

## Plath and Sexton's Artistic Affiliation and Art of Resistance

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### Abstract

*Known for their break of the rigid confines of formalism, the mid-twentieth century American poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath eloquently make of their sorrow a reverse discourse and a howl against hegemonic representations and practices exerted by patriarchal societies. Plath's later poetry, along with her novella *The Bell Jar*, converges with sexton's poetry in unraveling women's sufferings in hermetically-concealed confines of what Sexton refers to as the "gender of things." Such writers get to the bone of women's acquiescence in the domestic, medical, and sexual realms. The paper excavates, in the first part, both poets' artistic affiliation and bold disruption of Formalism through the celebration of the confessional mode. Then, it spots the light on their convergence in nodding to the close affiliation between women's suffering and domesticity through a vivid portrayal of their "kinds," whose aspirations turned into ashes by the requirements of motherhood and marriage.*

**Keywords:** hegemony, gender, Plath, Sexton, confessional, formalism, domesticity.

Before probing into Sexton and Plath's writing, it is astute to start with their relationship and then to trace Plath's assessment and evaluation regarding the latter's poesies. In her discussion of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath's artistic affiliation, Diane Middlebrook investigates Plath and Sexton's "buried" influences. Middlebrook puts forth that both poets share a "warm admiration" (105) for each other. In an interview with BBC, Plath expresses her captivation and enormous enthralment toward the enormous wit that characterizes the latter's poetics. She accentuates her admiration for "the poetess Anne Sexton" whose poetry, she believes, carries an "emotional and psychological depth" and is "new and exciting" (qtd. in Middlebrook, AS 105). In addition to her overwhelming excitement over what she calls a true "breakthrough" brought about by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Plath voices her interest in the poetry of Sexton, which carries, in her perception, similar talent and originality by affirming:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experiences in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar, private, and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman, and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting. (qtd. in Trinidad 25)

Plath regards Sexton's poetry as a real breakthrough in the history of American poetry, being teeming with "new" and "exiting" "psychological depth," both fascinating and evocative of Lowell's remarkable talent. When Robert Lowell expresses Plath and Sexton's correspondence and similarities, On March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1959, Plath interjects by saying: "Lowell sets me up with Anne Sexton, an honor, I suppose" (qtd. in Crosbie 15). In a letter written in August 21, 1962, Plath states her absolute stun and delight while reading Sexton's second collection of poems that houses the dead, *All My Pretty Ones*. She considers it as a distinguished and a force to be reckoned in American history, standing as a solid proof of the writer's outstanding verve and astonishing flair, as she states:

It is superbly masterful, womanly in the greatest sense, and so blessedly unliterary. One of the rare original things in this world one comes upon. I had just said the day before 'One book I will buy is Anne Sexton's next,' & there it was, in the morning mail the next day. I have these small clairvoyances. But I don't have to be clairvoyant to see the Pulitzer and National Book Award and the rest in your lap for it. I think "The Black Art" comes in my top favorite dozen, with the North Easter Letter, flight the Letter Crossing Long Island Sound, Water, Woman with Girdle, Old, For God While Sleeping, Lament. Hell, they are all terrific. (132)

Plath articulates her fascination with all the poems encapsulated in *All My Pretty One* volume. Among the best of them, she states: "The Black Art," "The North East Letter," "Flight the Letter Crossing Long Island Sound," "Water," "Woman with Girdle," "Old," "For God While Sleeping," "Lament," and "Hell." Because of the significant weight it carries, Sexton's second

collection makes a great stir not only in Plath's literary appraisal but also in local and artistic communities by receiving many acclaims. In her review of Sexton's poems, Joyce Carol Oates remarks on the striking resemblance between both poetesses. Oates observes: "It is uncanny as if somehow Plath were resurrected in Sexton" (144). Plath and Sexton are very similar by virtue of their "vitality and their employment of interior experiences and private and taboo subjects" (qtd. in Crosbie 224), which sheers from the confessional mode.

The confessional mode is generally perceived as an art of the self, dealing exclusively with private experiences and yielding many clues about the writer's autobiographical account. It deals with facts related to the emotional and bodily experiences of the writer's own life which may be appealing especially for inquisitive readers who crave all too often to be acquainted with the writer's personal life. It fuels their interest in poetry reading as they feel stimulated in unraveling what is deemed as "unspeakable" and digging into what is kept hidden. As far as the language used is concerned, it is centered on the abundant appropriation of metaphors and imageries and personal autobiographical style (Gill 20). This style of poetry writing represents a rupture in the history of American poetry as it frequently dwells on what is deemed as "scandalous secrets," (Horvath 9) breaking altogether T.S. Eliot's New Criticism. Robert Phillips provides illuminating insight about the confessional style as a genre and affirms:

The confessional mode . . . has always been with us. It merely has not until recently been officially named. It is that writing which is highly subjective, which in direct opposition to that other school of which Auden and Eliot are modern members-writers who consciously strove all but to obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems . . . in opposition to, or reaction from, the Eliotic aesthetic which influenced several generations poets. (4)

The confessional mode as a style of poetry writing is highly subjective in content in which writers do not "obliterate" the "I" from the center of the poems, destabilizing New Classicism. The major advocate of its tenets is T.S. Eliot who disdains the use of subjective concerns opting, instead, for an "objective correlative." He extolls impersonality with sacredness. In "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Eliot observes: "classicism is a goal towards which all good literature strives, so far as it is good" (qtd. in Mathew 176). His corroboration of the ideals of classicism bears in its recess a disruption to the romantic cult of subjectivity, in general, and to the romantically engrossed women's poetry, in particular. In the perception of Eileen Gregory, Eliot's classicism is:

Sterile and insensitive in character: A denial of all untoward, imaginative, emotional, spiritual stimulation that would give the lie to the tragic truth... [The] landscape of the New classicism is [. . .] hard, cold, dry, hierarchic, and regulated, impersonal and emotionally constrained brilliant and shadow less day light. (qtd. in Mathew 174)

Cold impersonality is the hallmark of good classical literature in Eliot's perception. On many occasions, this latter articulates his recoil from the pathetic venting of frustrated emotions and the insipid outpouring of personal traumas within poetry. On broaching the "relation of the poem to its author," Eliot contends 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" (48). His "impersonal theory of poetry" advocates a "process of depersonalization" which stresses an absolute separation between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates"

(39-49). The “more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.” Poetic decorum, in his line of thought, is based on a reduction of emotion and an “aesthetic distance” between the writer and his / her character. In sheer contrast to the Romantic embodiment of close affiliation between personal experiences and poems, he argues in favor of the restoration of classical values like objectivity and restraint.

Confessional poets, contrariwise, veer from the vicious circle of what New Criticism and Formalism deem as the cornerstone of good art, like clarity, precision, organization and coherence. They de-familiarize poetic language by shattering down the canonical way of poetry writing by placing center stage their sorrows. Such a deliberate display of private details in poetry breaks Eliot’s reticence on the impersonal nature of poetry, and paves the ground for the free expression of victimization and agony. M. L. Rosenthal claims that confessional poetry is “poetry of suffering,” (130) whereby the poet follows the romantic artist and parades his anguish in his work. He refers to Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) in which “private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems” are the major themes dealt with (26). Within the same vein, Robert Phillips pins down the mode as the depiction of “unbalanced and afflicted” protagonists (17). Equally engaging is Davie’s elucidation of such a style as “a vehicle by which the writer acts out before his public the agony or the discomfort . . . of being a writer” (142).

Sexton and Plath follow the lead and walk in the footsteps of some of the most renowned published poets of their epoch, those termed by Philip McGowan and others as “Middle Generation” poets (Goh 9), namely Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz. They are referred to, in Adam Kirsch’s terminology, as “the Wounded Surgeons” who alter their personal sorrow into “effective works of art” (Goh 9) and morph their hysterical convulsion into images of high fever. Alvarez postulates that:

[Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath] had assimilated the lesson of Eliot and the critical thirties: they assumed that a poet, to earn his title, had to be very skillful, very original, and very intelligent. But they were no longer concerned with Eliot’s rearguard action against the late romantics; they were, I mean, no longer adherents of the cult of rigid impersonality. They were able to write poetry of immense skill and intelligence which coped openly with the quick of their experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown. (24)

Sexton and Plath break with formalist notions of poetry in which imagery and metaphor were subordinated to sound patterns and rhyme organizations. They instead employ “an exceedingly personal free verse” (Bauer 7) marked by an excruciating exposition of personal troubles. The “literal Sel[ves]” of the poets “[are positioned] more and more at the center of the poem” (Rosenthal 26-27) and articulate mental illness, suicidal tendencies, and celebration of death. Both writers view death as “an art,” a “theater,” and a “call (ing)” (Plath, *CP* 245). In one of her essays about her friendship with Sylvia Plath, Sexton talks shamelessly about their fascination and attraction to death by declaring:

We talked death and this was life for us. . . . I know that such fascination with death sounds strange . . . and that people cannot understand. They keep . . . asking me why, why? So here is the why - poem, for both of us . . . I do feel

somehow that it's the same answer that Sylvia would have given. (qtd. in Newman 175)

Both poetesses appear giddy with enthusiasm vis-à-vis death and thrilled with its chill. With a fervent craving, both artists speak desirously and explicitly about self-destruction. Gilbert and Gubar view their death as an act of “dangerous impersonation of their own metaphors” (549) triggering a malicious politic or “epidemic” (Levertov 74). In “Light up the Cave,” Denise Levertov announces that she has heard numerous stories of young scholars who loved Plath’s poetry and who tried and sometimes committed suicide. The week, for example, Sylvia Plath killed herself in 1963, Alvarez records that over ninety-nine people committed suicide in Great Britain and that this figure is four times higher in the United States (qtd. in Crosbie 109).

The conflation and intermix of the two poetesses in visions drive Sexton to weave a poem entitled “Sylvia Death” for the sake of commemorating her friend who leaves her in the lurch. While describing the manner Plath’s suicide is successful, Sexton recurs to the use of a plethora of imagery brimming with “envy and reproach” (Madi and Neimneh 137). This poem can be read as a conversational poem in which the poet, nostalgic in mood, reflects on her experience with Plath. In portraying Sylvia’s death after a thorny battle with life calamities, Sexton confesses her downheartedness, rage, death hunger, and domestic imprisonment, and celebrates alcohol as a pain killer. The first two stanzas are initiated with an apostrophe to Sylvia Plath depicting household chores as a form of death in life, reading as follows:

O Sylvia, Sylvia,  
with a dead box of stones and spoons,  
with two children, two meteors  
wandering loose in a tiny playroom,  
with your mouth into the sheet,  
into the roof beam, into the dumb prayer,  
(Sylvia, Sylvia  
where did you go  
after you wrote me  
from Devonshire  
about raising potatoes  
and keeping bees?)  
what did you stand by,  
just how did you lie down into? (CP, “Sylvia Death”126)

Sexton mourns Sylvia’s death by drawing the domestic life Sylvia used to have, with the house described as a box built with stones and overcrowded with spoons for feeding the famished children. This portrayal carries Sexton’s anxiety-inducing consciousness of her sorrowful predicament and her bitter attitude vis-à-vis domestic slavery and incarceration. These domestic tasks are piercingly wearing to both Plath and Sexton given that they are juxtaposed with their essence as poets and true artists. Alicia Ostriker refers to such opposition as a battle between the true writer and the true woman. While “the true writer signifies assertion,” “the true woman signifies submission.” (qtd. in Showalter 315)

Sylvia’s death is holistically linked to her miserable domestic life, which echoes Sexton’s dilemma. This poem highlights both poets’ uneasiness about their roles as women and poets and their longing to break free. This is revealed through Sexton’s focus on the multiple roles that Plath is supposed to perform in the following lines, whereby she claims:

While the moon's bad,  
and the king's gone,  
and the queen's at her wit's end  
the bar fly ought to sing!

O tiny mother,  
you too!

O funny duchess!

O blonde thing! (CP, "Sylvia Death" 128)

Such a passage explicitly states Sexton's sarcasm as her poet friend is expected to be at once: a "queen," a "tiny mother," a "funny duchess," and a "blonde thing" by the "king" of the house. The poetic persona in "Sylvia Death" is full of dismay and shock towards her friend's departure putting all behind and leaving without a trace of a suicidal tendency in her poetry or in her letters. Addressing Sylvia as if she were alive, she asks about the last letter she received, telling her about "raising potatoes / and keeping bees," (126) which is tantamount to a typical housewife devoted to her job as a mother and as a wife. Sexton is traumatized by Plath's bravery to "crawl down alone / into the death" calling her a "thief" (126) because of her abrupt disappearance heedless of her friend's similar engulfing need. With a bruised voice and an ached soul, Sexton so desperately looks forward to joining her friend whom she misses by claiming:

Thief

how did you crawl into,  
crawl down alone into the death

I wanted so badly and for so long. (CP128)

The reiteration of "death" intensifies the poetess's ingrained conviction that suicide is the door to a peaceful realm (Madi and Neimneh 139). Despite trying on many occasions to be relieved from the absurdity and viciousness of living, Sexton fails to "ride home /with [her] boy," yet Plath gets ahead ultimately. Henceforth, Sylvia's death is pronounced as "a mole that fell out / of one of [her] poems." The dreams of that glamorized other world in death have been replaced by nightmares. To put it concisely, the "chief ingredient" of both writers' works is mutilation, as Sexton confirms:

Mutilation,

And mud, day after day,

mud like a ritual. (CP167)

Notwithstanding being centered on the emotional swing both writers experience, the voice of the writers transcends the exhibition of personal trauma to illustrate a parallel truth and voice a shared predicament of many beleaguered individuals. They apply "a universal self," rendering the veil between the personal and the public too thin to perceive. Speaking on behalf of all of the oppressed women of her era, they take the lid on male violence and hegemony in the domestic realm. One of my research objectives of the present article is to trace both poets' conversion of their hysteria from an otiose outburst to politically, culturally, and ideologically charged poetic manuscripts. I argue that they develop the persona of the hysterical poet as a political move, using the same language that devalues their conditions as shameful and unspeakable to give it a voice through her poetry, making of it what Foucault would call a "reverse discourse." The term "reverse discourse" is used by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (101). Reverse discourse involves taking an originally pejorative word or phrase and turning it into one with positive connotations instead." (Goh 9) It is through the

representation of the hysterical poet personae that they give themselves authority and alert such an experience into “a positive and purposeful act.” (9)

The article under focus sheds light on the fact that the “destructive hysteria of [the poets’ day-to-day-existence becomes a constructive hysteria” (Bronfen 302) once it performs and criticizes the discourse of culture to its extremist and turning point. It is a “Howl,” terminology used by Allen Ginsberg to allude to the “best minds of (his) generation” who “kill themselves by cutting their wrists, jumping from windows and bridges,” and “creating “great suicidal dramas,” (9-13) as the rash of suicide and hysteria permeating Sexton and Plath’s works is a psychological scream in the latter half of the twentieth century, a cry of horror. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus considers suicide as the “one truly serious philosophical problem,” (qtd. in Crosbie 111) “confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it.” (111) Thereby, the poets’ malady is a “means to gain a hearing,” “a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right.” (qtd. in Duncan 14) It is “productive, not to be understood in opposition to [sanity] but as part of discourse;” to put it differently, it “operates as a different way of saying” (14) that parodies the very essence of their age.

In her book *A Theory of Parody The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Linda Hutcheon defines parody as a kind of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion.”(6) It is “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.” (6) Instead of eschewing past representation, parody is a model of “revising, replaying, inverting and trans-contextualizing” (11) the previous patriarchal tradition, a “form of recycling.” (15) Sexton and Plath intend to “repeat, to invert, and re-invent in the duplicitous gesture of miming and dislocating, of complying and resisting.” (407) This intention behind such a re-enactment of personal torment is not making confession but playing at it. Their poems are, to borrow Bronfen’s terminology, “hysteric mimesis” (Bronfen 297) performing “the daughter discontent.” Just as they are traumatized poets who withstand untold atrocities - be it social, familial, or medical- so are the lives of many women of their era. Their real-life stories transcend the exhibition of personal concerns to spot focus on women’s real dilemmas in the vicious circle of patriarchy. As Jacqueline Rose has accurately named Sexton and Plath “the mistress[es] of the ‘I’ as fiction,” they play the ‘housewife’ with gusto “to thwart, to reclaim, to subvert, to undermine, to shock, to question. . . It was quite a performance.” (qtd. in Pollard 21)

The espousal of the persona “I” within both writers’ art is a performance, offering them a shield behind which they hide and a canvas to project different identities. A fragment from the 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles endorses Sexton’s public performance, whereby she asserts: I believe I am many people. When I am writing a poem, I feel I am the person who should have written it. Many times I assume these guises; I attack it the way a novelist might (qtd. in Kevles 22-23). Disparate personae, in Sexton’s view, reside beneath the poetic “I,” a method that confuses rather than reveals. Identity is more fluid and impervious than a persistent autobiographical I would suggest.” (Gill 44) In the same vein, Plath asserts that her writing exceeds the description of personal experience to foreshadow a collective quandary. She avers:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured . . . with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly, it shouldn’t be a . . . narcissistic experience. I

believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things. (qtd. in Ford170)

Instead of articulating a personal “life” dwelling on her denigration of gender politics occupying the familial sphere through images of torture, madness and death, Plath gracefully performs a collective predicament that unites all of the women of their epoch. To borrow Ostriker’s insightful words, she “provide(s) extreme but illuminating variations on a core female position.” (207) Likewise, “Her Kind” is a typical example of Sexton’s endeavor to shed light on a shared plight rather than focusing on her own experience of physical dismemberment and psychological mutilation. The woman of this poem is a “twelve-fingered” “possessed witch,” who is “not a woman, quite,” a “homemaker who fixes” “suppers for the worms and elves.” She is, as well, “misunderstood,” a “survivor . . . (who) is not ashamed to die.” (15-16) The speaker’s refusal to adopt any personal pronoun draws attention to a collective predicament, making the reader comprehend that this woman is not “one” in any sense of uniqueness, but “one among the many” who have spent their lives under similar positions. Steven E. Colburn has stated that the persona’s experiences in “her Kind” are archetypal of the ill-luck of women as a whole, who suffer under intimidating harsh societies (169). From his standpoint, the shift in voice, from the first pronoun “I” to the objective “a woman like that,” illuminates “the personal/political motivation of the poem.” (169) “The fate of the witch,” in his vision, is “the fate of any woman.” (169) Axelrod aligns himself with the same attitude and avers that “Her Kind” is a real “signature” to Sexton’s poetics because it presents a complex female subject that stages women’s ordeal in the world (176). According to Ostriker, Sexton’s work contains a “moral resonance” that relates to “the real lives of women,” and inscribes this rapport within itself (16). Hume claims that the profuse references to fragmentation and division like the “cracked mirror[s]” (of the asylum) and the “cracked stars shining (*CP*, “For John” 34) hint at women’s imprisonment “in kitchens or madhouses” and “aim toward the same general human truths that shine differently in different lives.” (10)

Sexton and Gilman’s endeavor, paradoxically, to shuck the inviolable shells of the kitchen sphere and expose hidden atrocities is a task too hard to achieve given that the socio-historical period within which they were writing imposed tight measures upon artists, as Adrienne Rich contends, throughout the 1950s, “the family was in its glory” and “in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were making careers of domestic perfection.” Prevented by “the loyalties of marriage,” women shunned voicing “their secret emptiness [and] their frustrations” (*On lies* 42). Nevertheless, instead of chafing under the yoke of patriarchal hegemony, they “set [themselves] the task of inventing a poetics that could explore the oppressive ideologies of the feminine woman of [their] time, and [they] sought to make overt [their] growing suspicion of the codes, categories, conceptualizations of a world dominated by men” (Yorke78-79). These writers start by unabashedly destabilizing the domestic tranquility of the home. They “expose[s] the poverty of the ideology of the family that dominated post-war culture and draw[s] poetic truth from the actual pain given and taken in the context of family life” (Middlebrook 648). They make the home a perquisite element in their texts only to protest against gender politics which take a heavy toll on women’s domestic and private lives; bearing in mind that it is not uniquely a palpable building but “a central political and formal metaphor of what it means to be private (Nelson 75). Home is a sine qua non of the political gender system serving to reinforce the dichotomy between the opposite sexes, which they awfully despise.



Sexton's rebuff of sexual segregation is echoed in "Hurry Up Please It's Time." The use of childish euphemisms, such as "crapper," "my little cunny," and "wee-wee," (CP385) highlights that she is brainwashed from infancy with sexual difference, as she notes that boys "wee-wee funny," and that she "wee wee(s) like a squaw" (385). Sexton notes that while the woman has "swallowed an orange," the man, contrariwise, has "swallowed a ruler" (CP 385). Whereas the swallowed orange is suggestive, according to Crosbie, of the silent or pent-up truths which are "dressed" in language, the interface of ruler and orange puts forward a history of male restraint and power (235). This gender difference is highlighted as well in Plath's *The Bell Jar*. This latter is autobiographical, with reference to Plath's own experiences with mental illness. It was published under a false name "because she didn't want (it) to be judged as the work of a poet" (Stevenson 285). Plath described this novel as a "potboiler" on many occasions, and she was fairly secretive about its composition and publication (227). Some critics argue that Plath's secrecy is due to the autobiographical nature of the novel; many chief characters look like, often adversely, people who were close to or members of Plath's family. Biographer Edward Butscher has noted that the novel "has engendered much unhappiness, many people being wounded and perplexed to discover themselves mercilessly belittled in a book by a girl they had once regarded with affection" (345). The confessional nature of the novel may have triggered Plath some anxiety, but, as Anne Stevenson has stated, she looked to be more anxious with the book's quality, than with its "barely disguised, hurtful portrait of her mother," or of anyone else (285). Underneath such a scornful depiction lies the writer's hatred of the ideology of her time marked by steadfast gender differential.

This attitude is perceived through Buddy Willard's, Esther's husband, perception of a woman's identity. Emulating his mother's attitude, he states: "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is a place the arrow shoots off from" (124). This led Esther, the protagonist of the novel, to articulate her absolute abhorrence of such a gender system by saying:

That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a fourth of July Rocket. (*The Bell* 83)

Several are the reasons that lead Esther to loathe marriage. Her insatiable desire to expand her wings and fly in all directions without restraints is one among them. She sounds teeming with the desire to experience "excitement and change" and to be like an arrow bursting in all directions and tasting freedom. Such a thrust is thwarted by stifling male hegemony and choking domesticity.

The same idea resurfaces in a plethora of Plath's poems. Among the conspicuous titles, we can mention "Cut," "Fever 103°," "Paralytic," "Contusion," "Thalidomide," "Amnesiac," and "Witch Burning." Plath equates physical and mental suffering with performing dull housework. "[H]er poetry so frequently contains images that associate physical and mental suffering and also effacement-a kind of living death-, as well as death itself, with domestic relationships and/or domestic roles" (Dobbs 11). This bewilderment, coupled with frustration, is noticeably perceived in her claims: "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day-spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free." (qtd. in Dobbs 16) Domestic work, in Plath's perception, is akin to slavery, driving her to self-effacement and stagnancy. In the opening line of her poem "Lesbos" from

*Ariel* collection, she depicts the kitchen at the gravitational center of servitude and monotony as she embeds this choking sphere with what she calls “viciousness.” The same imagery is evoked in “The Detective,” whereby the miasma of death pervades the kitchen setting. What reigns is “the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen” as “there is no body in the house at all.” This metaphorical absence is not ornamental but is laden with suggestive connotation, nodding to the fact the persona has lost her selfhood amidst a sole thrust, to keep the furniture polished and the floor clean. Even her sexuality has been metamorphosed and atrophied, as Plath argues:

The mouth first ...  
Her breasts next.  
Then the dry wood, the gates,  
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate. (CP20 )

Plath uses hyperbole to portray a setting fraught with death and withdrawal of love as even the natural setting is tainted with the same aura of boredom. The sunlight is “bored” and “there was no absence of lips, there were two children.” Such imageries are not only a reflection of external reality, but they “project the person’s inner reality as well (23), as she argues: “as if domesticity had choked me.” Correspondingly, it comes as no surprise that Plath chooses to withdraw from life by “sticking her head in a gas oven as a perfect symbolization of, and final statement on, that aspect of her experience” (Dobbs 24). This dismal portrayal of the kitchen sphere rings a bell to Sexton’s “Consorting with Angels”

“Consorting with Angels” elaborates upon the poet’s recognition and frustration of gender politics practiced within the kitchen sphere, reading along the following lines:

I was tired of being a woman,  
tired of the spoons and the pots,  
tired of my mouths and my breasts,  
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.  
There were still men who sat at my table,  
circled around the bowl I offered up.  
The bowl was filled with purple grapes  
And the flies hovered in for the scent and even my  
father came with his white bone.  
But I was tired of the gender of things. (CP111)

The anaphora used in the reoccurrence of the adjective “tired” stands for the poetess’s physical and psychic exhaustion. She sounds teeming with fury towards the rigid dichotomy between men and women within the house, and especially in the kitchen sphere. Such a rage is conveyed through the following diction: “spoons,” “spots,” “bowl,” and “table.” (CP111) In spite of most people’s preferences to avert the conflation of the kitchen with violence, the poet puts center stage the fallibility of such a space, turning out to be a site of family constraints. It is the place wherein the poetess finds herself dwarfed and smothered by what Gorge Chauncey calls a “highly visible male world,” (qtd. in Duncan 28) an idea encapsulated via the opposition between the personal pronoun ‘I’ standing for the smothered voice of the poetess versus the plural voice of the “men,” who gather at the table “circling” the “bowl” she “offers.” Such a metaphor blends “imagery of violence with imagery of the kitchen” (Colburn 307). This is what drives Plath to state in her journal entries that “[b]eing born a woman is[her] awful tragedy (UJ77).

This calamity finds echo in Sexton's "Self in 1958," (CP 155-56) from *Live or Die* in which the poet associates herself as a "plaster doll" planted in "all electric kitchen." She starts her poem with the following lines:

What is reality?  
I am a plaster doll; I pose  
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall  
upon some shellacked and grinning person,  
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.  
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?  
I have hair, black angel,  
black-angel-stuffing to comb,  
nylon legs, luminous arms  
and some advertised clothes. (CP155)

The outset of the poem divulges the difficulties of identifying what constitutes a self, ending up pinning it down as nothing but an approximate "I," akin to a mutilated phantom. This "I" has no reality beyond the features of a plaster doll, or better said, an "I. Magnintransplant." The mentioning of Magnin is awfully intriguing. In 1960, it "was a San Francisco-based high fashion and specialty goods luxury department store, founded in 1876 by Mary Ann Magnin," (Jones 176) and whose clothes and selling items are arranged through catalog and magazine announcements. The poet yearns to spotlight that her life is remindful of a mannequin, put in the exhibition window of a store for trade and usage. It follows then that her being is reduced to a mere item sold in a classy store department. This comparison signals the "counterfeit" currency and values of a perfected suburban dwelling." (Jones 176) This comparison of the housekeeper to a "doll" and a mannequin put on display is akin to the image Plath uses in her poem entitled "The Beast." Reflecting on her sentiment of disillusionment, the persona states:

I've married a cupboard of rubbish.  
I bed in a fish puddle.  
Down here the sky is always falling. (CP17)

Such an ironic marriage to rubbish cupboard finds resonance in Sexton's artful display of the "nylon legs." This exhibition foregrounds that the poet is part and parcel of the home's most detectible gadgets. As far as the "advertised clothes" are concerned, they model her lifestyle characterized by invisibility and incarceration behind the big façade door, as she states:

Someone plays with me,  
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,  
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?  
Someone pretends with me  
-I am walled in solid by their noise –  
or puts me upon their straight bed. (CP, "Self" 73)

Instead of being the director of her existence by being the one who plays and takes actions, the toy-like Sexton is "played-with." The passive mode underscores her lack of agency and speechlessness. She is acquiescently fixed in the "all-electric kitchen," disguised "as a Cold War home decoration," a "spy" in the house (Jones 177). The poet/housewife turns out to be an idealized robot, electrified as "the kitchen" she is confined in. Beneath all-electric lies a sarcastic tone; the poet seems to mock the claims that women are relieved of the burdensome chores thanks to the modern equipment that is meant to facilitate their lives. All-electric is

synonymous, on the other hand, with “no humanity and no spark,” (Pollard 7) which refers to “Woolf’s angel in the house but this one is full of ‘black-angel-stuffing’ like a toy or sofa” (6). The paradox that the poem encapsulates is that despite the highly advanced technological devices impregnating the housing sphere, women’s disenchantment and discontent persist, not to say, augment.

Friedan argues in *The Feminine Mystique* that the well-equipped suburban house with the all-electric kitchen gives no shelter from the gloomy side of human experience. Alluding to the sense of disappointment many women feel in this era, she claims: “in 1960, the problem that had no name burst like a boil through the image of the American Housewife.” (19) This idea is conveyed through Sexton’s cry, “They think I am me!” (CP, “Self” 73); her yell of astonishment is enormously suggestive, foreshadowing the central splitting between a food-preparing mother whose eyes never shut, and the presence of a hidden likewise- electrified interior life, not on display and, hence, not known. This poem is akin to a movie that projects a real-life version of the daily routine of the poetic self, a meticulously crafted production that seeps into the malevolence of suburban life. Throughout the poems that are critical of domesticity and this feminine ideal, the writers dialogize their personas’ traumas with gender politics which occupy every nook and cranny of their era-be it social, political, and medical. Plath and Sexton’s writings bristle with real-life scenes dramatizing the confrontation between men and women. For such female writers along with Adrienne Rich, poetry becomes a “harbinger of domestic totalitarianism.” (Nelson 76)

This domestic totalitarianism is articulated in Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Plath uses the image of a fig tree to symbolize Esther’s sense of dichotomy between her poetic self and its social construction. Esther refers to her life as “branching out before (her)” like a fig tree, where each fig is representative of a different option in life such as poet, professor, wife, athlete, and so on. Like the gloomy fate of many women, Plath’s protagonist dwells in “a society which necessitates the repression and concealment of real feelings, emotions and desires” (Hawthorn 117). Such feelings of repression are well revealed in the story of the fig-tree. She claims:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree  
in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig,  
a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband  
and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet  
and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was EeGee,  
the amazing Editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and

South America, and another Fig was Constantine and Socrates and  
Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer Names and offbeat professions,  
and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and  
above these figs were many figs I couldn’t quite make out. (*The Bell* 77)

In her attempt to fuse “femininity with intellect,” (109) Esther finds herself split between her feminine aspirations and her societal requirements. Lane affirms this protagonist fights “the warring elements within [herself]-feminine domestic instincts fighting masculine ambitious ones” (62). She depicts herself “starving to death” given that the “figs fall and rot,” being unable to make up her mind – choosing one meaning “losing all the rest” (Crosbie 77). The image of the fig tree symbolizes Esther Greenwood’s mediation between the self and its social construction’. She goes on to describe herself “starving to death” as the figs fall and rot because she can’t make up her mind - to choose one “meant losing all the rest” (80). As Linda

Wagner-Martin has observed, this passage reflects an “artificial dilemma,” which relates to the “social pressures” that “force choice” (186). The reconciliation between having successful family lives and brilliant careers is a weight too heavy to carry. Yorke sees these aspirations as “an inadmissible project for the feminine female of the fifties” (67).

Esther's struggle with these pressures instigates her breakdown and suicide attempt. Disappointed with life, she starts to conceive of death as her vocation. Her dissatisfaction with the limits of her body as well as the difficulties in writing her own story induces her to loathe herself and therefore chase death as an ultimate solution to her nervous breakdown. In so doing, to put in Elizabeth Bronfen's words, she decides to “write the narrative of her own life with her body as a medium before she can write it as a novel in disguise” (409). Plath illustrates the theme of suicide by having her fictive ‘self’ experience death by “fashioning herself in the image of death plots” (409). She reads: “SUICIDE SAVED FROM 7-STORY LEDGE” (*The Bell* 136). Esther continues her death fantasies on the beach, “only to find herself each time at an impasse that moves the seriousness of her undertaking to the grotesque” (Bronfen 410). This latter seeks death by imagining herself drowning saying: “I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst. Some of those babies in the jars that Buddy Willard showed me had gills, he said. They went through a stage where they were like fish” (*The Bell* 157). Choosing death because she finds it too difficult to reconcile her aspirations and social dictates, Plath's protagonist is evocative of many women's dilemmas who find domesticity a stumbling block thwarting their professional progress.

Such a concern is discussed in many of Sexton's poems. The most noticeable of which is “My Lover Returning to His Wife” (*CP* 188-190). This poem accentuates the “suppressed artistic potential (Zazula 86) of the female figure, especially in the light of the lines that follow:

She is more than that. She is your have to have,  
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.  
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,  
set forth three children under the moon,  
three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,  
done this with her legs spread out  
in the terrible months in the chapel.  
If you glance up, the children are there  
like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling. (*CP*189)

The imagery of the “terrible months in the chapel,” according to Zazula, subtly stands for the labor of the renaissance painter, lying on his sore back for hours on the solid wooden planks of the scaffold, just beneath the chapel's ceiling. Consequently, similar to “Michelangelo whose arduous labor results in the drawing of “three cherubs,” the dutiful wife gives birth to three little children. Babies are the housewife's “works of art.” (87) The inclusion of the opposition between the male's task and that of the mother figure yields considerable insights. It is indicative of the fact that the unique mark of artistry available to the children's mother is the family tableau. A woman, in Sexton's diagnosis, ends up leading astray her yearnings into false social identities. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, for instance, writes: “The poem constitutes a bitter commentary on women's search for identity. It points out how unaware of their social conditioning and their passive acceptance of culturally assigned roles women are (std. in Zazula 75). The aftermath of this arduous toil is that the housekeeper “washes herself

down,” (CP, “Housewife” 77) performing an act of self-effacement by being enmeshed in a vortex of never-ending housework.

In addition to expressing her aversion to domestic chores, Sexton underscores her hatred of motherhood. This is suggested through the description of how “the men enter the house, the fleshy mother” “by force.” (CP, “Housewife” 77) She puts forth that men’s aggression in breaking into their women’s homes and bodies emanates from typical relations with mothers, whom they unconsciously seek in their wives. This assertion resonates in her claim that “a woman is her mother.” The writer fears being associated with the mother, and, henceforth, finds herself operating in an Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture that overlooks the female principle as a transcendent position. The mother figure receives vehement criticism as she is portrayed as “the giver and devourer of life,” (Zazula 75) and an “ominously confining and overbearing fleshy figure.” (76) The speaker sounds too daring to cut off all ties even with her mother figure, emblem of submission and utter compliance. The anger that Sexton expresses vis-à-vis the maternal figure in these passages shows what Adrienne Rich calls “the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood.” (277) This revulsion is due to their abhorrence of being locked up in the ideals of upper-middle-class American society. When maternal control becomes too throttling to bear, Sexton expresses her generation’s fright from becoming a replica of their mothers and their willingness to destabilize the culturally androcentric image of the submissive mother. Adrienne Rich describes this fear as “matrophobia,” which she defines as “the fear not of one’s mother or motherhood but of becoming one’s mother. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the un-free woman, [and for] the martyr” (237-38). Sexton’s denunciation of matrimony as an institution that deprives women of rising and developing their selfhood is voiced with unprecedented directness.

Similarly, Plath views motherhood as “purdah,” a jail. Actually, motherhood’s duties prevent Esther from pursuing her artistic talents and become a burden too heavy for her to carry. Motherhood becomes a real threat to this woman’s sense of self. Instead of feeling psychologically comfortable, motherhood, along with her nervous sickness, kills her individuality and creation and brings her only anger and disenchantment. Driven home, Esther argues:

I stepped from the air-conditioned compartment onto the station platform, and the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything like death

I felt it was very important not to be recognized. The gray, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage. I had never spent a summer in the suburbs before. (127-28)

Through the meticulous amalgamation of visual and olfactory imageries, Plath accentuates Esther’s stifling conditions and boredom. Actually, the image of babies combined with that of “dogs” engulfs her like the roof of a hermetically- sealed prison, a prison where she desperately hankers for freedom. Such a portrayal is made further pungent through its association with the daily routine of modern life suggested through the imageries of “lawn sprinklers,” “station wagons,” “tennis rackets.” This portrayal serves to highlight that motherhood envelops her fragile self like whirlpools. There is corroborating evidence in the

text for such a feeling as she maintains: “children made me sick.” (*The Bell* 117) She further claims:

When I had told the poet [the famous woman poet] Esther’s college  
who is one of her principle mentors] I might well get married and  
have a pack of children someday, she started at me in horror: ‘but what  
about your career? She had cried. My head ached. Why did I attract  
these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and  
Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian scientist Lady  
and Lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way,  
and for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble  
them.(247- 48).

Esther builds a sheer contrast between the image of successful women embodied by the famous poet “Philomena Guinea,” “Jay Cee,” “the Christian Scientist,” and those whom she calls “weird old women.” The deft usage of the adjective “weird” carries her revulsion of their submission and yield. It even reinforces her disgust of being a typical example of them as they strive hard to “attract” her. Their influence, on the other hand, breeds an acquiescent woman who eventually succumbs to their thrust and ends by “resembling them.” Such a destiny has been unveiled by Buddy Willard, who informs her that “after [she] had a child . . . [she] wouldn’t want to write poems any more” (*The Bell* 107-08). She herself is frightened by such a claim as she affirms:

I knew that’s what marriage was like, because cook  
and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard’s mother  
did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university  
professor and had been a private school teacher herself. (93)

The boredom evoked in this extract through the reiteration of “cleaning” and “washing” orchestrates the “plug-ugly existence that a married woman is expected to lead” even if she is married to a highly enlightened man. “Given the society in which she lived, her aspirations were ash” (Bloom 108). This is just an extension of the Plath’s opinion. She quotes her boyfriend’s words which piercingly resonate in her ears as he says: “I am afraid the demands of wifehood and motherhood would preoccupy you too much to allow you to do painting and writing you want” (qtd. in Bloom 118).

All things considered, it goes without saying that both writers’ writings overlap in a variety of ways; they wrestle with and are at war with the society in which they find themselves ensnared. They exhibit women’s suffering within the home sphere marked by gender stratification and inequality, conveyed through an ardent portrayal of their effacement, subjugation, imprisonment, and the reduction of their beings into hollow and blank puppets or toys bereft of identities and wills. Leslie Ullmann extols both artists claiming that they “firmly grounded the confessional movement in a more direct and intense use of the personal” (195). She further insinuates that they “broke ground for women writers and also expanded experiential territory for all writers by making female experience and sensibility not only visible but powerful subjects for poetry” (196). For this reason, both Sexton and Plath, in the framework of many people, “die politically conscious deaths, struggling for a better life, not just for themselves but for [their] people, for The People” (Levertov 79). In his article “Light up the Cave,” Denise Levertov, for example, frowns upon critics who disparage their death by claiming that their tragedy is very different from that of suicide; they resemble “conscious actor[s] in dramas of revolutionary effort, not helpless victim[s]” (79). In spite of being split

asunder and vanquished by sorrow, both writers' suicide is "instrumental," laying bare untold atrocities.

Blending between perceptiveness and skill, Sexton and Plath simultaneously take up "the argument for social change" and turn "domesticity and the disruption of domestic bliss into new subjects for women's poetry (Michailidou 88). The poets yearn to maintain a healthy domestic life in which women become the subjects and the agents of their actions. Janet Todd has noted that their writings are part of a "nascent feminist awareness" since they endorse reform and action (qtd. in Crosbie 68). Plath foregrounds an extreme desire to smash the walls of silence and affirm her true womanhood. She maintains: "I want to express my being as fully as I can" (45). She articulates such a voracious yearning by saying:

I want to taste glory in each day and never be afraid to experience pain;  
and never shut myself up in a numb core of non-feeling, or stop questioning  
and criticizing life and take the easy way out. To learn and think; to think and  
live; to live and learn: this always with new insights, new understanding,  
and new love. (67)

This justifies the authors' incessant projection of females who are in a constant search for self-definition. They are fluid, flexible, and determined. From feeling vulnerable and useless, they turn out into autonomous personae with a boisterous desire to make decisions that are "self-created, self-named, and untouched by parental or social or cultural or even biological detriments (Oates 121). This is revealed in the ultimate scene of Plath's novel, wherein she describes Esther as "born twice," "patched," "retreaded," and "approved for the road" (257). This metamorphosis that Plath's protagonist witnessed nods to Sexton's persona in her eye-raising poem "The Operation." After slamming the door on bygone memories of parental death, the speaker's self is described as "a football," "laced up" "for the game" (CP 59).



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