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## Sappho and the Expression of Femininity

Barnana Baidya

M.A English 3<sup>rd</sup> Semester,  
Rishi Bankim Chandra College.

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### Abstract:

Sappho was regarded as the tenth muse by Plato due to her poetic excellence and superiority in the *Lyric Age of Greece*. Many of her poems deal with the passionate emotions of a woman towards another woman, making her an important symbol of homoerotic desire. She contributed in singing, poetry, recitation by organizing an academy for young unmarried women named "*Thiasos*". She was also famous for epithalamia, which strongly suggests the feminine expression. Very little is known about Sappho's personal life and most of it is based on the commentaries on the poems written by her. This paper has tried to put a light on Sappho's *psychology* and her expression of femininity through her excellent poetic creation. Being a devotee of Aphrodite, Sappho as a poetess celebrates love and its physical expression through her compositions, Sapphic language is decidedly feminine or rather *reversely masculine*. Sapphic texts can be analyzed as the earliest testaments of "*Women's Writing*" which, by subverting the patriarchal language, gave birth to a new way of expression that was essentially female. There are a lot of references to dresses and finery and her innate love for them but she also advises against any materialistic vanity. Sappho creates a world which is chiefly inhabited by women that she represents through her poetry. The *female erotic experience* especially of love between women, is often expressed with intense passion by Sappho.

**Keywords:** Lyric Age of Greece, homosexual desire, homoeroticism, thiasos, epithalamia, personal psychology, f reversely masculine, Women's Writing, materialistic vanity, female erotic experience.

It is said that the 'Wise' Solon of Athens had wished to learn Sappho's poetry and died. She is considered one of the most acclaimed and accomplished lyric poets of the classical Greek world. She was active around 650 BC, which is also known as 'The Lyric Age of Greece'. Sappho's poems now only survive as poetical fragments, but her superior metaphors, her use of beautiful

images have garnered for her much fame, not only in antiquity but among the modern readers as well. Many of her poems deal with the passionate emotions of a woman towards another woman, making her an important writer on homosexual desire, i.e., the erotic and romantic love and desire between same-sex people. In fact, her native home Lesbos lends its name to the term 'lesbian', which is used to specify female homoerotic desire. Moreover, Sappho was a poetess of such finesse and calibre that Plato deemed her the "Tenth Muse, also sets before her successors a distinct feminine tradition in the literary arts that was notably absent before her and for long time after her death.

Whatever little is known about Sappho's personal life, is based on unreliable sources such as the Suda- a Greek lexicon or dictionary compiled around the 10th century AD by an author known only as Suidas (lexicographer). According to the Suda, Sappho was an inhabitant of Lesbos, an island in the Aegean Sea. Her father was named Scamandronymus, and her mother, Cleis. There are mentions of brothers in her poems, and it is believed that there were three. Evidence also suggests she belonged to the aristocratic class, and her family was active in the political field, which can be the reason behind Sappho's exile in Sicily around 600 B.C. After returning, she got married and had a daughter, who was named Cleis, after her grandmother, as was the custom of the day. Sappho was responsible for organizing and running a thiasos or "an academy for young unmarried women". They were instructed in the social graces and were taught composition, singing, poetry, recitation etc. Almost all of Sappho's poetry is addressed to her companions and students of this academy. She was a respected spiritual leader and was regarded as a devoted teacher in that part of Greece (Bomarito and Hunter 423)

According to the Suda, Sappho's complete works were collected in nine volumes. Each of these volumes was divided based on the different types of metres that were used in composition, such as Sapphic, Alcaic, Ionic, Choriamb etc., with one volume devoted solely to the "Epithalamia" or 'marriage hymns", which she was renowned for. Unfortunately, the bulk of her work has been lost or destroyed, leaving behind only one complete poem of twenty-seven lines and some fragments scattered across the Mediterranean.

Sappho is believed to have been influenced in her writings by Terpander, Alcacus, and Archilochus. Much of her poetry is occasional, which is to say that they were meant to celebrate definite events. However, she also wrote narrative poems, religious hymns, marriage songs etc. Her poems typically differ from the classical Homeric Verse in language and style. Sappho is fond

of using vernacular diction in her poetry, which is closer to the oral tongue, as opposed to the high-flown diction of epic poetry. Her style is simple and lucid; the poems generally concern themselves with individual feelings and passions. The themes of friendship and betrayal, love and jealousy, anger and hatred are an integral part of Sapphic emotional verse.

Sappho is a devotee of Aphrodite - the goddess of love, and her son Eros, the god of erotic passion. So, it is only natural that Sappho as a poetess, celebrates love and its physical expression in her compositions. Her sole surviving complete poem, which was preserved by the Greek literary critic and historian Dionysus of Halicarnassos in his book *On Literary Compositions* around 30 B.C., is an ode to Aphrodite. She begins to describe the goddess as “splendour throned immortal, wile-weaving child of Zeus... stepping from thy father's house harnessed a golden chariot, and the strong opinions of thy two swans fair and swift...” (E.1). Sappho goes on to plead her goddess to “assuage [her] sore trouble” (E.1) and aid her to woo her beloved as her battle ally. The beauty of the poem lies in the grace and mellifluousness of Sappho's language. Words come afterwards in a smooth and coherent procession, giving it an effortless and natural aura. Sapphic language is decidedly feminine, or rather reversely masculine. We find that she plays with the standard traditional 'male' techniques of composition and then subverts them to suit her own voice. Sappho often blurs the line between the Subject 'I' and the Object, which is especially prominent in this poem. It begins with the poet in the subject position 'I' and then quickly morphs into a dialogic part of the exchange where both the devotee and the goddess are first-person narrators. The idea of time is also not linear but shifting. The poem begins in the present time, then moves to past recollection with “ever ere this thou hast heard and marked my voice afar” (E.1) and again returns to the present in the end with “O come to me now” (E.1). Sappho glides between past and present, yesterday and now with little effort. The unrestrained fluidity of her style resonates with the idea of female fluidity, which is to say that the 'female' mind can flow from the position of 'Subject' to 'Object', or from 'Self' to 'Other' with relative ease, as opposed to "male" rigidity. Cixous, while talking about *écriture féminine* or 'women's writing' (875), focuses on this very “openness of language, instead of the repressive patterning of masculine texts”. Sapphic texts can be analyzed as the earliest testaments of "women's writing" which, subverting the patriarchal language, gave birth to a new way of expression that was essentially female.

Sappho, the woman, emerges in her verse through her love for beauty and nature. Her nature imageries and unique metaphors make her lyrics unparalleled in ancient literature. She was

the first poet to use the word 'bitter-sweet' in reference to love: Lo! Love the looser of limbs stirs me, that creature irresistible, bitter-sweet, (E. 81). Sappho is familiar with the many flowers of Lesbos, and with great tenderness and attachment, she includes them in her poetry. She talks of "the many garlanded earth..." (E 133), where hyacinths and roses and lilies bloom. Nature is continually being compared to a woman, as in this fragment:

I saw one-day a-gathering flowers The daintiest little maid (E. 107)

She identifies with the delicateness and softness of nature, and it appeals to her feminine sensibility. She loves the moon, illuminating the world with its "silver light" (E.3), and then again visualizes it as being "rosy-fingered" (E. 86).

Not only through nature, but the world of women floats to the surface through Sappho's own love for garments. There are a lot of references to dresses and finery and her innate love for them. In a fragment addressed to Gongyla, she asks her to come dressed "in your milk white gown" (E.45) and in another fragment, she gives a vivid description of "golden bracelets and purple robes, aye and the fine smooth embroideries" (E. 66) (Robinson 60). However, she advises against deep materialistic vanity: "But come, be not so proud of a ring." (E. 51)

Sappho also added new words to her vocabulary, especially regarding colours and costumes David M. Robinson, in his essay "The Writings of Sappho", mentions some of the words. He writes:

She calls the chest in which women keep their perfumes and like things a grute the hutch (E 180). Again, she uses (E. 179) the word Beudos for a short diaphanous frock blouse. She is the first to use the word Chlamys, where she speaks of Love "coming from Heaven and throwing off his purple mantle" (E. 69). (60-61)

Sappho creates a world which is chiefly inhabited by women, and it is there that she represents. It foregrounds the feminine hues of nature that she focuses on through her word-paintings. Sapphic verse deals with emotion and passion. Unlike the male tradition of violence and war, she advocates peace and love. Nowhere is this contrast more pronounced than in her fragment dubbed as "To Anactoria" (E. 38). It begins with a general observation of varied definitions of beauty, such as "a host of foot" or "a navy of ships"; for Sappho however, "tis the heart's beloved". Interestingly, these images are contradictory - the former being military images or the 'male' idea of beauty, while the latter is of love and desire, which for Sappho is essentially feminine. The poetess then goes on to describe Helen's elopement with Paris. However, being a devotee of

Aphrodite, she applauds Helen's decision to follow her heart. Sappho views it as a triumph of love. Here, Helen is given the role of an active agent, as by Sappho's account, "she chose" her destiny and left, making Paris the passive object of her desire. This effectively serves to reverse the traditional dynamics of man-woman relationship; finally, Sappho laments the departure of her beloved pupil Anactoria, who has gone away to marry and declares that "I would rather the sweet sound of her footfall and the sight of the brightness of her beaming face than all the chariots and armoured footmen of Lydia", blatantly mocking the ideals of masculine military prowess and battle glory. This poem can also be read in a different light. It can be viewed as a metaphor, highlighting the contradictions between the epic tradition of Homeric verse and the lyric tradition of Sapphic verse in terms of style and approach.

The female erotic experience, especially of love between women, is often expressed with a passionate intensity by Sappho. In the fragment known as "The Sublime" (E. 2), she narrates the orgasmic upheaval in her body just by gazing at her beloved, with almost clinical accuracy. This poem can be regarded as one of the earliest documents of the LGBTQ literary historiography, as it deals with the poetess' love for another woman. The poem starts by describing the beloved laughing and conversing with another man. The reaction to this scene brings in the poetess' body is described thus: "... my speech comes short or fails me quite, am tongue-tied, in a moment a delicate fire has overrun my flesh, my eyes grow dim and my ears sing, the sweat runs down me and a trembling takes me altogether, till I am as green and pale as the grass and death itself seems not very far away"(E, 2) With the progression of each line it is evident that the poetess increasingly loses all control over her body, almost like she is going through a near-death experience. It is only in the last line she regains composure- "I must fain be content". Eva Stehle, in her essay "Sappho's Circle" marks this poem as "overheard" (290) as it is not addressed to any audience but to the poetess' own self. Sappho the singer detaches herself from Sappho the lover and takes a plunge in her own psyche. This style of narration has its counterpart in the modern-day 'stream-of-consciousness method. The charm of this poem lies in its multiplicity of experiences. As Longinus, the Greek literary critic, says of this poem, that "she has recourse at once to spirit, body, hearing, tongue, sight, flesh, all as quite separate things, and by contraries, both freezes and burns, raves and is sane, and indeed is afraid she is nearly dead, so that she expresses not one emotion but a concourse of emotions" (E. 2 commentary). It is this combination of contradictory yet all-encompassing words and emotions that have produced the excellence of this poem. However, what

makes this poem truly unique is the fact that in her internal ode to her beloved, Sappho does not objectify her as a passive receiver of affection, unlike most poems of the male romantic tradition. The man, who is "like a god" (Stehle 293), sits obediently, listening to Sappho's beloved's laughter and words. So, here the beloved becomes "the one who defines the situation rather than the object of his wilful desire; she finds herself represented as a speaking subject in the mirror of the poem" (293). Though Sappho herself both hears and sees her, her observations arouse in her an overwhelming sensation rocking her whole being, making this poem far from some detached contemplation of a beautiful object. Thus, the beloved "perceives herself not as a body caught in "Sappho's" gaze, but as a presence for others", which in turn, helps to resist "the culture's objectification of women, just as Sappho reversed the dominant construction of the female in her own self-presentation" (294). Sappho gives birth to the subjective woman' through her poetry, perhaps for the first time in literature.

In the six century BC Greece, public offices were held only by men. Women had no political or administrative entity, nor had they any voice in public matters. In the poems of Sappho, there is often an undercurrent of the question of the female space. It seeks to establish an alternate discourse of a female utopia and laments the exclusion of women in contemporary social reality. In one of the poetic fragments (LP 22)", we find an unconventional outlook to love and life, where Sappho urges her companion Abanthis to sing a song for another companion, Gongyla:

Please Abanthis, your Sappho calls you:  
won't you take your Lydian lyre and play  
another song to Gongyla while desire still  
flutters your heart strings  
for that girl, that beautiful girl: 12

The boundaries between the speaker and the listener, the desirer and desired get blurred. The three of them share a communion of mutual affection among them, celebrating a pan-sisterhood where constraints of the patriarchal social and sexual hegemony are null and void.

The theme of memory and forgetting also constitutes an important part of Sappho's rhetoric. In a fragment (E. 83) addressed to Atthis, we find women facing immediate separation and the speaker in the poem expresses her desire to die rather than part ways. Atthis has to leave the world of female companionship against her wish, so Sappho rekindles her memory of the happy times together to sustain her in her new life, which would be cut off from the richer experience of life

with her female companions. A sense of loss and longing pervades the poem. The memory of the past ecstasy - both physical and emotional haunts the speaker and the addressee alike. The loss of the homo-romantic love and female friendship equates with the loss of freedom and expression in the patriarchal heteronormative world. Yet the memory lingers, as Sappho bids Atthis to "remember me" (E. 83), so the will and the desire for the lost 'space' remain alive in mind.

Cixous, in her essay "The Laugh of The Medusa" that was originally written in French titled as "Le Rire de la Meduse" in the year 1975 and translated into English in 1976 by Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen, accuses men of committing the greatest crime against women by turning them into "their own enemies", by mobilizing "their immense strength against themselves" (878). She says that men "have made for women an antinarcissism...the infamous logic of anti-love" (878). It is then apparent that Sappho and her world of female companionship and sisterhood act as a foil to this experience of isolated womanhood in the modern world. The world she designs and inhabits is predominantly feminine. Her verses, too, in their tales of love, betrayal, anger, pleasure, jealousy and longing, unambiguously belong to women and emotions. It is not only erotic but sensuous, gorgeous, sisterly and motherly - all in all, it is a celebration of the female and the feminine. The presence of the body with the mind, the rhythmic convergence of the erotic and the spiritual permeates her didactic poetry. And through this, Sappho is able to create a "gendered space", for an expression of the Female Self in her work. This is the reason she is hailed as the "Wise Sappho", and it is also why she can never be ignored in the history of the feminist literary movement, as Sappho herself had predicted long ago: "Somebody I tell you, will remember us hereafter" (E. 76).

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