

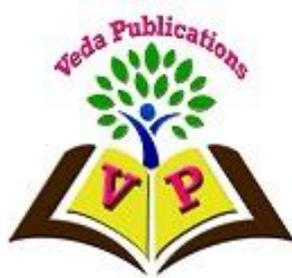


## REDEFINING MOTHERHOOD - AN ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S POEM *METAPHOR* AND *MORNING SONG*

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### ABSTRACT



Motherhood is regarded as the most glorified state of a woman's life. The romanticised and idealised images of motherhood perpetuated by patriarchal discourses have put motherhood on such an elevated pedestal that, under such assumptive images, it becomes difficult to realistically analyse, unravel and accept the real feelings associated with motherhood. When women started coming out in the late 1950s to find their own autonomy and started a journey to find and explore the "self", they found that the stereotypical beliefs regarding motherhood and femininity collided and contradicted with the reality of their aspirations and decisions. Hence, feminists and writers have frequently challenged the patriarchal underpinnings of such concepts, and in the process, have redefined the state of motherhood. This paper, through the analysis of Sylvia Plath's poems "Metaphor" and "Morning Song", seeks to examine how her poetry has contested and undermined existing notions of motherhood, thereby redefining and creating an alternative discourse of motherhood.

**Keywords:** *Motherhood, Femininity, Metaphor, Morning Song.*



"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor ... I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."

(Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*)

Post World War II, American society saw a rigid social structure with definite gender roles. As Vanessa Martins Lamb points out, "Have dinner ready, prepare yourself, prepare the children, minimize all noise, be happy to see him, listen to him, make the evening his", (*Evasion of Growth*, 5), here is what young women learned at school in the 1950's in America. As Plath puts it "they don't believe marriage can work without woman becoming maid, servant, nurse, and losing brain" (461). However, slowly this structure led to suffocation and discontentment in the women of that age.

Since centuries a man has the whole world to explore and rule, a woman on the other hand, was supposed to prosper in the confinements of the four walls. And within those confinements she came to realise that there must be more to life; "there is something missing" (Lamb, Vanessa. 1). And this led to a journey of self discovery- A journey that began with full storm in the late 1950's and 60s; a journey where the destination was no longer limited to motherhood.

Motherhood is regarded as the most glorified state of a woman's life. So much so that, throughout history motherhood has been universally celebrated, venerated and viewed as the culmination of womanhood. Definitions of the feminine and femininity usually coalesce with the idea of fertility. Since ages women have been raised to believe that their sole purpose in life is to bear children and manage households. Society has defined motherhood according to their narrow perception

and wide expectation and women have been silently portraying that image, regardless of whether it comes to them naturally or has been thrust upon them.

Patriarchal discourses have put motherhood on such elevated pedestal that under such assumptive images, it becomes difficult to disclose and accept the real feelings associated with motherhood. When a woman becomes a mother, she finds these myths about motherhood conflicting with realities of the same. Her dreams and assumptions about this fantasy comes crashing down when it hits the insecurities over unwanted physical changes, morning sickness, postpartum depression, expectations and responsibilities. But as Lori Walls said "Women would often opt to experience the difficult aspects of motherhood in isolation rather than risking the consequences of having publically failed in their roles as mother." Hence, no one ever talked about it or acknowledges it and under the pressure of fulfilling this made up role and proving her worth as a woman, she ignores the needs of her own mental health.

However, in the 1950s and 60s when women started coming out to find their own autonomy, feminists and writers set out to redefine motherhood. There came a time when they started challenging this discourse and concentrated on how they really feel. They rewrote the myths and assumptions regarding motherhood and exposed the realities of their experience with pregnancy, child birth and motherhood. One of the most common icons of that time is Sylvia Plath.

Plath, who is often described as an *accidental feminist*, dared to write about her true feelings regarding motherhood and contradicted any myth that is believed to accompany motherhood. This paper, analyses Plath's two poems- "Metaphor" and "Morning Song, from her collection *Ariel*, (1965). These poems were written after the birth of Plath's Daughter Frieda. Where metaphor deals with pregnancy, "Morning Song" deals with the time right after the delivery of the child. Hence, there is a continuity of thought and time in these two poems, which makes it easier to understand every aspect of motherhood. This paper seeks to examine how Plath's poetry has contested and undermined



existing notions of motherhood thereby redefining and creating an alternative discourse of motherhood.

Often motherhood is believed to be accompanied with a sublime and unadulterated joy of making something living and breathing. A mother is expected to take pride in the fact that she has this gift of reproducing. But Plath questions this notion when she highlights how she felt used. She sees herself as merely a “means” to bring the child on this earth. She is merely a “stage” where Pregnancy, like a “drama” played out within her. (Beauvoir (de), Simone, *The Second Sex*, 512)

Plath also breaks the assumption that mother experiences spontaneous overflow of an unparallel and incomparable love for the child, when she writes about how different the act of making a child is from the reality of the child. A woman comes together with a man because of her love for him, hence “love sets” the child (compared to a gold watch) “going”, however that love for the father is not extended to the reality of the child. Hence, Plath shows that how her love for her child developed over time and how she initially felt distant from the child.

The tone in the poem “Morning song” is distant. The poet does not feel any love or attachment towards the child. He/she is as inanimate to her as the “elements” around her and this is why she places the child amongst elements and not with herself. The child is still not a reality for the mother; therefore, child and mother are still on opposite spectrum. The mother is not able to communicate or connect to the child she has given birth to. Hence the child is like a new statue brought and kept in a “drafty museum” and the mother is like the walls of that museum. Nothing related to the child arouses love or affection in the poet. The cries of the child is “bald”, hence we see and unusual and an unpleasant description of a child.

However, this lack of connection and affection does not stop the mother from tending to the needs of the child, “at one cry” of the baby, the mother would “stumble from bed” and tend to the needs of the child. Nevertheless, with time a bond is formed between the mother and the child. Plath thus ends this second poem by emphasising that cries (which was earlier bald) has now changed into “handful of

notes” and “clear vowels” hence she can now communicate with the child.

As Simone De Beauvoir points out, the “splendours of maternity” are forever sung to a woman, while the drawbacks of her situation—menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery—are all justified by this “marvellous privilege” she has of bringing children into the world. But it is highly questionable if accepting the drawback is as easy as this ideology makes it look.

Plath through her work shows the constant challenges and inner turmoil that a woman faces in the arms of these unwanted changes that accompany pregnancy. Metaphor explores the insecurity and disintegration that a woman goes through on the onset of unwanted physical changes. Plath used unusual and unpleasant imageries to explain and express the emotions that a woman goes through during pregnancy.

In stark contrast to these myths, Plath’s poem shows that pregnancy is not always embraced and associated with undoubted and certain feelings of “being a part of something bigger”, As Collette describes in *l’Etoile Vesper* “pleasant pregnancy is ‘a man’s pregnancy’” (Beauvoir(de), Simone. *The Second Sex*, 519), Plath exposes the concerns and diffidence of a pregnant woman, who has lost her body and looks in the dawn of pregnancy. She is no longer a delicate rose, with perfect curves and ideal body, she now resembles “a melon strolling on two tendrils.” Plath uses an imagery of yeast rising on the loaf to describe the progress of pregnancy.

“It is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny. It is her natural calling”. (Beauvoir, 501) For a very long time reproducing children was seen as an obvious and inseparable part of a woman’s life. Reproducing was a duty and not a decision for a woman. Women were expected to embrace this experience with open arms and no qualms. But one always wonders if pregnancy comes as naturally as the society thought it does. And moreover, were women always as eager for it? Experiences of pregnancy and motherhood is highly universalized and generalized, so much so that any variation to it was not just unacceptable and shocking but also un-talked about.



One such experience that Plath explores in *metaphor* is that of contraception. With looming physical changes that threatens a woman's sense of self, often times pregnant women undergo uncertainties regarding the continuity of pregnancy. But at a time when child bearing was indisputable the duty of every woman, society failed to acknowledge and accept this internal conflict. Though women realised that motherhood is essential and wanted it just as badly as society expected them to, nevertheless they also experienced doubt and uncertainty that accompanied this monumental change in their lives.

Plath ends her poem "Metaphor" on the same uncertain note circumscribing the idea of motherhood where she foregrounds an aspect that is intertwined with pregnancy— abortion. Abortion has universally been viewed in a negative light by most religions and communities. Betty Friedan contradicts this idea of enforced motherhood when she says that, "Chosen motherhood is the real liberation". However, in a predominantly patriarchal set up, the idea of abortion remains inherently unacceptable. Therefore, as women lack control over their bodies and sexuality, they have been deprived of exercising this choice within most communities. And this makes pregnancy looks even more as a trap and often suffocates the mother. Or as Plath puts it, "there's no getting off" from the "boarded train".

Friedan, writes in *the feminine mystique* "It is wrong to keep spelling out unnecessary choices that makes women unconsciously resist either commitment or motherhood". The conflict between career and motherhood remains an enduring question for women all over the world. Women in the late 1950s and 60s were often forced to choose between career and motherhood which could not be perceived to exist in the same realm which consequently led to a major conflict where women had to choose one "identity".

Marriage was the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. (Beauvoir, 445) It is therefore evident that though men enjoyed an independent and individualistic identity, a woman did not. She has always had a dependent identity; she was either identified as somebody's daughter, a wife or a mother, but rarely just a woman. And though after

the World War II, in early 1950s women themselves accepted this "second hand identity", by the time they reached late 1950s this lifestyle was not enough. This discontent is well explained by Friedan:

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-- 'Is this all?'

As Plath writes in her journal, she can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living. She want to due to the urge to "excel" (Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*)

This discontent and the urge of finding something more in life, thus led to a major revolution in the history of women which saw women transform from dependent other halves to independent whole.

But like any other transformation, even this one was gradual and full of obstacles. One of the main obstacles was the idea of womanhood for women themselves. Though women did realise that "something is missing", they were still unable to grab that missing piece as it contradicted their traditional image of their femininity. This intense internal conflict led to an identity crisis which is well documented in the journals and works of Sylvia Plath.

When Plath was in her early 20s she was surrounded by women who were housewives, thus inculcating in her an image of womanhood that is strongly associated with the values of being an ideal housewife. However, in the late 50s when the discontentment of housewives was becoming prominent, thereby propelling them out of their constrained roles to step into this big bad world, Plath, a married woman by then, became one of them. Hence, we see how she was caught up in this transition, thus ingraining in her two very opposite and conflicting definitions of womanhood.

Plath was therefore caught up in a time where on a very subconscious level she still had the values of an "ideal housewife" infused in her psyche, while she was also a newly empowered young ambitious woman trying to find independent identity and leave a mark in this world. Therefore the same woman who



thought that to be deprived of the experience of child birth and motherhood is a “death indeed”, also questions “when and if” is she would feel anything at all for her child. (Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 495, 454)

What made matters worse in Plath’s case— a representation of many women her age— is her instability in her career as well when she became pregnant with Frieda. There was a “gulf between her desires and ambition.” (Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 273). She was still attempting to find and establish herself as a career woman/writer, like many other women she was also trying to find her “calling”.

“I, sitting here as if brainless wanting both a baby and a career but God knows what if it isn’t writing” (Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 469)

As she points out, “I hunger after nebulous vision of success.” ((Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 518) She was still trying to “find herself” and be a “contribution to her marriage and not “a dependent weak half” as most women prior to her generation were, when she became a mother (Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 446). The demands of being a mother limited Plath’s exploration of “self”. Plath’s journals are a testimony to these rather conflicting desires. They reveal a woman who is unstable in both the identities. While she was still working towards becoming a successful woman, she was thrust with the responsibility of being a mother. The journals document the intensely conflicting realities of her life and underscore the motherhood/career dichotomy.

This conflict rises from the gestation period itself, as is evident in the poem *Metaphor*, where Plath contemplates her own purpose and self worth. She questions whether bearing and raising children is all that constitutes a woman’s life. She feels that she is just a means to ensure continuity of life and nothing more; “A stage, where some other life is enacted. She felt like a cow in calf, only useful for the milk she produces, indicating to her purpose and worth being limited to her ability to breed and feed children.

This particular feeling of being nothing more than medium or a “mean” or a “stage” grows into the

period following the delivery of the child as well. It is seen in the poem “The Morning Song”, the monotonous responsibilities of a mother, where each morning and every night, Plath was rendering to the needs of the child instead of writing the poetry that she deeply wanted to. Hence, women saw their worth and importance limited to or based on their ability of being a mother. And this gradually led to an intense confrontation between two differing identities and goals.

This contemplation during pregnancy, matured to major identity crisis after delivery. Plath often felt like children stifled her art. Her career lay neglected on the fringes of her life when motherhood took up most of her time. In her children, whom she compares to the sea, she- the cloud, sees her effacement. Whatever identity Plath had found before her pregnancy was getting overshadowed and disintegrated in the dawn of motherhood, thus, creating an image that shatters the romanticised images that dominate the ideas of motherhood. Motherhood, in this poem, can be seen as an obstacle and a limitation.

However, it is important to note that in spite of these dark and negative emotions accompanying motherhood, Plath does not reject the love that a mother has for her child. Though, at times, she saw her children as obstacles, she also mentions them as an “impetus” to her writing. The conflicts regarding motherhood can be attributed to the fear that it instils in the mother. A mother in an age where women were trying hard to find a place in the professional world as well, Plath writes that she had a fear of becoming “one of those[...] blue stocking grotesques”. She had worked hard to become a writer. Her first book was already published before Frieda was born. Hence, her poems reflect how pregnancy and motherhood thwarted her growth as a writer. Plath felt that this new identity of a mother was overpowering her identity as a writer.

In conclusion one can say that, Plath’s poetry is an exploration of female identity. Her poetry articulates the enduring struggle between various roles that women are expected to play in a patriarchal society. Undercutting conventional notions associated with motherhood Plath’s poetry challenges stereotypical representations of a child



and a mother. Her poetry is also a journey that captures the minute realities that governs the life of a woman.

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