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A Woman cannot be Her Mother: Resisting the Inherited-violence in the Poetry of Selected Modern Women Poems

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Abstract:

The paper deals with modern women poet's resistance of the inherited violence that had been suppressing them for years and from a very early age, emphasizing on the silencing of women as it is one of universal and the most damaging type of violence. Like other type of violence, silencing of women is passed from one generation to the other, but unlike the other types of violence the silencing in many cases is imposed by mothers on their daughters for many reasons. As this legacy was passed down through generations, women poets had to find their voices resisting this inherited silencing to find their voices and tell their own stories out loud. The resisting of silencing is tackled seriously as it is not only a problem that faces the poets themselves but all the coming generations. The paper focuses on the women poets' resistance of the systematically enforced intergenerational silencing and how they use poetry to break this silencing and reclaiming their narrative authority. Then two poems of the outstanding poets Syliva Plath and Carol Ann Duffy will be discussed.

Keywords: Resisting, Inherited-Violence, Women Poetry, Syliva Plath, Carol Ann Duffy.

1. Introduction

Every day and in every dark corner of a house or a work place there are women who are fighting violence in all its forms and shapes which is inflected upon them merely because of their gender. For ages violence against women has been one of the disturbing practices that had targeted women from very early age. Violence has many definitions and it came in different shapes and types, yet the silencing of the voices of women is the cruelest and has a lasting effect. To be silent is just like to be marginalized, having no identity, and subjected. The women face such challenges from early age; she is to grow with idea of being different from the man, and more precisely inferior to him.

Violence is not only the power that causes physical injury, or it is any act that causes harm or injury to a person as American scientist H.L. Nieburg describes (1963). The physical violence can be seen clearly and treated, yet it is the psychological one that lurks deeply and has way more dangerous effect than most of the physical violence; physical violence sneaks deeply inside to kill silently. Silencing is one face of violence which most of the times leads to serious mental problems like depression, complex trauma, and suicide. Physical and psychological

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violence against women, on house, streets, or work place violates human rights, and silencing women is a pure act of violence. Speaking is a right not a privilege and patriarchy tend for ages to enforce silence on women using fear of rejection and punishment as a tool to emblements the silencing. The inherit cage of silence women passed down from one generation to the other is from mothers is designed by the patriarchal society.

Psychologically, violence has a long-term impact causing anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and even suicidal tendencies to mention the least. The exposures to violence, especially for children, tend to increase the risk of contracting mental as well as physical health disorder as Felitti et al. (1998) assure. The maltreatment for children in particular can even affect the development of core brain structure (Teicher et al. 2016), while the repeated exposure to violence can affect the victim's identity and leads to complex PTSD (Herman, 1992).

In general, women silencing is complicated since it can be tackled through psychological, social and cultural dimensions. There was always a debate between sociologists and psychologists about violence being inherited or not. Aliye. Mavili asserts that violence can be learned through the family whether directly or indirectly by witnessing or exposing to it (2014). Also, silencing can be literal or symbolic, and it is often inherited. (Szlyk et al. 2019). Mothers have been taught to keep silence about violence (especially sexual & gender oppression) and buries it in a secret closet; daughters inherent to keep those secrets by observing or learning or by being asked to, to become an intergenerational phenomenon. A woman would be harmed and even some commit suicide out of the parallel silence and secrets within the same family. Violence and Gender oppression of women has become intergenerational repetition and part of women formation and character development. Women would retreat to be silent for many reasons (Richards 2020). One of the most prominent reasons is to keep the family coherent and to protect the children from pain; believing that their silence will spare the emotional burden and consequences of speaking out in the society. Out of the families bonds, lack of trust in the justice system, and blaming the victim are also reasons. Social norms and traditions that shape the society to be patriarchy is the dominant element.

The traditional power shaped men-women relationship which is often the source and the reason of violence. The meaning is men are taught to use their power to control women (Iswahyudi etal. 2024). That what is called male domination culture and what caused violence against females in social life (Rahmawati et al., 2021). Being a woman is the outcome of many combined constructions: historical, social and cultural are among, a part of the biological fate. So, it is the society that shapes the idea of being a woman or the very meaning of a woman.

2. Theoretical Framework: Inherited Silencing and Female Poetic Resistance

The devoicing of women started very early; with the passing of time, it becomes an inherited habit that is being passed from one generation to the other. Mothers play crucial role unconsciously in perpetuating this imposed silencing, as they had been silenced before and convinced that this is the only way to be socially accepted in a male dominated society. For mother it is something instinctive to protect their children, so they do what it takes to pass what they learn to them including the gendered prescribed roles of women, the norms, the patriarchal coded messages which seem harmless in the surface but they convey very disturbing and suppressing messages.

The roles set for women were limited, they are to be good women and that is when they are passive, submissive, and obedient wives and selfless, self-sacrificing mothers who are simply created to stay at home to serve and fulfill men's desires. If a woman fails to be good, angle– like figure, so she is definitely evil, who will be cast off, marginalized, and rejected. A young woman or even a girl is used to be told that she should be quiet, meek, obedient, and silent if she wants to be socially accepted. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that the literature of the nineteenth century force the girls and women to choose between only these two roles the angel in the house or the madwoman, witch, or monstrous role (2020). In brief the young women grow to believe that they should accept any form of violence as long as it is socially accepted, and silencing is no exception. Ironically, the women

depicted socially rejected are proved to be not evil at all; they are simply creative, cleaver, and passionate women, among those who were also labeled as not angelic are women writers and poets as:

Traditionally, women were not expected to be creative or ambitious, they were taught that they do not need education or successful career or even aspiration to be true women. The woman has to be beautiful, obedient, and silent and to willingly embrace the man-made prescribed gender roles of wife and mother. In brief the woman should be an angel. However, women are warned that if they do not behave like angels, they will be monsters (Al-Wattar 2013).

Such restrains and social expectations hinder women from even considering going openly about their creativity or to start a successful career, not even to aspire to. In her 1931 essay "Professions for Women", Virginia Woolf asserts that women writers should 'kill the angel in the house' as the only way for them to write. By rejecting the restrictive role imposed on them, women will be freed from the restrains of the patriarchal society and control their voice and narrative. It is the act of "[k]illing the Angel in the House," wrote Virginia Woolf that "was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (1931).

In patriarchal societies, it is disturbing to see a woman holding a pen and trying to write her experience. In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf talked the dilemma of women's writing and brought it into question by imagining that William Shakespeare has a sister, Judith, who dreamt to be a writer. Woolf's treatise uncovered that the male writer's way is paved, but Judith as a woman writer has "many ghosts to fight, [and] many prejudices to overcome" (2011). It is clear, then, that writing has become a way to give women a voice and that what threaten the phallogocentric strict discourse. This issue of female's writing within a male-dominated discourse has gained prominence in the works of several feminist theorists who take Jacques Lacan's theory of discourse as a framework of their investigation of this predicament. Based on Lacan's four types of discourse, Discourse of the master, University, Analyst, and Hysteric, patriarchal writers, and poets reject women's writings because they do not want to lose grip over language which grants them superiority and makes of them the master signifiers of the symbolic discourse. (Clemens and Grigg, 2006) To keep this privilege and to maintain the idea that "a pen is a metaphorical penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 2011) men will normally consider any discourse that does not correspond to his rules as hysteric. This explains why madness and hysteria are usually ascribed to women, especially women writers and poets. It also elucidates why the Discourse of the Hysteric can be perceived as a sign of resistance that marks the symptoms of rebellion to unsettle and deconstruct the man-created Master Discourse.

Since antiquity, women tried to express themselves by writing. It started by writing dairies, letters and private poetry. They struggled to be accepted and for their works to gain recognition. They fight to speak and to be heard. It is considered as a facet of resistance. Literature has its own voice, but even in writing women had no right to write and if they could, they could not publish under their real names. If we make a simple investigation, it will be obvious that since ancient times women were suppressed and prevented from writing. Sappho (360-570 BCE), a Creek poet, was denied and most of her works were destroyed and was defamed by males just because she was a woman (Rayor and Lardinois 2014) Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), from France, she had to face hash consequences for entering male domains (Brown-Grant 1999). Aphra Behn (1640-1689), a famous professional English playwright, was accused of being immoral (Todd 1997). Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the English philosopher and writer, her works was vilified because of her radical thoughts about women's rights (Gordon 2005). Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880) wrote under a male pen (George Eliot) to get rid of prejudice against women writers (Gilbert 1979). The Bronte Sisters also adopted male pen for the same reason (Showalter 1977).

Even with all the difficulties and obstacles women poets and writers face, they continue to resist and express themselves against all odds. Modern women writers and poets went deep and enter all facets of life. They fought hardly to be heard through exposing their experiences, trauma, conflict and fear to say the least. The world of literature witnesses the birth to great women poets and writers who resist the enforced silencing through their literary oeuvre.

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Modern women poets in particular play vital role in breaking the silence imposed on them and address this problem along with all other issues which face women openly and candidly. The poets empower themselves and endeavor to reclaim their voices to be able to control their lives and narratives. Syliva Plath and Carol Ann Duffy are among the most outstanding poets who had great influence on changing the inherited silence and setting women free.

3. Resisting Patriarchal Silencing in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

Silencing is an essential strategy for survival. Unfortunately, while mothers were protecting their daughters, they silenced them passing on cultural norms, social restrains and trauma. However, the loss of voice for women especially in literature creates an absence, if women poets have no voice they will have no agency, nor stories to be told. In her poetry, the groundbreaking American poet Sylvia Plath writes about the enforced silencing of women, mother –daughter relation, and how mothers rendered voiceless while the daughters had to face a systematic silencing, suppression, and disempowering and struggle to break the enforced silence, find their voice and true identity.

Despite her struggle with mental illness and her dark and lifelong battle with depression, Plath strongly asserts that she would not become "the silenced hysteric", this could be clearly seen in her reclaiming of her voice to articulate various aspects of her womanhood: "the suffering, frightened, despairing, desiring, lustful, raging, vengeful woman." (Yorke,1991).

Being a confessional poet, Plath uses her poetry to speak openly about deeply private matters such her personal trauma, mental illness, subjection, and many other issues. In her poem "Daddy" (1965) she talks frankly and boldly about her anger defying the male authority represented by the two male figures in her life her father and her husband Ted Hughes. The poem is a courageous act of breaking the silence with its grand confessional and shocking opening:

You do not do, you do not do

Any more, black shoe

In which I have lived like a foot...

(Plath, 1981).

Plath uses "black shoe" imagery to represent her suffocating and restrained life enforced by her father. She had to live the life decided to her by her father the representative of patriarchal system and ideologies. She is expected to embrace this stifling role that had been inherited and passed down to her even if it is harming and makes her "barely daring to breathe or Achoo." (Plath, 1981).

Throughout the poem, the poet presented her father as the dominating male figure using various images, once he is compared to a Nazi as in the lines:

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika" (Lines 45-48)

Another he is a vampire who drains her blood:

The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year, (Lines),

Her father hindered her from having her own autonomous voice and identity. In his presence she had to be obedient, passive, and ultimately silent. Yet, Plath refuses to be silenced; she is rebelling and finally setting herself free to tell about her traumatic experiences, sharing her anger and frustration. More importantly, she is finally able to speak as before she rendered speechless due to the patriarchal authority represented by her father in the first place, then her husband.

Her enforced silence and lifelong struggle to have a voice is clearly stated when she said that "I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw". 223 Giving to the fact that her father died when she was young, the lines could refer to actual act of talking to her father and having a real conversation. However, in the poem as a whole her father is presented as a Nazi, vampire and a god-like dominating figure of whom she "... have always been scared of ...,"222 which suggests that his presence is silencing her as she feels the lack of the ability to speak and communicate with him, as well as the distance between them and how he seems so unreachable.

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The overwhelming feelings of anger and fear, as well as the paralyzing weight of his presence —even his memory muted her voice. Yet she is not to be passive and refuses to simply accept to be silent. Realizing the gravity of the matter in hand, she chooses a violent, shocking ending of her suffering that suite such an immense matter.

As silencing is an act of violence, Plath's response was equally violent; she declares "I have had to kill you."222 though it is a symbolic murder of the oppressive male figure, it seems the only way out for her. By killing her father and ending his damaging influence on her she is finally free. She declares her deliverance saying that "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." 222 This shocking and even taboo-breaking ending is a triumphant act of emancipation from patriarchy.

4. Reclaiming Female Poetic Voice in Carol Ann Duffy's "Little Red Cap"

Women poets face another kind of inherited silencing that is the literary silencing. For ages women were represented in literature merely by male authors and poets, they were deprived from the voice to tell their own stories. To be a woman poet in a male-dominated literary canon is challenging and for women poets to write means that they have to face many obstacles. As the renowned American poet Anne Sexton puts it "a poet/ a lady of evil luck" (Sexton 2001). Yet many women poets boldly went though many difficulties and defying patriarchy to reclaim their voice and to write their own stories.

The first step for women poets is to build their own identity, one that is not defined by patriarchy and definitely not the one that is being prescribed for women and passed generation after generation. This process of self-creation is essential as through it women poets can assert their poetic voice and authority, and to achieve that they need to liberate themselves first from social and literary confines and break free from women's "clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom" (Kumin, 2001).

So, women poets embark on a long and tiresome journey to reclaim and assert their poetic voice. Yet Gilbert and Gubar affirm that women poets face a crucial challenge, that is the 'anxiety of authorship', which is "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her".(qtd. In Villar-Argaiz , 2008). However, the challenge was bravely taken by many women poets who endeavor to write using their own voice and tell their own stories. The change began with the rewriting, reforming, and revising the distorted and misrepresented old images of the women to change the inherited patriarchal ideologies in society and in literature alike.

Carol Ann Duffy, the first woman to be a poet laureate, is among women poets who assert her authority using her own voice to write her story, experiences, hopes and personal issues. For her poems, she chooses strong female narrators to voice the critical concerns of contemporary women, their experiences and anxieties challenging the inherited patriarchal literary tradition. She rejected the inherited stereotypical gendered prescribed role predetermined for women and imposed on them. The clichéd canonical images of women and the stories of contemporary women who used to be marginalized, dehumanized and silenced are now represented by the poet. She gives voice to those who had been devoiced by patriarchal society or by their families or in the literary arena.

In her 1999 collection *The World's Wife Duffy* claims her voice and poetic authority. The poems in the collection are:

> direct and critical in which the poet endows the female characters with intelligence, self-integrity, and self-consciousness as well as a voice of their own. The feminist voice created by the poet in the poems is empowered by giving the women the role of storyteller, a role used to be only for male authors. The storytellers in Duffy's poems have been endowed with the power to retell, rewrite and revise the old stories from fairy tales, mythology or history which had been written by patriarchal males. (Al-Wattar, 2023).

Duffy uses revision as the main technique in her collection; she revised old stories from mythology, history and fairy tales, the three major sources in which lurk male-created the majority of the archetypal female characters. Alicia Ostriker explains that women poets' indulged in feminist revision of such material as the core of revisions "lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes" (1987). She asserts that while women poets

practice revision they mix both creation and destruction, as they "simultaneously deconstruct a prior 'myth' or 'story' and construct a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself" (1987).

Duffy, while revising, she put women in the center of the narrative in which they used to be undermined and marginalized, even dehumanized in the old patriarchal literary tradition. She works on rewriting the stories using the voice of the once silenced and marginalized women. The poet's feminist revision of the old characters defies well-established male's authority which deliberately disempowered, silenced and demined women. In her poems, women are bestowed with voice and authority as they are the narrators of their own stories from their perspective. By creating women narrators who are realistic, Duffy "knocks the predetermined and culturally romanticized heroic and manly figures off from their pedestal" (Al-Wattar, 2023).

In *The World's Wife* many poems are titles after their narrators husbands' "The Devil's Wife"," Mrs. Lazarus"," Mrs. Darwin ","Mrs. Faust ", "Mrs. Midas"," Mrs. Sisyphus", and " Mrs. Icarus", among others, which is a direct critique of the tendency to defined women only in relation to their men, challenging the manly and superior images of their famous husband. However, the poet opens the collection with a subverting revision of a well-known classic Grimm's fairy tale of "Little Red Riding Hood"; the reason is pretty simple she had to start by telling a story similar to her own, to lead the way for other characters to follow in next poems. The poem "Little Red Cap" is about the journey of the speaker, a teenager who is in seek of self-realization, self-autonomy, empowerment and more importantly a voice. Also the poem is about the challenges and biases women poets face in an androcentric literary society.

The original fairy tale, just like other tales, set the prescribed gender roles for women presenting stereotypes for women who are week, passive, obedient and silent. The tale of the red riding hood gives a very distorting image of the girl as so innocent, week, and even naïve who is in need for man's help to survive. Duffy revises the original tale starting by making the girl the narrator of the story. Though the poet keeps the classic story lines, yet she revised the tale subverting the patriarchal stereotypical female characters and patriarchal encoded messages.

The poem persona is not like the girl of the original fairy tale, she is not a victim who is reliant on a male to save and protect her. She is more of a modern girl who is trying to discover her real identity, potentials, and gain a voice to be a poet. The poem opens with the line "*At childhood's end*, "(Duffy, 2015) is a direct indication to the beginning of a very crucial stage of human life that is the adolescent. In the poem, the poet describes the surroundings of the girl as that of the modern urban society, yet there is sense of marginalization and isolation. The persona reveals that she has a feeling that she does not belong and that she is being casted away from her social life. It is a place which the speaker is leaving in favor of the wood where there is the wolf, there she believes that she can find a place for her own, her own realm. She describes her first encounter with the wolf saying:

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud

In his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw

Red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears

He had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!

In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me

Sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink. (Duffy, 2015)

Duffy in her revision makes the wolf a poet, who is reading poetry out loud with indisputable authority, an act that questions the masculinist poetic traditions. The wolf stands for male poets who have dominated the world of poetry and literature as well. The way the wolf is giving poetry reading out loud suggesting the greater publicity and publishing opportunities male poets men commonly have in comparison to women poets.

Reading the lines, it is clear that the girl is captivated and lured by the wolf, so she makes sure that she will attract his attention. Yet what really attracted her is a question that will be definitely raised in the minds of the readers. She answers this persisting question with one word 'poetry', she continues to tell her story addressing the readers saying:

... *You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry*

The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods

Away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place

Lit by the eyes of owls. (Duffy, 2015)

The speaker is seeking new experiences, knowledge, poetic voice and authority. Despite the lurking danger of the dark woods, she as a young eager and aspiring poet is willingly following the wolf into the mysterious woods. The little red cap's act reveals that this girl is in fact having a free well to think, to take decisions she is endowed with agency and power.

In the lair of the wolf, she finds a world of books and language in which she will learn her first lesson. However, as the speaker goes on with the telling of her story and how the years passed, she shows strong well and strength when she has rejected male suppression represented. With the passing of time the speaker tells how she used to sneak out when the wolf is asleep to discover the world of books and letters that is restricted only for males, till one day she discovers something way more exciting, a real treasure, she says:

... As soon as he slept, I crept to the back

Of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books

Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head

Warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood (Duffy, 2015)

What had charmed the young girl from the very beginning is the excitement and thrill of the wolf/poet's for poetry and books. Discovering the wolf's library gives the girl a great opportunity in this realm to enrich her experience and enhance her ability as a poet. The books which the poet used rich and lavish imageries to describe are the sole living thing for the persona. The word on the tongue the ability to speak, to recite poetry and to have poetic voice is the real charm; poetry is warm, beating, frantic and winged, it the only thing that makes her feel alive.

The girl after spending years in the woods, she is now self-conscious and fully aware of the damaging relationship with the wolf and it consequences. She asserts that when she first entered the wood she "... was young—and it took ten years" (Duffy, 2015) to finally be able to speak out loud, to have a voice and to tell her own story. After all these years she realized that:

... a greying wolf

Howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out

Season after season, same rhyme, same reason. (Duffy, 2015)

In comparison with her liveliness and creativity the wolf's poetry seems to be outdated and out-worn, which is a direct criticism of the male-dominated literary tradition and how this tradition is turning to be boring and even tedious as there is only the poetry of male poets. Duffy ends the poem with a surprising twist, when the now mature, fully aware young woman poet takes her final decision:"... I took an axe to the wolf/ As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat". (Duffy 2015).

For ten long years, the poem persona was subject to suppression, the abusive, self-centered wolf / male figure used to undermine her creativity and muted her. Yet eventually she was powerful enough to kill the wolf and became her own rescuer. In the final line of the poem, she declares her victory "Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone." (Duffy 2015) She is going out of the woods as a triumphant laureled heroine who is going back to her old life and society, but as a totally different person. She is a poet with authorial voice, free, strong, and independent, who is holding her "flowers", her poems, and singing out loud without the help anyone.

The symbolic killing of the wolf is a bold rejection of the silencing, suffocating domination and the stereotype female characters set by the old, worn-out patriarchal literary traditions. The liberation of women from the old role of silent muses for male poets and the inherited gendered prescribed roles set for them by patriarchy is liberation from the unfair persecution of women in both private and public spheres which prevented them from having their well-deserved and hardly-win place in the Western literary canon.

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5. Conclusion

Through an examination of silencing-resisting of women, particularly in relation to literary and parental context, the research demonstrates how women voices that once were suppressed by social norms and patriarchal constrains can restore their voices again through their literary oeuvre. In her poetry, the confessionalism Sylvia Plath unveiled the weight of patriarchal suppression of her voice in her poem "Daddy". She speaks about the burden of silencing and reclaims her voice and breaks the silence. Carol Ann Duffy, who is well known of her feminist revision of female figures, reintroduces the female characters who were muted in myths and fairytales bestowed them with voice to tell their own stories and reclaim narrative. In her *The World's Wife*, Duffy restores the agency of those silenced and marginalized women. Duffy and Plath's works show that to resist silence is not just an act to survive but also redefine identity, transforming absence into presence, oppression into art and silence into speech. Plath and Duffy assert that women's resistance is both deeply personal and profoundly literary, a legacy that continues to challenge silencing across generations.

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