

From “The Small Doll” to “The Lioness”: The Reversal of Master/Slave Role in Sylvia Plath’s Selected Poems

Atoosa Shahsavari*, Fahimeh Naseri, Abdolmohammad Movahhed

Department of English Language and Literature, Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran

Corresponding Author: Atoosa Shahsavari, E-mail: A2sa_shahsavari@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Written in the last two years of her life, selected poems of Sylvia Plath such as, “The Jailer”, “Three Women”, “Fever103”, “Purdah”, “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, and “Edge” reveal that the speaker’s inevitable movement towards her final suicide is rooted in her enslavement by men in society. This is observed by reading these poems in the light of Simon De Beauvoir’s dichotomy of master-slave in *The Second Sex*, with application of terms like “the other”, “realm of the women”, “double demand”, “servant”, and “enchantress”. In this article it is argued that the speaker manages to reverse the dichotomy and becomes the master of her own fate by committing suicide. To the best of my knowledge the application of De Beauvoir’s theory to the above-mentioned poems has not been done before; therefore, it can shed new light on how power relations between men and women are reversed in these poems.

Key words: Sylvia Plath, Suicide, Feminism, Simon De Beauvoir, Master-Slave Dichotomy

INTRODUCTION

In this study, Sylvia Plath’s poems such as “The Jailer”, “Three Women”, “Fever103”, “Purdah”, “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, and “Edge” will be analyzed respectively, with regards to the fact that they were written in an almost the same order during her last two years to show that they could be read as the story of a woman’s enslavement by men, her gaining consciousness about her situation, and fighting it back until she gains total autonomy through her suicide. This is shown by reading these poems in the light of Simon De Beauvoir’s dichotomy of master-slave explained in *The Second Sex*. This article will depict how the speaker of Plath’s poems goes through the process of self-realization, finding her voice, becoming aware of her situation, and deciding to commit suicide. It is of paramount importance to note that these works are chosen because they share the same concern for depicting the depth of a female’s oppression and suffering in a patriarchal society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several works have been written on Sylvia Plath’s poems in the light of feminism. For example, Deborah S. Gentry in her thesis *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* looks into *The Bell Jar* as well as *Ariel* and argues that suicide is a conscious and heroic act that springs from self-realization. Similarly, in “Portrayal of

Gender Roles in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath”, Tanu Gupta and Bala contend that Sylvia Plath’s poems do not show womanhood in its traditional image; rather, they portray women as living entities who want more than a husband and children. In an almost similar study, “Gender and Sexuality in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath”, Alita Fonseca Balbi claims that Plath’s poems aim to convey sexuality as something more individual than objective; however, neither of these studies has looked into Plath’s poems consecutively as a set of poems that portray a step by step process of realization of the speaker about her role as a slave and inverting it.

METHODOLOGY

In her groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir uses Hegel’s dialectic of master-slave to demonstrate how patriarchy is enslavement of women. She believes that Hegel’s dialectic of master-slave is applicable to the relationship of men and women. Quoting Hegel who argues that the consciousness of the slave is “the dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is [...] a mode of living bestowed by another entity” (qtd in de Beauvoir 90), she contends that the same dependent consciousness is ascribed to women, who are locked up in “a feminine domain” created by men (90). She goes on to say that, since the earliest days of patriarchy, men’s attempt was to “keep women in a state of dependence” and establish them as “the other”

(159). The enslavement of woman becomes possible because she can be possessed "in the flesh," she is "a conscious being" (160). According to Beauvoir, what a man wants from a woman is a "double demand" since he wants her to be both his "servant" and his "enchantress," and this capability of a woman as a servant who can impress him is what makes her more desirable in the male's eyes (207). It is important to point out that drawing on the master-slave dichotomy of men and women in this paper is not to suggest that men are always masters over women and that women are slaves to men in all societies but only to clarify and criticize such extreme cases which are depicted in the poems of Plath and which result in devastating inequality in society.

DISCUSSION

As explained in the introduction, Simon De Beauvoir believes that patriarchy is the enslavement of women (90) since, from its earliest days, men have attempted to "keep women in a state of dependence" and establish them as "the other" (159). On the other hand, according to her, it is possible and in fact inevitable for women to rise above this master-slave duo created by men because it is the slave who has to be active out of fear, and that is when he feels "essential" and that is when an inversion happens (160). In the above-mentioned poems, although the speaker goes through the process of enslavement by patriarchy, she manages to find her voice, realize the situation and invert it.

The Speaker's Struggle to Find her Voice

In "The Jailer", the speaker describes her relationship to a man who has "drugged and raped" her (6). She sees herself as a "negress" (19) in his hands serving his needs and living in his shadow (38). The word "negress", which means a black slave, manifests the degree of oppression the speaker feels in her relationship with this man. All the tortures of the jailer, like burning her with cigarettes (18), raping her (6), drugging her (6), and starving her (35), have stripped her of any sense of identity, self-confidence, and self-worth. Here, there is a feeling of subjugation in the speaker as the man has made her believe that she doesn't deserve freedom and happiness (41-45). Seemingly, the man has treated her according to the norms of patriarchal societies, in which, as De Beauvoir contends, the male members turn women into their slaves by keeping them dependent and powerless (159). She is so hurt and helpless in this enslavement that she says, "I wish him dead or away" (39); however, she is lured to believe "That, it seems, is the impossibility" (40). The last stanza of the poem refers to the fact that the speaker is aware of what is happening to her and considers it one aspect of patriarchal society in which, in order to define themselves, the males exert their power over females.

In the second poem, "Three women," there are three different speakers with three different outlooks towards life, pregnancy, and women's duty in general. The first woman has a normal birth, the second has a miscarriage, and the third decides to give her child up for adoption. The first voice of the poem somehow resembles the speaker in "The Jailer".

She sees herself as a victim as she says, "I am the center of an atrocity" (132), "I am breaking apart like the world" (142). Nevertheless, she does not wish to change anything as she believes that she is "used" and "drummed into use" (145). Therefore, she embraces her life as normal and says, "I shall meditate upon normality" (323); and "it is the exception that interests the devil" (331). Here, the speaker represents a traditional woman who cares about nothing other than her husband and children, which is the order of the day.

The second woman, however, starts with accusing the patriarchal society of flatness and thinks that they are responsible for the nasty aspects of life when she associates them with destructiveness and describes them with words like "cardboard"(17), "Bulldozers"(19), and "guillotines"(19). The last two lines of the poem give it a dimension of social critique, particularly of men who are held responsible for the destruction of lives and mishandling of affairs leading to the subjugation of women. Moreover, "flatness" in this poem refers to anything a woman is not: it is an image in opposition to female's body. The second woman goes on to say that she has tried to be like other women, who are submissive towards men, because she considers it normal to follow suit (74-76). Nevertheless, she is not like them, and that is what makes her different from the first woman. She has tried to ignore the voice in her head and be blind in the presence of a blind husband who is of the flat cult. She goes back to the issue of flatness and blames men for being against anything that is not flat, supposedly the pregnant females or more broadly speaking women whose character is not naïve or one dimensional or flat (273-8). She continues to condemn men by uttering that they have messed up with the environment as well. She says:

She [the earth] is the vampire of us all. So, she supports us,

Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.

....

Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.

Eat them, eat them, and eat them in the end (181).

Referring to earth as a woman who has fed and fattened human beings in spite of having the ability to destroy them makes the earth stand as a symbol for women, who have given birth to men only to be meanly abused and disrespected by them. This mother figure turns into a vampire who sucks men's blood until they die. This is the first image in this sequence of Plath's poems that shows an angry female who wants to take the lead and inverse the men-women power relations. Thus, the second woman is one step ahead of the first woman since she is gaining awareness and self-realization with an urge to be different from what society expects women to be.

The third speaker of the poem, supposedly a college student who is caught in an unwanted pregnancy, compares the man who made her pregnant to "a snake in swans" (52), alluding to the story of Leda who was raped by Zeus appearing to her in the form of a swan. But the harsh and undesirable reality of the rape or rape-like sexual imposition overshadows the apparent beauty and grandeur of the man. In fact, by changing the tense from past to present and declaring

that “there is a snake in swans,” she makes a generalization about what she takes to be the truth about men’s nature. By reporting that “his eye had a black meaning./I saw the world in it--small, mean and black,” she not only refers to the dark intentions (“meaning”) of the man in this particular instance but also to the whole patriarchal world which she describes as “mean and black” (54). She blames the presumably male doctors for what has happened to her and says, “They are to blame for what I am, and they know it. /They hug their flatness like a kind of health” (116-17). She is mournful for leaving behind her baby girl, knowing she would never be the happy innocent girl she used to be before this. Nevertheless, the feeling of being liberated soon overcomes the sadness of leaving her baby behind (341).

The fact that the three voices make one poem, might demonstrate that they are either the inner struggles of a woman who has a dilemma over choosing who she wants to be or just presenting a picture of what happens in society with regards to different perspectives of women about life. In either case the poem presents a picture of the mistreatment of women. While the first woman is ignorant of herself as an individual, relying and depending on her husband and children, the second and third women are examples of the females who are gaining awareness about how cruel and patriarchal society is and how they should not deny their existence as free people who can make a choice. They both articulate almost the same notion of womanhood. All in all, in the second and the third speakers, we see the struggle for finding a voice, each in a different way.

The speaker of the next poem, “Fever 103”, is going through a hot fever, burning in the fires of hell and being licked by the hellhounds to be purified. She asks what the meaning of pure is. Balbi believes that this question foreshadows the main conflict of the poem, which is “a woman’s attempt to get rid of the sexual stereotypes that have been imposed upon the female gender, more specifically the saint/whore dichotomy” (186). He goes on to argue that,

history, religion and social conventions, all sources of oppression, are burned through the speaker’s process of “purification”. In a kind of Dantian journey, the speaker begins her narrative in hell and ends in “Paradise.” In this process, she goes from a place of promiscuity to a state of such purity that no one can touch her and all her “selves” dissolve (186).

After the speaker’s selves are dissolved, they go to heaven and nothing remains but a petticoat, which is mostly associated with whores. Linda Wagner-Martin, in “Plath’s Triumphant Women Poems,” claims that this old undergarment that has remained of her shows that “the way she has whored her path through life has been to accept roles she did not ever want, only because society coerced her” (204). Thus, although society has forced her to burn in fire to become “a pure acetylene” (46) and a “Virgin”(47) to meet its expectations, the speaker manages to find a way to benefit from the oppression imposed on her. She does it by understanding her situation here and deciding that it is not enough, and no one deserves her (34); therefore, she must go to paradise. As Wagner-Martin also agrees, “Knowing herself,..., has

enabled the pure persona to reach her vision of Paradise” (204). In this way, she manages to find a way out of her misery like what happens in “Lady Lazarus”. It was mentioned earlier that in this study the change that takes place in Plath’s speaker is traced in the order of poems given above. This change started in the speaker of “Fever 103” where the fire has simultaneously two functions. It purifies the speaker and at the same time gives her authority. So, this poem could be considered as a transitional poem where the process of inversion is clearer, and the speaker has finally found her voice.

From “The Small Doll” to “The Lioness”

The next poem in the given order is “Purdah”. In this poem, the speaker generalizes her situation by bringing up the story of Eve’s creation from the ribs of Adam, saying that Jade, supposedly representing Eve, is “the antagonized/ side of green Adam” (3-4). It creates the context for what she is going to say later in the poem since she feels as a female who is the “other,” just like Eve who was never equal to Adam. This shows that she sees her sex as doomed to inequality from the early days of creation. The speaker identifies herself with a gleaming mirror (18) while she refers to her groom as “the lord of the mirrors” (20). Compared to the lord of mirrors, she becomes only a mirror whose job is merely reflecting, without having any identity of her own. She goes on to focus on the fact that she is only a means and an object to be used:

“I am his. /Even in his
Absence (29-31)

The mood of the poem changes as the speaker begins the process of unleashing her real self which was oppressed from within. Thus, “From the small jeweled/ Doll he guards like a heart” (56-7), she becomes “The lioness, /The shriek in the bath, /The cloak of holes” (58-60). Throughout this poem, we can see how oppression and enslavement of the female sex can lead to women’s struggles to change their condition, once they understand that they are enslaved. It seems as if men have locked women up in what Simon De Beauvoir refers to as “the realm of women” (90) so that they can become dominant and satisfy their needs as masters. Being a woman, she has the ability both to enchant her man with her doll-like beauty and serve his various needs, especially physical ones, which makes for the man’s treatment of her not as an equal being but as the “other” who can be possessed and exploited. As De Beauvoir explains, this is the reason for which the slavery of women sounds like a dream for men (207). However, this master-slave relationship cannot be permanent, for an inversion happens when the slave feels “essential,” begins to get rid of her fears and takes an active role in her own life (De Beauvoir 160). This process can be observed when the speaker, who was a passive mirror-like doll, becomes a lioness and a shriek. In fact, as Rajani also argues, in “Purdah,” the poet “demonstrates the recurrent pattern of rebirth motif of female protagonist with the extinction of her husband who suppresses her identity”(8).

A similar case can be found in “Daddy”, where the metaphors with which the speaker talks about her father and her husband show how much she has been hurt by their brutality. Gupta and Sharma, in “Portrayal of Gender Roles in the

Poetry of Sylvia Plath," contend that this poem "conjures the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society". The conflict of this poem centers on "male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and be free from male domination" (143). By generalizing her situation to every man and woman, the speaker contends that while women adore men, they are devastatingly brutal to women. In line 49, "the boot in the face" shows men's power over women and their heartlessness. More interestingly, as also pointed out by John Rietz, "daddy" is the shoes in which the speaker has lived (426). So, both "Daddy" and "a Fascist" seem to be references to every man as the shoes that have stamped on women. In the end, they are stamped on (48) by the speaker and the villagers who stand for marginalized women. Thus, at the end of the poem, the speaker attempts to demonstrate an inversion of gender roles by changing who is stamped on and who oversees stamping. She claims that she has killed both men and "the black telephone's off" (69), and thus, she is "finally through" (68). The speaker of this poem expresses more rage than that of "Purdah" and tries to fight back with the domineering male figures by acting rather than sticking to words.

The evolution of the female figure also manifests itself in "Lady Lazarus," where the speaker willfully and fearlessly commits suicide and compares it to "The big striptease" (29). Susan Van Dyne believes that the audience of Lady Lazarus' performance or "the peanut crunching crowd" (26) are the masculine society since they are here to see the striptease and what truly outrages her is their standing in the position of power and her dependency in every role (55-56). Furthermore, regardless of what that "peanut crunching crowd" may think, she is about to perform the art of dying, the dramatic suicide as a form of asserting her identity. Alicia Ostriker believes the rage of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" is "hollow" since she is "powerless, she knows it, she hates it" (qtd in Lant 654). She believes the speaker cannot convince the reader that she is dangerous since she is performing striptease and offering her body to male viewers; however, it can be understood from the poem that she tries to use her feminine features as a weapon to take her revenge on men. She knows that for men she is no more than a sexual object. She is aware of her situation as a woman in society, and she neither denies it, nor conforms to it. She invites them to see her and then claims that they should pay for all the trouble and pain they have caused her, and nothing will remain unpaid (57-61). She seems to be using her body to attract men's attention so that she could make them hear her voice and threatens them that she will come back to life and eat them all.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air (82-4).

According to Deborah Gentry, the color red is representative of "the creative life force within, the menstrual flow symbolic of the mature woman" as opposing to white which represents "women's outward passivity and purity in conformation to patriarchal culture" (140). Thus, the bridal image of the speaker in "Purdah" that suggests a woman with a

white veil is transformed into a witch-like redhead who is angry and threatens to eat all men. It is the second man-eating image that is portrayed by the speaker. The first one in "Three Women", when the second speaker claims that mother earth will eat men by saying, "Men have used her meanly. She will eat them. / Eat them, eat them, and eat them in the end" (277-8), and now in "Lady Lazarus," when the speaker threatens that she will come back to life and "eat men like air" (84). It is also the second time that the speaker has used disrobing to intimidate men. This was also shown in "Purdah", when she starts unloosing "Attendants of the eyelash" (37), "Attendants of the lip" (40), and finally everything.

Kathleen Lant argues that "in both poems it is the female speaker who finally disrobes and here she attempts to appropriate the power of nakedness for herself" (651). In "Purdah," she accompanies her undressing with "strong and lethal weapons-the claws of the lioness" (Lant 653), and in "Lady Lazarus," she repeats this act with the promise of her rebirth with witch-like red hair and the threat of eating men (83-4). It is as if the evolution that was about to take root in "Three women" has grown to be totally manifested in "Lady Lazarus". This is done by using disrobing as a rebellion, rather than conforming to patriarchy, that started with "Purdah" and found its proper meaning in "Lady Lazarus". As a result, it can be claimed that the female speaker is becoming more and more active during these poems.

Besides, for the speaker "Dying/ is an art" (43-4). There is a purpose, a meaning beneath this artistic creation to be performed, which means that in this case it is suicide; rather than a natural death simply because it cannot be performed or created. Suicide is an art since she can choose to do it with her own choice and shows that she is "under the command of her own superior will" (Wagner-Martin 199). The speaker describes men as agents of power by calling them "Herr Doktor," (65) "Herr God," (79) "Herr Lucifer," (79) and "Her Enemy" (66), and then, no matter how powerful these men are, she is able to rise again and "From the pile of ash, she becomes the uncontained and mystic phoenix, rising from the carnage that men have created for her, and of her" (Wagner-Martin 199). Hence, she is in a sense even more powerful than them for managing to exhort her power and rise above that carnage. Alvarez, who was among the first critics who read the poem, is of the same opinion and believes that "Lady Lazarus" is a step ahead of poems like "Fever 103" since, in this poem, the speaker finally achieves rebirth and becomes a liberated woman.

In "Edge", the speaker is talking about a dead woman who has gone beyond the restrictions of a patriarchal society, but "her dead/ body wears the smile of accomplishment" (2-3). Jennifer Yaros argues that using the words "Perfected" (1), "dead" (2), "accomplishment" (3), "necessity" (4) "empty" (11), "bleed" (15), and "bone" (18) pinpoints the fact that "emptying of blood and bone is a necessary accomplishment in her life, that death is her perfection and something to be happy about" (243). Nevertheless, by highlighting the speaker as "the woman", there is a sense of gender differentiation and comparison which makes reading the poem as the accomplishment of a woman in a male dominated society.

Unlike "Lady Lazarus", "Edge" does not express any hope for rebirth; and, in this poem death serves as the only way for the speaker to become perfected and gain control over her life. as the speaker says:

The woman is perfected

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment

The illusion of a Greek necessity (1-4).

As it is clear, here the speaker associates death with "perfection" to the point that she pictures the dead woman smiling with a sense of "accomplishment" as if it was a "necessity". As Pamela Annas contends, this poem is "about the attainment of perfection through a stopping process" (121). "Edge" is a dark and sinister poem which is the result of the maturation of the speaker's voice and her actions to reverse the gender roles throughout the course of Plath's chosen poems.

CONCLUSION

All in all, going through the poems "The Jailer", "Three Women", "Fever103", "Purdah", "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", and "Edge" respectively, with regards to the fact that they were written in an almost the same order during Plath's last two years showed that they could be read as the story of a woman's enslavement by men, her struggles to gain consciousness about her situation, and fighting back to reverse it. Paradoxically, committing suicide is presented as the last resort in this fight, not as a sign of utter despair but as a conscious means of becoming in control of one's own fate. To sum up the process of the speaker's maturation, in "The Jailer", "Three Women", and "Fever103", the speaker is more or less in a struggle to realize her role as a slave and find her voice to fight back. After burning in fire and being purified from all that has set boundaries for the speaker, in "Purdah" she turns from a delicate doll into an angry lioness who is sick and tired of being treated by her husband as if she was the "other" and she starts to reverse her role as a slave. In "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", in an act of transforming herself "from passive victim to active avenger" the speaker projects her "self-hatred" towards men, who are the very source of this anguish (Gentry 139). And in the last poem, "Edge", death is portrayed as an accomplishment and a necessity to achieve perfection and liberation by turning the master/slave relationship on its head through becoming the master of one's own fate. During these poems the speaker becomes aware of her status as a woman in a patriarchal society which always underestimates her. She feels the need to

assert her identity and rise above the master-slave dichotomy and the only way she finds to do so is by taking control of her life through committing suicide. the speaker's imposing of her power by performing suicide and stripping herself of her womanhood is considered as an act of protest to patriarchy and gaining self-autonomy.

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