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## **Asserting Gender Discrimination: A Study of Sylvia Plath's poetry**

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper is an attempt to analyse the poetry of Sylvia Plath, the confessional writer as depiction of gender discrimination between males and females and the consequent oppression felt by women. Women feel themselves caught in the web of gender politics. She expresses her anger and torture through Confessionalism in her writings. She has endured gender discrimination throughout her whole life from her father and her husband. Hence, her poems have become part of the gender studies genre. The paper focuses on gender discrimination and resistance of the writer in form of her poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender discrimination, resistance, confessionalism, gender roles, misogyny.

Sylvia Plath (1932-63) Plath is one of the most powerful confessional poets. The Confessional poets are highly subjective and write with considerable frankness and sincerity. They usually focus the reader's attention on "their misery and heartache, often at the sacrifice of beauty for its own sake". This attitude of the confessional poets was a break from the view that poetry should be impersonal, advocated by T.S. Eliot. Hence, Sylvia Plath is "largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche". She wrote in a time when women were still dominated by men. Within the patriarchal society women had to play set roles, they were to remain in the kitchen and were never to speak an unwanted opinion. Hence, Plath and the woman she portrays in her poems felt suffocated within these domestic prisons and were desperate to create a role for themselves outside the dominating misogynist role.

The major works of Plath are Poetry Collections: *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), posthumously published) Novel: *The Bell Jar* (1963), published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas) Notable Poems: Lady Lazarus, Daddy, The Applicant. Her poetry is known for its confessional style, tackling subjects such as depression, death, and the search for self-identity. *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a young woman's struggle with mental



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illness, was published shortly before her death. Plath had a history of mental illness, with her first suicide attempt occurring in 1953, during her time at Smith College. She was hospitalized and underwent electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which had a lasting impact on her. Her struggles with depression deepened during her marriage to Ted Hughes, especially after their separation in 1962.

Plath died in 1963, a few weeks after separating from Hughes. Her death brought her work widespread attention, and she became an icon of confessional poetry and feminist literature. Her poems, such as "Daddy," and her novel *The Bell Jar* have remained widely read and continue to influence literature and culture. Plath remains one of the most celebrated and studied poets of the 20th century. Her writing is praised for its emotional depth, striking imagery, and exploration of identity, mental illness, and gender roles

Gender roles are portrayed in most of the poems of Sylvia Plath. Plath's extensive assessment of gender-roles is based on her father's death and her divorce from Ted Hughes. Bawer has correctly acclaimed that "Plath was the mouthpiece of a movement embodying an independent woman oppressed by man in her whole life" (Quoted in Wagner Martin 20). Gender roles in her writing focus not her position as single mother, forced into a domestic setting to care for her children alone. The suffocation that Plath experienced can easily be rooted the historical context of women's right at that time.

It is clear from the poetry of Sylvia Plath that she has not liked the concept of womanhood as a mere source of enjoyment and reproduction. A woman is much more than that; she is rather a living entity, an individual whole. In another poem *The Eye-mote*, she indirectly proposes, through her own ease, what she would like a woman to be:

What I want back is what I was  
Before the bed, before the knife,  
Before the brooch-pin and the salves  
Fixed me in this parenthesis;  
Before the brooch-pin and the salve  
Horse fluent in the wind,  
A place, a time gone out of mind. ("The Eye-mote" 25-30)



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Simone de Beauvoir, (1908–1986) a French philosopher, writer, and feminist, best known for her work on existentialism and feminism in *The Second Sex* argued that man is able to mystify woman. This mystification and stereotyping is instrumental in creating patriarchy. A woman has been socialized since birth to feel and act in ways that automatically have excluded her from participating in the culture's most valued activities. Perhaps Beauvoir's most famous statement in the book is that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267). This important insight suggests that it is not biology or nature which makes a woman. Man is viewed as 'One', while woman as the 'Other' to man: as all the things which man is not. Plath's poem, 'Daddy' expresses her feeling of oppression from her childhood and conjures the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society. The conflict of this poem is male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and be free from male domination. Within the family unit, the father had to be strong and controlling.

In Daddy the speaker projects the image of a fascist to her father. The fascist image is the intimate symbol of controlling dictating power. Plath may not only be talking story of her father but of the patriarchal society in which she lives:

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you. ("Daddy" 48-50)

Plath's poem Daddy expresses her feeling of oppression from her childhood and conjures the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society. The conflict of this poem is male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and be free from male domination. Powerful imagery overwhelms the readers forcing them to imaging the oppression that the last two stanzas of the poem particularly represent a dismal picture of life for women who find themselves under a dominating male figure.

The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now. ("Daddy" 71-75)

The passage seems to demonstrate that the speaker has kept under a man's thumb all her life. Plath describes her husband and the ability of male power to strip a woman of her sense of self, as Plath was married to her husband for seven years during which he had an affair with another



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woman, Assia Wevill. He had drained her by drinking her blood, or figuratively sucking the life out of her.

Feminist anger is also embedded in her poetry. Her objection and the rejection of patriarchal traditions and restricting roles for women are registered in one poem after another. She shows an uncommon affection for her children. She regards women as the guardians and protectors of new life while men are found to be guilty of destruction. Thus, each line of her verse is lacerated with the awareness of pain, anguish and suffering which is an inevitable part of woman's life.

Plath's images and diction give a picture of suffering in relation to female roles and domestic experience in her late poetry and in several poems of her first book of poetry, *The Colossus* (1960). Many of the poems in this volume were written after her marriage and during her first pregnancy. Poem *The Colossus* deal with male - female relationship or motherhood. Plath describes the marriage system where man and woman are not treated equal. Woman is considered inferior to man and has to follow some conditions to get married. She expresses the same in her poetry. Millett states, "The term 'Politics' shall refer to power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Man is superior, God like: female is inert, passive, "doomed to immanence by man" (Millett 23). In the poem *The Applicant*, the marriage system is explained in terms of conditions where all the conditions are applied only on 'it' i.e. the wife. 'It' has to obey her husband and do whatever he tells to 'it'.

Here is a hand

To full it, and willing

To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it. ("The Applicant" 10-13)

In the same poem man is defined by the black suit he puts on, but the definition of woman shows her more alienated and dehumanized. While the man is a junk heap of miscellaneous parts given an exact shape by a suit of clothes, the woman is a windup toy, a puppet of that black suit. Even, she does not exist unless the black suit needs and wills her to. He (the husband) offers a black suit to 'it' (wife).

Black and stiffs, but not a bad fit.

Will you marry it?



It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Believe me, they'll bury you in it. ("The Applicant" 21-25)

The phrase 'Power Politics' used by Kate Millett, operates in a subtle manner in the institution of marriage, reducing the states of a woman to a mere utility item, an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification. The wife is nothing but an instrument for the husband's use, an object to care for him, console him, do his every bidding. She has no will of her own. She inhabits the world where man is superior. Woman is reduced to a function; she exists as robot for man's use, as suit of clothes, no more. She dissolves back into nothingness after it. In *The Applicant*, again the woman is described as paper:

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,

In fifty, gold. ("The Applicant" 30-32).

Through this poem, Plath describes the stereotypes expected of a woman and expresses the anguish, humiliation and pain associated to being a woman in the 1960's. She is expected of a woman playing roles like stitching, sewing and cooking and be an emotional support too at the time of need. Commenting on the status of woman, Juliet Mitchell observes: "Production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children are the key structures of woman's situation" (Mitchell 100).

The bride will have to obey her groom. Whatever he lacks, she will supply. She will support him in the same way as the cast supports the body. This woman is a domestic blob. She is a kind of Gracie Allen Puppet: "It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk" ("The Applicant" 36-37). Repetition of the word 'talk' shows her annoyance with this system. Plath continued to explore the subject of woman with child as well as that of woman with man. Women are imposed, hurt, made into puppets, hollow or blank with no identities or no wills. Plath's ambivalence toward men, marriage, and motherhood in her last poems, and the guilt. She surely felt help to explain the degree to which her poems are associated with suffering. They reflect not only her perception of external reality, but they project her inner reality as well. In *The Applicant*, the woman is kept in a closet and sold like an item of clothing. The woman, which throughout is described as 'it', thus depersonalising her, is advertised to the buyer as a thing. It



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is also described to the buyer as being his ‘last resort’. There are other images of woman as being helpless and merely looked upon as ‘object’.

Generally, in many of her poems, she feels that her role as a woman is inflicted on her by society as general she does indeed seem to see it as a conspiracy, and the only means to escape from it is unconsciousness or death. The doctors and the enemy both referred to as Herr, which is German word for ‘Mister’. In Lady Lazarus, the woman is made to feel like an object, and kept passive: “So, so. Herr Doktor/ So, Herr Enemy” (65-66).

The seizure of the woman by the man highlights that like many relationships, the male had successfully asserted his dominance. The snowman is everything that Plath resented and feared. The poem has a tone of quite resignation; it’s a poem of frustration that inevitably ends with the woman giving up her search for independence. The abusive relationship alluded to in this poem ended with Plath having to raise her children as a single mother. Plath’s personal experiences complicated her inner distress. The snowman carries the heads of independent women, symbolizing male domination over women who dare to speak out against gender roles. Juliet Mitchell said that oppression of woman is rooted in the ideological realism, which includes the production, reproduction of children, sexuality and socialization. These four functions are primarily or first carried out by the family. Hence the family plays a key role in the oppression of woman. These four elements of material life interact with one another, so that woman cannot be emancipated unless revolutionary changes occur in all of them. The roots of woman’s oppression will not automatically wither away under socialism.

In the poem Edge, Plath explains one of the fundamental problems with women — they are expected to simultaneously act as sex objects and domesticated mothers. Still, Edge is morose, even by Plath standards; it implies that the only way for a woman to achieve perfection by societal standards is through death. She writes that a woman has achieved perfection when she is dead, and also suggests that this is the only thing that a woman can truly obtain.

The woman is perfected her dead  
body wears a smile of accomplishment. (“Edge” 1-3)

The woman in this poem is dead, having given all she had to her children. It examines motherhood and femininity in a new perspective. The woman’s body is compared to that of a pitcher of milk, slowing being depleted by her children. For Plath, motherhood is the ultimate culmination of gender oppression.



Sylvia Plath shows a sense of alienation and a struggle for identity in most of her poetical expression that reveals the poet's search for identity lost somewhere in the middle of tradition, culture, language, sex and gender. Her poems show her relentless search for a true self, in spite of her socio-culture ambience. The feminine sensibility which appears her poetry is a natural outcome of her experience as a woman. Like a sensitive artist, she tries to communicate her suffering as a matter of human experience in her poetry.

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