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Anxiety of identity & true nature of women in American Poet-Anne sexton & Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract

The research paper aims to study the similarities in writing patterns of women in the Eastern and the Western world giving special attention to the confessional poet Anne Sexton who was a post- modern American poet and who possessed expertise in writing in autobiographical style and Sarojini Naidu who was the torch-bearer and harbinger of modern thought in India. The two women had different upbringing, lived in different countries with different cultures but there was a still a strange similarity in their writings. The paper does not aim to project the gynocritical analysis, but it covers a variety of aspects such as treatment of images, metaphoric use of language and idea of life and death along with feminine anguish.

Keywords: Gynocritical, autobiographical, patriarchy, post-colonial, identity, empowerment

1. Introduction

Anne Sexton was born in the year 1928 in Massachusetts, USA. She started writing poem at an early age. She attended lot of workshops with Robert Lowell, who pioneered writing in the Confessional genre which was absolutely new and unique in the world of English Literature. Anne Sexton shared the Literature platform of the age with big names like W.D Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, George Starbuck and Robert Lowell. The literature world experienced a new wave during the times of these authors. They rejected the traditional way of writing poems. They did not find writing about nature or the themes which the earlier poets dealt with, appealing but they wrote about their own experiences in a verse form. For many authors their own lives and politics seemed to require a more personal, even 'Confessional' writing. Sexton's poetry reflects this tendency and it moves from early impersonal academic verse to more open forms and a freer expression of feeling. Her poetry dealt with subject matter that was never written earlier in the American Literature. Sexton handled themes and subjects which were considered a taboo for the society. Traditionally they were never discussed in poetry. Themes such as mental breakdowns, suicide, incest, abortion made her the confessional poet. Although, the term confessional poetry was first coined by M.L.Rosenthal through a review, entitled 'Poetry as Confession' written discussing Robert Lowell's approach of writing poetry in 'Life Studies', Sexton made it her own by writing extensively as per the genre. Lowell encouraging the confessional label asserted that 'Life Studies' was about direct experiences and not symbols and it tells his personal story and memories. Rosenthal praised Lowell for removing the mask and emerging as "The damned speaking-sensibility of the world"(Sharma, 21) For some literary critics, it is the phenomenon of America in 1960s and early 1970s, best defined with help of adjectives such as America post- Christian, post-Kennedy, post-pill. According to the Academy of American poets, confessional poetry differs from the poetry of the sixteenth century because of its rejection of the standards for appropriate content. Some critics, like Howe argues, "Confessional poetry is the one, in which the writer speaks to the readers telling him something about his life. It unmask the poet's true nature and provides an insight into his private life" (Wagner-Martin) Sexton found this genre to be a channel of redeeming her unbearable emotional crisis and venting the repressed anger inside her. Since Sexton had a history of psychological disorders along with depression, it was her analyst initially who asked her to write between the therapy sessions about what she was feeling, thinking and

Dreaming. It would be a great mistake to call Sexton a poet with abnormal psychiatric history like some critics did just because most of her poems were recordings of her state-of-mind in between her therapy sessions with her therapist DrOrne. Sexton removed the veil from her soul and captured her life to large extent within the deep recesses of her heart. She was quite articulate about how poetry has enabled her to reach the most intimate truths lying deep within her conscious and which were never fully spoken in words. In words of Sexton "Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious" (Colburn, 11) Private experiences with feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed often in an autobiographical style. She bagged the most prestigious Pulitzer Prize for one of her best works "Live or Die" in 1967. Her other collection of verse are 'To Bedlam And part Way Back' 1960, 'All My Pretty Ones' 'Love Poems' 1969, 'Transformations' 1971, 'The Book of Folly' 1972, 'The Death Notebooks' 1974, 'The Awful Rowing Towards God' 1975 (Posthumous)

Sexton wrote about her personal friendship and relationships too in a quite candid manner and not many poets possess the art and expertise in doing so. For instance in 'Sylvia's Death' a poem written in 1963 by Sexton, she wrote about her personal friendship with Plath, whom she came to know when both poets attended Robert Lowell's poetry seminars in Boston in the late 1950s. Sexton recalls their discussions related to suicide and death and also remembers the contents of the letter which she had received from Plath few days ago and where she did not express any kind of mental trauma she was troubled with. Sexton was surprised to know about the unexpected news of Plath, committing suicide and she was shocked to a great deal that Sylvia could end up her life in the manner she did.

On the parameters of Elaine Showalter's theory of Gynocriticism, Anne Sexton has secured a place for herself as a feminist poet, as she writes a lot about women's psyche, their struggle with their own thoughts and dilemmas, their steadfastness regarding certain things in their life and their agony and emotions. The Freudian influence on Sexton cannot be negated and it is also reflected in her poetry. Freudian philosophy of psychoanalysis of characters specially women stated that women differ in anatomy from male and this aspect makes them feel inferior to male and feel less intellectual in comparison to the male. Sexton agreed to the Freud's theory of Oedipus complex but did not agree with philosophy which called men superior to women. Her poetry breaks down all the chains of literary tradition and propounds a tradition of her own. Her writings are solely feminine dealing with emotions and traumas of a woman's heart. It neither depends on the male writers for its style nor does it follow them in any way. Sexton has carved her own way. In 'Her Kind' she calls herself a witch. Through this idea, Sexton brings out the fact that modern women who try to see things differently and try to live their life independently are an outcast in all societies be it in the Eastern world or the Western world. 'Her Kind' can be called the signature poem of Anne Sexton. Published in the collection of poems called 'To Bedlam' and 'Part Way Back' in 1960. The poem no doubt bears a signature of Sexton, as it brings out her deep emotions, straight-speaking and her critical attitude towards the society and its norms laid down for the women. A free spirited woman is disliked by people. People have been trained since ages to believe that women are supposed to be well-behaved and obedient and they are

humiliated and criticized if they try going their own way. Using metaphors extensively, Sexton has described her points of view in each of the three stanzas in 'Her Kind'. For example, in the second stanza she "fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves". Sexton could be comparing worms and elves in the woods to her husband and children at home. Altogether, the collaboration of different repetitions and metaphors in this poem helps us gain a better understanding of the message that Sexton is trying to demonstrate – that she understands what it's like to be "her kind". Sexton was suffering bi-polar syndrome at the time she wrote 'Her Kind' the influence is well reflected in her poetry. Where she writes 'a woman like that is not ashamed to die' this suggest that although the persona, and Sexton herself, feels that she has been isolated all her life and forced to find safety in 'warm caves in the woods' in which to hide herself from society. She is still proud of all that she has achieved and therefore is 'not ashamed to die' and this massively juxtaposes the beginning of the poem where she calls herself a 'possessed witch'

**I have ridden in your cart, driver,
Waved my nude arms at villages going by
Where your flames still bite my thigh
And my ribs crack where your wheels wind**

Sexton has expressed how women have suffered physical and mental rib cracking pain, torture and stress because of unsupportive people around them. A patriarchal society is all responsible for this kind of mindsets since times immemorial and beyond the geographical boundaries.

In another poem from 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back: For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further' Sexton candidly refuses to accept her friends and her teacher John's advice to not explore themes like incest, menstruation, abortion and the other likes. Her refusal brought lot of criticism to her but she was sure to write on themes which she wanted to bring out to the people.

**And if I tried to give you something outside of myself
you would not know that the worst of anyone can be,
Finally, an accident of hope.**

She stressed on being original and not compromising with herself in order to meet the expectation of others. Sexton had a deep desire to help the agonizing people like her through her poetry and this is why she did not mind writing about the most personal things and aspects of her life. People were shocked to see her dealing with topics such as abortion, celebration of female body, menstruation, suicide etc which were a taboo in the society. Once Sexton had expressed her desire to her daughter Linda to use anything related to Anne for helping people in mental or physical stress and relieve them. Following this, Linda gave a lot of liberty and access to Diana Middlebrook who later attempted to write the biography of Anne Sexton.

In 'Transformations' a collection of Sexton's poems, Anne voiced against the folk tales and expressed her deep pain. Sexton retold the stories of Grimm's brothers. She threw a light on a new aspect on the thought process regarding these tales and expressed her discontent over the telling of the stories like Cinderella, Snow-White and the seven dwarfs, The Frog King etc. Sexton did not appreciate the way all the fairy tales projected a dominant patriarchal pattern in the

society. Nobody could ever relate the things as Sexton could. She expressed her discontent over the society's trend of telling stories which always projected a woman and girl to be most delicate and incapable of making any decisions. She is naïve, ignorant, and needs a male support for her existence. Her life can be restored only by a male always. Women plots against the other woman and she has to depend on the man in her life for her fulfilling emotional needs. The fairy tales show quite a dependency of women over their male counterparts for their safety and their existence. Sexton does not approve of this kind of society which communicates that females are physically as well as intellectually inferior to men. She puts across the thought of true liberalization, liberty and equality to men and women in the society.

**No matter what life you lead
the virgin is a lovely number:
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhône,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes
open and shut.
Open to say,
Good Day Mama,
and shut for the thrust
of the unicorn.
She is unsoiled.
She is as white as a bonfish.**

Sexton's poem 'In Celebration of My Uterus' the poet connects the entire women community of the world and says that it only because of the presence of the uterus that a woman is a woman and all women have this one organ which is common and thus it unites them all. Wherever they may be, in whichever part of the world they may be, they are unique and nobody can take their place. Almighty has designed the female body in a unique way and no one can fail it.

**Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you.**

Trying to befit herself in the man's world, Sexton ended her life by committing suicide in 1974. Sarojini Naidu, on the other hand was an Indian poet and comparing her work with that of Anne Sexton is actually an incomparable task.

2. Similarities in the Personal Life of Anne Sexton and Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu was born in 1879 in Hyderabad, India. So if we see Anne Sexton was born much later to Sarojini and we can't call her Sarojini's contemporary. Even at that time the United States of America had a better standard of living in comparison to that of India which was trying to come out of the shackles of the Britishers. Emergence of women was a phenomenon at that time in India. India did not have that rate of literacy which USA had at that time. The political state along with the economic state of any country affects the literature of that place and so it did in case of India too. Sarojini's father himself studied in Edinburgh and founded the modern system of education in Hyderabad. He was well-

known as a reformer, thinker, scientist, and alchemist. One could see the great impact of her father on Sarojini too. Sarojini Naidu and Anne Sexton have responded identically, when it comes to the question of the literary expression of female consciousness. They both wrote from the ink of their heart expressing their experiences and collective oppression of women which they represent uniquely in their poetry. They both shared some striking similarities like both of them started writing poetry at a very early age and both fell in love and married their lovers at a very early age. Anne Gray married Alfred Sexton when she was barely nineteen and had hardly completed her higher education. So did Sarojini. She fell in love with Dr. Naidu when she was just fourteen years old and she married him when she was nineteen. Both Anne Sexton and Sarojini Naidu had to face a lot of opposition regarding getting married to the person of their choice.

Another similarity between both the ladies was that they both had been motivated to write poems by different men in their life. In case of Anne Sexton it was Dr. Martin Orne who convinced Anne to take up writing one more time in life as a therapy to her mental illness. Anne Sexton had dropped writing poetry after being criticized by her mother once who accused her of plagiarism. Sarojini came in touch with some of the leading English poets of her time like Edmund Gosse, while she was a student in England. He later became her patron and encouraged her to write. Anne Sexton suffered severe post-partum depression and in the absence of her husband Alfred she became susceptible to frequent bouts of depression and developed suicidal tendencies. Later she got solace after she started writing poems on the advice of her therapist. She got a vent out to her feelings and emotions through writing verse. Her visits to the hospital became more frequent after she gave birth to her second daughter. Sexton got associated with a band group and called it 'Her Kind'. It provided her a platform where she gave readings of her self-composed poems to the people. She had a large audience comprising of people belonging to various age groups. Anne Sexton was a woman of new America and wanted to expand her horizons, she aspired to expand beyond her household. Similar was Sarojini's story. Soon after, she had four children in quick succession; she could not be contented with the life of a housewife. She plunged into public life and public service, publishing her poems alongside her other activities. Before long, she became an important member of the Congress Party and joined Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement of India.

Sarojini's poetry portrays an unconscious feminist ideology which does not surface always, but remains latent in her poetry. It reflects the constant battle against the force which is used against the women everywhere. Every woman faces it at least once in her life time, irrespective of the social, racial and cultural differences. It has a new face in a new region. And this unifies the women throughout the globe.

Both Anne and Sarojini were left torn between their domestic responsibilities and their aspirations and they both found the way to their heart's content.

Sarojini's poems revolve round the theme of love too like Anne Sexton's. Human love, love for self and apart from this love for the eternal, with the creator just like it was expressed by Anne Sexton in her later collections 'Awful Rowing with God' where Sarojini uses the Indian imagery of "The flute player of Brindavan" and the 'Love songs sung by Radha', Sexton talks about love between Jesus and his disciples.

**Still must I like a homeless bird wander, forsaking all
The earthly loves and worldly lures
That held my life in thrall,
And follow, follow, answering
Thy magical flute-call.**

These lines from 'The Broken Wing' seem to express the same thought of line. The poet yearns to merge with eternal love, love of the Lord.

In another poem "Songs of Radha, the Milkmaid" Sarojini expresses her deepest desire to merge in the God, be with him always and be his servant for all hours. This thought support the fact that women are naturally made up in a fashion where passion becomes secondary after they enter motherhood. The sexual energy may either lead a person towards higher goal of merging with God or it could become destructive and consummative for an individual. It was the desire of beauty that made her a poet; her 'nerves of delight' were always quivering at the contact of beauty. Anne Sexton went on exploring the worldly pursuits to achieve the ultimate happiness in her life but failed and finally ended up taking her own life. Like Sexton, Naidu, also wrote about love and passion but she followed the traditional style of the English poetry unlike Sexton who completely rejected the traditional styles.

**The thousand little gold and blue and silver breasted
birds bursting with the shrill ecstasy of life in nesting
time. All is hot and fierce and passionate, ardent and
unashamed in its exulting and importunate desire for
life and love. And, do you know that the scarlet lilies
are woven petal by petal from my heart's blood, these
little quivering birds are my soul made incarnate
music, these heavy perfumes are my emotions
dissolved into aerial essence**

Sarojini drew the imagery basically from the local Indian surroundings. Her poetry defined her passion and her yearning for love and relationships. Her poetry reflects her sensitivity towards nature and feminine sense of relating beauty.

**The gold of dawn and daylight, the gold of the stars,
and, now dancing in weird enchanting rhythms
through this magic month of May, the gold of fireflies
in the perfumed darkness--'aerial gold.' I long to
catch the subtle music of their fairy dances and make
a poem with a rhythm like the quick irregular wild
flash of their sudden movements**

Her poetry reflects her desire to be a wild spirit, free like air and birds, with too much fire in too frail a body similar to Anne Sexton who wanted to enjoy her free spirit. Their writings gave the impression of the subtle tyranny they had been facing since their childhood. The idea of patriarchal pattern of society with women being treated as subaltern and it was the male members of the family who could dream; think about a career but not the women. Since their childhood they were expected to behave like ladies, obedient, conducting themselves gracefully. All men around them laid different rules for ladies. Women experienced a subjugated status in the society. Every man had double-standards. This experience found words and expression in the verse of these two feminist poets in their own style.

**Where the voice of the wind calls our wandering feet,
Through echoing forest and echoing street,
With lutes in our hands ever-singing we roam, all
men are our kindred, the world is our home**

In the poem 'Humayun to Zobeida, Sarojini narrates the agonizing heart of every woman who is in love with someone.

**What war is this of THEE and ME? Give o'er the
wanton strife, you are the heart within my heart, the
life within my life**

Through her poetry, The Bangle-seller, Palanquin bearer, The Coromandel Fishers and the Ginger crushers Sarojini prettifies the living beings and investigates it with some sort of dignity. The poems reflect her protest against colonialism just like Sexton's revolt against anything which she found unjust. Some of Sarojini's poems turn out to be sad, pessimistic, even brutally realistic poems for instance sonnets like 'Love and Death' Sarojini was capable of dealing with some hard-headed, heart rending engagements with reality of love and life.

3. Conclusion

Similarity in the works of American Confessional poet Anne Sexton and that of Indian culture Sarojini Naidu points out to the disintegration of the social institutions of love and marriage in many similar ways, using many phrases. Love in their view, is a deceptive passion that lands a woman into uncertain conjugal connection. Both of them believe that women have the potential to overcome the barriers and limitations and accomplish what they actually yearn for, from the society. They are complete in themselves. This sense of completeness and self-realization revives a woman like a phoenix. Phoenix dies and rises from its ashes once again similarly poetry of women poets like that of Anne Sexton and Sarojini Naidu unleashes the true nature of women and make them rediscover their potential and power. Their poetry highlights 'anxiety of identity' as the most prominent feature of the modern literature. Women writers throughout the world have expressed the desire to breakout the silence and cross the patriarchal threshold in their contribution to literature.

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