



"Like a Sleepwalker: An Ecofeminist Reading of the Binaries of Death and Desire in Sadaf Raza and Sylvia Plath's Poetry"

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Abstract:

Sadaf Raza, a Pakistani poet relates to women's miseries in Like a Sleepwalker, and this process assimilates her with the harsh realities, shared experiences, and minor pleasures of life. Sylvia Plath, an American poet, is known as a "suicidal doll" after committing suicide in 1963. Both write exclusively for women and depict their emotions in a way that brings them into harmony with nature. The study uses Susan Griffin's book, Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her, as a theoretical framework for ecofeminist reading, and the imagery of birds, trees, sun, moon, sky, stars, etc. is gathered from their poetry and the implicit concepts behind them are discussed about woman and nature, as both are considered subservient. The research reads death as a derivative of desire and it is not to be considered a purely biological event. Thus, the attitude concerning death and its meaning for a woman is derived from her suppressed desires. Moreover, the culture and society work in a patriarchal order to deprive women of essential desires. Where the hope for fulfillment and desire ends, the desire for death starts.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Griffin, Feminism, Nature, Death, Desire.

Introduction

Pakistani poet Sadaf Raza is well-known for her writings on rights, gender, and education. With her emphasis on gender and education, her debut book, *Like a Sleepwalker*, presents a distinctive viewpoint on introspection. Raza's poetry highlights the value of writing as a medium for expressing hopes and illusions while reflecting the sufferings and challenges faced by women (Amazon). Sylvia Plath, a famous American poet, decided to end her life due to depression (Ghafoor, 2015, p. 13). Sylvia Plath frequently addressed the issue of death in her work, depicting it in a variety of ways. Her father died too soon, leaving her depressed, which contributed to her pessimistic outlook on death (Stenskar, 2004, p. 12). Her poetry explores the conflict between desire and death, evoking the same feelings as both authors. From an



ecofeminist perspective, Plath's suicide offers a comparative analysis of death and desire, demonstrating the boundaries between nature and women.

In feminist theory, dualism emphasizes intellectual and pragmatic dominance (Warren, 2000). Val Plumwood (1994) notes that A hierarchical fixation on this contradiction causes devastation in an inhumane environment. The ecological consequences of relocation primarily affect females (Bianchi, 2012, p.3). According to Aristotle, mythology is the cradle of theology, just as Freud believed art was the cradle of psychoanalysis (Kofman, 1988, p.198). Feminist philosophy and ancient mythology serve to explore the boundaries of what one can imagine and what one cannot (Zajko & Leonard, 2006, p.89). Women are forced to leave their homes and the mourning woods because they are confronted and intimidated for breaking masculine norms (Daily, 2017, p.19). Ecological feminism aims to eliminate male dominance over women. Anything that helps to alleviate a woman's tyranny and subjugation is intrinsically feminist. Ecofeminism seeks to demonstrate how gender concerns are inextricably linked to patriarchal frameworks of traditionalism and ecological fury, as they necessitate the ongoing dominance of patriarchal determination in a global society (Warren, 1997, p.213).

Losing sovereignty to outside power is a sign of using consumption as a tool. Tolerance appears feminine and fragile, whereas power is portrayed as a militaristic, authoritarian male character (Mies and Shiva, 2014, p.109). The environment's dual nature, which constantly disrupts the delicate balance of the earth, is reflected in aggression against it. He claims that because extraterrestrial stories have replaced tribal myths, the melody is no longer performed, and the ceremony is meaningless (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p.107). The body holds the world in place. The flesh does not give life; rather, it endangers existence by elevating humanity above what is natural. As a result, supremacy is associated with humanity rather than gender (Beauvoir, 2010, p.99).

Research Methodology

The study examines bird, tree, sun, moon, sky, and star images from an ecofeminist standpoint using Sadaf Raza's poetry. A theoretical foundation for eco-feminist reading may be found in Susan Griffin's book *Woman and Nature; The Roaring Inside Her*. According to the study, since anything with greater qualities is connected to the soil, women are more in tune with nature



than males, much like birds. By understanding the names of the natural objects, man, who was made to serve as the viceroy of heaven and earth, may command them. With teeth made for eating, animals moving on four feet, and coal positioned closer to the earth's surface, all of nature has been crafted to serve human needs. Women are more like animals; they are sensual and cognitively weaker, lack vivid imaginations, and shun reading (Griffin, 1978, pp. 9-17). Griffin argues that the traditional association between "women and nature" needs to be challenged and redefined. According to the author, developing a deep understanding of our history, present, and future goals necessitates a thorough understanding of how all living things and people are interconnected and form one entity with the earth. "Women and Nature" initially discussed their interaction and the impact of "science and technology" on environmental degradation, but later revisited these topics (Bianchi, 2012, p. 2).

Those Who, moving others are themselves as stone

Unmoved, cold and to temptation slow

They rightly do inherit heaven's graces

And husband nature's riches from expense. (Griffin, 1978, p. 13)

Analysis of The Laughter of the Medusa

Throughout history, women have been excluded from any kind of writing that could allow them the participation in the making of history and culture. Being considered as creatures of lesser rank in mental capacities and intellect, women have been, over centuries, kept in the dark by a patriarchal system that has successfully muted their needs for expression, be it physical, oral or written. In her fundamental essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous, French philosopher and feminist critic, openly introduces this idea of woman's need for writing as a biological drive which intimately relies on her ceasing back and mastering her own body that has been violently misused by male's rhetori

Literature Reviews

Eco-feminism aims to eliminate gender-based dominance and authority over women by addressing interconnected issues such as "sexism, classicism, racism, and environmental" degradation, all of which are influenced by masculine behavior and global hegemony (Waren, 1997, pp. 213-226). The destruction of the female utopia in Lanyer's "The



Description of Cooke-ham" is a more recent example of ecofeminist verse. When faced with the prospect of violating masculine customs, women are forced to leave their homes and mourn in the woods (Dailey, 2017, p. 19-22). In her essay, "The Earth Is the Indian's Mother," Potiguara writes that "the social disintegration of Indigenous peoples affects, even more, the acculturated Indigenous communities and the displaced and marginalized Indians who live in the city, with the following results deaths and suicides" (Potiguara, 1978, p. 147). Farrokhzad, an ecofeminist poet, challenges patriarchal norms by investigating the relationship between women and their environment. Her piece "The Wall" focuses on how violence harms both women and the environment. Other poets, such as "Linda Hogan, Marge Piercy, and Maya Angelou," stress the need for an intersectional lens in understanding eco-feminist poetry by exploring how their feminism interacts with the environment (Dailey, 2017, pp. 10-30). Many well-known American women poets, "Sara Teasdale, Edna St Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Bogan, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath were only a few of the many poets who suffered from death's desire. Teasdale, Plath, and Sexton had tragically ended their lives by suicide." Sara Teasdale writes,

When I am dead and over me, bright April
Shakes out her rain-drenched hair
Tho' you should lean above me broken-hearted
I shall not care / I shall have peace, as leafy trees are peaceful
When rain bends down the bough
And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted
Than you are now. (Al Wattar, 2019, p. 712)

In her poem Death, Sarojini Naidu presented a variety of perspectives on death. Unlike Plath, Naidu's verses do not portray death as a terrible reality. In a number of her verses, she treated death similarly to Dickinson. She saw death as a way to escape the world's pain; in others, she saw death as a mystic quality that allows one to communicate with the Eternal; and in others, she saw death as a threat to humanity. She says, "Death stroked my hair and whispered tenderly / Poor child, shall I redeem thee from thy pain / Renew thy joy and issue thee again / Inclosed in some renascent ecstasy" (Khanna, 2013, pp. 26-34). Emily Dickinson's poems address death in a variety of manners, incorporating everyday encounters and comparing predictions with actual



events. Her pieces, including "I Died for Beauty" and "I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died," question cultural ideas while also reversing accepted views regarding death. Her best poetry, "Safe in their Alabaster Chamber," depicts an expedition from gloom to illumination, solitude to possibility, and fleetingness to longevity (Roy, 2015, pp. 167-170). Parveen Shakir's poems explore themes such as mortality and longing for the natural world, gender inequality, victimhood, and self-discovery. In her poetry, "Sirf Aik Larki" explores an individual's incarceration and desire to challenge social norms,

Kash merey par hotee
Terey pass ur aati Kash maen hawa hoti
Tujh ko chooh k lot aati
Maen naheen magar kuch bhi
Sangdil riwajoon
kahini hasaroon mein
Omar qaid ki mulzim
Sirf aik larki hoon (Khushboo 92; Ghafoor, 2015, p. 13)

Analysis

Plath chooses the title for her poem, I Am Vertical. She says she is vertical, but she prefers to be horizontal. Plath claims that she is not a tree with roots in the ground. The land here represents patriarchy, which has robbed her of strength. She is kept away from minerals and riches. Desires have thus died. She likens herself to an immortal tree. Her miseries, therefore, are eternal. Plath wrote, I am vertical, in utter dejection. She is disappointed with society. She claims no one is noticing. She is lonely and seeks light from the stars. The star represents her love for a man who is not out of reach. Plath depicts herself in perfect communion with flowers and trees. Death is revealed to be the only liberating phenomenon. After eternal sleep, she would be able to lie horizontally, free of the miseries of life. Then she will resemble these carefree trees and flowers (Plath, 2004, p.53). To Plath, the natural world appears unnatural and strange. She believes that life after death is more natural. Her continuous desire for death has brought her closer to death. She has thus grown accustomed to agony. She would rather lie horizontal, with nothing to



desire and communicate with the sky. Thus, communication will be limited until she drinks the droughts of death. Sky, a symbol of patriarchy or manly love, is beyond her reach in this life.

Thought gone dim

it is more natural to me, lying down

Then the sky and I are in open conversation

and I shall be useful when I lie down finally

the trees may touch me for once,

and the flowers have time for me. (Plath, 2004, p. 53)

In the poem *Black Rook in Rainy Weather*, she claims to be a delicate bird who spends her life arranging and rearranging her feathers in harsh weather. A woman struggles and does her best to adjust and survive in her life. But everything is in vain. She is thus hopeless, waiting for no accident or miracle. She understands that no accident will set her on fire to be free of this world (Plath, 2004, p. 19). Plath claims in *A Better Resurrection* that the harshness of life has transformed her into a stone. She no longer feels any emotions. She is alone in the world. The woman is thus brought parallel to a fallen leaf, which is tormented by all passers-by. She then begs Jesus to hasten her departure to the eternal world because her life is meaningless, "I have no wit, I have no words, no tears / My heart within me like a stone / Is numbed too much for hopes or fears I dwell alone / No everlasting hills I see / My life is like the falling leaf / O Jesus, quicken me" (Plath, 2004, p. 2). The imagery of 'big as a sky' represents patriarchal dominance. Plath states in *A Birthday Present* that a woman is dependent on a man. She claims that the man is like a dead center, howling and threatening her through her window. He has extinguished all of her desires. So, it's better to die physically. Plath asks death to take her life, not letter by letter or finger by finger. Every day, at least one woman dies,

Must you kill what you can?

There is one thing I want today,

and only you can give it to me

It stands at my window, big as the sky

It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center

let it not come by mail, finger by finger



let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
by the time the whole of it was delivered, and to numb to use it
only let down the veil, the veil, the veil
if it were death. (Plath, 2004, p. 4)

Plath claims in *Lady Lazarus* that she has witnessed many deaths in her life. She describes dying as an art. She has mastered the art because her desires meet their end every year. Women, she claims, are accustomed to the harshness and coarseness of life, “I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it- A sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade / My right foot / A paperweight / My face a featureless, fine Nevertheless, I am same, identical woman” Plath rewinds her death forebodings through digging its traces in her past, “The first time it happened I was ten / It was an accident / Dying / Is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well / I do it feels like hell / I do it so it feels real / I guess you could say I have a call / Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (Plath, 2004, p. 59). Plath's poem *Death & Co* begs death to take her along. She's done with this life. She claims that the frost has passed, a flower has bloomed, and seasons have come and gone, but her wait for death is not over. Frill at the neck / Then the flutings of their Ionian / Death-gowns / Then two little feet / He does not smile or smoke // The other does that / His hair long and plosive / Bastard / Masturbating a glitter / He wants to be loved // I do not stir,” Plath adds, “The frost makes a flower / The dew makes a star / The dead bell / The dead bell // Somebody's done for” (Plath, 2004, p. 32). Sadaf Raza affirms that women are bound by social norms. She keeps her desires to herself. She understands that she must walk with tiny steps. She can't afford to be carefree. Raza writes in *Ambush*, “She flew on Gossamers wings / Touching the horizon of her gentle dreams / And walked on the ground with tiny steps / Afraid to create ripples in time” (Raza, 2003, p. 60). In *A Strange Affliction*, Raza depicts a woman's utter dejection and humiliation as she attempts to fly. She compares herself to a bird. Despite appearing delicate, she can withstand roaring winds and howling weather. Her flight is not guided like a kite, but like a stone, she is left on the ground, “So when you see me fly / Don't take my flight / For that of a kite/ I am a stone / Hurlled at a passerby, condemned / Before the crime / And each day / A portion of me turns to dust” (Raza, 2003, p. 1).



Being Independent compares a female to a tree. Raza expects her future to be dark and gloomy. The nature of man is brought closer to that of the earth. Everything on Earth depends on him and is under his control. As a result, obeying him will be beneficial to her. If she refuses to accept subordination, her desires will be met with death. Man is thus presented as a dry illusive land, making her unaware of the moisture and riches he possesses. He keeps her roots free from all of her desires. She, as an opposition, chooses independence over submissiveness. She intends to be steadfast in her decision, chasing the clouds away to keep her roots dry. She'd rather suffocate her desires and die from thirst than be submissive. Thus, she resists him and says, "My roots will always be without moisture / Thanks to me / I chase the clouds away from them / I know they have a mind of their own. I drown their thought" (Raza, 2003, p. 11). Her independence kills her desire for motherhood. In Alienation, Raza laments how her fertility is dependent on him. She feels compelled to become a mother. She says, "I have no roots and how would a tree without roots bear fruits / Don't you feel the need to nurture your own seed" (Raza, 2003, p. 30).

As a result, not only does the man control her past and present, but also her future. The poem Reasons for Living expresses her desire for love and motherhood. The images of 'raindrops' and 'drops of moisture' depict love, emotions, and sensuality. Thus, a woman is depicted as a plant that lives for 'few drops of moisture' and is entirely dependent on rainfall. The poem does not pursue death as a desire, but it does argue that a woman is persistent in her hope for life. She spends her life hoping to be loved and cared for. Raza portrays women's sensitivity and sensuality. Man is portrayed as emotionless and incapable of perceiving her desires. He either does not recognize her or never tries to do so. The woman thus lives for his admiration, "I live for the sound of raindrops falling // few drops of moisture" (Raza, 2003, p. 93). Raza's poem, Don't Muddle Your Eyes with My Tears, depicts a wide range of utter dejection and confusion. She is once again acknowledging that a woman cannot survive without the support of a man. She is well aware that without him, everyone who comes into contact with her will take bits and pieces from her. Either she has to be his property or she should prepare to be victimized. Patriarchy is compared to crashing waves. It is also suggested that only he has the right to bear



fruit from his vacant womb; otherwise, she will be humiliated. Raza thus claims that the truth is within man. A woman has no right to seek the truth without his permission,

Otherwise the crashing waves would claim

My bits and pieces

The truth lies within you

And your love would be the only seed

Which would bear fruit on my barren limbs

And my vacant womb. (Raza, 2003, p. 68)

The poem *Before the Final Wish* implies that women are not designed to be resistant. Nor does she regard freedom as her top priority. She resists and demands freedom in response to his disgust. She wants to be cuddled, safe, and protected. However, the tragedy is that she is tormented, humiliated, and abused by the manmade safety blanket. She thus puts her desires to death. Her final wish, therefore, is a lament rather than a wish. The exhausting freedom cycle was taking her life away, so she made one final wish. She would rather speed her exit than face shame and humiliation. 'Howling wind' refers to patriarchal dominance that mocks her roots. Raza uses the image of 'scattered stones' for a woman's ego and respect that has turned to dust with shame. "For years I have bowed my head / Before the howling wind / It mocked my roots / On which I stand / Alas now I stand on burning sand / Too late / To think and dream / Who would then count the scattered stones / For the one which turned to dust with shame" (Raza, 2003, p. 32). In the poem *My Dope Dreams*, Raza compares marriage to rape and murder, and the wedding dress to Leda's. She describes the dream of getting married as absurd and dope. She is objectified, tormented, and humiliated while wearing a prayer scarf and a red dupatta with yellow lace that promise security and nobility. Religion is thus interpreted to his advantage. He considers it a religious right to subjugate a woman and abuse her. He objectifies her with 'smoke columns', leaving her with only ' screams sky high'. Here the image of 'sky' symbolizes patriarchal justice, which is deaf to feminist cries.

Wearing red

With fringes of yellow

Are my dope dreams



Dress of Leda, ripped and bleeding

Raped and murdered

ill surrendered

Screams sky high

my dope dreams

Smoke column, burning lakes

A scarf to pray and a scarf to slay

With guns to play my dope dreams. (Raza, 2003, p. 8)

Raza's poetry paints a realistic picture of how the environment influences a female's upbringing. Her poem, Dali's print, is picturesque of such a room, depicting man's frailty as it hunts her like a bird. A woman serves him morning tea and crisp biscuits but is still shown standing on shaky ground. Her future is in his hands. He boils her in his cauldron as if she were prey. She is sniffing and sweating from fear. Thus, Raza says in Dali's Print, "Morning tea with crisp biscuit / Sniffing noses, sweat of fear / Restless souls on shaky grounds, Human frailty, running the stakes / A boiling cauldron, seeping fear / A hunter hunting a prey next year / T'is the way, coffee room / Thrives" (Raza, 2003, p. 16). When Raza compares wind to patriarchy, she uses the word 'breeze' to describe females. The wind is given the ability to destroy, but the breeze rarely causes a stir. As a result, men are portrayed as destroyers, while women are portrayed as capable of homemaking. Her flow appears to be persistent, despite her demeanor. The dense surroundings choked her. She pretends she didn't hear anything and that her nerves didn't feel anything. As a result, the so-called home is filled with smoke, suffocating her completely. She then feels hopeless and seeks escape in the 'forbidden worlds'. Raza chose bird imagery to represent feminine existentialism. Independence and freedom from the harsh realities of life are portrayed as an impossible phenomenon for a woman. Her wait to fly is eternal, like a caged bird. She hangs between life and death. Utter hopelessness is depicted in the poem, Life in a Limbo. Raza elaborates that every trial to pursue a life of freedom is in vain,

Like a dying whisper

Life ebbing slowly like curly smoke

Seeking for forbidden worlds



Where time and existence twined like

And no death

Here waiting is eternal, like a bird in a cage

Away from life away from death

A controlled environment

lives in heavy stupor

Inside, the ticking goes on and on

So much at stake

Freedom, will, and decision. (Raza, 2003, p. 15)

Raza's depiction of a home also conveys the trauma, agony, and agitation of a postcolonial homeland. Her vocabulary traces otherness and marginality, implying that her place has become unfamiliar to her. Her desire for a home meets death when she realizes that what she once desired is no longer a reality. In her poem Lessons, Raza discusses the lessons she learned from colonization, "The sunshine on my window Silvers before entering / And the cold in my bed has / A blue face and blue feet // My lovely pets with ugly faces, drooling tongues / And sharp teeth / Are very quiet." Raza adds, "They live on me / I feed them pieces of my skin // It lives with me / Lives like a rusted nail / In my soul" (Raza, 2003, p. 23). In Destiny, Raza compares patriarchal objectification to the wind. She claims that, like a desert wind, it haunts and howls at her all night. As a result, she either becomes resistant and resilient like a flood and rushes away, or she lives a submissive life, like a dew drop that sits meaninglessly on a sleeping petal for the entire night. As she says in String Puppet, "She is a bride of one season / The season of rain / Which falls and falls / and becomes a raging flood / Or falls like a dew / Of sleeping petals" (Raza, 2003, p. 34). Further in Resurrection she laments that there are even no images of her history left. She has no start, no end, "No start no end / Not even images to console / Hope a dying bird in my hand" (Raza, 2003, p. 66). Raza here refers to land as a motherland. The sun is taken as a colonizer. Thus, the sun has pronounced her sentence, "Land / The midday sun pronounced her sentence / Settling night, her initiation rites / With a bent head. Walked with measured" (Raza, 2003, p. 56). Raza embodies the hybrid personality of a colonized female. One Flew Over the



Cuckoo's Nest portrays a clash of identities and a loss of balance. The reality is thus cringe-worthy,

One flew East
One flew West
And one flew over the cuckoo's nest
When ideologies clashed and identities came crashing down
Both lost their balance
Spilled their marbles
Soared to the sky
To meet death
How can you climb in the air with no wings?
In thoughts you soar
But in reality
You cringe. (Raza, 2003, pp. 12-13)

Conclusion

Both poets yearn for death and die for it. Raza's poetry depicts fewer instances of physical death than Sylvia's. Raza is more concerned with her desire to be fulfilled. Sylvia is obsessed with death. Raza appears to be living in hope, whereas Plath has passed away. Her poetry is filled with utter dejection and gloom. If she has any desires, she hopes to fulfill them in the afterlife. In depicting their emotions, they find themselves in communion with nature. Plath's poetry is more subjective than Raza's, and she also writes about her native land. In terms of feminine emotions, both writers express their intense feelings with equal intensity and resist the patriarchal order. Both write only for women. Sadaf Raza and Sylvia Plath are both complex poets who deal with multiple variations in the feminine perspective about the social and cultural contexts in which they wrote. Sadaf Raza and Sylvia Plath are both from the modern era of literature. Both poets' characteristics include confessional poetry, modernity, realism, pessimism, humanitarianism, mysticism, emotionalism, freedom of thought, musicality, lyricism, liberty of thought, and innovation. One of the primary goals of this study was to open up new possibilities in death research. A significant portion of literature has been dedicated to death. Deriving meaning from



death and pain is essential for progress. Finding purpose in life and dying perspectives are strongly related. Where hope for fulfillment and desire ends, desire for death begins.

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