
Freedom of Female Authorship in Sylvia Plath's Select Poetry

Soumita Mandal

M.A. in English Literature, UGC NET, Bankura University
Raipur, Bankura. West Bengal

Article Received: 16/01/2025

Article Accepted: 16/02/2025

Published Online: 17/02/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.238

Abstract

Sylvia Plath is one of the most celebrated and dynamic poets of the 20th century because of the lack of restrictions she practices in her writings. Her early death at the age of 30 brings an end to writing thought-provoking and powerful statements with raw confessions of her tragedies. Elements of her works captivate the concentration of readers who glimpse the reflection of her depression, catalog despair, violent emotion, tragic incidents, and obsession with death through her writings. The women then started to question and evaluate conventional rules and values, focusing on women's liberty, individuality, and autonomy. They must emerge from the traditional rules and limitations to achieve their lost power and societal position. When a woman can extinguish her doubts and fear and identify her power and potentiality, her rage turns into a social order. This paper intends to show the freedom of female authorship in Sylvia Plath's poems "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "The Colossus."

Keywords: Suicide, confessional, power, poetry, freedom.

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Joyce Carol Oats expounds Plath as 'one of the most celebrated and controversial postwar poets writing in English' (Joyce 21). Plath's mental anguish, unhappy marriage to Ted Hughes, and her wrath against her parents are also articulated in her poems, most of which are written during the final, turbulent weeks of her life. She is famed for winning the genre of confessional poetry. Unlike their predecessors who prioritized the presence of masks at the time of unveiling the true thoughts of poets, the confessional poets unravel domestic breakdown, mental illness, and sexual satisfaction or frustration as the subject of their poems in order to design new poetry. As a unique poetic symbol, they spotlight the presence of self in the poem. Plath's poems confront some issues like gender constructions, the social role of a person, and unrevealed life from her feminine perspective. She played a role in the movement of the human psyche: her engagement in separating the female from male subjugation.

Adrienne Rich finds a strong female voice in Plath's writings, 'it is finally the woman's sense of herself-embattled, possessed that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its

rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy' (Rich 523). Robert Phillips evaluated Plath's confessional poetry as 'poetry therapy' (Phillips 2). It is the outburst of neurotic anger through her creative art and shows her fascination with death. Her poems can be reviewed from a psychological point of view as well as a feministic point of view. Deborah S. Gentry has scrutinized that women characters in Plath's poetry and her novel *The Bell Jar* are moved forward by their desires for freedom from a wall of restrictions that are sketched by society to restrain women. The poet endeavored to find a way to move beyond body through suicide and took it positively as a form of feminist self-definition. However, the purpose of this paper is to represent the freedom of female authorship in Sylvia Plath's poems "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "The Colossus" through confessional mode.

For Plath, writing is a way of identifying herself, of opposing her deficient sense of identity. 'Haunted by a fear of her disintegration' Stevenson opines, Plath 'kept herself together by defining herself, constantly writing about herself, so that everyone could see her there, fighting and conquering an outside world that forever threatened her frail being' (Bloom 11). Butscher's notion was that Sylvia was three selves struggling with each other for domination. She was the humble, devoted, bright, and hard-working girl of a middle-class family. She was the golden girl on campus, destined for the best things, as well as the bitch goddess receiving her destruction. In *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Linda Wagner Martin treats Plath's suicidal depression as a phenomenon that is not related to the poet's day-to-day psychology.

Plath's confession of certain aspects of her personal life is beautifully portrayed in the poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." She was the daughter of a German father, like the speaker of the poem "Daddy," and she attempted to commit suicide several times, like the subject of "Lady Lazarus." These poems are sketched in the genre of dramatic monologue, in which the poet manifests her idea through the assumed persona of another person. She wholeheartedly takes the idea of her poems as subjective effusion. These poems deserve special attention because they more bluntly address Plath's psychological conflicts.

It is an expression (outpour) of her neurotic anger through creative writing. It is therapy for her. The poem "Daddy" can be interpreted psychologically and symbolically and goes beyond the poet's life or experiences. The poem starts with the poet's verbal attack on her daddy – 'black shoe', a ghostly statue, a seal, a devil, a vampire, a German father, Hitler, and so on. Plath feels like a Jew who is also burnt in a Nazi concentration camp and unable to escape. This poem goes beyond the father-daughter relationship; it moves from personal experiences to worldly experiences like Father to Hitler, own misery to sufferings of Jews and inhumanity.

Written from the perspective of a girl addressing her 'daddy' who has the power to suppress her daughter, the poem reveals the poet's struggle to get her free from her father's influence. For 30 years, she has to live inside a black shoe, deprived of any kind of joy and happiness. The poet informed her father that she wished to kill him, but he died before she got that chance to do. She sketches her father as a bag full of God' and a horrifying statue

like a San Francisco seal. She says that she used to pray for her father's return from the dead world, and in German, she says, "Oh, you".

In the poem "Lady Lazarus," Plath terms the unnamed tormentor as 'Herr Doktor' (65) and 'Herr Enemy' (66). She compares herself to a victim of a Nazi concentration camp, indicates her victory over death, which makes her a 'sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade' (4-5), and exhibits that victory as a grotesque revenge upon opposite sex :

Beware
Beware
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
Moreover, I eat men like air. (80-84)

The speaker of the poem "Daddy" refers to her father as a 'black shoe' (2) in which she has to suffer 'For thirty years' (4) and influences her suicide attempt to 'get back, back, back' (59) to him. She 'made a model' (64) of her father with whom she lived for some time, but now she has murdered a person and by doing so has killed both: 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through' (80). It is prominent that her identification with the Jew is the result of the crisis of representation in the place of her father. The speaker seeks to find him everywhere. Moreover, she visualizes every German as the image of her father because of this hallucination. It makes the German language obscene and directs to the first reference to the Holocaust :

And the language
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen
I began to talk like a Jew. (30-35)

Plath outlined "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" to A. Alvarez is 'some light verse' (Bloom 20), and it seems that the voice in these poems was not hers but of an imaginary persona. She sketched that the speaker in "Daddy" was a girl whose father was a Nazi and her mother was possibly part Jewish. The fact that the poet felt compelled to write poems in this fashion signifies that, even though she could not eliminate the poem's weakness, she was astute to reveal where that weakness lay.

Wieseltier criticizes that Plath's identification with the Jew is only for the introduction of Jewish history. Joyce Carol Oates reprehends Plath for 'snatching [her word] metaphors for her predicament from newspaper headlines' (Bloom 22); Seamus Heaney argues that in "Lady Lazarus," Plath attaches cultural reference to a 'vehemently self-justifying purpose' (Bloom 22); and Marjorie Perloff explains the references of Nazis as 'empty,' 'histrionic,' 'cheap shots,' 'topical trappings' and 'devices' which wraps true

meaning of poems. In all these criticisms, it can be said –either Plath tries to trivialize the Holocaust through personal references, or she attempts to aggrandize her personal experiences through historical events.

"Daddy" clearly depicts the transition from victimization to revenge. This allows the poem to be read personally as her vindictive assault on Otto Plath and Ted Hughes. The poem represents itself as a protest and freedom from an oppressive condition of life.

In an early poem, "The Colossus," Plath explores the state of consciousness on a more personal level. This poem delineates a daughter who is unsuccessfully struggling to recover her dead father and trying to persuade him to speak to her.

For thirty years now, I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser. (8-10)

Here, the poet evokes a mood of futility. If her father could speak, he would have nothing to say. The daughter wastes her energy by engaging in this obsessive activity. As in "Daddy," the daughter sacrifices her own vitality to revivify a dead father.

While this poem is unquestionably confessional, Lynda K. Bundtzen asserts that "The Colossus" exposes the subordinate position of the poet related to her husband, father, and other institutions framed and dominated by a patriarchal culture. It is based upon her experience exhibiting a regressive tone in which she is engaged in creative art and literary phenomenon, and it also focuses on feminine modes of life, which are full of bitter experiences of her domestic life and married life. She secretly tries to free herself from the stricture and obligations that prevail in society. Plath unravels the distorted visions of women trying to free themselves from the restricted circumstances of traditional gender roles. She writes to her mother in a letter that she is struggling to get the strength to claim the right to be unhappy while being joyful for creative affirmation. In this poem, the poet attempts to bring the huge figure into existence. She feels like an ant compared to the gigantic father figure who is now a ruin'(23) and is described with the words 'fluted bones and acanthine hair'(20). She tries to be protected and sheltered inside his father's gigantic ear. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, Plath's persona finds herself softening with this human-shaped ruin. Squatting in his ear protects her from the wind at night, and she watches the sunrise at dawn under his tongue. This ruined figure implies how her recollections allow her only an imperfect configuration of the lost paternal body with fantasy. Her endless mourning creates not only a fragmentary but also an inanimate representation of her father.

After analyzing these poems, the confessional poets can make the readers empathize with their sufferings and establish a strong relationship between them. Public confession is not easy. Without regret, sharing the deepest feelings of mind through poetry is an act of courage. Unveiling their personal life in front of others is not easy, especially when the family, society, critics, and readers notice that she has broken some literary and moral rules.

Using this mode, Plath has exhibited her liberty and ability to express intense desire, feelings, emotions, frustrations, and depression in her writings without filtering them through the figures of styles, Symbols, mythological or imaginary characters.

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Citation:

Soumita Mandal" Freedom of Female Authorship in Sylvia Plath's Select Poetry" *International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2025, pp. 235-238. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.238.