her fascination to death is her spiritual fascination.

Plath honestly provokes the disturbing side of domestic bliss and dangers of kitchen to project her splitting self: She wants to create a new and bizarre artifice to subvert the "convention roles of childbirth, primeval and intuitive version of mother and baby" (107). For that purpose she employs surrealistic images where inanimate becomes animate, and the animate the inanimate. Her family oriented poems help her express a developing yet a conditioned self.

Hammer Langdon, in "Plath's Lives", claims that "Plath's education as a writer promised her freedom and self-expression" (60). Her poetry confirms two qualities in her writing: self-consciousness and intensity. By "consciousness", Langdon means "the capacity to contemplate herself as an object with acute awareness" and by intensity, it is a "drive to be fully present in her writing to achieve a superior authenticity" (61). By all means Plath wants to assert her identity through her confession of own private turmoil. Her intensity is to search a vivid and memorable language. Langdon says that Plath has chosen, to be writer "to choose a special way of life . . . to be in the process of becoming" aimed through self-realization



(67). She does not want to record a self but to bring one into being. Langdon asserts that Plath wants to be famous, to gain public identity as well as immortality:

She is constantly in search of the second 'self' of writing — an improved image of her face and body — with special material qualities [like] glossy, radiant, poreless, white, new. At last in her late work, Plath overcomes this dilemma . . . as she represented in self- violence. (67)

Plath's poetry is nothing but a tale of her rebellion against the patriarchal constraints that has confined her to be a social Plath but not a creative Plath for which she is in head over heels.

Ted Hughes, her husband has commented that Plath's early poetry is "highly intellectual style and highly disciplined" due to the study of thesaurus (qtd. in Axelrod 76). But Wagner in Axelrod's article claims that Ted Hughes has deliberately neglected that the thesaurus once belonged to Plath's father. Indeed her father has become a part of her. However his abandonment in the form of his death has shocked her. Therefore the father is both a source of love and hatred for Plath. The same father-daughter relationship is the subject matter of many poems such as "The Colossus", "Daddy" etc. Moreover her early and later poems have a single metapoem: "the imaginative struggle that generates power and forces that impede, stifle, paralyze and silence that power" (Axelrod 78).

In "Firesong", Plath asserts that "born green we were to this flawed garden" (78). Plath wages a green war against patriarchal garden. In this poem too, the tragic flaw of the garden is her father's life, his death and ghost. The presence and absence of her father has caused much psychological pain in Plath. Axelrod quotes Alice Miller who says that:

It is not trauma that is the source of the illness but the unconscious, repressed hopeless despair that is not allowed to show and is unable to express the feeling of rage, humiliations, hopelessness and sadness. Later however Plath

could not escape her childhood experiences, fantasies, and feelings as they came to dominate her mental life . . . nevertheless Plath attempted to deal with her feelings . . . by turning them into poetry and thereby to make them meaningful. (80)

In this way the father figure is pre-dominant issue discussed by Plath in her poetry. The presence of unconscious feelings and repression are caused by the male figure in her poetry.

Apart from dealing, her most intense pain in poetry Plath also tries to interconnect the private trauma with public interest. The event of Holocaust is the one that is strongly present in her poems. In an interview with BBC, Plath has said that "in particulars, . . . my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that what part of it comes from" (qtd. in *Strangeways* 375).

Particularly she feels herself sharing the era of victimhood and she is herself victimized by the modern life. Plath's personalized moment of Holocaust stems from two motives .In this connection, *Strangeways* remarks that "her sense of events and her desire to combine the public with personal so as to shock the contemporary conformist Cold War America" (375-76). *Alstrangeways* means to express that poems are not strictly about the Holocaust only, nor are they extremely private as they appear. Rather Plath combines her "myth" and "history" relating Nazi persecution to Jews. In the controversial lines in "Daddy", "every woman adores a fascist / boot in face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you", she asserts the archetypal male figure whereas it connotes an escape from freedom through sadistic and masochistic strivings (372).

Emphasizing the idea of self-disclosure a literary critic named Kathleen Margaret Lant says that her disclosure of self seems to be grounded in the life experiences of twentieth century. He makes a contrast between the nakedness in male confessional poets and female

ones. The males' disclosure of body stands for transcendence, freedom and power. But the nakedness for female is nearly a matter of falsifying gestures:

The metaphoric rendering of female body is not a shimmering emblem of the soul's glory but seems rather an embarrassing reminder of self's failure, an icon of vulnerability . . . the unadorned, psychical self of female subject cannot function as a male subject. [It] reminds [us of] . . . unworthy, inadequate and ultimately vulnerable rather than ascendant. (625)

The depiction of male nakedness as the symbol of masculinity and muscularity are all the constructions of the power itself. Presenting woman as vulnerable and insufficient is the stereotypical tendency of society. In that sense Plath shows the social dilapidating scenario through her own most private events. However, in "Lady Lazarus" Plath is successful to challenge the so-called patriarchal society. Obviously when she says "Do I terrify?", her tone is sarcastic but feminine(653). "My face a featureless fine / Jew Line // peel off the napkin shows a big strip tease" (653). By "a strip tease", Alstrangeways means, to seduce. More than threatening, the assertion is psychological and sexual. She presents herself as an object to the male audience "Herr God / Herr Lucifer / Herr doctor" (654). Nonetheless she confidently boasts to "eat man like our" (654). She means she wants to make the patriarchal world hollow and groundless. Despite being seductive, and submissive, her strong voice for identity cannot remain unheard.

Reading all these critics, we can state that Plath is a poet of her wound and her self-realization. Her painful experiences allegorize the pains of all the women in the America of her time.

### **1.5 Critical Review of Anne Sexton**

Anne Sexton who produced seven volumes of poetry who won the Pulitzer Prize for "*Life or Die*" (1960) shows similar yet different feminist concerns. Her description of personal turmoil and nightmare almost hurts the reader. Her life cannot be separated from her poetry. Erica Jong has said, "Sexton was uneven and excessive but that was because she dared to be a fool and dared to explore the dark side of the unconscious" (1124). In another words, Anne Sexton's poetry is the creation of repeated "nervous breakdowns, her stays in hospital, dreams, fantasies and broken relationship" (Parr 669).

Sexton is primarily a poet of family and family relationship. Her early volumes are remarkable for its beauty, insights and crafts whereas her later poems are uncontrolled, boring and sentimental. There is a devastating paradox in her life that she gets success for disclosing her private failure more publicly. This event inspires her to write more openly but the failures lead her to more progressively deteriorating poetry. As a result, her suicide remarks as her expression of anguished life. Suicide becomes the price of her artistic genius. Through the poetry of suicide and unconscious, Sexton has tried her best to reflect the miseries of women of contemporary America.

In *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*, Alicia Ostriker states that Sexton's poems are "tragic, defiant, truth-seeking and compassionate" (652-53). Sexton's poetic assertion marks the issue of gender. She identifies herself with Oedipus who tries to enter the world of intellectual fathers, play their roles, and finally, to claim their male authority. In her explicitly autobiographical poems there is exploration of trauma, breakdown, guilt, fear, need. All these features indicate a subversive notion of feminine behavior. However, it is not that there is no defiance in Anne Sexton. "A defiance of gender is also compliance of gender: such contradiction is typical of Sexton . . . [there is] a meeting and fusing of opposites — love and hate of the body and the self, worship and contempt for the mother, I'm made of, fear of and

desire for death" (653-54). Rationally such fusions are impossible but Sexton's greatness lies where she probes the same irrationalities which patriarchy most tries to deny. She, in fact, has made attempts to dig out the human truth that phallogocentric world mostly tries to avoid. In clearer version she wants to defy the patriarchy through the expression of her most disturbing experiences.

While discussing incest in Anne Sexton's poem "The Briar Rose", Dawn Skorczewski states that the voice of Briar Rose identifies with the voice of Sexton, herself. Sexton believes that "language is a site of conflict and struggle" that speaks out through sexual violence (310-11). Sexton's "The Briar Rose" depicts both "a culture that sanctions sexual violence and the personal consequences of a history of silencing such violence" (310-11). In other words, "The Briar Rose is a representation of the potentially traumatic consequences of being born female in a culture that sanctions sexual violence against women" (311). The poem offers a vision that sees sexual violence as a personal critical and cultural problem. "The Briar Rose" presents an " 'Electra complex' – a male tendency of treating female as an object of male pleasure" (328). By dramatizing a woman as a pleasure object, Anne Sexton wants to subvert the marginalization of women in male-dominated society.

Angela Reich assumes that Anne Sexton writes poetry about her family "cruelly, selfishly and subjectively" (556). Her postpartum depression, psychotherapy and convalescence have transformed her from domestic woman to literary person. The mother-daughter relationship is most disturbing in her poetry:

What took Sexton to the hospital was a preference for suicide over the role of mother as she had construed it from her own glamorous, intelligent, repressive, and punitive mother - in the world's eyes, a competent, well-bred woman. The disturbing subject of the "Bedlam" poems is Sexton's experience

of the female roles of mother and daughter as in themselves a sickness, and not merely her sickness. (560)

But Sexton has believed that poetry is a revelation and critique to female unconscious. On the one hand, her role of housewife and wife has left her most restless and bored whereas her poetry gives her a new life to give voice to the submerged feminine roles. Thus Sexton takes poetry as a means for life assertion.

Sharon O'Brien assures that "Sexton's mental breakdown was a catalyst for her writing because it liberated material from the unconscious" (142). Her mental illness has freed her from the wifely and maternal roles. She gained an opportunity to enjoy Virginia Woolf's " 'roof of one's own' , to write, to take and teach course, give poetry reading and to travel" during her manic depression (142). Anne Sexton therefore treats poetic creativity as her rebirth. Reading Middlebrook's biography, Angela Reich says, "the death and birth of an artist . . . was a struggle to create travails of debilitating illness" (562).

Maria Damon presents Sexton's career as "the poet's own evolution from protégée (protected, subservient) in a male dominated aesthetics, metaphysical and social realm, to artistic mastery in an increasingly self-confident and self-sufficient female realm" (100). Sexton boldly asserts her individuality by creating a separate female realm.

Similarly Sexton is fond of quoting Kafka's remark that "a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us" (qtd. in Zancanella 88). She writes poems for belong to "the big people" (85). She wants them to understand the world quickly. Sexton actually aspires to describe the child like helplessness of women who must understand this world. They must try to make this world their world rapidly.

Frances Bixler investigates Sexton's use of the theme of motherhood

as spiritual office, analogous to creative writerly activity, not only why in that she gave birth to poems, but also in that her poems themselves functioned as midwives for birthing a new consciousness. . . a new understanding of the meaning of being woman - the new thing.(Damon 100)

She is trying her best to evoke truth of women. Sexton wants to create a new being made up of new consciousness. Consciousness of women is another major theme in her poetry.

In order to expose the inhumanity and exploitation done upon female, Sexton's poetry employs myths regarding mother-daughter relationship. Christian myths display the archetypal feminine structure in the patriarchy. Exploiting the Greek "Demeter - Persephone" myth, Sexton writes poetry against the tradition that silence and domesticate women (100). In such a society the conflicts such as 'witch/poet, mother housewife and evil/good" continue (101). Sexton's "Otherworldly Journey" is a Jungian piece that explores her ambivalence of living in Christian agony, creativity and feminine social roles. Torn by metaphysical strife, she truly wants to under mine such opposites. She struggles for a new world without marginalization. In fact she represents American middle class women's history, and the influence of artistic, medical and political currents upon them.

Sexton's poetic narrative concerns the position and role of women within American society. Mapping the internal spaces of fragmented subjectivity, her narratives of despair, loss, depression and dependency deliberately attempt to subvert the patriarchy. Her poetry operates to "deconstruct (male) language from within the empowered positions within her [and reinforces] ultimately those of female voices realized through the codes and strategies of her concentrated poetic style" (Mc Gowann 656)

A poet of the unconscious, Sexton uses a series of central motifs:

the loving and hating relationship to parents, the vision of the body as a defiled "vile vessel . . . a prison, a madhouse, a box of dog bones, rotten meat" but also [as] a sacred; the poetic 'I' as a plural rather than singular phenomenon; and, suicide as a quintessentially paradoxical and ironic impulse, in both emotional and vertical terms. (Damon 101)

One of her remarkable motifs is death in relation of art to gender. Sexton says, "the true religion of patriarchy is death worship" (102). However, she believes poetry is a creative force and opposite of suicide.

Rejecting suicide, Sexton is successful to present her public self. With her innate talent and manic drive, Sexton puts all her moments in art. In short, her life and family are transparent in her poetry. Angela Reich resumes that the "truth of these works rests not in them but in their emotional credibility as a source of insight into the psychological and social complexity as a woman" (562). All in all, we can state that Sexton tries her best to project the female trauma through her own depression. She is not only speaking for herself, but also revealing the plight of the whole American women.

### **1.6 Comparison and Contrast between the Reviews of the Poetry by Plath and Sexton**

Both being feminist poets, they have given vent to their own psychic trauma and failure in their poetry as a representation of female exploitation in their time. Both are diehard true in their exploration of psychological fragmentation. Both are clear enough to subvert the patriarchy and re-establish a new realm. According to Sandra A. Gilbert, "both women poets have, consciously or not, echoed terrified and triumphantly self-defining metaphors" (443). For instance, in Plath's "Strings", Gilbert shows,

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women . . .



but I

Have a self to recover queen. (443)

Similarly Anne Sexton's "The Ambition Bird" says,

All night dark wings

Flapping in my heart

Each an ambition bird. (443)

Both poets are persisting for the assertion of identity and emphasizing the central mythology of self.

These female confessional poets are different from male confessional poets in the sense that these male poets can involve their private drama with universal themes of god, humanity and society. Their poetry is "at once private and public, lyrical and rhetorical" with the touch of national and cultural crisis" (443). These poets seem not to be in paradoxical ease with their anxieties. Plath in "Lady Lazarus" says,

What a trash

To annihilate each decade . . .

It's theatrical

Come back in broad day. (Ferguson 2969)

These lines evoke her anxiety, rage and sufferings. She finds herself totally unavailable to her:

Herr God,

Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair. (Ferguson 2970)

Here she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral not central. Yet in her effort to challenge the prevailing male definitions of women, she kills herself so as to transcend death and get victory over men.

Nevertheless there is a slight difference in their poetry that Anne Sexton is life affirming in her poetry although she too deals about death. She struggles with the temptation of death but chooses life. She appears as a single person-wife and mother as well as poet - who questions much while disclosing her dissatisfaction. She sees her life as a prison, yet, she continues to search growth that is possible both in death and life, but her choice is life.

Today life opened inside me

Like an egg and there inside.

After considerable digging

I found the answer

I say live, live because of the sun

The dream, the excitable gift. (Vossekuil 126)

Similarly in her famous poem, "The Farmer's Wife" the persona is described as a habit when the husband urges her toward sex saying, "honey bunch, let's go" (121). "Honey bunch" is a name given to child. Through the comparison between a woman and a child, Sexton projects how the patriarchy is belittling her even less than a child. She is almost asexual – mentally chaste though she physically participates in love. She wishes her husband to "cripple" or "dead" or a "poet", because poetry is a life-affirming act for Sexton. Thus for Sexton suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem" (121).

Though Sexton and Plath both see child as a hindrance in the life of mother, Sexton yearns towards human connections. Unlike Plath, the latter is more pessimistic, direct and

angry in protest when she says, "Off, off eely tentacle / there is nothing between us" (123).

However the pessimism and the fascination of death ultimately succeeds to provoke rebellion. The chosen death itself becomes a source of optimism-an attempt to rebel against ruthlessly going situation. Such a moment is profusely present in "Ariel" which describes "a morning ride in which the horse and the speaker become one as the horse speeds through the landscape, toward a mystical point of arrival" (Mc Cann 566). The narrative itself turns into death and rebirth. The triumphant red is seen in the end of the poem:

And I  
Am the arrow  
The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red  
Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Ferguson 2713)

Here "arrow" and "dew" may be the merging of male and female symbols but "the red eye" and "the cauldron of morning" is conflated as death-birth experiences. "Ariel" shows Plath's vision of poetry and life: the transcendence of the old, confining order and the creation of a new self and a new world.

Viewed as confessional poets who die for a creation of a new world, both Plath and Sexton are miraculously bold in expressing their intimate pain and personal turmoils. Making their private life a public thing for viewing, they create a space for coming hard on the patriarchy which both of them, see as playing havoc with life. They are speaking for the feminine realm where the survival for women is for their self-accomplishment and victory. Both Plath and Sexton, who exploit the autobiographical materials of their lives to reveal their personal problems – both psychological and feministic – with unusual frankness, turn

out to be confessional poets. The next chapter clarifies their confessional mode through a discussion of psychological and feminist issues relevant to their poetry.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

Both confessional poets, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, explore their repressions, inner conflicts and psychic anguishes in order to express them as a traumatic representation of all the women in the contemporary America. Observing their technique of rebellion to female marginalization in a patriarchally dominated society, the methodological tool of this study is a confluence of confessional poetry and feminism that verges on psychoanalytical.

### **2.1 Confessional Poetry**

Confessional poetry is a conventional designation to the group of poets in the late 1950s and 60s, who made an overt discussion of their own psychological lives. They write about many taboo subjects such as their manic-depressive illnesses, conflicts between parents and children, unhappy marriages, tormented personal experiences, drug addictions, sexual harassments and so on. It is a kind of directly autobiographical poetry. The poets like Robert Lowell, W.D.Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz are remarkable confessional poets. They invent new style and technique, as well as voice and experimentation in order to express their inner turmoil. Yet these poets are successful enough to interconnect the self-pains with the world-pains. Their interchange of the person and the world is at once seamless and profound.

Confessional poetry has a connection with literary traditions that range from Augustine to Catullus, from Wordsworth to Whitman, and from S.T. Coleridge to Williams Carlos Williams. In a sense modern autobiography has first found its self-referential voice in the self-serving confessions of Rousseau. In other words, confessional poetry can be seen as one degraded branch of Romanticism since it “places the sensitivity of poet at the center of concern”(Molesworth 163). Roy Pascal has concluded that the great age of autobiography is

marked by the “search for the true self”, regarding Rousseau’s confessions and Goethe’s “Poetry and Truth” (qtd. in Stelzig 17).

In poetry, Romantic lyrics allow an intense overflow of powerful feelings. They abide highly subjective tentative evident in the prolific lyrical production of Goethe and Wordsworth. Molesworth opines that the confessional poet is often a “failed sage” whose wisdom arises at the price of debilitating pain (18). He becomes a spokesman for an entire community through a means of ironic consideration. In fact, from the Romantic age to the present confession, there is not only a vigorous psychological impulse, but also a continuous effort to achieve authenticity. Mr. Phillips characterizes the strategies of the confessional poetry as “highly subjective”, written in first person narrative. It is an “expression of personality, not an escape from personality”. It portrays “unbalanced, afflicted or alienated protagonists. It is therapeutic and / or purgative” (qtd. in Dembo 416). Furthermore in depiction of highly effective and affective characterization, it diminishes a fictive gap between the audience and characters. In simple terms, “the fictitious confessions can be even vivid and convincing than verifiable sort” (Stelzig 19).

Confessional poetry differs from autobiographical in the sense that the poet or the speaker does not readily and truly presents every hidden secrets of his / her life. Instead, the autobiographer uses the artistic shaping of the lived experience. Hence the confessional poetry is “an imaginative reconstruction of the past experience at the moment of writing. The autobiographer does not present the pre-existing truth but creates the truth of self in the moment of writing”(20). That’s why Pascal comments that confessional poetry indicates the act of “fact-in-making” (qtd. in Stelzig 20). Therefore such autobiographical composition is imaginative recomposition as well. Yet the writer’s biography is also revealed more or less. It points to the fact that, in confessional poetry, the biography does not hinder the freedom

inherent in the paradigm of poetry. But sometimes the autobiography tends to misrepresent himself / herself so pervasively that the misrepresentation is designated as “alterbiography” (23). As a result, the first person narrator in the confessional poetry is an unreliable one.

Sometimes in confessional poetry, the reader begins to understand the confession better than the confessor understands himself / herself. This superior understanding on the part of the reader yields a “confessional irony” (28). The self is always in the dramatic search in the experimental process of becoming. Hence we can posit that the autobiographical material is blended with invented material. It is often an “exploration of the road not to be taken”(28). As a means of psychic compensation for the shortcomings of life, the confessional poetry functions as a “mere sentimental escapism, of mode of self- healing through the active exercise of the imagination”(28). Therefore degrees of “distance and proximity; and levels of ironic detachment and sympathetic attachment” in confessional poetry are rampant (29). Such poetry encourages an aesthetic psychological game playing with fragments of the “self, self-exposure and self-masking”(29). Modern confessional poetry seeks out the element of “play and play-acting”(29). The use of “double” is another characteristic technique of this sort of poetry (30). In it, certain truth is brought out through fiction.

Thus the essential nucleus in the confessional poetry is always its dramatic element or “drama in combination with narrative” (Hoffman 689). So the earlier efforts of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton codify confessional style, which is unmistakably dramatic. The persona’s naked ego is involved in very personal world with particular private experience. Confessional poetry incorporates anti-establishment theme in the sense that it began as a rebellion against the demand for impersonality by T.S.Eliot and the New Critics. T.S.Eliot, a champion of poetic individuality and impersonality, claims that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality,

but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things” (qtd. in Hoffman 691). Considering personality is necessary for the expression in poetry, Robert Lowell has done a job by fusing fused a unique and multifaceted aesthetic personality in his *Life Studies*. He draws on the New England colloquialism of Frost, understatement of Ransom, and subjectivity of Bishop. The confessional poetry of Plath and Sexton is the representation of the women psyche and their turbulent experience.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most consistently stylized and elaborately masked confessional poets. Her theatrical repertoire ranges from the “downtrodden little girl of “Daddy” to the long suffering Christ of “Fever 103”, the avenging bitch goddess of “Lady Lazarus”, and the distant legal queen of the bee poems. Her suicidal urge reflects the reaches of her personal turmoil. That’s why for the confessional poets, the experience is not in itself poetry. Rather the experience must be transformed into “images, the images into the rhythmic patterns; and the patterns, finally into dramatically convincing poetic incidents, which became a joint possession of poet and reader” (Hoffman 692).

Confessional poets expand the province of self to include the uncharted regions of the preconscious and unconscious. N. Hoffman asserts, in Sexton’s “Flee On Your Donkey”, that the protagonist makes her “escapes from the stultifying world of the hospital to the same old crowd / the same ruined scene by means of a ‘hairy beast’, to one of the sweet dark playthings deluged from the unconscious dehumanizing forces of 20<sup>th</sup> century” to gain the most precious independent self (48). In the process of the exploration of self, the revelation of preconscious and unconscious is definitely discussed repeatedly in Sexton. In that stage, the confessional poetry is definitely the projection of unconscious psychological feelings as well.



## 2.2 Psychoanalytical Theory

Psychoanalytic theory has come late in existence in the 1920s. The early practitioners are Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and so on. Freud has developed psychoanalysis as a mean of “analysis and therapy for neuroses at first, but later he has expanded to account for analyses of human civilizations, including warfare, mythology and religion”(Guerin 99). Freud’s contribution emphasizes on the unconscious aspects of the human psyche. He has demonstrated that the human mind is structured like the iceberg, because its weight and density lies beneath the surface. In “The Anatomy of Mental Personality”, Freud discriminates between the levels of conscious and unconscious mental activity:

we call “unconscious” any mental process the existence of which we are obligated to assume because . . . we infer it in some way from its effects- but of which we are not directly aware . . . If we want to be more accurate, we should modify the statement by saying that we call a process “unconscious” when we have to assume that it was active *at a certain time*, although *at that time* we knew nothing about it. (qtd. in Guerin 99-100)

Freud further emphasizes the importance of the unconscious by pointing out that even the “most conscious process are for only short period; quite soon they become *latent*, though they can easily become conscious again”(100). In the view of this, Freud defines two kinds of unconscious:

One which is transformed into conscious material easily and under condition which frequently arise, and another in the case of which such a transformation is difficult . . . only come about with considerable

expenditure of energy, or may over occur . . . We call the unconscious which is only latent. (101)

Thus Freud's first major premise is that most of the individual's mental processes are unconscious. The second is that all human behavior motivated ultimately by sexuality. Freud designates the prime psychic force as libido or sexual energy. His third major premise is that because of the powerful social taboos attached to certain sexual impulse, many of our desire and the memories are repressed.

Freud presents three psychic zones: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is entirely unconscious. The only a small portion of the ego and the superego is conscious. The "id is the reservoir of the libido- the primary source of all psychic energy. Its function [is] to fulfill the primordial life principle", which Freud considers as the pleasure principle (Guerin102). Speaking metaphorically, Freud explains this is "obscure inaccessible part of our personality " as "a chaos, a cauldron of the thing excitement [with] no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle "(qtd. in Guerin 102). Freud further stresses that

the laws of the logic do not hold for processes, . . . the id knows no values, no good or evil, and no morality. In short, id is the source of all our aggregation and desires. It is lawless, a social and a moral. Its function is to gratify our instincts for pleasure without regard for source of convention, legal ethics and moral restraints. Unchecked, it would lead us to any lengths –to destruction and even self-destruction- to satisfy it's impulses for pleasure. Safety for the self and for others does not lie within the province of id; its concern is purely for instinctual gratification, heedless of consequences. It is identical in

many respects to the devil as defined by theologians. The children make uncontrolled impulses toward pleasure in excessive self-indulgence and even to self-injury. (102)

In order to protect the individual and the society from id's dangerous potentialities, the regulating agency is called ego. As Freud points out, "in that ego stands for reason and circumspection, while the id stands for untamed passions" whereas the id is governed solely by the pleasure (103). Consequently, the ego serves, as intermediary between the world within and the world without.

Other regulating agent to protect the society from the unconscious is the superego. It is the moral censoring agency and the repository of conscience and pride. In "The Anatomy of the Mental Personality", Freud says, "the superego is the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse toward perfection, it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the higher 'things in the human life' " (qtd. in Geurin 105) . The superego serves to repress or inhibit the drives of the id. It pushes us to block off and thrust back into the unconscious those unacceptable impulses over aggression, sexual passion and the Oedipal instincts. The superego is dominated by morality principal. Where the id makes us devil, the superego makes us behave as angels. It is ego that maintains a balance between these two opposing forces.

Following Freud's examples in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, the psychoanalytic critic tends to see all concave images (ponds, flowers, cups or vases, caves and hollows) as female or Yonic symbols. And all images whose length exceeds their diameter (towers, mountain peaks, snakes, knives, lances and swords) as male phallic symbol. Contrary to traditional beliefs, Freud has found infancy and childhood as a period of intense sexual experience. He states that during the first five years of life, the child passes through a series of phases in

erotic development. Freud indicates three zones: the oral, the anal, and the genital. Oedipal complex derives from the boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother. Likewise the girl's unconscious rivalry with her mother for the love of her father is known as Electra complex.

Another tool in the Freudian procedure for uncovering the unconscious is dream analysis. Dreams are psychological products that represent a person's reactions to his daily experiences. Freud calls dreams the royal road to the unconscious. Dreams reflect unconscious conflicts, express repressed unfulfilled wishes and thoughts. During the day physical and social pressures like moral standards, etiquette and considerations of decency do not let us give expression to many ugly, embarrassing and unpleasant thought and feelings, but in sleep this censor is removed. The repressed unconscious wishes and desires get a free play. The ego is less vigilant and repressed wishes; feelings, thought and memories try to enter into consciousness resulting dreams. The contents of dreams are expressed in a disguised form called manifest content. But to understand the real meaning, we have to look for the latent content of the dream. However, the manifest content appears in three mechanisms: a) condensation — the fusion of unconscious material into a single entity; b) displacement — the substitution of an unconscious object of desire by one that is acceptable to the conscious mind; and c) symbolism—the representation of repressed, mainly sexual, objects of desire by non-sexual objects.

Both Plath and Sexton present their psychological turbulence enormously. They confess their fear of abandonment, the guilty desires, unresolved conflicts, repressed wounds and inferiority complexes. Both invade their most private being and reveal themselves in adequate problems of Oedipal conflict, Electra complex and so on. The use of unconscious is present in their confessional poetry. It is such a group of school where most unchecked and

uncontrolled, amoral and asocial instinctual gratifications are projected through excessive self-indulgence and self-injury. They neglect their superego. Instead of keeping the repressed as repressed, they are oriented towards speaking their most intricate desire and intense trauma most honestly. Their untamed passions come to us directly through language, which is always male.

### **2.2.1 Psychoanalytic perspectives in Plath's Poetry**

The moments of expression of repressed feelings, guilty desires, fears, unconscious libidinal forces are profusely present in Sylvia Plath. When her beloved and feared father dies at the age of eight, she seems to have encountered a complicated and immobilizing trap. She must have denied and terrified that he will die since he has already become a part of herself. His death is certainly a big loss for her. She must have felt that in dying her father has abandoned her. Experiencing anger at the loss, and terrible guilt at the anger she must have felt that she deserves to be punished. Her confusing feelings are transformed into poetry. Her poetry is a compensation for her loss "to diminish psychic hurt, to escape the wave of operation, to express what needs expression, or to obliterate what needs destruction" (Smith 323). Plath has written "Daddy" as "spoken by a girl with an Electra complex"(324). Her father has died when she has thought him as a God.

While writing from the recesses of dark imaginings, Plath brings haunted and terrible figures of our shared fears. "Freud and Jung underlie her perfectly poised revelations" (Wisker 104). Plath exposes and dramatizes those terrors in order to face them and refuse their power. She expresses her hidden secrets as well as the undersides of complacent everyday world. These shades of life reveal her split self in the gendered roles. Her oscillation in male-biased world, however, enables her to transgress beyond death. Death, in

fact, becomes “something perfected, achieved, neither decayed nor the result of a desperate act (108). Axelrod has noted that her poetry is

controlling the unconscious specially her complicated and painful feeling about her identity in relation to her father, with whom she still wishes to please . . . [there is] a wish to be her father with whom she identifies . . . [finally] a conviction arise[s] from her feeling of guilt, that she does not or should not exist”(79).

Obviously Plath finds herself emotionally trapped in the most relentless and pervasive but destructive power. She realizes the psychological force creating a barrier between “the worded world and the unspoken; the accessible and inaccessible,” and her “the worded world” and “inner wordless world as between the father and the child”(79). The matrix of conflicting feeling has never left Plath. Her feelings toward the absent father figure are “compounded with identification, loss, guilt, admiration, inadequacy, anger and fear find powerful and recurred expression in “The Colossus” (84). Both in the earlier as well as in her later work, Plath struggles against her father to transform the voiceless psychic hurt make voiced.

Besides Electra complex, her repression has been found out to the household chores, too. She fears the babies and marriages as imperfect because they prevent writing. Her family-oriented poems like “The Morning Song” celebrate the experience of childbirth to express her own self as “developing [yet] constrained, oppressed and conditioned” (Mirror, Axelrod 288). Plath has exhibited some ambivalence about her identity with her repressed “I”(Langdon 67). She widely uses the disclosure of the female body as “another falsifying gesture”(68). Such engendered body is nothing but as icon of the poet’s vulnerability. Despite the western construction of male body as a symbol of being “powerful, sexually potent and

sexually armed,” Plath often brings female body in her poetry as powerless and weak (76). The irony of Plath’s situation is that “while her own figures for creativity are drawn from masculine models, her use of such figures is deeply compromised by reality of her own femaleness, by her body which is a woman’s body” (85). Thus Plath strongly associates with the creativity as a function of sexuality. She says, “creativity emerges from sinuous masculinity and muscularity” (76).

In “Words”, Plath portrays herself as the powerless victim of her own conscious. She presents the inner world of inhuman horror where “inanimate objects initiate and perform” (Budick 875). The verbal failure of Plath also means her failure of ideas. Her words become “dry and riderless” as “the heart shuts . . . the mirror are sheeted” (872). Plath falls into what Henry Adam has termed “the subconscious chaos below” and “disappears” (qtd. in Miller 880).

Despite her agony, there she is never self-pitying rather she is always darkly witty and ironic toward herself. Lately she has become a “culture heroine”:

[T]he mad high priestess of the death cult and a martyr to women’s liberation cause . . . the experience of her private of her private inward world [is] more vivid and meaningful than the events of her life. While extremely sensitive to her environment, her psychological detachment from the peoples and occasions . . . illustrates her desire to escape from or neutralize the threatening pressures, which even a to benign bouquet of tulips could exert. (Stelzig 21)

In this way, for her primary identity is always that of a poet. Being a poet is always the pure essence of creation energy, which is the true subject of “Ariel”. Also definitions

imposed by society can approach the reality of that. That's why she speaks, "the blood jet is poetry, and there is no stopping it"(21).

"The Beekeeper's Daughter" is another poem in which masculine and feminine contest one another. The beekeeper controls the swarm. He is "the maestro of the bees". Yet the poem's real contest is not masculine- feminine but feminine-feminine, the battle Electra has waged for her father's love: "here is a queenship no mother can contest - / a fruit that death to the taste: dark flesh, dark parings"(Austin 414). The bee-mother is overcome by the bee-daughter.

Father, bridegroom in this Easter egg

Under the control of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the writer of your year. (414-415)

In these lines, we find the marriage proves to be uneasy. A bee's season is not winter but spring and summer. But the "Easter egg" brings intimation of resurrection and rebirth despite it seems poisonous. The hibernation has not ended in marriage but in waking to death.

### **2.2.2 Psychoanalytic Undercurrents in Anne Sexton's poetry**

Sharon O' Brien comments that Sexton's mental breakdown is a catalyst in her writing for it has liberated her from the unconscious. Her painful experiences as a wife as well as a creative poet frequently repeat in her poems. Brien strongly asserts that Sexton's creativity has been stirred by the primal emotional needs-"desire for fusion and fear of abandonment"-which has laid as the source of her art (142). Her inner conflicts and trauma have fueled her best poetry. Her biographer Middlebrook writes about "Sexton's incestuous relationships with her family of origin, mental addiction to pills and alcohol; obsessive, even addictive affairs . . . sexual abuse of her daughter Linda" (qtd. in Brien 140-4). She further describes that this mingling of compression and detachment allows her handle the



material with tact and sensitively. Thus Middlebrook explains Sexton's frankness to reveal her most "hidden" and most "true" self (144).

Susan Redneck Parr remarks that her poetic efforts are recreation of her "repeated nervous breakdown, her stays in hospital and her exploration of memories, dreams and suicide" (669). She comments that her fictional voice confronts the realities of "life and death and loss"(671). In her poem, "Elizabeth Gone" Sexton attempts to accept her great aunt's death. Each stanza ends with the same refrain": let me go, let me go" (qtd. in Parr 672). But she bravely asserts that dying woman is also helpless. Elizabeth becomes child-like and her breath "grow[s] baby short" (672). Her mention of child-like helplessness reveals the fear of abandonment repressed in her mind. Moreover, even in her childhood. She writes poem about indifference of father and carelessness of mother. So her unconscious desire of love and intimacy is pervasive in her poems.

Similarly Sexton's "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" makes a deliberate effort to "disguise" the detail of her life (675). She is attempting to speak through fictional situation where the pain speaks for her separation from her son Joy. Her next poem "The Farmer's Wife" also explores deep, often repressed, taboo emotions. The farmer's wife is alienated from her husband despite her physical and sexual involvement in act of lovemaking. She wishes for more excitement and meaning in life. Therefore in her fantasy,

She wishes him cripple, or poet

Or even lonely, or sometimes

Better, my lover dead. (qtd. in Parr 675)

It is the lack of adequacy and objectification of her existence as pleasure-object that she has wished for her own husband's death. It means she is so direct to express her guilty desires.

In “The Double Image”, the double image refers to the mother and daughter who reflect each other. She experiences the self-hatred to such an extreme that has forced her to abandon her child. She begins to value belief in the self. When the child asks where the fallen leaves go, the poet explains, “I say today believed / in itself, or else it fell”. She urges the girl to “love your self’s self where it lives”(675). Still she is overwhelmed by guilt for leaving Joy. However, she recognizes that the child brings her a sense of renewal:

The time I did not love  
Myself, I visited your shoveled walks  
You held my glove.  
There was new snow after this. (676)

The poet explicitly applies the double image to Joy and herself. Despite their separation, she says to the child; “And you resembled me; unacquainted / with my face, you wrote it. But you were mine after all” (676). Yet tragically the poet assumes the role of mother saying that “you call me mother, and I remember my mother again’/ somewhere in greater Boston, dying”(676). Because she is socially constructed, she suffers from her responsibility towards child. Her own individuality is subordinated, she feels like a dying mother. The word “dying” shows she is dying emotionally in the patriarchal society.

The exploration of parent –children relation is extensively present in Sexton’s “All My Pretty Ones”. She fully writes about her parent’s death and the causes of her breakdowns. She powerfully affirms the value of love and life. Her poem is filled with images with “psychological motivation, awkward moments” and “uncontrolled voice”(676). More persuasively she has written “The Truth The Dead Know” where she determines to love and live. At the face of death, she sincerely confesses the desire for love, which people must hide to accomplish the social requirements.

Sexton's one of the usual theme is the Electra complex towards her father. Her poem "Santa" begins nostalgically asking her mother who is "that tall" one, kisses her father as he masquaderades as Santa Claus. When the poet realizes that Santa has "Daddy's cocktail smell", his voice becomes slithery like soap. She is disillusioned. Years later they re-enact the scene, but with a difference. The daughter, now "tall enough", kisses the father (690).

Another psychological preoccupation present in Sexton is incestuous desire. For instance, Jesus, in "Jesus Asleep" has an incestuous desire for Mary

Jesus slept as still as a toy

And in his dream

He desired Mary.

His penis sang like a dog. (690)

But instead of giving into the taboo, Jesus sublimates his desire into art: "he made a statue out of his need"(690). Middlebrook does point out that "Sexton fits the clinical picture of a woman who had undergone sexual trauma" (qtd. in Reich 556).

### **2.3 Feminism**

Feminism is a distinctive and concerted approach inaugurated in the late 1960s. It is a political movement struggled for social, legal and cultural freedom as well as equality for the women. Feminist thinkers regard feminism as somehow different from the mainstream – as innovative, inventive and rebellious. Beasley points out that for the feminist writers, the western thought is "malestream" and thus its authority needs to be questioned (3). It means the Western Civilization is pervasively patriarchal, male-centered and male controlled. It is organized in a way to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. Abrams comments that

from the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as an “other” or a kind of non-man. By her lack of the identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits, they are marginalized in the patriarchy. (98)

Hence women themselves are taught in the process of being socialized and to internalize the patriarchal ideology. The issues like masculine and feminine are largely the cultural constructs. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine”(993). By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative, while the feminine has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. Feminism is a two-century long political movement marked by the books such as Mary Wollstonscraft’s *A the Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of Her Own* (1929), Simon de Beauvior’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and the like.

An important precursor of the feminism is Virginia Woolf who has revealed the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within the patriarchal society. A male-dominated society always prevents the women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities. Woolf addresses the question of “why a sister of Shakespeare would not likely to have been able to write anything” (817). She also focuses that language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing, she finds no common sentence ready for her use.

Her central argument is that women do not have money and a room of their own. They do not have separate space for writing. Though she never adopts a feminist stance, she continually examines the problems faced by women writers. Rejecting a feminist consciousness, she hopes to achieve a balance between a “male self-realization” and female

“self-annihilation” (822). She admired the seventeenth century writers and eighteenth century novelists like Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, George Eliot, etc. They are praiseworthy for their courage to create such good novels despite the less experiences of life, common sitting room and the lack of money. She emphasizes that the women feel just as men feel. The women need exercise for faculties as much as their brothers do. According to her, literature is open to everybody. She opines that libraries can be locked but freedom of woman’s mind cannot be locked. Woolf has imagined a society in which men and women will come together in purpose and desire:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally, but women feel just like as men feel; they need exercise for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged low-creature to say that they ought to confine themselves to making pudding and knitting stocking . . . it is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or to learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for sex.(822)

Another important feminist is Wollstonecraft whose main focus is that “the mind does know sex (394). Adams quotes Claire Tomalin who has remarked “society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of convenient domestic same and alluring mistress, denies them, encourages them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else”(394). In “A Vindication of the Rights of the Women,” Wollstonecraft discusses the pernicious impact of the sentimental novel in the lives of women in the eighteenth century. These novels present the women as passive beauty and lacking intellectual faculty. While the man is presented as active, intellectual, rational and dominant in decision-making, the woman

lacks the power of decision-making. Therefore she chooses a rake, luxury and a brave person.

She clearly states that

Women are solely employed either to prepare themselves to excite love, or actually putting their lessons in practice, they cannot live without love. But when a sense of duty or fear of shame, obliges them to restrain this pampered desire of pleasing beyond certain length, they [female] obstinately determine to love . . . they become abject woers and fond slaves. (397)

Projecting women as mere pleasure object, Wollstonecraft is severely attacking the social construction of prejudiced patriarchy, which trivializes females.

A much more radical criticism has been launched in France by Simon de Beauvoir. She makes wide-ranging critique of the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or, “other” (993). She views that men treat themselves as “subject” who is assumed to represent humanity as dealt in “the great collective myths” of women in the work of male writers (993). Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) is scholarly and passionate plea for the abolition of the myth of the “eternal feminine” (999). This seminal work has become a classic of feminist literature where she establishes the fundamental issues of modern feminism by arguing that man defined human, not woman. She further says that women are not born women. Woman is woman is just a gender concept. But gender itself is nothing but a social or a cultural construction. Beauvoir attacks the parochial concept of man possessing his freedom and transcendence but a woman being doomed to immanence. She refuses the notion of a female essence prior to individual existence. She has attacked the patriarchal myths of women:

To say that woman is a mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood, she is there but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? Angel, demon, one inspired, an actress . . .but one considers woman in her immanent presence, her inward self, and one can say absolutely nothing about her .She falls short of having any qualification. (998)

Similarly E. Porter defines feminism as a perspective that seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices women suffer because of their sex (Beasley 27). Likewise Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poet, describes feminism as “the place where is the most natural, organic way subjective and politics have to come together”(Guerin196).

Elaine Showalter, an American literary critic and founder of Gynocritics, has identified three historical phases of women’s literary development:

The “feminine” phase (1840-80), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the “feminist” phase (1880-1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the “female” phase (1920-present), during which dependency on opposition — that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts— is being replaced by a rediscovery of women’s texts and women. (Guerin 198)

Showalter describes a woman’s tradition in literature that is an “imaginative continuum [of] certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation” (223). She further identifies four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. In the *biological* model, she claims if the text mirrors the body, this can reduce women merely to bodies. Yet Showalter praises those poets who praise their bodies with

intimate frankness and their confessional tone to rebuke the patriarchal construction. Her *linguistic* model of difference posits women speaking men's language as a foreign tongue. It generates a sense of alienation in the women. Therefore she advocates that women do not have own separate "female" language. Her *psychoanalytic* model identifies gender difference as the basis of the psyche that emphasizes the relation of gender to the artistic process. It stresses feminine difference as the free play of meaning outside the need for closure. Showalter's most important contribution has been the *cultural* model that places feminist concerns in social context. It acknowledges class, racial, national and historical differences and determinants among women. But her focus is on offering a collective experience that unites women over time and space as "a binding force" (Guerin 200).

Speaking for the representation of the marginalized female, Showalter invents gynocriticism where women appear as writers. Such criticism "eschews the inevitability of male models and theories and seeks a female model. It is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology . . . all of which have develop hypotheses of female sub-culture including not only the ascribed status and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women.

(Abrams122-27)

It is to develop new models based on the study of the female experiences rather than adopt male models and theories. Such gynocentric criticism concentrates on female creativity, stylistics, themes, images, careers, and literary tradition. Such new emphasis has begun with the rediscovery of neglected or forgotten female writers. It has been grown to redefine gender in literary studies.



Currently there are four types of most pervasive feminist criticisms: gender studies, Marxist studies, psychoanalytic studies, and minority studies. Feminists have argued that mainstream thought is simply a part of three ongoing processes: excluding, marginalizing, and trivializing women and their accounts of social and political life. The bottom of all this subordination is the lack of freedom. Marriage has become one of the bondages that restrict woman from realizing her independent self. Men have defined it as a legal authority over women. Feminists address this issue to instill a sense of human existence that is devoid of sexual biasness. Women are trying to attack male writing as well as they are seeking redefinition of their identity in their writing.

The collaboration of the two contemporary feminists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar has made an extensive study of women writers. Their influential work, *The Mad Women in the Attic* (1974), explores the pressure of psycho an “anxiety of authorship” when they talk about the feminist poetics (1234). They assert that their anxiety is more pronounced because the women writers have to struggle against the effect of socialization as a struggle against man’s oppressive reading of the women. They also talk about the social anxieties, physical and mental illness. After all they posit the problems of women writer in the patriarchal culture and tradition. Gilbert and Gubar assert that

The woman writer feels herself to be figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives [of] her culture and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to ‘breed’ like sentences of death in the bloody shoes inherits from her literary foremothers. Therefore critics see ‘infection in sentence breed’. (1242)

Gilbert and Gubar see the diseases and dis-eases accompany the symptoms of “anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia”(1242). All these illnesses are the consequences of

inescapable chains of patriarchy. Finally they state that the literary women have always faced degrading options with female limitation. So they posit that “the woman writer seems locked into the discovering double bind: she had to choose between admitting she was only a woman and protesting that she was as good as a man”(1244). They reject man’s oppressive reading of women and demand for a separate feminine paradigm. Gilbert and Gubar point out how the monster / mad women figure represents aspects of the author as well as elements of the author’s anti-patriarchal wholeness rather than the theory of “otherness” that prevails as a definition of identity.

The French critics practice “écriture féminine” as a tool to uphold the power of psychological category of the femininity. They dismiss the actual sex of an author as important following deconstructive attack upon the author or the self. The French feminists see feminism in its binary oppositions as a male cultural notion left over from the past.

They focus on Jacques Lacan’s notion of Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which child has not yet differentiated himself or herself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language. This Oedipal crisis marks:

the entrance of the child into a world of symbolic order in which everything is separate, including unconscious and conscious, self and other, words and actions. This transition also marks entry into a world ruled by the “law of the Father,” “isms” or rules that confine us.

(Lacan qtd. in Guerin 204)

Lacan calls it the phallogocentric universe .The Imaginary is the realm of feminine and is the vital source of language, which is tamed and codified by the Laws of the Father.

The relevance of Freud and Lacan for French feminism arises from their treatment of language Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language. When we speak

language we may identify gaps in what is signified as evidence of the unconscious, for language is a mixture of fixed meanings and metaphors. “Femininity” is then a language that destabilizes sexual categories. The *écriture féminine* disrupts the unities if western discourse is pointing to its silences. French feminists speak of ‘exploding’ the sign rather than interpreting signs. French feminists who follow Lacan, particularly Helen Cixous, propose a “utopian place, a primeval female space that is free of symbolic order, sex roles, otherness, and the law of the Father and voice of the mother”(204). Cixous’ pronouncement “sisters, write with the white milk of your mothers,” marks the importance of women’s body not only as a subject of writing but also the energy and the instrument of writing ( Sheldon 151). She contends this place is the source of feminine writing. It is the source to gain access to find a source of immeasurable feminine power. Cixous posits the existence of an incipient “feminine writing”(écriture féminine) that has its source in the mother. She says that the stage of mother-child relation is the real world before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. In her view,

the prelinguistic and unconscious potentiality manifest itself in those written texts, which undermines the fixed signification. . . . These writings subvert the logic and the “closure of our phallogocentric language, and open out into a joyous freeplay of meanings. (qtd. in Abrams 92-3)

Another major interest in feminism is to reconstitute the ways we deal with literature in order to do justice to the female points of view, concerns and values. It is to establish a “revisionary rereading,” to bring to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work (Abrams 93).

Alternatively, Luce Irigaray posits a “woman’s writing” which evades the male monopoly and the risk of appropriation into the existing system. She tries to establish its generation’s principle in place of the monolithic phallus.

Similarly Julia Kristeva describes a mother-centered realm of expression as the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic law of the Father. Like Lacan, “in her mind the prior semiotic realm of the feminine is present in symbolic discourse as absence or contradiction” (Guerin 205). Kristeva opposes phallogentrism with the images derived from women’s corporeal experiences. She posits “a chora”, or prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal and unsystematized signifying process, centered on the mother, that she labels “semiotic”(205). The father-controlled, syntactically ordered and logical language known as symbolic represses the semiotic process. This process can break out in a revolutionary way as a “heterogeneous destructive causality” that disrupts and disperses the authoritarian “subject”. It stresses for the world free of the oppressive order and rationality of our standard discourse. It is the product of the “law of the father” that consigns women to a negative and marginal status (Kristeva qtd. in Abrams 93). Kristeva makes the succinct observations that “a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh” (94). In fact, she characterizes future of feminism as one with a utopian vision where “many voices are always speaking, and that each individual can have many voices”(Bizelland qtd. in Guerin 206).

Several feminist writers have adopted its perspectives and transformed the myth criticism for the purpose of feminist criticism. Feminist myth critics tend to center their discussion on the Great mother and other early female images and goddesses. They view these figures as the radical others that can offer hope against the patriarchal repression of women through the popular figures like Medusa, Cassandra, and Isis. Modern women show

their attraction to the most destructive women such as Medea or witches and seductresses for their power of resistance.

### **2.3.1 Feminism in Sylvia Plath's Poetry**

Sylvia Plath is extremely sardonic and sarcastic in the act of resisting the patriarchy. She is uncontrollably aggressive with patriarchal tendencies. Her disgust with marginalization of women as secondary explodes in her poetry. She comes as a “white Godiva” a rebellion spirit of expressiveness (Ferguson 1326). She is courageous enough to destroy herself in order to create a new world. By destroying herself she tries to destroy the male values. Her every effort is directed toward changing the cultural construction and recreate a new space –a feminine world. As a female, she is mythologized as the incarnation of otherness. Despite the presence of the male myths about female, they [at once] turn her into a triumphant repudiation against the very male myths.

More than angel, Plath appears to be a devil as a spirit of resistance. The level of rebellion is more striking when she tries to conquer the male domination through a struggle with the help of her own self-destruction. Plath wrathfully writes “to rules, to rules, to rules”(Gilbert 449). Her assertion is to overthrow the over whelming patriarchal rules. With Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, she denies that she is the passive place but is an arrow that “shoots off in all her directions” herself, to be as active and full of intension as the colored arrows from a “fourth of July rocket” (449). Plath grieves with her mistaken identity and finds herself trapped in identity crisis. So she calls herself with intense relief “I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosion. I have given my name and my day-clothes up to nurses”(450). She is split in double selves: first as socially defined as daughter, wife, mother; the second as a poet's self with “secret names rebellion longings, rage against imposed definition, her creative passions, her anxiety and . . . her art” (451). Inhabited with such rage

Sylvia Plath often “struggle[s], with a kind of feverish panic, to define herself, frantically clearing away the debris of alternative selves like ‘old whore petticoats’ . . . in the hope of retaining the blazing chastity the inviolate singleness, of a ‘pure acetylene virgin’ ” (453). Gilbert asserts that Sylvia most often has chosen her real self as a queen, unleashed and flying. The terror is not a cause of anxiety but a sign of life and triumph. Plath’s supernatural self appears at last as “a red / scar in the sky, red comet, flying over the engine that killed her - / the mausoleum, the wax house” of the dying “natural” self (454). It is for the sake of the survival of the women that she appears in her second self.

Plath’s primary identity is always that of a poet. Being a poet is always the pure essence of creative energy like in her poem “Ariel”. No definitions imposed by society can approach this reality. That’s why she says “the blood jet is poetry, / there is no stopping it” (Stelzig 21).

Plath’s self-examination and re-evaluation of the female psyche seriously probes the crisis of the modern American women. The problem she has confronted remains crucial in her poetry. The issues such as existential loneliness, confusion about identity, an alternating passivity and rebellion to male-oriented universe are dominant in her poetry. Smith notes that “Plath [has] turned her vision to a glad, disembodied other world, one at least, partially based on a Unitarian - Universalistic faith in a punishment free union with the whole in the afterlife, the other world of death” (22).

Plath basically sees poetry as a way to redefine her own premises. She strongly articulates the inner-world experience of being a woman. She proclaims herself in her “own words, own vision, undistorted by the prevalent male definition of women” (21). Most of Plath’s poems intensively juxtapose the desire for transcendent freedom and the earthy “hooks” which restrict it. (21). Her oppressor is the unexpressive and authoritative male consciousness: a by extension the rules and conventions of society which crush individuality

warmth and imagination” (21). In “Daddy”, god, father, and husband are chillingly equated with nazi panzer man. In “the applicant” marriage itself is villain.

She severely reveals that those who love her do not adequately fulfill her great need for a correspondence in life. She calls it in “black rook in rainy weather” that “rare random descent” of the angel (22). Life kills her by its complacent insensitivity; she refuses to be a passive victim, like the Jews whom she identifies so closely. She believes if death is the only freedom and escape, she plunges into it, and transcends it. She is Ariel,

The arrow

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Stelzig 21)

Similarly Plath’s well-known autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, effectively dramatizes the stereotyping of women’s role in the 1950s. It also depicts the turmoil of a young woman who is only partly aware of her gifts and ambitions. The success of Plath’s poems depends on her imaginative transformation of experience into myth. For instance, her Prussian father in “Daddy” is transformed into an emblem for masculine authority. As an aggressive personality, Plath presents a “rigid, false, an amorphous, uncongealed personal”(336). The very person undergoes constant metamorphosis, especially continually dying and being reborn in the mutation of the imagery. In “Elm”, the social self speaks as a “tree, wrenched violently by a wind” that “will tolerate not by standing” (Smith 336). But such fixity is an illusion for its roots reach down to a dissolute sea. It contains subversive lines that are frighteningly independent:

I am inhabited by cry

Nightly it flaps out  
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love  
I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me,  
All day I feel its soft feathery turning its malignity. (336)

Plath repeatedly sees the relationship as predatory exploitative and, destructive. She says, in "Tulips", even the smiles of husband and children "catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks" her identity itself. "The Applicant" is seen as a collection of functions. She turns out to be a "living doll" that is an "accretion of artificial limbs and artificial commitments" (336).

Plath exhibits a pattern of intense, simultaneous self-absorption and self-denial. She makes a process of suffering negative change. Yet in "Lady Lazarus" there is a slight possibility of positive change. It is a rare break through poem because the speaker presents herself as a female Lazarus, a miraculously reborn woman. Plath rises from her death after her third suicide attempt. Plath presents herself as a special kind of skeleton, a "vituperative victim of human unnatural cruelty" (N. Hoffman 54). Finally she rises as a "red-haired demon" to "eat men like air"(56). Her anger is toward male hegemony that subordinates female life.

Jon Rosenblatt notes that through the exploration of the death- rebirth theme, she is making a "tremendously violent struggle to gain control of the [male] psyche"(35). Plath's terrible metaphors try to create new but agonizing identity. She tries to make a self-discovery through poetry. The "sense of otherness" has gnaws Plath's psyche. Her entire poem can be seen as "dialogue with another" (Smith 331). Through the physical annihilation and dramatization of private pain, Plath seeks to destroy the entire patriarchal construction.



### 2.3.2 Feminism in Anne Sexton's Poetry

Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton's poems have broader psychological and mythic import. It has been noted that her poetry catalogues most of the significant events that can happen in a woman's life. Many of her poems are confrontations with the past. Many classic battles with parents are re-fought in order to achieve freedom and identity. That's why she wryly concludes in "Housewife", "A woman is her mother. / That's the main thing." (Stelzig 22)

As a feminist she celebrates women in submissive roles. Sexton abandons the child's voice but is dependent upon male figure. In her poetry, the speaker receives her identity and happiness from the love of a man. In "The Touch," the speaker is vulnerable and unhappy until her lover gives her life:

Then all this became history.  
Your hand found mine.  
Life rushed to my finger like a blood clot.  
Oh my carpenter,  
The fingers are rebuilt. (qtd. in Parr 688)

In "The Kiss" her entire body is useless, a boat "no more / than a group of boards," until her lover has "hoisted her rigged her" (688). In "The Breast," the lover's hands find her "like an architect". Moreover, only when she is defined in relationship to men, as mother, daughter, and lover, she comes alive:

Now I am your mother, your daughter,  
Your brand new thing –a snail, a nest.  
I am alive when your fingers are. (683)

Even deception is acceptable if it will bring her sexual pleasure:

So tell me anything but track me like a climber.

Far here is the eye, here is the jewel,

Here is the excitement the nipple learns. (683)

She is merely a wife, a monument or a sculpture in the city of patriarchy. She is entrapped in the domesticity of patriarchy. She is a victim of society. She is marginalized in the relationship between sexuality and violence. Her superego keeps her as a happy mother and a satisfied wife. Yet her consciousness does not allow her to remain silent. This is not only her plight, but also of all the living women in her time. Her honed pictures of domesticity make all the women furious in order to get rid of patriarchal construction. She forces them to struggle for equality.

Feminists prefer the monster women like Medusa, Eve, Medea for their act of resistance. Rather than portraying good, obedient and silent girls, the rebellious Medea and Eve are chosen more. That's why Sexton's presents the happy ending in "Cinderella" as sterile:

Like two dolls in a museum case

Never bother by diapers or dust,

Never arguing over the timing of an egg,

Never telling the same story twice,

Never getting middle-aged spread,

Their darling smiles pasted on for eternity. (Parr 684)

Here Cinderella is a model of a patriarchal woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchal tendency. Traditional gender assumes women as born inferior, emotion, weak, nurturing and submissive. Cinderella is not exception to it.

Anne Sexton employs the fairy tale to be an important childhood influence that is eventually reconciled with the reality of actual circumstance.

Anne Sexton herself has stated in an interview:

‘[fairy tales] reach the unconscious very directly . . . I knew they got to the emotion beneath the formed exterior of the ways people around the acted.

What I am trying to get at is undercurrents of intention—the secret of the fairy tale.’ Her transformations particularly expose the lies and illusions of romantic love, which have crippled our culture. (Stelzig 23)

But Sexton’s choice is “Rumpelstiltskin,” devil having a split self: “a nurturing parent” like soft mother and “part papa” and the other side as a “barbed hook”, “the doppelganger”(684). Her choice of a devil than a docile girl shows her inclination for the resistance than submission. Since she herself is a woman more tormented and more pathetic, she expresses her pains as the world’s pain.

Historically, the only potent source of female power has been sex and magic. But Sexton rejects the sex cheapened or sentimentalized by our culture. She introduces herself in “Transformation” as a witch. Through art, the individual can express ideas that are traditionally denied by men. For Anne Sexton, “poetry is magic ‘black art’ . She describes it as “trances and potents” “spells and fetishes” (Stelzig 23). Here she strongly challenges male construction through the minstrels’ images.

*An Encyclopedia of American poetry* quotes that

Sexton encodes [the] language of patriarchy with female significations. The subjective of her female speaker may be unraveled by the male construction of language and the meaning

interrogated. The internalized female voice is an uncharted phenomenon for Sexton because it belies the factuality of male system of language and categorization, which cannot map the geography of the concealed female self. (Mc Gowann 656)

In January 24<sup>th</sup> from “Words” for Dr. Y, she writes

I am alone here in my own mind  
There is no map  
And there is no road.  
The speaker experiences isolation because  
Of the known routes of access or indicators  
Of direction, the lack of adequate examples  
Of textual mappings of this internal female region. (656)

Lonely and isolated within the speakers are the constructed persons. In her “Unknown girl in the Maternity Words,” she brings a portrait of a girl who is institutionalized. Though the girl remains silent, her history is presented in the male version in official texts. The poem provides a textual space to counter the institutional text of patriarchal America. In fact the fragmented subject reflects the individual psyche of America with full narratives of despair and loss as well as depression and decency.

Both Sexton and Plath’s self- examination and re-evaluation of the female psyche seriously probe into the crisis of modern American woman. The problems they have confronted remain as the crucial issues in the poetry of contemporary women: existential loneliness, confusion about identities. Their poems strongly articulate the prevalent male definition of women and women facts. Their main assertion is for freedom, equality, identity, individuality and a separate feminine universe.

### **3.1 Travails of Being a Woman: Dynamics of Death-rebirth in**

#### **Sylvia Plath's Confessional Poetry**

A remarkably furious and rebellious poet, Sylvia Plath performs both the roles of a pathetic victim of social-economic forces as well as of a revolutionary woman when she confesses her turbulent emotions, deep fears and challenging exorcisms. She compares herself with Oedipus who is in a constant struggle to push herself into the world of intellectual father and to play their roles. Throughout her struggle, her sole aim is to gain her own identity and authority. She poignantly demonstrates the age-old repression of women and allows gust of rebellion to uproot the male domination. In the patriarchally created society, most women have already internalized the stereotypical roles that mark their own marginalization. They are complacent with their submissive roles, motherliness and domesticated, dull as well as nullified existence. They comply with what patriarchy wishes them to do. They are oblivious to their social, cultural and conceptual injustices. But Plath is conscious enough to realize her slow decay due to these stereotypical roles. In many ways Plath demonstrates the turmoil as the outcome of the lack of individuality that is gradually overshadowed by masculine authority. She is aware of her poetic gift as bright, young, middle-class woman of the 1950s. Therefore she furiously writes about her own mental illnesses caused by nausea-like domestic confines, her unhappy childhood, marriage experiences and her repressed guilty desires. Fuelled by anger towards her husband and father, she attacks patriarchy. While doing so, this extremely erudite and highly stylized poet, Sylvia Plath, seizes a mythic power and transmutes the ordinary domestic experiences into the hallucinatory and utterly strange images. In that process, she takes death as a means of emancipation. Then as she transcends death she becomes terrifyingly victorious, bold, defiant, fearless and radical. She seems as if she is going to burn down the entire male

hegemony within a second. This is how Sylvia Plath's own personal confession functions to expose the excruciating pain and endless suffering of all women of her time. Nevertheless her ultimate goal is to achieve freedom, equality, justice and the power they are ever deprived of. Such rebellious undercurrents are widespread in almost all of her poetry. However, this study will highlight the following poems by Plath: "Ariel", "Lady Lazarus", "Morning Song", "Daddy", "Fever103", "The Colossus", "Words", "Metaphors", and "Tulips".

### 3.1.1 "Ariel"

Written on 27 October 1962, less than six months before Sylvia Plath's suicide, "Ariel" is the title poem of her well-known collection of poems *Ariel*. The poem is a powerful and mysterious confession as -- "a holy scream of splendid agony against patriarchy, it is beyond sex, beyond delicacy and beyond all but art" as *The North Anthology of Modern Poetry* puts it (1416). It means, in her poetry, she generally shatters her own self, labors to fit it again and finds a new one. Plath tries to redefine the women's identity through her self-inflected death poems such as "Ariel". With the dew taking a direct flight to the morning sun, Plath seems to reach the fusion of death and rebirth. Plath accepts suicidal course, yet she is able to transcend death itself and get rebirth. This pattern of self-annihilation-transcendence-rebirth boldly presents, firstly, the transcendence of the old, confining order that marginalizes the women's freedom and existence; secondly, the creation of a new free self and a new world of femininity. "Ariel" is, therefore, a document of extremity of the women pain and their aspiration for a free world.

Her furious regulation against patriarchal construction and her desire for revisionary study of feminine domain is evident from her choice of the title itself. Besides being the airy spirit of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel is the horse Plath used to ride at Devon. Ariel is in thrall to Prospero until the latter sets the horse free. Despite being an "airy spirit", Ariel is

bound to serve Prospero. Similarly Ariel is a cursed city in the Bible that will be redeemed only in the apocalypse. Thus, the speaker both as an airy spirit and as a cursed city, is in thrall but looks forward to a deliverance that comes only through the violent revision of the order of things.

Her urge for freedom is evident with her incorporation of the different order of movement from darkness to light of the morning, from stasis to activity coincide with her own movement from void to meaning, and understanding, from anxiety to confidence, and from the confusing unconsciousness to alert consciousness. The progression in the poem begins with the slow beginning of the ride in the pre-dawn stillness: “stasis in darkness” to the “cauldron of the morning”, the ecstatic transformation-through-motion of the closing (Ferguson 2713). The poem describes the moment when she is mounted on the horse but has not yet emerged from the stables into daylight beneath “substanceless blue skies in the tar” to a craggy hill at distance. This state of inactivity is seen in Plath’s life itself when her life and her work merge and become one. Her domesticity has overshadowed her creativity that they almost become “interchangeable and indistinctable” (Axelrod 286). Not only in the Plath’s personal life, this motionlessness shows the subordination in the entire female world where their life is seen as passive and immanent ‘other’. Women are stereotypically defined as domestic slaves and pleasure objects as Mary Wollstonecraft states. Women are denied economic independence. They are encouraged to be docile and demure. But Plath is aggressive towards such subjugation. She cannot be complacent with the role of inactivity and silence. Therefore she is making a journey where the rider is hurtled forward to merge with horse and to become one with it:

God’s lioness

How one we grow

Pivot of heels of knees! - the furrow

Splits and passes, sister to. (Ferguson 2713)

The speed of the journey is so quick and rapid that almost everything seems to be moving. This swiftness remarks the urgency for the change. The marginalization of women is so tremendous and painful that she cannot tolerate it any more. The change is the must now.

Plath passionately advocates for a change. She is stunningly revolutionary. The antagonistic forces that impel Plath to revolt are profusely present in form of images such as “nigger-eye,” “berries” that cast darkness, “hooks”, sweet but black “shadow” “dead hands, dead stringencies” and the like. These images refer to the chauvinistic society where women are looked down upon as “other”. Men become dominating authority and the women merely a shadow of the powerful male. Alas! the women remain satisfied in the patriarchal framework, losing their independence and individuality. But if one like the speaker tries to transgress the boundary, she is “hailed through the air”. Yet Plath will not lose her heart.

Ironically instead of surrendering to the demoniac negative forces, this hypersensitive and distraught speaker reincarnates as “white Godiva” -- a spirit of rebelliousness. According to Irish legend, “lady Godiva has ridden naked through the street of Coventry in order to persuade her husband . . . to lower taxes” (2713). Like pure Godiva, Plath wants to purify herself from dead patriarchal hand and control. In that process, she dissolves in the form of foam: “I / foam to wheat, a glitter sea / the child cry” which indicates hope (2713). She becomes arrow, the phallic symbol that shows masculine power. Again she transforms into dew, a symbol of impermanence and transitoriness. The flight is driven toward the sun, symbol of the male traditions against which she aggressively protests and intends to avenge. Her drive into red “cauldron of the morning” suggests her suicide (2713). The red is the blood- color of the both life and death. In this point of arrival, redness refers to the fusion of



the birth and death. In the other words, the complete dissolution itself is the herald of the rebirth. The actual dawn has just begun after her suicide. Patriarchy binds every dimension. Only after death she is free to do whatever activity she likes to do. She becomes the maker of her own destiny.

In fact, the dissolution is not extinction, rather a rebirth or a salvation of the protesting woman. Apparently the “Eye” is the tyrannical eye of the male hegemony, but ironically it is herself “I,” her own identity or her own selfhood. It means that after death she gets her own independent identity and existence. Thus Plath seems triumphant to overturn the male-dominated society through the means of self-destruction and self-immolation to get transcendence. Sylvia Plath is extremely angry at patriarchy that denies substantial freedom for woman’s self-definition. She makes attempts to challenge the man’s hostile world and strip away their conventional orthodoxy through dark yet new vision of transcendence. She is androgynous for the essence of freedom and selfhood. It is her anger that warns the woman of her time who suffocates in the shocking patriarchal atmosphere. More or less she is successful to create her own poetic creativity and redefine femininity.

### **3.1.2 “Lady Lazarus”**

Extremely aggressive and intensely emotional poem “Lady Lazarus” is Plath’s extraordinarily bitter and desperately poignant expression of resentment toward patriarchally created society. She identifies her excessive turbulence and turmoil with the pathetic victimization of innocent Jews. Through the powerful and chilling indication of her distraught in the form of thrice attempted suicide and her rebellion of Godiva-like desperate bravado, Plath shows her rage against oppressive male-dominated society. With her technique of self-negation in the dark death that ultimately turns out to be a life-giving force or rebirth, Plath explicitly explores the psychological repression that most women accept

silently throughout their life. But the marginalization becomes so unbearable to Plath that she challenges to “eat men like air” (Ferguson 2970). Such direct threatening is the dramatization of her struggle for existence. The image of phoenix when she rises from ash depicts the truth that despite the pain in femininity, she is triumphant to turn the patriarchy down.

Plath’s androgyny and contempt against male oriented world is apparent from the title itself. The title ironically identifies a female Lazarus, while the original Lazarus was male. Jesus raised Lazarus from the death. The present speaker identifies herself with Lazarus different in sex, behavior and every thing. By changing the sex of Lazarus, Plath wants to subvert the tradition that tortures the woman. The poem’s persona does not conform to the society’s traditional idea of lady-like behavior. She is angry and wants to avenge the society in every way possible, even through the self-destruction. Dramatic confession and private recitation of anguish take the form of myth. Her subjectivity changes into generalized universal feeling of woman.

The confession of the universal feeling of the woman comes right from beginning in a very sardonic but boasting mockery. She confidently declares:

I have done it again . . .

Nevertheless, I am the same identical women.

The first time, it happened I was ten

It was an accident.

I second time I meant

Last out and not come back at all. (2969)

In her confession, she appears exceptionally daring and miraculously defiant to challenge the murderous atrocity over women. She boldly commands the male present over there to

peel off the napkin

Oh my enemy

I do I terrify? . . .

Gentleman, ladies. (2969)

The speaker is a “big strip tease” for the peanut chunching male audience. Her body is exposed for the sexual favor of the so-called sincere men. These people don’t sympathize Lady Lazarus. Instead they are enjoying her vulnerability and sexual accessibility. The male psyche is so suppressive that women are crushed to nullification. Yet Plath is never calm and silent. For her “dying is an art” which she does “exceptionally well” ( 2970). This is where Plath differs from other women who are oblivious to their individual freedom. They are satisfied with nullified existence while Plath’s choice is resistance. Though dying feels like hell, it allows her freedom. So her preference is freedom, not marginalization. Thus Plath’s artistic craft of choosing self-annihilation heads towards victory in the form of rebirth.

As a feminist, Plath hates a beautiful and obedient woman. Instead her choice is minstrel image such as monster that eats men like air. Normally conscious women are considered monster in a male-oriented world. Plath is conscious that death is not extinction but re-creation.

Therefore for Plath, this masochistic self-annihilation is not actually destructive, but is creative. Plath’s death reaches the darkness like that of womb. The particular moment of death is the moment of birth. This birth is suggestive of the birth of a new world. Jon Rosenblatt says:

The symbolic dismemberment and symbolic death leads to the way of the rebirth and new life. The pattern of death and rebirth is common ritual practice. All this images express regression to performed state to a latent and of being . . .

rather total annihilation . . . [which is] inextricably connected with embryology.

(25)

Thus the suicidal ending of Plath turns out to be transformed identity. It remarks the resistance followed by victory. She is optimistic to construct a feminine domain. The transformation of socially and politically exploited woman into the re-born queen itself is the manifestation of her victory that uproots the patriarchal foundation.

Similarly the female victimization in patriarchal society is represented by the penultimate horror of Holocaust, too. There are many surrealistic images indicating torture of the Jews by the Germans during the World War II. She compares her skin with “lampshade,” a product out of the Jews skins; her right foot with a paperweight made up of Jew-bone, her face “a featureless fine Jews linen”( 2969). The marginalization of women in the patriarchal society is so intolerable that Plath finds that its comparison is possible only with the slaughter of Jews. She sarcastically points out that male domination has commercialized the freedom of women. The man’s faithlessness and gross inhumanity is widespread. Therefore she mocks by saying she is “opus” for the doctor; a corpse for scavengers to find the gold, “a cake of shop” for dentist (2970). Her mockery is toward the general but perennial domination. Such general human protest is aimed toward the male hegemony which is all “theatrical / the same place, the same face, the same brute” (2970). Strangeways states that

“Lady Lazarus” enacts a performance that attempts to compel a reconsideration of place and stability of her positioning . . . the sense of performativity not only compels the consideration of the conventional positioning; but also that historical metaphors as object of the gaze. (386)

Thus Plath uses her own scars from father’s death and husband betrayal to portray the social dehumanizing pain of women by men. She tries to overcome them through self-destruction.

Her self-negation is a reaching point to reverse female role in order to gain her true self and annihilate her detractors. The poem actually envisions the destruction of patriarchal construction and creation of feminine relation.

### **3.1.3 “Fever 103”**

Exceptionally outrageous and feverishly panic, Plath makes an outcry for redefinition of conventional masculine values in her “Fever 103”. By clearing away the “old whore petticoats”, Plath thwarts away the “otherness” and the malignity of patriarchy (Ellmann 1425). She imagines a paradise where the dull tongue of hell that can’t speak the feminine trauma, will be burnt down. There only the “pure acetylene” and virginity will govern entirely (1425).

Patriarchal ideology subordinates women for their lack of separate language they define women as different, vile, impure and mysterious. But contradictorily, Plath disqualifies the male language itself condemning it sarcastically:

Pure? What does it mean?

The tongues of hell

Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull. (1425-26)

According to Plath, the phallogocentric words are inadequate to express female experiences. They are outdated “dull” words. They stick to the conventional values. They do not welcome challenges and novelty. As a result, they keep the defying forces in fear “I’m in a fright” (1426). The lack of freedom in expression and her paranoid feeling at the perennial masculine propensity leave her helpless to survive. She realizes herself as “aged”, “weak” and “meek” (1426). This ambivalent woman addresses her male enemy as “devilish leopard”

(1426). A woman burns herself to keep the family and society bright. However, Plath's rage is beyond her control that kills the man like air

[o]f a snuffed candle . . .

Such yellow sullen smokes . . .

Radiation turned it white

And killed it in an hour . . .

I am a lantern-

My head moon. (1426)

Plath is destructive for the creation of a new world where no hierarchy rules. She is angry for the marginalization that patriarchy rewards since her birth. This souvenir from masculine ideology is as fatal as the mass annihilation in Holocaust during World War II. She feels nausea at the innocent victimization of women like that of Jewish mass slaughter. The cathartic transformation lingers for her mythic reference to Cerberus, death of Isodara by her fatal scarves and the history of nazi persecution upon the Jews. The psychoanalytic turbulence reflects from the surrealistic metaphoric transition from fire to smoke.

The smoky exploitation in the form of love, kisses, admiration and roses appear disastrous to Plath. The "pink" refers to frivolous nature of women that she detests most (1426). The "old whore petticoats" appear as a source of nullification. Her harsh accusation "not you, nor him / not him, nor him" posits that a man can never understand the female psyche (1426). Only a new paradise will be able to sense her sensibility and creativity. Nevertheless, her ultimate destination is a utopia where the entire name will be revised, the ideology will be redefined and the patriarchal construction will be subverted. A new world with changes in social, political, and economic linguistic freedom along with female identity is on set.

### 3.1.4 “Words”

In the process of condemning patriarchy, Sylvia Plath identifies linguistic difference in her poem “Words”. The linguistic culture set on the patriarchal model is full of echoes and tears as well as words and emotion, but only for men. The language that man speaks only communicates his desire to nullify women from the center. That’s why the female speaker in the poem becomes mute, unable to articulate her wants. Her

Words go dry and riderless  
The indefatigable hoof-taps  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed star  
Govern a life. (Baym 2975)

In the phallogocentric world, the grammar turns and attacks the female user. The words define women as ‘other’ and negate the feminine perspectives. They trivialize women as objects. The commodification turns a woman merely into an irrational and immanent subordinated being. The “fixed stars” that govern life are the male-centered traditional values that assign silence and passivity on the part of women (2975).

. But the speaker is not a loser. Despite her wordlessness, her alienation towards words itself reinforces her to struggle to control the words. Feminism believes in possessing the power to rule over the tyrannical patriarchal forces. They gear towards controlling the patriarchal stability. Her deadly suffering has engulfed her rationality. Therefore she frantically advocates a separate linguistic domain where the existential loneliness regarding the identity crisis disappears automatically. Indeed she is asserting for the revisionary re-reading of the so-called patriarchal linguistic construction.

### 3.1.5 “Daddy”

One of Plath’s most anthologized and idiosyncratic poems, “Daddy” mythologizes her struggle and her spitting contempt against her dead father, an emblem of masculine authority. Plath has distorted autobiographical facts to portray her sado-masochistic and mutually destructive relationship. However, after twenty-year-long suffocation, suffering and exorcism-the stake in the heart of vampire-she is successful to make him lie still and “get through” her personal freedom (Vesterman 50). The dramatic, torturous and sinister death of Plath is paradoxical: on the one hand, it is her androgynous anger and protest against patriarchy while on the other; it is a poem of Electra complex. The poem comes as a psychological out-pouring of mad anger and social angst that function as therapy. Plath’s harsh verbal attack against tyrannical forces comes through ironic exasperation, self-mockery and hallucinatory surreal images.

Plath’s self-mockery conveys her anger and bitterness towards her father. The exorcism of the demon-father comes through different metaphors describing suffocation, rejection and violence. In fact, her father died when she was eight; leaving her destitute, poor and exposed to intense suffering. In such desperate condition, she calls herself “a foot” inside “black shoe”(50). It indicates her deplorable situation in absence of her father. Her love and hate, both towards her father suggest the unbearable trauma in her life. Lynda k. Bundtzen cites Susan Van who comments Plath’s desire to overcome the “feeling of isolation” or helplessness with her father with “malevolent mythic and historic figures” of nazi, vampire and devils (50). Her father is Hitler whom the whole Europe and America detest. He is a fascist, a panzer man, and a representative of an autocratic monopoly. He is a teacher standing in front a black board with a stick. The surrealistic images:

Marble heavy, a bag full of god



Ghastly statue with one gray toe

Big as a Frisco seal. (50)

refer that her father is an imposing and fearful figure. He is not god like benevolent, yet he is omnipresent but as oppressive, suppressing and treating women like objects. But extremely angry Plath attempts to loosen herself from the pull off her dead father by marrying someone like him, and then, dissolving the marriage to find freedom.

Similarly “Daddy” is related to Plath’s own sense of being hunted by the father, too. Her fascination towards death is due to the presence of disgusted yet heroic picture of her dominant father in her life even after his death. She tries to exorcise his influence by shockingly direct naming: “daddy, I’ve had to kill you” (50). The image of father grows, becomes a rock or sculpture, solid, “heavy, a bagful of god” over which every thing washes (50). Images of the oppression and the horrors of personal suffering equate with human suffering and cruelty on the wider scale. She envisions her father bearing a brute heart that breaks her heart into two. Not only during lifetime, but also after his death he sucks her blood as a vampire. Her love, loss, hatred and the need to articulate a free individualized self emerge in the enforced silence with a snare—“the tongue stuck in my jaw / it stuck in a barbwire share / ich ich ich ich” (50). In that sense her father is a detestable monster in the guise of human whom she despises and condemns forever. Indeed her personal hatred to her father remarks her hatred towards the authoritative masculine forces.

The domination is so disastrous that she makes an analogy between the exclusive sufferings with massacre in Holocaust. The nuclear genocide of the innocent Jews is compared with marginalization of the women. Her desire to combine the public and the personal is to shock the conformist of American society. The nazi torture is so overwhelmingly depressing that it touches every part of Europe such as Auschwitz, Dachau.

Similarly male domination is present everywhere. She compares herself as a Jew: “I began to talk like Jew / I think I may well be a jaw / I may be a bit of Jew” (51). It points that the innocent victimization of female is like the monumental victimization of Jews. She can’t speak oppressor’s language. Moreover she can’t understand his obscure and vulgar language. Thus she vents out her anger at the inadequacy in language that belongs to male.

The paradoxical sentence “every woman adores that the fascist . . . brute heart of a brute like you” ironically indicates the women are forced to love men and to live under their domination (50). The female figure adoring the fascist is an ironical example of stereotypically “feminine escape from the feeling of aloneness associates with freedom, through masochistic strivings” (Strangeways 386). In such sadistic voyeurism at a woman’s helplessness, the man takes pleasure. The male construction is meant for male-pleasure and female victimization that is repeatedly remarked through “oo” rhyme pattern as well as onomatopoeic expression in the poem such as “achoo” (50). Yet she is not to remain silent. Instead she tries to avenge him, even after his death with a manic cry

Daddy, I have had to kill you  
You died before I had time . . .  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you  
Though even the bones would do. (51)

Consequently she appears triumphant when she claims, “so daddy I’m finally through . . . / daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”(51). Defeating her father, Plath is relieved of his torture. Psychologically, Plath can’t get her father’s love but by killing the model of her father, she is able to get the father position at least. She is not alone in this task. In fact, there is the entire villagers singing and dancing at his grave. Plath asserts her freedom and

individuality only after killing her. Therefore Plath believes a feminine domain must be established after the destruction of patriarchal framework.

Though the subtle and complex relationship between two poles-daddy and daughter, nazi and Jews, violator and victim, oppressor and oppressed, Plath makes an attempt to articulate her self in the male dominated language and social context. The masculine power of the demon-father must be subverted. Comparing personal with the public, Plath is asserting for her identity and individuality. Therefore “Daddy” is a powerful poem that defies death and cast off the oppressive relationship with man and life.

### **3.1.6 “Metaphors”**

Plath’s “Metaphors” is a representation of women subordination in familial domain in the male-centered society. It shows that women are patterned to socialize and internalize the patriarchal ideology in the profound concerns like marriage, family and love. This poem particularly explores how a pregnant woman in nine-month period of gestation is bound to domesticate herself in family, overlooking her creativity and clouding her potentiality. She becomes merely a sex object. Plath is silently resisting the patriarchal values in order to create own free utopian feminine realm.

Plath has employed a hyperbolic metaphor of a riddle to the nine-month gestation. She is riddle for she is known of the sex of her unborn baby. She is an elephant for her peculiar giant body. She is the ponderous house since she goes on thinking about her unknown baby and happiness related to it. The destruction of the shape of her body shows how a woman destroys own shape for the satisfaction of male sexual pleasure. Furthermore she is unknown of her own future after the childbirth. Where are her life, her own decision and her existence? Is she an object who needs male support and meaning for the survival?

Nevertheless patriarchy defines woman in that stereotypical framework where she loses her existence.

The male chauvinistic desire of treating woman as an object of pleasure becomes clear when she compares herself as a melon strolling on the tendrils. As a melon satisfies the thirst, a woman satisfies male sexual passion. During pregnancy her body is rising like a loaf with yeast. She is nothing but “a stage, a cow in calf” (80). The confession “I’ve eaten a bag of green apple” reflects that she has accepted the patriarchal role of marriage (Kirszner 822). She pretends to be happy in the gendered role. Now she is a boarded train where there is no getting off. She knows that her baby is as valuable as “a red fruit or ivory and new minted in this purse” (822) However there is a sense of alienation or estrangement between mother and children. Though blood ties are unavoidable, Plath wants to denounce her tremendous responsibility as a mother. Plath senses babies and marriages are imperfect to prevent the women from being creative.

Likewise the picture of shapeless and clumsy woman shows how shapeless and distorted woman has become in the adherence to stereotypical patriarchal roles. She must be either a wife or a mother. She must internalize the male culture. The unconscious potentiality remains hidden. She must choose silence. She is excluded from social, political cultural interest and she must indulge herself in domestic affairs. From that perspective in “Metaphors,” Plath is rebelling against male-domination. As radical French feminist Helen Cixous proposes a feminine world that encourages women to be more creative, rational and intellectual, Plath also refuses to be a mere alluring mistress and a loving mother. She prefers to be a creative woman such as a poet. Thus revealing her own psychic anguish through hyperbolic metaphors, Plath is attempting to expose the psychological turbulence of all

women of her time. She is asking them to create their own world refuting the patriarchal construction.

### 3.1.7 “The Colossus”

“The Colossus”, the title poem of Plath’s first collection of poem, is the amalgam of Oedipal theme and honest confession of her eternal search for self in the patriarchal dominance. The poem comprises the metapoem of Plath’s struggle for the power of expression that is easily impeded and paralyzed by terrifying patriarchal forces.

The poem discloses a masculine figure of immense, pervasive and frightening power in the disguise of the speaker’s father. The death of her beloved and feared father has hunted her whole life. She feels that in dying her father has abandoned her. She has experienced anger at this loss and terrible guilt at the anger. Therefore she realizes that she deserves to be punished. Her repressed desire for father gets expression in “The Colossus”. The primeval father figure appears as “dead, archaic, risen, gigantic, bestial, and godlike”(Axelrod 81). But the very father figure becomes a daunting obstacle in her creative life. The love for her father is, in fact, the love for his power and authority. Therefore she wants to transgress his shadowy ghost in order to “compensate for losses, to diminish psychic hurts, to escape the webs of oppression, to express what needs expression or to obliterate what needs destruction” (81). In other words, she writes poem in relation to her father to gain the father’s place and authority.

Her disgust with her father is reflected when she says,

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle mouthpiece of the dead,  
On of some god or other  
Thirty year now I have labored  
To dredge the slit from your throat.

I am none the wiser. (Ellmann 1418)

The suffocation in his shadow is extremely immense that she does not worship her father rather she wants to destroy the world he has constructed.

Not only her father, every male figure appears to be equally oppressive to Plath. She tries to fulfill her desire for father through marriage but unfortunately, “her hours are married with shadow” -- shadow of inanimate and oppressive husband-father (1418). Marriage has to be life provoking, but unknowingly she herself becomes shadow-like. “The Colossus” refers to the column of trees that stand in sun and makes shade where she lives in. Since the ‘I’ does not possess her shadow or her artistic identity, she is herself possessed by other. In that sense, when patriarchy overrules the society, women desire and voice are nipped in bud. The tyrannical exploitation marginalizes the sense of freedom and identity of women.

Her attempt is not only to expose age long historical patriarchy but also to mend the destroyed patriarchy-“to mend the immense skull” (1418). It is mentality that has been decayed, and “the hair” that are “littered” (1418). Plath wants to rebel against the patriarchal construction by bringing the allusion of Oresteia who is the protagonist from drama of Aeschylus and wants to avenge his father’s murder. Similarly as patriarchy murders the dreams and desire of feminine world, Plath fiendishly wages a war against male dominion. In fact she wants to establish a female paradigm that brings femininity not in periphery but in center. She is trying her best to redefine the patriarchal definition in “The Colossus”.

### **3.1.8 “The Tulips”**

Like other poems of anger by Sylvia Plath, her “Tulips” also expresses better agony and severe frustration against patriarchy through the imageries of fury and abnegation. The feminine role set up by patriarchy as demure and docile is torturous and suffocating to her.

Plath cannot easily accept it any longer. Therefore she appears defiant and dauntless so as to create her own female dominion.

The title "Tulips" itself is an example of the pattern that a male dominated society wants a woman to be. The persona in the poem is a faceless hospitalized woman who sees herself as "ridiculous, a cut paper shadow" (Ferguson 2718). She is conscious of her overshadowed condition. She loves her self and her existence a lot. She desires for a sea, which means water or life in the lifeless masculine hegemony.

The red tulips are brought to welcome her. The flowers stand for the patriarchal model of a woman-woman as a pleasure object. Men want women to be innocent, obedient, silent and immanent in the role of wife, mother and daughter. A happy home with devoted female members is what the expectation of patriarchy is. But Plath questions us is it only love, marriage and family that satisfies a woman's aspirations and dreams. Obviously not. That's why the smell of flower becomes a harsh breathing of a baby for Plath. Moreover the redness corresponds to her wound made by patriarchy. The breathing of the tulips is not calm and soothing. Rather it is harsh like a "loud noise" (2718). Therefore this woman's choice is not household work rather her selfhood. Her individuality, her identity, her freedom are the thing that she strives for. She believes a woman should never be complacent when she becomes tulips-- beautiful means of decoration and pleasure for male. In fact these tulips eat her oxygen -- her life or her identity. Conscious of her overshadowed condition, she loves her self and her existence tremendously. She desires for sea that means water or life in lifeless male hegemony.

Plath presents the male controlled world as quiet and cold like winter. It is white man's world where he over rules. It is quiet because the women cannot understand the language and it is cold since male authority never grants justice and equality for the women.

Her tendency of self-negation is evident in this poem, too. She defines herself as “nobody; I have nothing to do with explosion / I have given my name and day-clothes of the nurses . . . / The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble” (2718). It is someone’s identity that sustains somebody but shadowy existence of the speaker lacks her identity. She has given her identity to the nurses who also lack individuality. There is no idiosyncrasy in the nurses. They are mere ‘types’. Such is the predicament of the women who conform to stereotypical definition silently. Her history is anesthetized. She is made unaware of her presence by taking her to numbness and a bright sleep. The explicit confession that “I have lost myself / I am sick of myself” denotes her existential crisis (2718). She is a pebble, a lifeless thing as she describes herself.

It is usual domestic concerns such as love, marriage and family that narrow down feminine creativity. Her husband and children along with their smile play the role of hooks that obstruct her from going ahead. These familial factors are the chains that bind her tightly in household chores. The speaker is identified with a tea set and linen clothes. She feels herself impure even though she is a nun, ‘ I m a nun know, I have never been so pure’(1426).

Her choice is not flowers but utterly empty hands because they stand for freedom. She concedes, “I have wanted to efface myself” (2718). The ironical approach of destruction as a source for creation is present in this poem, too. By killing herself, she wants to gain her existence. Hence the poem shows the choking patriarchal boundaries that suppress women’s desire for freedom and identity. The patriarchy decenters the woman and forgets her needs. But Plath exceptionally aware of her existence, her rights and her identity is never ready to accept the patriarchal norms. She challenges this world despite the negation of her own self since she knows it is not the servility but the defiance that leads her to emancipation.



Thus an intensely crafty confessional poet Sylvia Plath has explored her psychic trauma of being a female in her poetry. Her confession operates as a medium to represent the universal pain of women in the patriarchal world. The suffering and suppression that a woman silently endures is the culmination of the patriarchal domination of the fair sex. wishes. The marginalization of the women in social, political, religious, cultural and economic domains represses the potentialities and creativity of women. Their confinement within the boundries of patriarchy leaves the women most helpless and restless. This suffocation even leads them to manic depression and nervous breakdown. But Sylvia Plath is not a pacific conformist, rather she is an angry rebellion. She can neither accept the rules nor can be indifferent to the marginalization. If possible, she wants to overthrow the patriarchal castle modeled on male psyche and to establish new world where female perspectives govern every nooks and corners. Where other women remain satiated as well as oblivious to their trivialization, Plath appears utterly furious and excessively turbulent to challenge the patriarchal foundations. She is ultimately prepared to sacrifice her own life for her existence as she does in "Ariel" by making a direct flight in the sun; or dramatizing theatrical death in "Lady Lazarus". Ironically death is not her finale destination. Therefore the ultimate death transforms into the immediate rebirth--a triumph. As the flight in "Ariel" is re-appearance of new life and the dead soul rises as phoenix in "Lady Lazarus," the self-immolation becomes a symbol of refreshing life. In other words, the self-destruction is the replica of the annihilation of male-centered world and her rejuvenation is the reconstruction of the world conducted by female possibilities. The end of patriarchal construction and the beginning of an amazing feminine world is the only solution of the psychic anguish, excruciating pain and endless suffering of the agonized women of Plath's time. Thus Plath appears as an extremely powerful goddess as well as a witch to destroy the oppression and herald justice and equality.

This death-rebirth process posits her insights at the travails in women's life that ultimately turns out to be a catalyst to assertion of her existence. Thus Plath while choosing darkness, hopes for light.

### **3.2 Texture of Affirmation: Confessional poem of Anne Sexton**

A poet of the family and family relationship, Anne Sexton hammers out her own autobiographical account of alienation, despair, anomie and madness. She has broken a new ground; has shattered taboos and has endured a barrage of attacks because of the flamboyance of her subject. She openly and fanatically writes about femaleness such as menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery and drug addiction as proper topics for her poetry. James Dickey writes, "it would be hard to find a writer who dwells so insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience" (Kumine xx). Sexton delineates the problematic position of women, though she herself is not able to cope with her personal trouble that the patriarchal society has created. Sexton vents out her inner turmoil and frustrated feeling as the outcome of restriction imposed by patriarchy. She highlights the most boring and restless roles such as housewife and mother. She uses poetic creativity as a therapy for her ongoing struggle with conventional life. Her troubled life of feminine experience comes in the direct and honest expressions. Sexton's counter phobic response to rejection and admonishment is always to defy, dare, press, and to contravene. Thus the frightened little woman within domesticity transforms into a flamboyant and provocative woman. Yet her female speakers are vulnerable and isolated who try to conform to the demand of traditional society. The power of these women is measured by their ability to attract and please men. She appears to be a passive victim of patriarchal society while her enemy is a uniquely self-illuminated one. Her poetic narrative includes the register of female position and role of women within American society. The depiction of lost, dependent and

submissive women gears toward deconstructing male hegemony from within. She makes an attempt to recognize the disintegrating life so that the unheard voice of women can be clearly heard. The same issues are dominant in almost all of her poems. However this study will hover around the following poems: “The Truth the Dead Know,” “All My Pretty Ones,” “Unknown Girl in Maternity Wards,” “Housewife,” “The Farmer’s Wife,” “The Starry Night,” “The Touch,” “Wanting to Die,” and “Live.”

### **3.2.1 “The Truth the Dead Know”**

“The Truth the Dead know” is a confessional elegy on the death of the poet’s parents in 1959. However, the poem depicts the strong resentment toward the dead ones. Her refusal to go to the church but her drive to the cape for the touch suggests the anti-establishment theme of confession poetry. In fact, the burden of the family relationship and the role of an obedient daughter have turned the speaker into a pretentious woman who ignores the social bondages. She moves towards life affirmation. But the awareness of the life-affirmation depicts the piteous condition of woman that forces her to revolt for her identity. Because of the loss of identity, the speaker even rejects to mourn her parents’ death:

Gone, I say and walk from church  
Refusing the stiff process to the grave . . .  
And what of the dead? They live without shoes  
In their stone boats they are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They’re  
to be blessed, throat eye and knucklebone.(Ellamnn 1305)

Her rejection to go to church shows her disgust towards the void. Similarly, her petrification of parents into stone bone, and their dismemberment as eye, suffocates the environment. Its

culture can never see women as autonomous and self-dependent being. The people are stonier for the heartlessness and emotional dryness of the patriarchal culture.

Moreover her open confession “ I am tired of being brave” (1305). A girl is abided by the masculine norms ever since her birth. She needs to be an obedient daughter or a submissive wife. But these entire gender roles are fake pretensions that cannot promote a woman’s creativity. Consequently she realizes her loss of potentiality and finally takes recourse to cape. But when the speaker enters the “cape” and enjoys “touch entirely”, unfortunately this alternative is not reliable too. She declares that

. . . I cultivate

Myself where the sun gutters from the sky

Where the sea swings in like an iron gate . . .

My darling the wind falls in like stones

From the white hearted water . . . ( 1305)

The cultivation of the family life indicates how gradually a woman is marginalized in a patriarchal society. From the dead parents, she turns to a partner but that very choice is also another form of subjugation. She feels hell-like since her personal desires are nullified. She is regarded as a mere sexual object. Similarly the open confession of her desire for sex symbolizes other stereotypical role that the speaker has already internalized. The “guttered sky” and “the iron gate” are also oriented to eliminate the women spaces. “Men kill for this” describes men wage war in the race of placing women in the secondary position. But when man involves in love making, the woman is truly alien to it (1305).

Thus the demonstrations of a passive woman who can neither be free nor can completely conform to patriarchy shows the helplessness of women in the marginalization made by a patriarchal society. She is rebelling against chauvinistic trend with the representation of

submissive and docile woman. Nevertheless her attempt is not to dissolve in patriarchy but to yearn for an immortal soul as well as free individuality.

### 3.2.2 “All My Pretty Ones”

A pivotal work of Sexton “All My Pretty Ones” focuses on the confessional themes of unhappy childhood with insincere parents: alcoholic father and a docile mother. While sniffing through the photographs and mementos of her recently dead parents’ life, Sexton explores the opposed version of male and female writing. Sexton combines her personal history with American public history to show the feminine perspective during that time. She basically employs her mother’s diary exposing the real picture of inactive life of a woman in the contemporary America. The poem shows the patriarchal tendency where the female writing is only a superficial story, not the original one of the real suffering and pain.

The psychological issue of the presence of her father is obvious this poem. Although her father overlooks her childhood life, she feels extremely lonely at the death of her parents.

The event is not endurable to her:

Father, this year’s jinx rides us apart.  
Where you followed our mother to her cold slumber  
Second shock boiling its stone to your heart,  
Leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber. (Ellmnn 1305)

But the irony is that her fear of abandonment of her parents does not mark the intimacy between herself and her father. In fact, the whole world of father seems strange to her since she is not able to understand him:

. . . I stop here where a small boy . . .  
For this soldier who hold his bugle like a toy  
Or for this velvet lady who do not smile

Is this your father's father, . . .

I'll never know what these faces are all about.

I lock them into their book and throw them out. (1305)

Indeed the patriarchal codes can't never be easily modified a simple woman like Sexton. Whether it is social, political, or linguistic, every field is defined according to patriarchal ideology. Every thing is male-controlled. A velvet lady doesn't smile in the picture because she lives in the same chauvinistic world. If so, her lamentation at her father's death can be described as an example of detachment and fear at the failure of achieving masculine privileges. Since the pictures are alien to her, she throws them out so that she can create own version of history.

Her history is a different history from the diary her mother used to keep. Her mother highlights the hurly-burly years of father but conceals his alcoholic tendency. Even the diary, the most personal thing of the keeper cannot express the truth. The mother writes only what patriarchy allows her to write. She transmutes, manipulates and falsifies the experiences. In contrast, Sexton's version of history includes "specific of American history in 1928, the year of her birth: Hoover's election, victory for republicans, the confirmation of prohibition legislation that his 'dry' victory [had] ensured, and the later movements toward World War II. The fragments of her life . . . are intricately interwoven with the cultural and political life of America" ( McGowan 659). Thus Sexton appears daring and challenging to the patriarchal construction.

Where the stasis and inertia in her mother's version replicates the patriarchal construction of contemporary America, Sexton's different version of history presents an attempt for unconventional beginning of defiance to all traditional codes. She truly struggles so as to bring about changes in male version of society. She seems powerful when she

outlives him. She shouts “now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator, / my first lost keeper, to love or look at later”(1305). This is how Sexton shatters the patriarchal linguistic framework that denies the feminine truth. Her first attempt is to create a new version of language that speaks truth of feminine trauma and experience. She demands a new and free feminine realm.

### 3.2.3 “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward”

In “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward,” Anne Sexton exposes the psychological repression when a child is born to a woman deserted by her husband. Certainly a child is a hindrance in the life of a woman. A mother erases her own existence and merges with the existence of her child. But the poem further criticizes the description given by the patriarchal institution. Everything is institutionalized according male perspective. Even though the girl is silent, the male doctors fabricate her history. The poem reveals the prejudiced plight of the women in a racially discriminated society. Since the birth of the child is the end of the mother’s existence, the speaker does not see the child with love. Instead she compares it with animals such as:

. . . fisted like a snail, so small and strong  
At my breast. Your lips are animals . . .  
You tip like a cup . . .  
Your need, the animals of your lips, your skin  
Growing warm and plump . . . (1304)

The ironical relationship between mother and child is the ordeal of the being a woman. A mother’s love and touch sustain the child. Sexton articulates the very truth of immediate birth of a child as the ultimate extinct of the mother:

My arms fit you like a sleeve . . .

You bruise against me. I am a shore  
Shocking you off . . . you break form me. I choose  
Your only way, my small inheritor  
And hard you off, trembling the selves we lose  
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more. (1305)

In the stereotypical domestic role of a benevolent mother, Sexton finds herself disappearing. Her love for identity and individuality becomes so powerful to her that she calls her child as a sin. Her suffocation specifies that all women surrender themselves in self-destructive roles everyday.

Simultaneously the poem posits the tension between female and male texts. The language and the interpretation are the male property. Therefore the real history a woman is suppressed silently but the history that comes forth is a different and gendered interpretation of reality. In the poem, the girl's case history "stays blank"(1305). When she doesn't answer the doctors, presumably male, speak for her. Patriarchy considers the male are rational, logical and intelligent people. They lack emotional reality. They are rich in factual detail. Through the misread by the doctors, Sexton wants to distinguish this particular female voice from male textualization. "The doctors are enamel. They wants to know / the facts" (1365). Although the girl is institutionalized her history is not. She is unconcerned about the man who has left. She only knows the child is part of her life. She remains silent but the doctors themselves chart the male version of her history in the form of official riddle:

They though I was strange, although I never spoke a word.  
I burst empty of you, letting you teach how the aim is so  
The doctors chart the riddle they ask  
Of she and I turn my head away. I don't bow. (1304)



Such is the patriarchal propensity that interprets a whole history in the silence of grill.

Even in the silence of the grill, it writes the whole history. The real woman experiences are subsided. The distanced male version of writings is emphasized. The poem provides a textual space to counter the institutional text of patriarchal American society.

However, Sexton cannot remain aloof from society. The speaker must accept the child and conform to social codes. Her identity as mother, daughter or lover is defined with her relation to male other. There is a quest for a male authority to love and trust. By divulging the reality of child as an obstruction, Sexton makes a call for her own identity and release from exploitation.

### **3.2.4“The Starry Night”**

Anne Sexton’s “The Starry Night” vents her desire to die in a starry night. She is anxiously self-deprecating in the poem. She talks about a town that does not exist because it is silent. Symbolically speaking about a patriarchal town that denies space and voice to the female, Sexton is asserting for the female voice in power.

In order to depict the overwhelming reality of female, Sexton brings the imagery of a black-haired tree”. The woman like a tree is a source of life. Despite being green, it is a black-haired. It does show the sterility in the male-controlled universe that negates female possibilities. Moreover the simile of “a drowned woman into the hot sky” expresses the helplessness of a woman. The women live with an excruciating pain in the blistering sunlight of patriarchy. Likewise “the night boils with eleven stars” symbolize the eleven stars as the stars of tradition rules: “oh starry starry night! where everything is lively. / It moves. They are all alive”(1307). But this sustenance is for male only. Such a bitter reality of life arouses strong vengeance against the male representatives.

Her agony is so feverish that she becomes mad like moon, another mother figure. Though unwillingly, a woman must conform to the domestic roles of caring the children as their own existence. Like the moon, a savior, the mother also tries to defend her children from the “eye” of patriarchy (1307). Sexton brings the metaphor of a serpent that “swallows up the stars” (1307). It designates her own desire to swallow up the patriarchal creation even through the passive role of a mother.

Another image she brings is that of a great dragon who “sucks the beast of the night” (1307). The dragon is a phallic symbol that treats the woman as nobody from nowhere since she has no flag or no nationality; no belly or no physical existence; and no cry or no emotional value. It demonstrates the women are excluded in every walk of life by masculine ideology.

Terrified by all these absences as well as prejudices, Sexton turns out nihilistic and aspires for death: “oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die” (1307). The repetition of these two lines proliferates her love to death. She is bold enough to stand against the patriarchally formulated society no matter the means is her own death itself. The self-negation seems to be optimistic way out for her survival.

### **3.2.5 “The Farmer’s Wife”**

The title “The Farmer’s Wife” itself is evocative of the truth that women lack identity. The speaker has no independent existence when she is known as a farmer’s wife. The patriarchal structure never allows freedom to women. So the conscious speaker is bound to accept the prevailing gender discrimination.

The poem presents a peasant life where the farmer’s wife is only a pleasure object for her husband. She leads a passive and static life. However, she wants her own existence, with the transformation of her husband either as death or as a poet. She believes if he is dead, she will

be completely free, or if he is a poet, he will provide equality to his wife. Poetry is a life-affirming act for Sexton. Anyways her final destination is an independent life devoid of patriarchal prejudices.

Similarly the poem posits as a burden like bondage of being somebody's wife. In the ten-year long passive life the speaker has become only the husband's "habit" (G.Sexton 25). Where men lead an active life, the women survive as a habit. The situation is obtrusively precarious. The marriage bed becomes a deathbed for the speaker. Her husband calls her a "honey bunch"- a pet name as for a child. Obviously this relationship is an agonizing one where the male figure judges her as unequal. Indeed no one can grow in such relation. Likewise when the man asks the woman to do something, she neither answers nor she counter-questions. It marks her docility, simple mindedness and servile obedience. She is so dependent on him that her life gets completion only when her husband touches her. However, the consciousness of this truth makes her a schizophrenic split personality with a separate body and a separate mind. The relationship is so deteriorating that when the man sleeps soundly, the woman visualizes the layers of suffocation in the marriage bed "of his usual sleep while / her young bungle past" (25). Her hatred to her husband rises to such an extent that she wishes him "cripple" or "poet" or a better "dead"(25). Such a pray of death is suggestive of the masculine ideology that smothers the feminine life. She strongly believes that she can achieve her own authority only after his death – a completely life denying concept.

Physically she participates in the love act with her husband but she is almost asexual or mentally chaste. Her life of stasis is without fruition. It means even such potentially life giving act becomes a life denying act. Thus Sexton rebels male dominated society by

complying with its rules and regulation. The picture of a docile farmer's life, Sexton reveals the repressed life all women.

### 3.2.6 "The Touch"

The victimization of women in patriarchal society in the form of helpless and passive speaker is evident in "The Touch," too. The women never want to confine her in the gendered role but the construction itself forcefully designates her to be a servile woman. In this poem, the metonymic presentation of exploitation comes through the symbol of hand that requires touch of somebody, particularly a powerful male figure either as father or husband.

The bruised hand has been sealed off in a "tin box" like an "unconscious woman / fed by tubes she knew not of" (G.Sexton 173). The hand is suggestive of a submissive woman who needs the touch of another hand for survival. The vulnerability of the speaker is explicitly stated "it was fat and soft and blind in places nothing but vulnerable" (173). Biologically a woman is considered as a weak creature. Furthermore the society harshly regards a woman as intellectually incapable, too. This discrimination produces a psychological trauma without expression. Yet Sexton dares to project the reality in the form of poetry.

She compares herself inferior than a dog "I'm no better than a case of a dog food"(113) She believes even a dog independently looks for "frog"(113). But the lonely woman in a male-dominated society is always dependent upon the male-figure. But she is conscious of this fact. So she can't remain silent too "the trouble was not / in the kitchen or the tulips / but only in my head" (113). The chauvinistic tendency trivializes her yet she cannot imagine beyond the reality the house. "Then all this became history"(113). This is not only her history but is the history of the entire women. Nevertheless her reality his wife weakens her to thwart away the patriarchy entirely. Then she conforms to the social norms

and performs her role perfectly. The unhappy and vulnerable poet gets completion with her husband's touch:

Your hand found mine  
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot  
Oh my carpenter  
The fingers are rebuilt  
They dance with yours. (113)

The "unknown tubes" remark the alienation of a woman for being unknown in a patriarchal society. A woman's boredom grows and lives whole life as a stranger throughout her life. Sexton aims to gain feminine individuality through the picture of a woman living in the hierarchical world.

### **3.2.7 "Wanting to Die"**

"Wanting to Die" is Sexton's another poem that evokes both defiance and compliance with gender. With the inclusion of fusion of opposites such as love and hate of body and self as well as fear and desire for death, Sexton depicts the compulsion the patriarchy imposes upon the women. Yet the compliance does not remain mere silence but there lies protest even in the silence. She heralds a daring voice out of her wound so as to create a utopia of or for women.

Sexton's helplessness at the lack of independent existence is evident from the title "Wanting to Die". The infatuation toward suicide denotes the lack of individuality. The internalization of socially constructed gender role makes her impatient to continue her life. The only option remains for her is suicide. Ironically, death cannot be her true choice as well. Because the show of life must go on, she must tolerate the manic depression. In that sense, her poems affirm life.

The speaker says “most day I cannot remember / I walk in my clothing unmarked by that voyage” (Ellmann 1308). She cannot remember because she is without mind. She is “unmarked” because men patronize her. She is “unmeanable” for she lacks her name on her identity of the women. The women rights are subjugated. They are announced as “other”. Their rationality and creativity are subsided. They pronounced weak. Their own body becomes a curse. Fending fake myths patriarchy marginalizes the women as mysterious, enigmatic, either as angel or as witch.

The speaker compares herself as carpenters who only know “which tools” but never ask the purpose “why build” (1308). This maps out the intellectual sterility of the women as noted by masculine decision. The men concede that women are devoid of creativity. But the severe reality is that he patriarchal pattern itself denies the women to be creative. Sexton mentions an “old wound” which refers to the age long patriarchal prejudice exercised upon the women.

Sexton calls the religion of patriarchy is death worship. Quintessentially ironic impulse in Sexton clarifies that death is not her right choice since she asserts:

Even then I have nothing against life . . .  
Twice I have so simply declared myself  
Have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy  
Have taken on his craft, his magic . . .  
I did not think my body at needlepoint  
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.  
Suicides have already betrayed the body. (1308)

When she accepts the patriarchal values unquestionably, she is nullifying her own existence. In the superficial happiness, she is hiding her angst and agony. The society always mistakes a

woman's behavior. In compliance she is dying. Death awaits her till she is in a bad prison of masculinity. "They [men] mistook for a kiss"(1308). The men always misread the woman. The woman's book is "carelessly open" because the man neglects women and her knowledge (1308). Whether it is love or family it is only "an infection"(1308). The women live in such infectious world where her dreams are tampered on.

Therefore Sexton writes about her family and family relationship harshly, selfishly and subjectively. Through the masculine world of language represents death sentence. She actually challenges phallogocentric world. Her intension is, however, to make a world free of masculine power and marginalization. Sexton's individuality comes where she is successful to prove her compliance as a strong means of defiance.

### **3.2.8 "Housewife"**

Sexton's ten-lined poem "Housewife" includes as epigram asserted by Kafka, "a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." (Mills660). The poem actually uses the verbal axe to cut through the psychological insight frozen in her traumatic life. Sexton's basic intention is to deconstruct the structural bias created by a male-dominated society.

The title itself expresses the suffocation a woman feels in the role of housewife. Marriage, housewife, mother and family are the chains that force women to remain silent. It is silence that actually hurts. The servility and the obedience kill women, yet she must keep quiet. Sexton fights against the society with this silence against the psychological violence.

The poem is humorously satirical when she speaker says, "some women marry houses"( 77). The poem shows a house-woman. How can a woman be happy when she marries houses? Her whole creativity is lost in houses. The domesticity leaves her helpless. The second statement "it's another kind of skin", shifts the subject from a woman to a singular house referred to as "it" with a skin "internal organs" and "bowel movements"(77).

The metonymy of skin suggests the transformation from womanhood to a housewife seems inevitable. The same disconcerting play between funny and frightening experiences continues in the fourth statement where the walls of the house are “permanent” suggesting rigid prison of patriarchy and “pink” indicating feminine frivolity. The fifth line indicates another feminine practice assigned by patriarchy. She is a patriarchal construction who “sits on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down”(77). A woman is a puppet performing the role of a demure and beautiful woman to please male sexual passion. She brings the reference to men who “enters by force, drawn back like Jonah / into their fleshy mothers” which indicates the biblical story of unwilling prophet who was swallowed by a divinely sent whale as he tries to avoid his missionary act (77). This reference points out the distance between men and their mothers sharply contrast with the union of the women and her mother explained by Nancy Chodorow. She says that “ ‘a girl retains her pre-oedipal tie to her mother’ and ‘she becomes the mother’” (Mills 61). A woman is fated to internalize the stereotypical role since her birth. That’s why Sexton expresses the universal fate of women, as “a woman is her mother”(77). This paradoxical sentence states that a child learns all feminine value from her mother and again she get in the race to hand the learned values to female descendent. She confesses that she herself cannot escape from then role of as she claims “Now I’m a wife, I’m the mother / that’s the main thing” (77). In the last statement the term “thing” indicates the discomfiture at the dehumanization of the women in male hegemony. Nevertheless Sexton envisions the feminine paradigm, which frees her from the traumatic repression produced by patriarchy.

### **3.2.9 “Live”**

“Live,” the final poem in the collection *Live or Die* clarifies that Sexton’s choice is against death or is life. Despite Sexton’s propensity is “violent” and “suicidal” as observed by



Robert Boyers “she has something to live for,” she is submissive and conformist in her struggle against patriarchy. She embraces life fully along with all its contradictions and restrictions. She moves towards victory striving bravely to embrace life. The poem is an example of her creativity to life-affirmation.

Both title and sub-title “Live — live or die, but don’t poison anything” justifies that Sexton’s choice is life in her struggle against patriarchy. Sexton has tried her best to unveil the tumults of a woman’s soul through the dissatisfied persona. The speaker discloses her uneasiness with stasis and inactivity in the feminine roles. She sees her life as a prison where fulfillment and growth are ever-receding dream. She herself says that she is leading a life-in-death:

Well, death’s been here  
For a long time  
It has a hell of a lot  
To do with hell. (Kumine 167)

She explains the patriarchal world that excludes the potentiality of a woman is hell-like. The demoniac male figure restricts the woman with his suspicious “eye” represented through “religious objects” and “ritual” (167). These are the agents that function as thorns in the life of women. Aware of the harsh fact that she is leading a split life, she claims, “the chief ingredient is mutilation” (167). Her consciousness of the deteriorating existence allures Sexton to call the role of mother as “the damn bitch”(167). Her identification of the mother’s life with the doggerel life is the explosion of the repression confined in her. Her body is a burden — a “sawed off body in the trunk” (168). More crudely, she asserts that a woman always performs a role of a doll:

It became an outright lie

And even though I dressed the body  
It was still naked, still killed . . .  
But I play it, dressed it up,  
Dressed it up like somebody's doll. (167)

It is a disheartening truth that a woman has to conform the social dictations as a doll, despite her knowledge of her own dissolution. She cannot reject the social bondages. Even if she defies the constraints, the society starts suspecting her “everyone yelling at you to shut up”(168). A woman is considered as incapable of thinking on her own. She is thought to be whimsical. Patriarchy cannot digest individual thinking of a woman. This is the indication of deep-rooted gender discrimination stamped in male psyche. Outraged by the stereotypical hierarchy, the speaker compares herself with “fire” around which other people live and cook food. She is “ice” again on which people skate in little ballet costumes”(168). She wears a mother's apron. She is as nice as a “chocolate bar” (168). These are the examples of the roles where women are found. They are assumed to be docile, demure and satisfied with domestic life. Their consciousness is regarded as demoniac and witch-like. But Sexton's witch has been painted in “pink,” a colour indicating frivolity. Symbolically the speaker has already internalized the otherness of the women. She comes with the “kisses in her hood” (168). She easily yields in the role of mother. She is ready to dissolve herself so that she can give life and existence to her baby instead of “aborting” and “destroying” it (168). Furthermore she feels proud to be a mother. Thus Sexton chooses to live.

Though she chooses life, she is hopeful that patriarchy will bow down in future. She is firm to abolish male chauvinism entirely. A new enthusiasm has emerged in her.

Today life opened inside me like an egg  
And there inside

After considerable digging

I found the answer. (167)

She is optimistic to assume to be an empress. She is a “birch tree”-- a source of life (167).

Despite her knowledge of severe victimization, she boldly challenges patriarchy. She lives for her right and individuality: “. . . *Live, Live* because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift” (170). Hence Sexton struggles to possess the power of patriarchy and to rule a new feminine universe although she unwillingly yields to the masculine system.

In her life-affirming poems, Sexton revolts against the patriarchal boundaries, but not with the same ferocity as Plath does, but as a passive conformist agonized by the psychosexual disillusionment. Confessing her personal transformation from a housewife to poet, from sanity to madness, Sexton presents herself caught in a uniquely feminine role where she allows herself to be exploited, and then she apologizes for herself. In that sense, Sexton’s struggle is a story of a victim, not of a conscious participant. Her poems evoke the horror of creative sterility, the suppressed violence and irrational fear enmeshed in domestic routine. Her reinvigorated psyche scrutinizes the psychological torments and scars made by traditionally formed society. She realizes how vigorously patriarchy erodes her incongruities and idiosyncrasies through the stereotypical roles of pleasing men. She feels regularly manipulated in masculine language. She discovers herself submerging own status. Her existential loneliness, and dissatisfaction in domestic life leave her most bitter, despondent and deprecate. However, despite her internalization of dominant male aesthetic tradition and standards, Sexton writes cruelly, selfishly and subjectively so as to place herself in the literary world of intellectual fathers and claims their authority as her own. Her poems of fears, guilty desires alienation, split selves and despair function as representation of the women of her time. Her resistance is against the masculine hostility that assigns silence on

the part of women. Though her poems come as a therapeutic outpouring, they verge on a veritable reconstruction of the corrupt patriarchy. Her final assertion is to found a feminine paradigm unmarked by masculine prejudices. Her attempt is to achieve identity, freedom, equality and justice. She dramatizes a universe free of social, political, and cultural marginalization. She makes effort to subvert the absences and silence in order to herald a presence and voice with a redefinition of feminine roles. She believes in life as “an excitable gift” not to be denounced but to be lived (“Live” 167). She wants to make revisionary reading of predatory activists. By living, she wants to change the femininity from marginalization to centrality.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Comparison Between Plath and Sexton as Confessional Poets**

Both confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Sexton as confessional poets confess their inner conflict, repression and agony that basically concern femininity. Both of them suffer from the crises like existential alienation, fragmented personality and lack of identity. They are fed up with the antipathy and lethargy of patriarchally dominated society. Both poets make their wounds as the source of poetic creativity. Their poetry originates from their own lives. Their poetry is the poetry of unbalanced and afflicted personas that have strange fascination to self-destruction. Both poets transmute the ordinary domestic experiences into ironical, hallucinatory and utterly surreal images. They are undeniably concerned with the exploration of female spaces. They are terribly angry at patriarchal construction that marginalizes feminist concerns. Both Plath and Sexton are exclusively rebellious for the patriarchal definition of women as sub-human, other, inferior, mysterious, uncertain, and refined. They are radically against the suppressed and submerged personality. They attack male-dominated society with poignant images of the disheartening experiences. Their persistent endeavour is designated towards the abolition of the traditional chauvinism. In fact, these poets are in quest of the “self”. The despondent and distorted woman in their poems with a spiritual infatuation to death is the product of the society itself. The agonized women press for the demolition of the conventional definition of women assigned by patriarchy. They are making for a call for the redefinition of women and their facts. Their emphasis lies on revisionary re-reading of feminist studies. Therefore their real goal is the achievement of freedom, equality, identity, justice and a separate feminine universe.

Despite the similarities in the assertion of identity, the presentations differ in that Plath becomes something “imaginary, wildly, and subtly created—one of those super-real, hypnotic great classical heroines,” as Robert Lowell has commented (Baym 2967). On the

hand, Sexton believes that “poetry should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt”(2968). Her ferocity relies on the sensitive effects and changes to be brought upon the patriarchal psyche. Sometimes she seems to be imploring with patriarchy to sympathize her. If so, Sexton is not denouncing the marginalization rather she seems to be reinforcing it. But Plath’s approach is something different. She revolts against patriarchy boldly. No matter what happens with her life but she must gain freedom. The patriarchy must be collapsed. While confessing their turbulent emotions and deep fears against patriarchy, Plath turns out to be furiously rebellious, whereas Sexton comes out as a conformist apostle. While Plath is triumphant even being nihilistic in the process of assaulting patriarchy, Sexton is complacent as she accepts the stereotypical roles and affirms life. Both poets realize that the patriarchal foundation as the root of female marginalization and exclusion. But Sylvia Plath appears as aggressive witch-goddess that boldly determines to overthrow the male dominated structure whereas Sexton conforms to masculine values and continues to live. Plath agonizingly accepts darkness or death as her choice. From the remains of her death she rejuvenates her life, freedom and individuality. Hence destruction functions as the foundation of construction in Plath’s poetry. On the contrary, Sexton adheres to patriarchal control and denies death. For Sexton, death annihilates every thing. Instead she chooses poetry for poetry is a life-affirming act especially for her. Thus Plath is radically rejectionist to refute masculine construction while Sexton is excessively outrageous but yet a conformist who continues to live. Plath seems strongly haunted by age-old repression that takes the form of suicide. Self-hatred, self-annihilation, self-destruction and self-immolation come as the devastation of the patriarchal construction. By destroying her body, she transcends death and becomes more terrifyingly victorious and bold that can eat men like air. However, Sexton too struggles for female freedom, but her adherence to life, she remains harmless. Plath is more revengeful and

pessimistic at patriarchy but Sexton is more a conformist apostle. Plath is more vigorous and seems hurtling to gain a new sunrise while Sexton appeases and moulds herself in the patriarchal modulation.

Though both poets identify their pain with the pain of psycho-socio-politico-economic body of world, Plath is more severely haunted by the inferiorization, otherness and marginalization. Plath believes that only the nullification of male hegemony is the right solution for the beginning of beautiful world of the nullified women. Even though Sexton undergoes a trauma of existential loneliness, her preference is not destruction but a compromise. Her female persona gets completion only when she is supplemented by male figure. In that sense the female speaker is identified only in her relationship with the male other. Her poems lurk with the voice of painful submission. She cannot be completely against male and so she recoils to patriarchy despite her struggle against patriarchy. But Plath's case is different. She defies patriarchy openly. She is an androgynous whom all men appear as devil. Her only aim is to eliminate all men from the world and to achieve the emancipation from traditional patriarchal chain. Her heroine is certainly a distorted woman, nevertheless, an autonomous, free and self-dependent. Her agony and pain are so torturous that her death is nothing dearer at all to her but a means that frees her suffering. Thus Plath, an enigmatic poet envisions a world free from patriarchal boundaries after the destruction of patriarchy. On the other hand, Sexton rebels against patriarchy by displaying the reality of helplessness of a woman even when she is conscious of her own subordinated existence. She knows her dwindling condition, yet she must keep quiet. Everyone cannot die like Plath. Suicide is not the ultimate solution. Death can do some good but it is not the only alternative. Therefore Sexton compromises and chooses life. By living she wants to change the suffocating world of female.

Howsoever the ways of presentations are, both confessional poets boldly defy the patriarchal structure that crushes feminist concerns. Both of them struggle against patriarchy to push it down and to set forth a feminine world free of masculine prejudices. Both poets search “selves” to present themselves as independent beings.



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