Female Otherness in Selected Poems by Sylvia Plath

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Otherness is a recurrent theme in most of the American literary works and in poetry in particular. American writers, along the history of American literature, have been preoccupied with social, racial, ethnic, religious, and female otherness. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American literature began to highlight the suffering of women in the American male-dominated society where women were devalued and othered by men. They were regarded as biologically, psychologically, socially, and even intellectually inferior. They were deprived of equal rights; instead, they were assigned the traditional domestic roles of housekeeping, child rearing, cooking, and other similar tasks. They were supposed to remain in their normal place: their homes, and more specifically, their kitchens which represent their prison. Furthermore, women were objectified; they were regarded as mere inanimate objects with no identity. In such a patriarchal American society, women were recognized as no more than means to serve men and satisfy their pleasures.

Simon de Beauvoir, the French writer (1908-1986), was the first to introduce the theory of female otherness. Though Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1948) focuses on the concept of "[women] as other" and on "[their] role as the other" (xxi), Aristotle was the first to allude to the inferiority of women when he declared that "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (qtd in Beauvoir xvi). Beauvoir describes women as being "oppressed" and tortured by man, "the oppressor" (xx). She asserts that man dominates women and controls them as "[h]e is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other" (xvi). In her point of view, the society which is "codified by man" forces women to be inferior. They are not considered human beings, but females. Furthermore, they are always subordinate because they are denied "independent existence" (754). Beauvoir believes that women have to destroy the male supremacy

when they recognize each other as subject. Women have to get rid of their objectification; hence, as Beauvoir suggests, “each will yet remain for the other an other” (767). The stereotypical images of the objectified, subordinate, marginalized, oppressed, repressed, and othered twentieth- century American woman are best portrayed in the works of the American most renowned poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963).

Plath has been widely praised for her real representation of the dilemma of the suffering women in modern America and her works have always been approached from a feminist point of view. Elaine Showalter, an American critic and feminist, coined the term “gynocriticism” to refer to women as writers. Female writers provide a more realistic depiction of their dilemma than that provided by male writers. Man depicts women from his own prejudiced point of view, ignoring women's true inner, conflicting feelings. Showalter seeks “to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on women’s experience” (131). Women were presented as mere shadows that are shaped only according to their male masters who can be either their fathers or husbands. Plath has succeeded in embodying the revolt against the male depiction of women as having no identity by themselves. She has also succeeded in changing the pervasive attitude that “a woman can only be heard if she adopts a male perspective, if she speaks a man” (Barwell 93). Readers are always confronted by genuine and lively female characters in realistic situations presented through the use of lifelike language to highlight the othering of women on gender basis. The way women were othered in the twentieth-century America is best portrayed in some of Plath's poems such as “ Lesbos”, “Mirror” , “Mushrooms”, “Stings”, “Purdah”, and “Three Women”. In these works, there are three main aspects of female otherness: the image of women as subordinate and inferior, the representation of women as mere objects and the prevalent image of lost and alienated women.

The subordination of women is the first aspect that stresses the representation of women as an other. Women were presented as subordinate to men; they were not allowed to engage in activities other than those assigned to them by their male counterparts. Women were always silent, or more specifically silenced, and if they spoke, no one even tried to hear them or sympathize with their cause. Women's needs were completely ignored as they were regarded as inferior creatures; not human beings, but just females. Plath has received much acclaim as she "displayed sparkle and genius in her domestic war against STEREOTYPING " (Snodgrass 424). She presents a real reflection of women's rebellion against the stereotyped images in which they were framed. Plath's "Lesbos " reflects female otherness in the twentieth- century American society that has marginalized women and confined them to the traditional domestic roles of cooking, housekeeping, and childrearing.

From the very beginning, Plath stuns her readers by bravely declaring her ultimately aggressive attitude toward the kitchen, the supposedly natural place for women. She begins: "Viciousness in the kitchen / The potatoes hiss " (Hughes 229). Even in her own realm, she is silenced; only the potatoes can break that utter silence with its hissing. In "Lesbos", the poet rejects the passive role of women and the domestic roles imposed on them by the patriarchal society. She adds:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats (Hughes 229).

The poet identifies herself with the female speaker in the poem as manifested in the repetition of the first-person pronoun “I” which strengthens the poet's belief that it is the cause of all women. She depends on the repetition of the adjective “Thick” to escalate the atmosphere of tension that permeates the poem.

Plath revolts against the male prescription of such domestic roles to women without any cooperation from the other partner or even any sympathy as she affirms: “I do not speak”. This actually stands for denying women any chance to express their own opinions or even to complain. The same tension is also emphasized by the word “hate” that directly expresses the poet's sense of hatred toward both the place and the everyday routine which she describes using parallel simple sentences in addition to the progressive tense in order to affirm that all these boring activities, along with this miserable situation, are endless. The idea of the boring daily routine is similarly indicated by the use of the simile “like good clothes” and the repetition of the verb “packing”; all these roles are physically monotonous and lacking any creativity which is thought to be mainly a male characteristic. Moreover, the beginning of both the second and third lines with the capitalized “Up” and “Thick”, though they are complementary to the unended first line, exhibits how tremendous is her sense of hatred that results in such fragmentation. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, asserts that women yearn for something more than the roles of a housewife, or a mother could fulfill as these roles hold women back from discovering their true identities (36). This is exactly what Plath, as a second-wave American feminist, overtly tries to undermine; she always offers a hope for all women to change this status quo.

The second aspect of the representation of women as an other is their objectification and depiction as inanimate objects or mere ornaments. The notion of female objectification has aroused much debate when Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*,

first directs the attention to this concept. Women are objectified, imprisoned in their bodies and regarded as mere objects devoid of any feelings. Female objectification has been developed as a theory of its own. Martha Nussbaum, an American feminist, has defined objectification in relation to seven main factors: “instrumentability, “denial of autonomy”, “inertness”, “fungibility”, “violability”,“ ownership”, and “denial of subjectivity” (257). Thus, according to this view, the twentieth- century American masculine society has objectified women by regarding them just as tools, ignoring their independent identities and possessing their lives. According to Beauvoir, “Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female- whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the man” (754). This view affirms another way of objectifying women by denying them autonomy and subjectivity. Women have regarded as imitated copies of the original copy: the male master. Rae Langton, a feminist philosopher, supports Nussbaum's views with greater emphasis on the “reduction” of women to body, and appearance; and on the silencing of women (246). This is evident, as shown earlier, in “Lesbos” where women are silenced and denied the right to speak.

Plath continues her exploration of women as an other in her “Mirror” (1961) where the female speaker is objectified and described as a mirror which has no significance by itself; it just reflects whatever comes in front of it. It derives its value from the thing it reflects, just like the woman who has no identity by herself. Plath identifies the speaker with the inanimate mirror, “I am silver and exact/ Whatever I see I swallow immediately/ Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike ” (Hughes 173). Suzan E. Schwartz points out, “[a]lthough the speaker of the poem is a mirror, the true protagonist is the woman as an object who is more mirror than person and sees herself both in and as mirror ” (70). In fact, the poet's use of mirror symbolizes the female

passivity and subjection. According to Sharma Rajani, "[t]he female protagonist … has got no identity of her own except those assigned to her by her male counterpart such as wife, mother, daughter, and living doll to cater to the needs of her master 'lord of mirror ' (2). Women, like a mirror, have no value by themselves. The perception of women's existence is closely associated with their beauty; but when that beauty fades, they become worthless. Men reduce women to bodies and appreciate only their temporal physical beauty which vanishes with the passing of time, a theme recurrently emphasized by Plath.

Not only are women identified in "Mirror " with a mirror, but they are also identified with a lake, and a terrible fish in an attempt to further enhance the idea of objectification. The speaker affirms that she can only judge herself according to the male view of her. After likening herself to the inanimate mirror, she now identifies herself with a lake, "Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is " (Hughes 174). This also affirms the woman's continuous search for her true identity which she fails to discover by herself and tries to find it in the gaze of her society. This again assures the female passivity, helplessness and loss of identity. At the end of the poem, the female speaker proves to be no more than a terrible fish, "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish " (174). Plath depends on a series of similes in her successive comparisons between women and objects in "Mirror" where the speaker is never given human qualities. The female character in the poem, as Parvin Ghasemi claims, is "reduced to a dependent, marginalized victim. Her expectation about the reflection of her identity is subjective and impressionable. She is condemned to hear a dreadful death sentence as the mirror identifies her as 'a terrible fish', not even rendering her humanity " (60). The poem is extremely realistic in its typical presentation of the male

vision of women as inanimate objects lacking human characteristics that are considered to be fundamentally male.

Female objectification is referred to in many of Plath's other poems. Women, in Plath's poetry, are always identified with bees, fish, mirrors, mushrooms, and dolls. In "Mushrooms ", for example, women are likened to mushrooms because, as, Jessica Fernquist suggests, "[t]he link between a mushroom and a woman of the 1950's is not hard to establish. Women were still second class citizens and subject to their husband's opinions and decisions". Plath expresses the male ignorance of the women's needs, and feelings- an aspect of female objectification-in "Mushrooms". She writes, "Nobody sees us,/Stops us, betrays us;/The small grains make room" (Hughes 139). "Mushrooms", in fact, is a revolt against the denial of equal rights for women and this is what Nussbaum has identified as "ownership and denial of autonomy". They are possessed by men who direct them regardless of what these women really say or need.

Plath's choice of the mushrooms to symbolize women is so expressive and accurate. Though women, just like mushrooms, are so many, no one takes notice of them. Plath emphasizes:

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,
Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:
We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door. (139-140)

Women themselves insist on identifying themselves with inanimate objects like shelves or tables and this is indicated by the manipulation of the plural first-person pronoun "we". They do not even liken themselves to such objects using the word "like"; instead, they are completely identified with them. Although women are helpless and negative toward the more domineering male community, in the last stanza, Plath hints at the possibility of female revolt; women are capable of retaining their rights and "inherit[ing] the earth" one "morning". Women are fully aware of the inferior position in which they are placed and treated as submissive and powerless inanimate objects related only to the kitchen such as 'tables' and 'shelves'; however, they will rise to defend themselves and call for equal rights.

Women are always controlled by men who deny them the right of independence and autonomy. Plath asserts this view in "Stings" (1962) when she writes:

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking, (Hughes 214-215)

The female speaker admits that she is under the full control of man likening herself to the machine that works without thinking. Not only are women likened to objects; they are also denied human qualities. The same image of the controlled woman is portrayed in "Purdah" (1962) where Plath writes, "I am his" confessing her utter subjugation (Hughes 243). In "Purdah", woman is described as a 'doll' subjected to man's full control and exploitation. Konstantina Georganta alludes to the change of the doll's state that will destroy her master (116-117). Each poem starts with the image of the powerless woman and ends with the image of a more powerful one. At the end of the

"Purdah", the doll changes into a "lioness" as if Plath tries to convince her readers of their ability to break the fetters imposed on them.

The third aspect of female otherness, as manifested in the poetry of Plath, is the common female sense of alienation . In fact, it is the natural outcome of the first two factors which are treating women as subordinate and regarding them as mere objects. Plath sheds light on the sense of alienation through the depiction of the disabled women as in her "Three Women" where the poet's own voice is divided into three different voices; each expresses her point of view through different situations such as pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion. The first voice celebrates her childbirth, the second suffers from repeated miscarriage, and the third is so scared as she gives birth from an unwanted pregnancy after being raped. The first voice explores the desperate situation of women as they are alienated by their own society which never gives them their due attention. The first voice asserts, " I do not have to think, or even rehearse/ What happens in me will happen without attention " (Hughes 176). The lines are symbolic as they refer to the lack of attention of the society that led to the alienation of women within their communities. The second voice refers to the institutions of society which alienate women when she affirms, "And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,/ Governments, parliaments, societies,/ The faceless faces of important men "(179). R. Baird Shuman points out: "[t]he overtones of isolation and of alienation from the public world resonate through all the women's speech" (1227). Plath directs a severe social attack against society as a whole, including all its faceless members and institutions as well. She is concerned with women's retreat, escapism and withdrawal from the society that imposes male physical and social domination. Death was the only way out from that life; thus, the second voice later suggests:

I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,

Hating myself, hating and fearing. And now the world conceives
Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love.
It is a love of death that sickens everything.
A dead sun stains the newsprint. It is red.
I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them. (Hughes 180-181)

Again, the female speaker likens herself to an object: a garden; however, there is a sort of irony. It is not a garden of flowers; on the contrary, it is a garden of black suffering in which she is fully absorbed as indicated by the action verb "drink". Another irony lies in the prevailing sense of love that runs through the lines; nevertheless, the readers soon discover that it is a love of death as the only savior from such suffering. There is a sharp contrast between love and hate; death and life, and black and red. In addition to these contrasts, the image of the "dead sun", the "dark" atmosphere and the sense of loss, indicated by the repetition of the verb "lose", all contribute to the sense of loss and alienation from which all women suffer. For Plath, women can get rid of their agonies-from which they suffer in isolation from the whole world-only through death. She repeatedly refers to death in her poems, such as "Daddy" (1962), and "Lady Lazarus" (1962) as a way to escape both physical and psychological pain and torture. The female characters in these two poems have attempted suicide to get rid of their alienation which is also the result of the patriarchal society.

Women do not only suffer from isolation, but from loss of identity as well. The second voice, in "Three Women", reflects her own conflicted identity as she sees herself neither like a woman nor like a man. This is the product of that patriarchal society which gave women no chance to express themselves or to have confidence in their mental abilities. The second voices claims, "I see myself as a shadow, neither a man nor a woman / Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man/ Blunt and flat

enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack" (182). Women are no more than a shadow; they are not independent and their very existence is determined by their owner, the man whether a father or a husband. They are aware of the emptiness that inhabits both their psyche and mind, but at the same time they do not take any action to overcome it. They always wait for their more powerful male counterpart to shape their own lives. Lois Alfredo Fernandes suggests that "[m]aking use of John Locke's philosophical theory, the Gods in 'Three Women' see that women's minds have to be a tabula rasa or a blank space so that they can be easily alienated in such patriarchal society" (48). Through the three voices represented in the poem, Plath reveals the profound sense of alienation from which all twentieth-century American women suffer. She also exposes, through the depiction of the three women's different situations, the main causes of that overwhelming sense that leads to their own destruction.

Plath has placed her main emphasis on the way women were treated in America during the twentieth century. This way of treatment shows how women were othered by all the male members of the society in which they physically live but are psychologically murdered. She has been concerned with various dimensions of female otherness such as inferiority, domesticity, objectification and alienation. She has managed to emphasize the intense mental, physical, and social suffering that inflict all twentieth- century American women. She skillfully asserts her rejection of the confinement of women to the traditional domestic roles as in "Lesbos" and "Mushrooms". All the female characters suffer greatly as a result of domesticity which is one of the essential aspects of female otherness. Women aspire for more complex responsibilities than those of a housewife and a mother.

The poet also focuses on women's inferiority, another aspect of female otherness; women are presented as biologically, socially, psychologically, and

intellectually inferior. The superior male counterpart denies them equal rights in all fields. Female objectification is a way through which women were othered. The male view of women as objects, possessions, and sexual properties is clearly exposed in many of Plath's poems such as “Mirror”, “Mushrooms” and “ Stings” .Women, in these poems, are identified with inanimate objects, bees, machines, mushrooms, and dolls. According to the theory of objectification, women are also objectified by denying them subjectivity, and autonomy. Moreover, women's silence is another indication of their objectification as they are denied the right of expressing their views or even their feelings.

After displaying the causes behind female otherness, Plath has shifted to discuss its terrible effect on women, men, and the whole society. The treatment of women as an other leads to their alienation, isolation, loss of identity, and depression. Plath adopts the idea that only death, and more specifically suicide, can serve as an outlet from this growing feeling of isolation. She has succeeded in presenting a perfect reflection of the feminist concerns that have preoccupied all women in the twentieth-century America. As a feminist writer, she focuses on the desperate conditions of women, the oppressive views of men and the male/female dichotomy imposed by the unjust and prejudiced patriarchal society. Plath finally affords to offer suggestions for the ways through which women can eradicate these repressive male- prescribed images of women: either by revolt or death.

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