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SELF-EXPRESSION AND DEFINITION OF WOMEN THROUGH CONFESSIONAL POETRY

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Abstract

For a long time, women's voices have been oppressed by the society they live in simply because of their female identity. They have had a long time struggling to gain a voice, an identity in the society. One of the ways women could express themselves was through writing confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is special to the person, it is the poetry of the personal experiences of the individual and their psychology. The individual's reactions to the personal experiences are reflected through confessional poetry which is the reason why it is quite different from the traditional ways of writing poetry. The women's approach and style in confessional poetry was so much different compared to the writing style of men. Women poets used confessional poetry to reflect their psyche and struggled to find their voices in the society. This paper aims to show the struggle women poets faced in 20th century while trying to make a name for themselves in a society where everybody has made a different name for them through analysing the literary works of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, Female identity, Feminism, Liberation, Self-definition, Sylvia Plath, Women poets.



1. INTRODUCTION

In a patriarchal world, women struggle with many problems due to their femininity even starting from their household with the parental patriarchy. The struggle they face because of the male authority in the patriarchal society is reignited by the fight for freedom against all sorts of oppression and the individual's journey to reach the full potential of their complex being as a woman. With the onset of the feminist movement, women started raising their voice against the sexist oppression they have been facing in the society. However, it has been a never-ending struggle to obtain the identity they want in the community they live in ever since the girl-child is oppressed by the sex role socialization in the beginning of her life. The roles that are given to the girls from their childhood starting with their family and the community restrict the potential they carry within themselves. This restriction harms their personal growth, their ability to decide and speak for themselves which results in their insecurity because of the inability to voice their opinions freely. The identity that is given to women by the male superiority and the identity women think they need to have clash and that is when women try to find new platforms to fight for their rights. One of the largest grounds women have found their voices is through confessional poetry.

Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal. It is the personal experiences and psyche of the poet reflected between the lines. There are many confessional poets who are males, thus the literary world plays a crucial part in supporting the misogynistic power figures. Female confessional poets help expand the literary patterns not only for the sake of the readers but also for the poets themselves. Women's ability to seize a feminine world view aids them in exposing the readers to the perspectives they cannot encounter in the works of men (Hoffmeister 33). The ongoing cycle of misogyny breaks with the female poets using their pens as their strongest weapon against the discrimination and oppression they are battling with. Their words encourage the other women in the society to speak up, to use their power against the hardships they are facing and raise more awareness among each and every woman they can reach so that they can express their own experiences, opinions, and own ideas. 20th century female poets showcased their own experiences of identity in their writings which result in them receiving criticism and fight for their own rights to express their opinions and fight for the acclaim the male poets get from the society easily. They often display a consciousness of their being by the paradoxes of similarities and differences from other women, their families and from social dictations for what female identity should be like (Gardiner 354).

One of the pioneers of the confessional poetry among female poets is Sylvia Plath who is known for her successful poetry and tragic death. She had a formal literary education in Smith College with a scholarship to study English, yet her works have always been criticised by other critics both male and female. After graduating from Smith College, she was offered a Fulbright Scholarship from Cambridge University and here she met fellow poet Ted Hughes whom she got married to. Including her marriage and her relationship with her father, she has had many troubles in her life which she expressed through her poetry. There was mainly a common idea that Plath's poetry was good but she was overly concerned with herself. However, it was her intention to be concerned with herself as she explains in an interview with Peter Orr: "my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have" (ModernAmericanPoetry). However, her explanations were not enough to keep people from criticising her "preoccupation with death and self". She was criticized because most people believed that a woman's personal experiences should be kept private. Although Plath liked writing about her personal experiences, her poems were not entirely autobiographical. In fact, she preferred manifesting her personal experiences into poetry to reflect her own thoughts and ideas in a chaotic time she was both a mother and a wife while working on her husband's poetry. Always being in the background of other people, she struggled hard to find her own place in the literary world.

Plath's poem *Lady Lazarus* is the perfect example of her way of manipulating her personal experiences into a masterpiece so that people can find relatable parts from their lives between the lines of the poem which she succeeded by globalizing her feelings, pains, and struggles to help people grasp the idea better. The poem is simply an autobiographical take on Plath's struggles with death and life. She starts from a detailed childhood accident where she almost drowned and goes on to the time where she attempted suicide in college. Her experiences coming close to death is not something she shows any fear of, in fact, she approaches the situation with an unflinching stance against death when she writes: "Dying / Is an art like everything else / I do it exceptionally well" (Plath 43-45). Her witty approach to death is striking because she regards it as a play to be performed and herself to be a good actress. Her way of displaying herself through the eyes of the male authority draws a clear image of the patriarchal society's restrictions upon her psychology and character.



Sylvia Plath shows the conflict between the image people make of her and what she feels about her identity clearly with the lines: "A sort of a walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade". She reflects the difference between the way people perceive her and the way she identifies herself. She is a "walking miracle" in the eyes of those who succeed in saving her from death; her skin is the embodiment of the miraculous salvation she has experienced thanks to the efforts of the people surrounding her. However, the way she sees herself is so much different, "a Nazi lampshade", an inanimate furniture that is the product of struggle and oppression. The clash between the way she defines herself and the way people define her is the indication of the divergence between different points of view. Plath received criticism from people because of the fact that she used a large amount of Nazi and Jewish metaphors and that she is not a Jew, nor does she have any connection to Jews and their experiences about the concentration camps at all. In fact, it was her intention to globalize her personal feelings with events that is accepted as painful all over the world. With her striking way of expressing her feelings and connecting with her readers, Plath has tried a lot to have a voice, a stance and an identity of her own.

Another "confessional" poet who is successful in having her own stance and sharing her own world views in a strikingly successful way is Adrienne Rich. She plays a great role in showcasing the oppression of female identity in a male dominated world. The influential poet has been seen as a feminist ever since her striking works have been published. However, she preferred the term "women's liberation" rather than feminism because the word feminist could be regarded as a label which can be misunderstood. In fact, there are many male critics who praise her works, especially the collection of her poems in the book *A Change of World*.

In her poem *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, Rich displays the inner struggle and passion of a woman in pursuit of creativity and freedom in the patriarchal world of male domination (Rahaman 119). It is the example of the oppression that women are faced within the heterosexual marriage which is destructive in its nature. Rich exposes an opposition between her art and marriage. The oppression of the marriage and her soul's pursuit of freedom from it is reflected perfectly in the poem: "Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen, / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green. / they do not fear the men beneath the tree; / They pace in sleek chivalric certainty." Freedom is portrayed in the form of the tigers in this poem, who are not afraid of the men, but in reality she is weak and oppressed by her marriage. For Jennifer, her art, her embroidery, is the form of protest she needs to save herself from the strings that are attached to her by her oppressive husband, yet she is frightened by the chances of him discovering the truth within her art. The way Adrienne Rich shows the division between a woman's reality and dreams, expresses the reality of her own struggle as a woman poet in the male dominated society, her struggle as a woman who is trying to find her place and break away from the chains of the oppression of male patriarchy. Unlike Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich's most poems are entirely autobiographical; reflecting her experiences and personal opinions. The division between their world views, writing style or their opinions does not change the fact that they have been controversial confessional poets who have affected a whole century of poetry and paved the way for the new female writers and readers who idolize them. It is important to be a powerful voice if there is no other voice to show the way and encourage people to follow their dreams, especially when this is about the liberation of women. Because in the patriarchal world of male domination, it has been and still is difficult for women to stand against the wrong-doings, oppression and discrimination of the people with an unflinching stance..

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