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“THE BIG STRIP TEASE” : AUTHORIAL ANXIETY AND PERFORMATIVE FEMININITY IN SYLVIA PLATH’S POEMS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore one of the issues that the scholars of Plath frequently encounter in her writings, a desire to escape the engendered female body along with the social taboos and restrictions associated with it, through a study of some of her iconic *Ariel* poems, with a special focus on “Lady Lazarus”. It traces this desire to escape femininity on part of Plath to her choosing to work within the confessional tradition of poetry, a predominantly masculine literary discourse and contends that this gave birth to an “anxiety of authorship” in her , manifested in the violent and self annihilating images of victimhood that “Lady Lazarus” among her other poems contains. It further puts forward the view that in order to overcome this authorial anxiety stemming from her female gender, Plath resorted to a questioning of the very concept of gender in “Lady Lazarus”, through a subversive performance of femininity, thereby exposing it as a performative construct. The central claim of the paper is therefore that Plath writing in 1956, years before the emergence of third wave feminism, was able to arrive at a

poststructuralist understanding of gender in her poem and use it to transcend the impediments to creativity that working within a claustrophobic male literary discourse generated.

Keywords: Plath, confessional tradition, anxiety of authorship, gender, femininity, performance, performativity, Butler, post structuralism.

Writing her journal in the summer of 1950, from her mother’s ancestral place at 26 Elmwood Road, Wellesley, Massachusetts, a young, eighteen year old Sylvia Plath described the feeling of suffocation she suffered from in her maternal home:

Through the glass square, high in the door, I saw a block of sky, pierced by the sharp black points of the pines across the street. And there was the moon, almost full, luminous and yellow, behind the trees. I felt suddenly breathless,

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stifled. I was trapped, with the tantalizing little square of night above me, and the warm, feminine atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery smothering embrace. (*Journals* 13)

It was the “feminine atmosphere” of her mother’s house therefore, what made Plath feel claustrophobic and entrapped, as she, in here, clearly associates femininity with stifling restraints that envelop and smother. This mistrust for femininity or femaleness that she had, has not only been expressed in this particular piece of writing but is something that comes up very frequently in her journal and letters, making it a much discussed and debated issue among the scholars of Plath. In her journal entry on June 1951, for instance, she declared “being born a woman” to be the most “awful tragedy” of her life and labelled her “inescapable femininity” (93) as responsible for circumscribing her ability to think, feel and act. Similarly, in a letter that she wrote to her mother, Aurelia Plath, on April 8, 1957, she noted, “I dug up the poem “April Aubade” which I wrote in the spring of my senior year: and gaped, it seemed simply terrible to me now, coy, feminine . . .” thus ,yet again exposing her lack of faith in femininity. One way in which this faithlessness or mistrust can be decoded is by looking into Plath’s literary life, that is the type of literature she read and chose to create, an investigation of which will

confirm her affinity to the confessional school, an age old tradition in the Western literary discourse.

When Plath was gradually discovering her identity as a poet, in the late 1950s, the confessional movement led by Robert Lowell was gaining momentum in America; this sudden revival of the tradition of confessionals deeply impacted Plath’s writing, making her appropriate the confessional, autobiographical tradition of the Western canon to voice and celebrate her own sense of selfhood. The confessional tradition, as is well known, began as a religious discourse, with the Christians recording their conversion experience in autobiographical forms and continued to be so, for a long time, from St. Augustine’s Confessions (c. 400 AD) till the eighteenth century; when, with the emergence of a new atomistic vision of the self under enlightenment thought, the tradition finally started to go through a secularizing process. This literary discourse of confessionals, from its Augustinian origin, has always been a phallogocentric space, and this is the reason that a very few female names come to our mind when discussing autobiographical writings, a fact that has been taken in to account and pointed to by noted critic Sybil Oldfield, while listing the names and works of the chief practitioners of this tradition:

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Rousseau's focus on his *coeur sensible* and his acknowledgement of his salvation in this world at the hands of Madame de Warens in his *Confessions*, Alexander Herzen's heart-rending account of the breakdown of his marriage in *My Past and Thoughts*, Kafka's pitiful – and pitiless - *Letter to His Father*, these, together with the work of Aksakov, De Quincey, Proust and Shakespeare in his *Sonnets*, are some of the acknowledged masterpieces of emotional autobiography by men. But what of that by women?"(297)

The singular absence of women writers in the confessional genre, a problem once pondered upon by Virginia Woolf, ("I was thinking the other night there's never been a woman's autobiography. Nothing to compare with Rousseau") (453) can be used to explain Plath's feeling of entrapment and suffocation within her feminine identity; she, desperately trying to fit herself into a predominantly masculine literary canon and consequently coming to experience her femininity as a debilitating obstacle, weighing her down.

Since within the confessional tradition, she lacked female precursors to look back to and derive inspiration from, she suffered from an acute sense of alienation, that is felt anomalous as the sole female trying to work her way, through a masculine

discourse, under the condescending gaze of her literary forefathers and therefore, it can be argued that it was owing to this "anxiety of authorship"(Gilbert and Gubar 49) that she constantly tried to liberate herself of her female identity. "Anxiety of authorship", the concept coined by Gilbert and Gubar refers to the fear that a female author suffers from, in trying to work within an almost exclusively masculine creative domain, a fear that results in the feeling "that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her"(49). One of the abiding tropes in Plath's poems interestingly, is that of vulnerability and self annihilation, most explicitly visible in "The Colossus", "Daddy", "Ariel" and "Lady Lazarus", among others.

What we find in "The Colossus" is a female speaker lamenting her inability to resurrect a father figure from its ruins : " I shall never get you put together entirely./pieced, glued and properly jointed"(129), an act that has been interpreted as a daughter's looking up to her dead father for "paternal love and approval"(Ghasemi 289). This father figure, described as an "oracle,/Mouthpiece of the dead"(129) has been considered by many critics such as Margaret Dickie Uroff, as the "creative" rather than "actual" father, she coming to argue that "the concentration of mouth imagery to describe the colossus also points to his identification as a speaker or

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poet”(37). Given these inferences, it is possible to view this poem as reflective of the authorial anxieties of Plath, because the vulnerable female speaker (“I crawl like an ant in mourning”) looking up with reverence to her deceased father, can be interpreted as a vulnerable poet looking up to her male literary predecessors, having been taught by the patriarchal society to think of herself as an “interiorized female descendant” (Gilbert and Gubar 51) of them. In “Daddy”, composed two years after “The Colossus”, though the same pattern is repeated, with a vulnerable daughter trying to reach her tyrannical father through self annihilation (“I was ten when they buried you,/ At twenty I tried to die,/And get back, back, back to you”)(Plath 224), this poem however, ultimately reaches a different conclusion, since by the end the speaker manages to emerge triumphantly from under the shadow of her father(“Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through”)(Plath 224), rather than merging with the same, as we see in Colossus. So Plath’s “Daddy” voices both the aspects of her “anxiety of authorship”, that is her society inculcated reverence for literary forefathers as well as her incessant struggle to establish herself against them, trapped between which, she could not think of exercising her creativity in any way other than by bringing about destruction upon herself. This dichotomy faced by the poet has been brilliantly summed up by Gilbert and Gubar in their path breaking essay “Infection in the Sentence”:

Unlike her male counterpart, the female artist must first struggle against the effects of socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile or even—as in the case of the Queen in “Little Snow White”—self annihilating.(49)

These polarities in the life of a female poet finds expression in “Ariel” as well, another poem that powerfully dramatizes the tension between gender and creativity, by characterizing feminine creative energy as a prancing “lioness” and swift “arrow” while at the same time depicting them as held back by “hooks” and “shadow”, thus manifesting the split between the desire to create and the fear of such creation which in female poets result in the contemplation of suicide : “ And I/ Am the arrow,/The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive”(Plath 239-40). “Lady Lazarus”, takes this image of suicide much further since its speaker, not only contemplates but even enacts the act of death and this enactment is significant ,since through it, Plath, apart from visualizing her authorial anxiety , also, as it will be subsequently argued, managed to transcend the same.

The poem features an apparently powerless female artist or performer, who feels fragmented and commodified, (“my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade,/My right

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foot/A paperweight,/My face a featureless,
fine Jew linen”)(Plath 244), being obliged
to perform under the voyeuristic and
objectifying gaze of a patriarchal society,
 (“the peanut crunching crowd”)(Plath 245),
a situation reflective of the fragmentedness
of a female poet, from her need for and yet
“culturally conditioned timidity about self
dramatization”(Gilbert and Gubar 50),
under the disparaging and ridiculing gaze
of the predominantly male literary world.
So, in other words, what “Lady Lazarus”
manifests is that in an overwhelmingly
masculine social order, the only way in
which a female artist can perform, confess
or self dramatize is by surrendering her
subjectivity to a male audience and thus
becoming a fragmented, sexualized object
of their play and ridicule:

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
They unwrap me hand and foot
The big strip tease. (Plath 245)

Given this view, the argument put
forward by noted critic Margaret Kathleen
Lant seems to be supremely valid since she
contended that in the act of strip tease, “no
woman is terrifying, no woman is
triumphant, no woman is powerful, for she
offers herself to "the peanut crunching
crowd" in a gesture that is "theatrical" rather
than self-defining, designed to please or to
appease her viewers” (653).

There is however a slight problem
with such a reading of the poem as just
performed since there’s a lot more to Lady
Lazarus’s “big strip tease”, than just making
an offering of herself to the sacrificial altars
of patriarchy, as this interpretation makes it
out to be. So, though many critics commit
the mistake of viewing “Lady Lazarus” as
just another story of artistic crisis and
female victimhood, such a reading of the
poetic piece is strictly inadvisable, because
it will inevitably lead to the effacement of
the revolutionary potential of the poem and
might even result in a reductive
misinterpretation. While it is true that “Lady
Lazarus” is a poem giving voice to the
uniquely feminine experience of oppression
and victimhood - one that highlights the
profound debilitation that the subjectivity of
a female artist has to undergo in a
patriarchal world - but however, it is not
only limited to such an expression of female
sufferings, it being a polemical and
subversive piece of writing, rather than a
conformist one of hopeless resignation.

Undoubtedly, the poem labels all
forms of female creative performance or
expression in a patriarchal society as a strip
tease but what is infinitely more significant
is that it does not stop there, rather, goes on
to show, that this act of strip tease need not
be a debilitating one since it can easily be
transformed into a political weapon for the
accumulation of power. The strip tease
performed in “Lady Lazarus”, it must be
noted, is not one that the society expects a

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woman to perform, not one that caters to its sense of aesthetic and sensual pleasure and it is through this subversive performance, it will be argued, that the female artist gains an agency for herself in a world where her creative endeavors' are subject to male disparagement and ridicule. Instead of treating the patriarchal audience to the only kind of performance it feels a woman is capable of giving, what the artist does is to stage a macabre suicidal drama disguised as a strip tease- she engages in an unpeeling of her skin rather than only her clothes, thereby exposing herself, in a grotesque visceral self annihilating form, a form that terrifies, rather than cheers:

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?
The nose, the eye pits, the full set
of teeth ?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.
Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times
to die.(Plath 244)

What has been depicted by Plath in her "Lady Lazarus" is therefore a woman's stringent refusal to submit to gender stereotypes, that is perform her gender role

in a manner expected by the society, leading her to undertake a subversive performance of that very role, an "intentional self parody"(Van Dyne 57). This parodic enactment of a role imposed by the patriarchal society upon women, it can be contended, puts the very idea of specific gender roles and by extension, of gender, into crisis, by revealing it to be nothing but a social construction, dependent on "performativity" or " a stylized repetition of acts"(Butler 191). In her non-cooperation in the performance of the gender role assigned to her by the society, Plath's poetic persona, Lady Lazarus, refuses to go through this repetitive role playing by the means of which we sustain and perpetuate the myth of gender, and moreover, through her enactment of something as startlingly different from strip tease as death, she succeeds in bringing about a death of her gendered female body. So, the act of death, instead of being something debilitating becomes a powerful mode of self assertion in the poem, the art of dying being what frees the speaker from the shackles of femininity:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else?
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a
call.(Plath 245)

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Just like a drag queen who by suddenly stripping his female costume takes the audience by surprise, Lady Lazarus, shocks her spectators with the visceral undressing she undergoes, and through this metaphor of undressing or unpeeling, reveals that the skin or cultural signification on the surface of her body is what constitutes her female identity, there being no essential core underneath it :

Ash, ash —
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there
(Plath 246)

Therefore, one can claim that long before the emergence of third wave feminism Plath was able to reach a somewhat poststructuralist understanding of gender in her poem, since her strip artist Lady Lazarus manages to convey a notion of gender, very similar to the one propounded by Judith Butler in 1990 :

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true or false , but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity(186).

Plath's prior anticipation of some of the main tenets of poststructuralist feminism, though initially might seem very

surprising but given her abiding authorial anxiety from being one of the very few females working within the masculine discourse of confessionals, her arrival at an understanding of gender as helped her transcend the feeling of debilitating inadequacy as a female poet, should not be much of a revelation to us. Plath's repeated attempts to distance herself from her female gender, refusal to accept her gender as an inherent part of her was probably lead her to achieve the breakthrough in "Lady Lazarus", conceive gender as a performative construct.

It was with this fluid conception of gender that Plath battled the impediments to creativity in the masculine literary world, she having found socially constructed gender identities as being too narrow for containing her multitudinous self : " I am part man, and I notice women's breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress ... but that is the artist and the analytical attitude toward the female body ... for I am more a woman; even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring ... I desire the things which will destroy me in the end" (Plath *Journals* 63)

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