

## Patriarchy and Oppression in Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*

Hasan Hussein Karo

Dept: of English Language University of Zakho [hassan.karo@uoz.edu.krd](mailto:hassan.karo@uoz.edu.krd)

Received: 05. 2023/ Accepted: 09. 2023 / Published: 03. 2024

<https://doi.org/10.26436/hjuoz.2024.12.1.1254>

### ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses Sylvia Plath's feelings towards her patriarchal society. In her poem, *Lady Lazarus*, she expresses her contempt for the mistreatment she receives from the close male members of her family, her father, and husband. Through the poetic lines in the poem, she illustrates the world that women live within a patriarchal society. This paper justifies her hatred of men that Plath conveys in her poem. Her poetic lines in *Lady Lazarus* are analyzed to show her inner feelings. The paper also explains Plath's attitude against this oppression that she suffers from. It explains how Plath employs an example of oppression to blame patriarchy for their actions.

**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchy, Oppression, Women, Hatred, Holocaust, Sylvia Plath.

### INTRODUCTION

Women have experienced numerous forms of oppression on their part. In this paper, the tyranny Plath writes about in her poetry is carried out by the intimate family members and the male-dominated culture that she lives within. Different members of society have oppressed and subjugated women. Through her writing, Plath hopes to convey the idea of victimization to her readers. There are numerous images of the females' actions of resistance in *Lady Lazarus* (1962). At this point, Plath starts to challenge the patriarchal system. In *Lady Lazarus*, the female speaker experiences oppression, which eventually gives way to rebellion. This poem covers the women's sufferings within the patriarchal society. It contains representations regarded as a "response to the norms and values of the fifties and sixties in which women were restricted and limited to stereotypical images of mothers and wives" (Qazzaz, 2017: 210). The way Plath attaches herself to her writings has resulted from the repression that she wants to express.

#### Plath and *Lady Lazarus*

Plath places her female voice in her female character in a world where men predominate. She chastises the males for mistreating her. The speaker makes reference to both the men she loves and other people who hold particular roles in society. She had grown weary of the people controlling her independence. To escape her dirty world, the speaker frequently takes her own life. She desires a second rebirth in order to exact revenge. In a patriarchal culture, Plath contends, a woman cannot celebrate her independence. As a result, the female speaker looks for a way to combat the patriarchal tyranny that has an impact on both her inner and outer selves. Plath wants a woman to break free of the house's cage "because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her" (Irigaray, 1985: 122). The female speaker in *Lady Lazarus* is influential and strong and she doesn't fear her enemy "Oh my enemy. /Do I terrify?" (Hughes, 1982: 244). She antagonizes patriarchy with a spirit of resistance. She efforts to defend herself and her aim is to

preserve her identity. The poem explores the possibility of extinction and the strength of a female fighter. It tells the story of a woman who bravely confronts her oppressors. Bloom stands with this:

The poem's title, its final line, and much of what is in between, focus on annihilation, rebirth, and female power. Its title refers to the biblical story in which Christ brought Lazarus back from the dead. However, in this poem, it is a woman who comes back from the dead—on her own—without the help of a male/God figure. (2001: 74)

Plath dramatizes her personal concerns in *Lady Lazarus* by using the Holocaust as a metaphor. To demonstrate their violence and cruelty, the patriarchy's many male figures, predominantly German, surround the female speaker. The poem makes it unequivocal that a lady is overwhelmed in the man-centric climate:

The suffering woman, who is a metaphorical Jew, and the dominating man, who is a metaphorical Nazi, are also implicitly mentioned in *Lady Lazarus*. The latter directly refers to the woman's hatred of the male doctor who dominates her. (Subagyo, 2009: 87)

Her speaker in *Lady Lazarus* utters the German word 'Herr' to talk to her opponents. They are confronted with the self-determination of the female speaker "So, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy" (Hughes, 1982: 246). The group has come to observe her hopelessness happily. They couldn't care less about her suffering. In the group's eyes, the female speaker is seen as an amusing item.

Plath is horrified by how the patriarchal grown-ups in her life—primarily her father and husband—treat her. Wagner-Martin contends that Plath's primary adversaries are "more often men-husbands, fathers, power figures at large (2011: 113), and that is why she despises men so much. She is despondent because no one hears or acknowledges her pain. The speaker in *Lady Lazarus* defies accepted social conventions by "moving from her conventional state of social acceptance to the flourish of triumph, no matter how unconventional her behavior has become" (*ibid.*: 111). The speaker threatens the oppressors of her immortality and she will consume her enemy's lives as a hostile warrior. If she fails to win the fight, she will sooner or

later win the war. Her passion is powered by women's hatred of men:

The creation of a new self is a symbol of freedom from man's domination. Consequently, the woman in *Lady Lazarus* is willing to suffer, to die one time every decade. To begin with, she tried to liberate herself from male control when she was very young. (Subagyo, 2009: 87)

The oppression that the speaker suffers from is more aptly described as objectification. As a result, the patriarchal society views the speaker as an object. The individuals the speaker addresses are various sexes of male characters. These individuals stand in for all male authority in the speaker's life. Her life is frequently in their hands. To escape the male's type of oppression, the female speaker wants to die. Plath is in a difficult situation as a result of the dominant masculine figures in her life. She is overcome by the freedom of which she has been dreaming ever since she was a young child. According to feminism, the masculine figures represent all of the male members of the patriarchal society. Revolt and resistance are expressed in Plath's poems through her revolutionary writing style as Birkle states:

Potentially revolutionary, by attending to what is repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, and therefore threatening to the paternal code, can women hope to disrupt its order and acquire our own voice. (1996: 10-1)

The two persons from her life who are perceived as her first oppressors—her father and husband—must be gone for Plath to achieve self-liberation. Plath frequently speaks out in order to make her voice clearly heard through her revolutionary remarks. She fights against patriarchy's oppression and exploitation. She exceeds the transgression thresholds that society imposes on women.

A beautiful illustration of suicide and death serving as empowerment and salvation is *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath. A wide range of individual experiences in the repressive patriarchal world are presented. There are frightening pictures of women being victimized and treated unfairly that are meant to represent Plath's own experiences. Plath is a specialist in self-harm and suicide. Her behavior is not inherited; rather, it is a product of the patriarchal society's activities. Since there is no other option to achieve self-liberation, she has chosen this route. She views dying as a form of art. Men have violently subjugated women, forcing them to view suicide and death as their own private affairs. Suicidal attempts by women are motivated by their hatred towards males:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well (Hughes, 1982: 245)

Plath discloses her two suicidal attempts through her female speaker "I have done it again" (Hughes 1982: 245). Such endeavors have bolstered her character. She has become accustomed to it, one could say. She remains a strong woman and has grown even stronger in the wake of the suicide attempts. She is no longer able to tolerate males. The end is not death. Reincarnation and rebirth are processes involved. She will be reborn and reincarnated as a more potent being as Masal remarks that "Her [Plath's] whole experience is depicted in her poems. The pain and torture of living finally end in the art of dying, which symbolizes rebirth. Most of the poems of Plath reflect her socio-psychological situations (2006: 79).

Plath encounters oppression based on sexuality. The unequal treatment of her fellow citizens has given rise to her death wish. She thinks that once she passes away, she will resurrect to exact retribution. She will handle patriarchy fairly. Plath still has more lives yet to live. She is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for salvation. "And like the cat, I have nine times to die" (Hughes 1982: 244). Death is terrible and real to her, but she celebrates it as a noble obligation toward a higher life. She

is willing to be scapegoated so that other oppressed women might have a life of equality and fair treatment:

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call (*ibid.*: 245)

One of the great metaphors Plath uses in *Lady Lazarus* is to contrast her oppression and suffering with the persecution of Jews. To illustrate the emotional horror she experiences, the Holocaust is powerfully shown. She no longer believes in the kindness of people in a patriarchal culture. Because of the lack of love, she expected to get from her family and society, her mental health has deteriorated. When there isn't any affection to treat women with, the abhorrence of men would be their reaction. Her verses could be seen as a response to her victimized feelings. It is implied that the majority or all of the male figures in her life are represented by the male figures in her poems. Because it is the only option for them to escape the miserable reality they live in, Plath's poetry uses death as a metaphor for women's fortitude. Cixous' feminist point of view makes it clear accordingly:

Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves! (1975: 885)

It is understandable that the men that Plath indicates are seen as detestable in her eyes since they mistreat women in every single situation. The victimization of Plath in her personal life is compared to the one of Jewish women in the disgraceful event of the Holocaust. The German Nazis showed no mercy regarding a total race when invading their lands. Plath tends to make the reader feel the emotional and physical damage of these women and compare it to her own suffering that she is undergoing in her life from her close members of her family as her husband.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has reached the conclusion that the hatred that Plath possesses is a result of the mistreatment she receives in her life. The lack of love she gets from her father and husband makes her treat men as enemies in her poem. She feels like a victim in her own environment which she considers highly patriarchal. She believes that her life is controlled by men. That's why she makes her female speaker in her poem a warrior to challenge the patriarchal norms of society. She sees death as an escape from the sordid reality that she lives. She is not afraid of death as expressed through the female speaker of *Lady Lazarus*. It is concluded that her voice is transferred in her female character to show Plath's standing against a male-dominated society. Plath uses the Jewish Holocaust as an example to illustrate the oppression women suffered under the occupation by German Nazis. Plath ensures the women that they will triumph over men sooner or later.

## WORKS CITED

- Birkle, C. (1996). *Women's Stories of the Looking Glass*. München: Fink.
- Bloom, H. (2001). *Sylvia Plath*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Cixous, H. (1975). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (4), pp.875-893. Trans. by Cohen, K. and Cohen, P. (1976).
- Hughes, T. (1982). *The Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper and Row.

- Irigaray, L. (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. by Gillian C. Gill. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Masal, N. (2006). *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. PhD Thesis: Shivaji University.
- Qazzaz, E. J. (2017). Acts of Resistance in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel": A Journey from Oppression to Emancipation. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (IJHCD)*, 4 (1). pp.209-217.
- Subagyo, K. (2009). Confronted Patriarchy in Sylvia Plath's Poems. *TEFLIN Journal*. 20 (1), pp.83-103.
- Wagner-Martin, L. (2011). *Sylvia Plath*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

البطريكية و الاضطهاد في قصيدة سيلفيا بلاث "السيدة لازاروس" ali

الملخص

يناقش هذا البحث مشاعر سيلفيا بلاث تجاه مجتمعها الأبوي. في قصيدتها ، السيدة لازاروس ، أعربت عن ازدائها لسوء المعاملة التي تتلقاها من أفراد عائلتها المقربين مثل أبيها وزوجها. من خلال أبيات القصيدة ، توضح للعالم أن المرأة تعيش في مجتمع أبوي. يبرر هذا البحث كراهيتها للرجال التي تنتقلها بلاث في قصيدتها. يتم تحليل خطوطها الشعرية في السيدة لازاروس لإظهار مشاعرها الداخلية. أيضاً هذا البحث موقف بلاث ضد هذا الاضطهاد الذي تعاني منه و يشرح كيف يوظف بلاث كمتال للقمع لإلقاء اللوم على النظام الأبوي لأفعالهم. الكلمات المفتاحية: النظام الأبوي ، الاضطهاد ، النساء ، الكراهية ، الهولوكوست، سيلفيا بلاس.

باب سالارى و بن دهستى ل هلبهستا سيلفيا پلاس "خاتين لازاروس"

پوخته

نهف فمكولين بهحسى ههستين سيلفيا پلاسى دكهت ههمبر جفاكا وئ يا بابك سالارى. د هلبهستا خو يا بناقى خاتين لازاروس ده نهو كهريا خو ل ههمبر رهفتارا خراب ژ نهدامين نير بين نيزيكى خو بين مالباتا وئ دستينه وكي باب و ههفزي بي خو. نهو ب رنيا رستين هلبهستا خو بو جيهانن دده خويكرن كو ژن د ناف جفاكى باب سالارى دژين. نهف فمكولين كهريا پلاسى ژ نهدامين نير بين جفاكى وئ رهوا دكهت ل هلبهستا خاتين لازاروس دا. ريزين هلبهستا وئ ههستين پلاسى بين نافمكى نيشان ددهت. ههرومال فئ فمكولينيدا ههلوپستى پلاسى ژ زولما زهلامان بهرامبر ژنان ديار دكهت و باسى چوانبيا بكارنينانا پلاسى وكو نمونهك زولم لى هاتيه كرن د هينته ديار كرن ژ لايى جفاكى باب سالارى و كيرارين وان. پهيڤين سهرمكى: باب سالارى ، بن دهستى ، ژن ، كهرب و كين ، هولوكوست ، سيلفيا بلاث.