

Female Identity & Culture of Modern Women Writers in Feminist Literature with Special Reference to Anne Sexton

Azadeh Mehrpouyan

Ph.D Scholar

Bharati Vidyapeeth University,

Pune,

India

azadeh.mehrpouyan@gmail.com

Abstract:

Modern women writers help modern feminist literature and their creativity and innovation in using their own techniques and genres serve modern literature. Modern feminist writers attempt to explore, express and think of women's conditions. It is proposed they are successful in transferring their senses, emotions, experiences and issues because they write about their sex and are from women community.

This article will focus on the impact of female identity and culture of modern women writers on Feminist literature and their reflections on Anne Sexton's Poems. This article will evaluate modern women's writing and to bring out how far they could develop an especially female framework and culture while dealing with various issues and find a place in literary anthologies. Further, the author will investigate whether they are successful writers who have a firsthand experience of patriarchy who write about themselves, their problems, experiences and various other issues.

In conclusion, some modern women writers such as the selected one in present article have achieved both wide popular readership and much critical attention because they tended largely to focus on their cultural, political and social views most notably their feminism. Also, modern women writers are really talented and creative such as Sexton, a modern woman writer who develops feminism and expresses herself through confessional poetry. Modern women writers even introduced and innovated new genre and technique for their writings about contemporary feminist thought and used to explore modern and traditional – cultural and social issues on women.

Key words: Confessional poetry, Culture, Feminism, Modern women writers.

This paper focuses on female identity and culture of modern women writers in feminist literature with special reference to prominent poetess, Anne Sexton. Anne Sexton is poet who is famous for confessional and autobiographical forms of writing and who has continued to be popular since the 1950s. Poetry "should be a shock to the senses. It should also hurt" Anne Sexton believed (Nina Baym, 2703), and evidence of this maxim's implications echoes loudly through the writing of Sexton as well as through the work of her friend and contemporary, Sylvia Plath. Sexton's lifetimes spanned a period of remarkable change in the cultural role of women in America, and both are obviously feminist poets caught somewhere between the submissive pasts of their mothers and the liberated futures awaiting their daughters. With few established female poets to emulate, Sexton

broke new ground with her intensely personal, confessional poetry. Her anger and frustration with female subjugation, as well as their agonizing personal struggles and triumphs appear undisguised in their works, but the fact that both Sexton and Plath committed suicide inevitably colors what the reader gleans from their poems. Sexton transforms, reinterprets, and blends traditional and nontraditional literary forms in highly inventive ways. Unencumbered by restrictions on subject matter and form, this woman writer has claimed every genre and every subject as their own. She no longer expends energy trying to stake a place for themselves in literary traditions because they are already there.

Anne Sexton was a poet and a writer who "used the personal to speak to cultural concerns, many of which apply to women's conflicts and transitions in modern American society" (Heath 2344). Many of her works helped gain focus on the development of the female identity within the American culture, as many feminist poets and critics have found. By looking at one of her poems, *Her Kind*, one can see an example of this. The repetition in each stanza of the line "I have been her kind" (Heath 2345) summarizes a different view of how women seem to appear and are generalized. In the first stanza she writes about how women that are like a person who is "possessed", or otherwise, controlled by how people want her to be, are not really women. In the second stanza, she writes how some women work and work, and how men usually see this in women as housewives, yet she says "A woman like that is misunderstood" (Heath 2345). Yet in the last stanza, she explains how women are proud and are fighting for their rights and understanding. She states how she has been through all this and that as a woman like that, she is not "ashamed to die". A balanced presentation of Sexton would include mention of her major themes, most of which are touched upon in the selection of poems here: religious quest, transformation and dismantling of myth, the meanings of gender, inheritance and legacy, the search for fathers, mother-daughter relationships, sexual anxiety, madness and suicide, issues of female identity. Female issues are illustrated with strong images with all details in which the reader can imagine them clearly on her/his mind. In Sexton's poetry there is a strong focus on the female body. It is possible to study her works in the light of French feminist writers who feel that a woman writes with her body in most major works such as, *Transformation*, *Unknown girl in the Maternity Ward*, *All My Pretty ones*, *Cinderella*, *Briar Rose*, *For My Lover Returning to His Wife*, *In Celebration of My Uterus*, *The Touch*, etc. Sexton is among the most celebrated poets of the confessional school. Her highly emotional, self-reflexive verse, characterized by preoccupations with childhood guilt, mental illness, motherhood, and female sexuality, is distinguished for its stunning imagery, artistry, and remarkable cadences. An unlikely latecomer to the literary scene, Sexton underwent a rapid metamorphosis from suburban housewife to major literary figure in the early 1960s. Sexton's art and life culminating in her suicide converged with the convictions of the contemporary feminist movement, drawing attention to the oppressive, circumscribed existence of women in middle-class American society. Anne Sexton uses poems like these to point out the identity the general population has on women, and says how she too has been among this generalization.

There is a courage in Sexton's willingness to transmute painful experience and taboo topics into art, others have condemned such themes as exhibitionist and inappropriate. James Dickey wrote of Sexton's poems in his now-famous review of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, "One feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of such naked suffering". Despite the limitations of Sexton's unabashed self-scrutiny, many critics discern profound archetypal motifs in her work, particularly allusions to the Oedipus myth in themes of incest and the relentless search for forbidden truth and her complex handling of her own search for spiritual meaning in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. A celebrity and trenchant poet whose frank discussion of sexuality and mental illness offered liberating honesty for many, Sexton remains among the most important female poets of her generation.

Further, some indications of creation of feminist versions and the images of female identity and culture are found in Sexton's works and. For example, in her poem *Briar Rose*, she takes the classic Grimms' fairy tale of *Briar Rose*, more commonly known as 'Sleeping Beauty' and, if not reclaiming it as a woman's tale, at least rereads it from a modern point of view and looks at what meaning this tale might hold for women. When reading a classic fairy tale from a feminist viewpoint (as defined by Marcia K. Lieberman), a reader will find that women characters are important and chosen because of their beauty. Sexton, as a feminist, ignores this point and goes directly to talk about the issues and problems facing that a woman character must face. What the woman thinks, feels, and experiences is far more important than her appearance, and Sexton makes this clear by never once describing how the princess looks, but describing instead what happens to her. Even more importantly, she does not just describe what happens to Briar Rose, but how Briar Rose feels and reacts to what is done to her. In most traditional fairy tales the heroine is an object, a reward to the hero, a plot device. She is "passed hand to hand/ like a bowl of fruit" (*Transformations* 11). As a feminist, Anne Sexton focuses on Briar Rose, not as a plot device, but as a person. Transformation explores the concept of feminism and challenges the traditional fairy tale ending of happily ever after. Sexton delved in the school of feminism with *Transformations*, retelling of popular Grimm's fairytales. Most important is her gift for unique imagery, often centering on the female body or the household.

The researcher believes that contemporary readers, despite the feminist movement, often have difficulty dealing with Sexton's explicitly bodily and female identity and imagery. Academic and public reactions to the women's movement, even though Sexton did not deliberately style herself as a feminist poet, will help to make the readers understand the depth and extent of her cultural and poetic transgressions.

Modern women writers particularly Sexton reflect feminist trends and elaborate female identity in their works; of course, writers' movement, their techniques and thematic works can help modern world to understand women's issues and feminine concepts in different situations and stages of their life. Sexton could develop a female framework through figurative languages e.g. symbol, image, metaphor, simile, allegory, myth, etc. while dealing with various issues and find a place in literary anthologies. Sexton is a successful writer who has a firsthand experience of patriarchy who

writes about themselves, her problems, experiences and various other issues as a woman. She is successful in transferring their senses, emotions, experiences and issues because she writes about her same sex and is from women community; even relatively in the same form, tone, style and figures of thought. She expresses herself and female culture in details in various stages of her life like childhood, period, marriage, pregnancy, and different difficult moments of her life including divorce, diseases and death. The crucial issues to women's culture are reflected in her works.

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