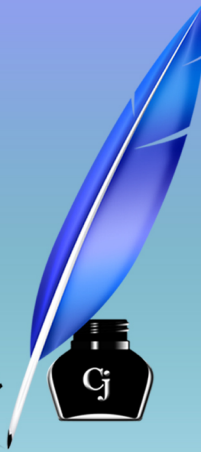


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Anne Sexton's Poetry Tested on the Axis of Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism

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During the twentieth century the feminist criticism was almost an isolated and under-rated aspect in the studies of English Literature. Not before the Modern Era did the feminist criticism become one of the major contributing studies to the study of English Literature. It heightened the need to put efforts to reconstruct the social, political and cultural experiences of women.

According to Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the internalized consciousness of the female. It is exploring the female subculture and come up to a female model based on psychoanalysis. Showalter in her essay "Towards A Feminist Poetics" brings forth the three distinct phases of gynocriticism- Feminine, Feminist and Female. Wherein the first includes the female literature which idealized images of women constructed under the influence of patriarchal oppression. The second one registers a protest, agitation and resentment towards earlier feminine ideology and the last one emerged as a 'female criticism' when the women free themselves of the influence of male literary tradition and focuses on the new world of female culture and identity.

Anne Sexton (November 9, 1928-October 4, 1974) was born and brought up in a well to do family of Massachusetts. She remained under a strict supervision of her father in her childhood and was expected to behave like decent ladies. She has been credited attention because of the themes she touched upon in her poetry. Themes which were treated as unusual and some of them were also considered a taboo in the society. Sexton's Early and Later poetry engages a process of transformation, a metamorphosis in her poetry marking a descent into darkness followed by an ascent into light.

My work is an endeavour to study representation of women's psyche in Anne Sexton's literature and to evaluate whether her work could really evolve as a female canon free from the male literary tradition.

Introduction

Elaine Showalter's term 'Gynocritics' has been paralleled from 'La gynocritique', where Showalter has stated that if one studies the stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles played by women in literary history, we could gauge not only what women have

felt and experienced but also what men have thought; what women should be. Gynocritics aims to concentrate on female culture from a different perspective. The 'muted female culture' which was dependent upon history, anthropology, psychology and sociology have done a great effort to develop the concept of a female sub-culture. Feminist critique doesn't want to see women trying to live in a shadowy refuge. Showalter advocated the need to create her own culture and criticism which provides the emergence of naïve woman character. This state can be reached after the woman frees herself from the codes of male dominated culture. In 'Literature of Their Own' Elaine Showalter defined three phases which displays the development story of feminine literary thinking. She called the first term as 'the feminine phase', which is dependent upon 'imitation of prevailing modes of the dominant tradition and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles'. It is thought that this epoch begins with the emergence of male pseudonyms in the 1840's. The second era of women's literary movement is denoted 'the feminist phase' which encompasses the period against the standards and values and advocacy of minority rights and values are recognized. These challenging times are followed by 'a phase of self-discovery' or the 'female phase' that lasts from 1920 to the present. The aim of this last stage is the quest for the identity.

Julia Kristeva, a French feminist, projects similar concept as that of Showalter when she describes feminine character as 'a secret garden that is not discovered and told yet. According to her 'woman is someone outside naming and ideologies'(Kristeva pg 84)

Hence, concluding we can say that Showalter's gynocriticism is something which projects the pure woman character which breathes without the help of maleness. "It is all about the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female career and the evaluation and laws of a female literary tradition".(Showalter pg 26)

Anne Sexton's Poetry and Gynocriticism

The thought of testing Anne Sexton's work, the gynocritical way came to my mind as Sexton is one of the most important poets of the genre 'Confessional Poetry'. She can be called a torch bearer, as she was one amongst the awakened females who objected to the unjust treatment of males as the owner of force in society. Sexton in her poetry projected the alienation of woman because of her male counterpart and the circumstances in which she took refuge under the realms of loneliness. In a way she brought out how male dominated society leads to obscurity of womanhood. Being a confessional poet, Sexton experimented with her personal self and 'I' in her poetry. Anne operated the hidden part of her life and made the readers witness her psychological fluctuations. Her poetry began to cover autobiographical pieces which merged with subject matters like female victimization, sexual disappointment, rage on being the loser, the disorders in the interaction of family members, tortured family relationships, researched female body, psyche and the dynamics of mother-daughter interactions.

The most important aspect to be noted is, there is a large difference between male and the female reflection of suffering in their works amongst the confessional poets. Although, Robert Lowell, Snodgrass, Ginsberg, Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, all wrote in the confessional

style but a marked difference could be noted in the writing style of the female and male confessional poets.

Studying the two most important male confessional poets Robert Lowell and W.D Snodgrass, it has been charted out that they wrote on subjects which were different in treatment, in comparison to the female poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Robert Lowell in his work has written about conversations from Episcopalianism to Catholicism and explored the dark side of America's Puritan legacy. He incorporated the political and social crisis of the sixties, wrote entries influenced by personal history and obsession and also incorporated themes related to social and political significance and childhood. He wrote about the repressed memories of his family and the family conflicts which normally people like to hide. On the other hand W.D Snodgrass wrote about marriage and companionship, themes dealing with war and conflict, voices of Nazi figures during their last days in their Berlin bomb shelter, separation and divorce, photography and film and social commentaries. There has always been a difference in a women's treatment of a subject than a man's way. According to some critics there was a basic difference in the dreams of the two. It should be well understood that man and woman are separate selves. Both of them feel that they belong to two different races and do not share a common ground.

Perspectives of Female Body in Anne Sexton's Poetry

None among the confessional poets had ever written about the female body as Anne Sexton did. Through her poetry she represented the female body from three different perspectives- the historical, the biological and the cultural. This was a treatment which was completely unique and brought a new perspective of looking at things. With reference to special study of Sexton's poems like 'In Celebration of My Uterus', 'Transformation' and other poems from her other collections, gynocritical analysis of her poetry is attempted.

The Historical aspect specially from the background of Sexton's poem highlights that the female organ uterus was considered no less than a machine to make babies without considering the psyche or the emotional or the physical needs of the of the women. We can pick up examples from any civilization be it Roman, Egyptian, English, French or the Indo-Aryans, the females were considered a machine for giving an heir to the kings and his soldiers. In the western world, especially in American land the women in the nineteenth century was exposed to many fatal diseases like tuberculosis, cancer, hormonal imbalances and many psychological threats too. They remained continuously ill and thus became frail and submissive.

Women were the possession of man to serve the purpose of men's sexual drive bearing and raising children for reproduction and serving as ornaments. Women weren't able to identify with their bodies as they were mere objects in through scientific and social spheres. The fact that she was a person and not just a human body was ignored to a large extent. The society went on suppressing their women on various grounds and in case a women became independent financially and opted to behave according to her own values, she would then be perceived as abnormal or the one who has gone off track from the standard definition of a woman.

The Biological aspect of the female body is well reflected by Sexton when she speaks about the process of menstruation, ovulation, menopause, birth, fertility and reproduction in her poetry.

The cultural aspect is represented in the best way when Sexton integrates women's sexuality and spirituality, creativity and procreativity, praising the womb as a factor uniting woman around the world.

Analysing Sexton's to remain a woman. That means she rejects the idea which says that if there is no uterus 'In Celebration of My Uterus' she insists that the womb does not define a woman, nor does she have to keep her uterus in a woman's body than she would be worthless and no more will be a woman. This feeling arose in Sexton's heart when she was advised by her doctor to get her uterus removed on account of some disease and she strongly refused to do so. She insisted on making her own decision whether to keep or remove her uterus. She dislikes the idea of treating her organ as an object whose future lies in the hands of the doctors.

They wanted to cut you out
But they will not

The woman in the poet asserts her right to say 'No' for when she has been suggested to part with her organ. This could also be interpreted as declining the oppressive medical approach which was quite uncommon during that time. The woman within the poet takes a strong step and decides the fate of her womb. She admonishes the unity of her organs and does not accept alienation of her psyche and her body.

Anne Sexton acknowledges her being a woman not only from the biological perspective but she adds the spiritual level. She calls the organ 'uterus' the soul of woman, uses words like central creature and spirit to address the uterus and further connects it with nature by mentioning the fertility of the soil of the fields.

In celebration of the woman I am
And of the soul of the woman I am
And of the central creature and its delight
Each cell has a life
There is enough here to please a nation

The line indicates that a woman's egg cell is life in itself. It is quite alive and doesn't depend on man's sperm to get life. Literary critics Natalie Angier have commented over this line saying that 'it is not the quantity of the sperms of a man can produce instead it is the monthly ritual of the women's ovulation, its celebration and then the acceptance of menstruation as the inevitable continuation of the cycle, if the egg is not fertilized.'(Angier pg97)

Sexton highlights again the aspect uniting women all over the world when she says

All seem to be singing, although some can not
Sing a note

To the poet singing is the symbol of freedom and cheerfulness. It marks the presence of women's voice in the world they live in. It prompts preserving their inner voice which can become a propeller of their actions.

In the last part of the poem, Sexton celebrates being 'The woman' and sees the uterus as a factor uniting her with other women suggesting female solidarity. It also emphasizes the unity of the self and the body, not their alienation and fragmentation.

Transformations- Fairy tales retold from a Female Perspective

The 'Transformations' collection is Sexton's colloquial renditions of Grimm's fairy tales. Transformation was the fourth volume of her poems. Through these poems Sexton stood up against the meek portrayal of the women in the fairy stories which every child is told in his childhood. Sexton in her version of 'Cinderella, Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, Red riding hood, Rapunzel, Frog Prince etc represents the society's expectant behavior of a woman who is weak, submissive and a mute worker. She retold the tales using her own prologues, epilogues and a number of metaphors and similes. The cause and effect of Anne's Transformations reveal as much about her, as her confessional poetry does.

In 'Cinderella' the story originated as oral traditions and was passed along the generations. It was retold by Sexton in her own style, contrasting the rosy images of human happiness with that of decay and despair of everyday life. She conveys this message with a sadistic tone and modern language, while drawing upon the hardships of American culture. As a child Anne came across parents who were busy with socializing and alcoholism and she suffered neglect and verbal abusive nature of her parents. Her marriage with Kayo became unstable later on and Anne was continually engaged in extra-marital affairs.

In Sexton's version of 'Cinderella' Anne sarcastically emphasizes that all the stories are mythical and unrealistic. The concept of 'happily ever after' that the society chases, does not actually exist. Through the poetry Sexton projected that fairy tales are not real and they do not exist in the real world. No matter how hard one tries to find a world of fantasy, it will never exist. This is a dream world and society goes after this illusion in their head that will never come true. Anne starts the poem sarcastically saying 'You always read...' insisting on the fact that the current society brain wash their children saying that everything in life is always fine when in reality, it is not always great and happy. Anne insists that 'trickery and deceit happens more often than the Cinderella story' (Middlebrook p201). People are always trying to get revenge at other people. Cinderella and the prince

lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.

Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story.

Sexton feels that the concept of 'happily ever after' is completely impossible in real life. Real life stands for discussions, arguments, calculations, give and take principle, deprivation, continuous fighting the hardships and facing the harsh realities, dealing with people who think differently and adjusting with them to maintain peace in one's life. But still everyone in his childhood is told stories of the fairy world, a world which actually does not exist. It is something which could be preserved in museums or better to say a place which has nothing to do with the present time and the true world.

Through the poems in the collection 'Transformations' Sexton has created new myths or tales of the twentieth century serving a specific viewpoint discarding, adapting the old myths. Sexton brought in the fact that myths and rituals are often used to express the victory of good over evil and so on but eventually they become dogma and repressive.

Conclusion

Anne Sexton has given her readers a full serving of female biological material in her poems. From description of her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion, her 'tiny jail' vagina, her love life, the act of eating to the way her father's 'serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me like a great god' when she danced with him after much champagne at a wedding, even the trauma of her childhood enemas. Anne gave it all. Unlike Sylvia Plath for whom body was synonym to pain and mutilation, Sexton challenged individual's residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public and the woman must be seen and not heard. By this meant that not only must people and the stake holders of the society show interest in women's anatomy but her voice and her emotions must be given priority too. She is assertively emotional and possesses an unending thirst for acceptance and care. She addresses her audience and asks them to feel what she feels, accept her, love her, and love everything about her, from her strengths to her weaknesses.

Reviewing Anne Sexton's poetry contents on the axis of Elaine Showalter's concept of Gynocriticism, one cannot disregard the unusual and juxtaposition of content and style of hers. The line in the poem 'In Celebration of My Uterus' where Sexton says

In celebration of the woman I am
And of the soul of the woman I am
And of the central creature and its delight

She calls the organ 'uterus' the soul of woman. The words like 'central creature and spirit'; to address the uterus takes it to a level which is beyond the subject of biology. In this way Sexton connects the woman community throughout the world into one strand and this union is divine and spiritual. Sexton's idea successfully makes women from all parts of the world get connected to each other. This unique concept relates directly to Showalter's notion of gynocritics. It seems to personify Elaine Showalter's opinions of independence of women writing, the 'Female' aspect of her theory which states that it is a phase of self-discovery. Showalter says "women reject both

imitation and protest two forms of dependency and turn to female experiences the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to forms and techniques of literature” (Showalter p 23) Proving her skills, Anne Sexton was the first poet who got approved herself and could be called truly a writer of the Female category as per Showalter. She dared to praise and sing songs on female body and its processes, which were a restricted and unventured zone by any poet. Sexton’s way of leveling woman sexuality with spirituality and creativity with procreativity was a novel concept.

Sexton writes

You are not torn

This reflects her understanding of recognizing the unity of her body and her psyche. There is no alienation or disparity between the two. Continuing the novelty of her style she gives her readers the idea of reproductive function of a woman giving reference to fertility of the ‘soil of the fields’

Sexton gives a number of examples of different women across the world. She emphasizes that despite of the difference in their profession, ethnicity, race; all women are similar as they all have this unique organ ‘the uterus or the womb’ which connects all women world- wide.

Through her work ‘Transformations’ Sexton deflates characters, pretentions, undercuts most expectations held by readers of Grimm and rebuilds in their place her own view of things. Sexton criticizes the patriarchal society by revealing the falsity of it. She brought attention to the subjugation of women along with revealing the role played by women in perpetuating the stereotypes in the patriarchal society. Beauty and virginity of women was treated as a must have commodity as per the society. It was not the wit and the intelligence or the over- all personality but the virginity and the beauty which appealed more to the society. Sexton has endorsed Beauvoir’s statements that for a great many women the roads to transcendence were blocked because they do nothing; they fail to make themselves anything in a patriarchal society. Women were brought up with the feeling of not trying to rise above their circumstances or learn from their mistakes. Character of Snow White is the best example for this statement. She does not react to anything; she does as she is told to do. The pretty girl is incompetent to make any decisions for herself. Sexton emphasizes that Snow whites cannot be treated equal by the patriarchal society until they themselves consider them one. It was only Sexton who brought new significance to the Grimm’s tales, extending the themes from fairy tales and bringing them into the reality. Hence, we can say that Anne Sexton proved herself true to the ‘Female’ concept, as per the theory of Elaine Showalter

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