

# EXPLORING SECOND WAVE FEMINISM: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

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## Abstract

The second-wave feminist theory is an essential lens through which the poems of Plath can be interpreted as more or less predictive and confusing of the feminist issues. Plath has become a strong interlocutor of second-wave feminism. The present work explores the intricate connection between second-wave feminism and poetry by Sylvia Plath with the help of three of her most famous poems: *I Am Vertical*, *Daddy*, and *Lady Lazarus*. This analysis forges Plath as a conflict zone, where the second-wave theory came to the intersection with the boundaries of ideological appropriation, and provides a lasting perception into the convergence of gender, trauma, and creativity.

**Keywords:** Confessionality, *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, Second-wave feminism, Sylvia Plath.

## INTRODUCTION

The second wave of feminism, which ran through the early 1960s to the early 1980s was a radical extension of feminist movements in the achievements of the first wave, including female suffrage [1]. Having developed as the next phase to the initial research by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), the idea that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, the era came to emphasize the cultural, psychological, and domestic aspects of gender oppression, including inequality at work places, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and the omnipresence of patriarchal norms in daily life [2]. In contrast to the formal equality of the first wave, the second-wave feminists aimed to change the world in a substantive way as the institutions and cultural practices depicted women as the Other and limited them to subordinate roles that suffocated independence and self-realization. The *Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan revealed the problem that has no name the discontent of educated housewives and *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millett explored literature and power structures as domains of male domination [3] [4]. Gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter spread the discipline further by promoting the female literary tradition and reviving female authors lost in history [5].

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), who was writing at the border of this movement, has a central but controversial place in its literary heritage [6]. Written in her last months of life, her major poems are written pre-historically to the full blossoming of second-wave feminism, but echo its issues: the commodification of the female body, the anger toward the patriarchal system, the psychic fragmentation under the pressures of domestic life, and the rebirth, revenge fantasies [7]. Second-wave feminism, which developed in the 1960s and 1970s, changed both the axis of movement toward the cultural, psychological, and domestic aspects of women's oppression, anticipating lived experience, bodily autonomy, and patriarchal forms of power [8]. Just before her suicide in 1963 when her work was mostly published in the early 1960s. The image of a martyr of gendered suffering was sealed by Plath's suicide, when she was in the middle of a marital crisis and economic distress, which continues to be retrospectively appropriated in feminism since then. Plath was turned into a symbol of rebellion after critics acclaimed such works as *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, and *I Am Vertical* as radically critical of father-husband figures and invisibility in society [9]. But this myth-making has come under fire: is Plath confessional intensity, with its Holocaust-alluding allusions and suicidal thoughts, a feminist solidarity, or a more personal, psychoanalytic conflict?

These tensions are challenged in this article by exploring three iconic poems: "I Am Vertical" (1961) that opposes the inadequacy of the speaker in his upright form with the vast permanence of nature; the poem "Daddy" (1962), which demolishes the tyranny of the father and husband; and the poem "Lady Lazarus" (1962), a play of resurrection of the body and revenge. Incorporating the confessional theory, which prefigures the crude naked I, and the taboo confessions, and second-wave feminist assumptions of de Beauvoir to Showalter, the analysis traces the modes of how the texts by Plath anticipate feminism and transcend it.

The importance of the study is in the fact that it does not pigeonhole Plath as a feminist poet. Even though her versions of female alienation had an impressive gynocritical informative effect, they also criticize the orthodoxy of second-wave feminism by placing aesthetic extremism above political consistency. Plath was not a member of feminist movements; her goal was the literary mastery of god like stature, not feminism. Her work, however, pushed the feminist theory to the challenge of mental illness, use of ethical metaphors, and the boundaries of biographical reductionism. This analysis throws light on the presence of feminism once again in a current period when feminism continues to be a subject of ideological struggle, where the personal trauma of the writer and the culture come together.

The article structure is as follows: it provides a theoretical background of the second-wave feminism, connecting the great minds to the motifs in Plath, a methodology introduces a triangulated approach, and the analytical studies of each poem explore the confessional, psychoanalytic and feminist aspects, and a conclusion shows an ambiguous legacy of Plath. In this perspective, Plath comes out as no heroine of feminism, but a poet whose uncouth digs at the self-remain unsettling and productive of second-wave paradigms.

### **Second Wave Feminist Movement of the 20th Century: Theoretical Background**

Second-wave feminism as a continuation of previous movements on suffrage and equality changed the focus of campaigning to the politics of daily living, sex and representation. One of the most critical predecessors is usually considered to be Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949), who famously contended that one is not born, but made, a woman, which thus took the femininity of the subject and transformed it into a cultural and historical product [2]. This led to the subsequent theorists to question how gendered subjectivities are created and reproduced through literature, psychology and social institutions.

In literary criticism, this shift was away from the feminist reading of the texts written by men, to the gynocriticism, that dealt with the traditions, experiences and forms of women writers themselves. Elaine Showalter, as an example, highlighted the rediscovery of forgotten female authors, and the development of a distinctly female literary paradigm, and other critics focused on the metaphoric aspects of the female body, childbirth and housewifery as influences in female writing [5]. Simultaneously, there arose discussions of Anglo-American, French, and Marxist feminisms as to whether they should focus on oppression, language or material conditions [10]. A highly charged case, with Plath entering this field, Plath is obsessed not only with the female body and power relations, but also not to be narrowed down to a single ideological label.

### **Confessional Poetry and Plath's Position**

Confessional poetry developed in the postwar United States in response to the impersonality of New Criticism and high modernism, and prefiguring the use of the I, it was an instance of unparalleled directness in its attitudes and subjects, including mental illness, sexuality, and domestic crisis [11]. The term was coined by critics like M. L. Rosenthal in the late 1950s, in which poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath were seen as putting their literal selves in the middle of the work [12]. Confessional poetry tended to be based on taboo subjects, suicide, depression, addiction, and exploiting the overlap of art and life.

The association that Plath has with this label is controversial. Critics have claimed that her poetry is representative of confessional literature, as it is evident that she tackles the death of her father, her marriage, and her suicide attempts [13]. Others argue that the fact that it is called confessional is deceptive in that it undervalues her formal control, intertextuality and symbolic complexity, and that the category itself is vaguely defined and hard to test when compared to the actual practice of the poets. Anyway, the confessional mode overlaps in a fruitful manner with the second-wave feminism, in that both of them promote the use of personal experience as a location of political and cultural conflict [14]. In this way, poems of Plath are privileged texts, in which one can investigate the question of the female subjectivity, trauma, and patriarchal authority.

### **Plath's Life and Feminist Mythmaking**

The reception of Plath has been greatly influenced by her biography. She was born in 1932 in Boston to Otto Plath, a German-Polish entomologist and professor, and Aurelia Schober, an English/German teacher, and therefore showed literary precocity at a young age, first appearing in magazines when she was eight years old [15]. The death of her father in 1940, when she was still a child, became one of the main traumas, which is over and over again in her work, and she tends to mediate it with images of authoritarian male figures, of the sea and nature.

Plath was successful in her academic life and had endured distressing psychological reactions as an adult [16]. She was a winner of a scholarship at Smith College, briefly worked in New York as a guest editor, experienced a significant breakdown and attempted suicide (later fictionalized in *The Bell Jar*) in the 1950s. She then relocated to England on a Fulbright scholarship after which she married the poet Ted Hughes and had two children before divorce occurred in the marriage. Through economic misery, emotional loneliness and depression, she ended up committing suicide in 1963, soon after having completed many of her most effective poems [17].

Late 1970s and later feminist criticism of the second wave tended to make Plath a martyr of sorts, a woman ruined by patriarchy, whose anger and powerlessness revealed how gender conventions are violent [18]. Nevertheless, as the appended study points out, this myth-making endeavor runs the danger of making Plath and her work easy to understand and appear as a representative of the so-called feminist heroine instead of a multifaceted poet who wrote in various impulses and bore no connection to mainstream feminist activism or to theoretical movements [19]. Any interpretation of Plath as a second-wave feminist poet must thus have in place the strong feminist applications of her work and the indicators that she identified herself as an ambitious writer more than she identified as an advocate of women as a category.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on qualitative, interpretive approach that incorporates confessional theory, psychoanalytic criticism and feminist literary criticism to examine the poems of Sylvia Plath and her relation to the second-wave feminism. Instead of perceiving the texts of Plath as either open autobiographical texts, or as formal texts, the approach considers them as triadic networks of personal experience, unconscious conflict, and gendered power relations. This approach is thus triangulated: the poems are analyzed using three different perspectives that are then set to discuss and not to create one definite meaning, but to trace the territory of the tensions and possibilities.

The confessional theory assists in the interpretation of the workings of the Plathian I as a poetic subject matter and the subject of lived experience. Based on the description of confessional poetry as a genre that anticipates the literal self, taboo subjects, and an apparent breakdown between life and text, analysis is made of the texts of "I Am Vertical," "Daddy," and "Lady Lazarus" as these texts that turn biographical material into more accentuated symbolic plays. Close reading is concerned with voice, address, and performance of personal history, and it is hesitant to make an extreme analogy between the speaker and the writer, recognizing the performative, crafted nature of Plath's confessions.

Then, the psychoanalysis criticism is applied to shed light on the repetitive images, fantasies and relational patterns which are beyond conscious intentions. Ambivalence, repetition, identification, the relationship between the father and daughter are among the concepts that contribute to the strength of the Plath representations of authority and self-destruction in the essay *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*. The approach pays attention to the fact that the Nazi imagery, vampiric metaphors, and resurrection motifs are overdetermined and can be understood as the ways of unresolved grief, aggression and desire, but not just as the historical or political allusions. Psychoanalysis therefore explains the way Plath imaginative world organizes the psychic struggles that the feminist readings subsequently steal.

These psychic dramas are placed in the context of more generalized systems of patriarchy, gender ideology, and women literary tradition, using feminist criticism, particularly, second-wave theory. The work uses ideas of de Beauvoir, as the woman as constructed Other, Friedan as the domestic imprisonment, Millett as the sexual politics, and Showalter as the gynocritical concentration on women as text producers. The views of these opinions inform close readings that situate the female bodies as spectacle in the poems by Plath, voice patriarchal domination, and explains ambivalent methods of resistance.

The process is analytically divided into theory and text. The poems are analyzed first at the imagery, form, and voice level, and then the confessional, psychoanalytic, and feminist ideas are selectively used to elucidate particular elements, i.e. how the father is depicted, how the speaker commits suicide, or how the speaker feels, being invisible. Intersections and contradictions between these frameworks are foregrounded, as these contradictions are what demonstrate the boundaries of reading Plath as so clearly "feminist" and highlight the difficulty of her location to the discourse of second-wave feminism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sylvia Plath whose greatest works were created in the early 1960s has, since then, been retrospectively described as a feminist icon, despite the fact that she never wrote under an overtly feminist banner. This section discuss the connection between second-wave feminism and the poetry of Sylvia Plath with references to three of her most prominent poems: *I Am Vertical*, *Daddy*, and *Lady Lazarus*. Based on the feminist theory and confessional poetics, it examines how the representations of self, the body, and feminist power structures by Plath resonate with and challenge the issues of the second wave feminism. It is not to make Plath a feminist or non-feminist poet but to demonstrate how her writings are the site of contested readings in which feminist readings and other critical practices collide.

### **I Am Vertical: Nature, Self-Image and Gender**

Officially, the poem "I Am Vertical" (1961) consists of ten-line stanzas, a form of brief, unrhymed, unrestricted verse, which helps to support its pessimistic, self-seeking mood. The very title of the poem itself can be characterized as a physical fact, that of being upright, which is immediately contradicted in the first line by the speaker favoring the horizontal nature, and this paradox opens the main tension of the poem between the human and the desire of the speaker to unite with the natural world [20]. Trees and flowers get romanticized as a symbol of permanence and beauty, which the female speaker contrasts her own body with and finds unsatisfactory.

In second-wave feminist terms, this poem may be interpreted as the dramatism of internalized inferiority. The speaker refers to herself as being invisible and useless as she transfers the energy and functionality to the natural things surrounding her [21]. The repetition of the comparison of I with the tree or the flower indicates a subject who is not included in the realm of meaningful being, a being that has been attributed by most feminist critics to the social marginalization of women writers and the experiences of women. The fact that the speaker in the poem insists that he or she will only be useful as he or she lies down in death can be interpreted as a criticism of the culture that only

appreciates women as icons or martyrs, and not as active participants in life.

Simultaneously, the poem can be also interpreted in less feminist vein as a meditation on mortality and alienation. Those who have resorted to psychoanalytic methods have noted that Plath tends to see death not as complete destruction, but as a passage to a new state where the form is dissolved into an undifferentiated potentiality [22]. The need to lie flat, to be submerged into the earth suggests not only an obliteration of the self, but a wish to remain connected with something greater than the self. In this regard, *I Am Vertical* stands in a grey zone between feminist protest and existential lust; its applicability to the second-wave feminism movement is that it prefigures how women perceive themselves and how much they dislike the world that makes women invisible.

### **Daddy: Patriarchy, History, and the Feminist Controversy**

*Daddy* is one of the most widely talked about and controversial poems dedicated by Plath to be formally constructed, consisting of sixteen five-line stanzas with forceful internal rhyme, alliteration, and insistent, childlike and menacing sound of the suffix “oo”, which brings about a sing-song effect [23]. The poem combines both personal experience (the loss of the father, the unsuccessful marriage) and a national tragedy (the Holocaust), creating a situation where the female voice puts herself on the position of a victim of a Nazi father-like figure [24]. Such a hyperbole and historical inaccuracy of such an identification have resulted in spirited debate on the ethical and political consequences of such metaphors by Plath.

*Daddy* has frequently been praised as a stern illustration of patriarchal oppression in the framework of second-wave feminism. The father is monolithic, fascistic, the power that runs even beyond the grave and the husband is presented as an imitation of the original, implying that masculine power is reproduced both in time and also in sexual bonds [25]. Critics feminist have suggested that the poem is not only a personal statement of anger by Plath but of a general female anger at male domination and that the vast image of Nazism is an attempt to convey the perceived absolute nature of the patriarchal oppression. Killing the father, as it is interpreted in the end of the poem, has been interpreted reflexively as a matricide of the discourse of patriarchy, a necessary (though bloody) process of feminine self-determination [26].

Nevertheless, there are other researchers warning against blindly following the adaption of *Daddy* as a feminist proclamation. The study provided above points to a number of complications: the history that the father of Plath was not a Nazi, the ambivalence of feelings of the speaker (love and hatred), and the danger of projecting the psychological drama of Plath on a universal state of the female. Biographical evidence indicates that Plath was a real woman who has grieved and is attached to her father and so the vitriol tone of the poem is a defense of that grief at least in part [27]. Besides, the fact that the main voice used in the poem is a girl with an Electra complex beckons psychoanalytic interpretations which focus on intrapsychic conflict as opposed to feminist comradeship.

In second-wave feminist perspective, therefore, *Daddy* is both essential and problematic. It provides scalding portraits of male dominance and female victimization, which resonated well with the movement towards challenging patriarchy, but has its own roots in a very particular, highly melodramatized autobiography and applies the historical horrors in a manner that is not approved by all feminists. This tension is the strength of the poem: it is the dramatization of fantasies and extremities that can constitute the perception of a woman about the power of patriarchy, without offering any solid ideological standpoint.

### **Lady Lazarus: Body, Spectacle and Feminist Ambivalence**

*Lady Lazarus* is composed of twenty-eight tersely enjambed tercets, the abruptness of the line breaks and the irregularity of the rhythms reflect the fragmented and volatile nature of the persona of the speaker [9]. Coming back to the repetitive suicide attempts, the poem sets it as a sort of performance, with its own audience, voyeurism, and commodification of female body; the allusions to Nazi camps are reintroduced, but this time, the imagery speaks more of striptease and show business. The speaker

identifies herself as a walking miracle, prides herself that it is an art of dying, and speaks to the audience who feeds on her pain as entertainment.

The objectification of the female body and the transformation of a woman into a visual spectacle is a major concern of the second-wave feminism, and Lady Lazarus may be interpreted as an angry protest against this act [10]. The female body in the poem is described as a location where medical, patriarchal, and commercial forces are at work cutting, burning, displaying and making money. Simultaneously, the speaker demonstrates a perverse agency in her constant resurrections, and in the last stanza, in fact envisions herself emerging out of the ashes to consume men as air, a vision which many readers might suggest to be a fantasy of female retaliation against the repressors of the patriarchal order [28]. This phoenix repetition is very close to second-wave feminist stories of women regaining power by raising consciousness and resisting.

However, as the analysis above states, the feminist position of the poem is not that obvious. The speaker is hysterical and self-destructive, as well as highly ambivalent regarding the survival of herself; her victory in the end can be interpreted as a psychological act as opposed to a political one that will last. Critics interpret the poem as being more about suicidal psychology whereby the male characters (doctor, spectators, Nazis) are a reflection of the internal struggles of the self as opposed to being a real world embodiment of patriarchy. Also, the overload of the poem with Holocaust imagery and religious symbolism makes it difficult to read the poem as a simple feminist work about the power relationship between males and females.

In the case of second-wave feminism, Lady Lazarus is, therefore, a very strong yet unsteady icon. It enacted the possibility of making spectacle of a body and suffering belonging to a woman, foresees feminist theory that would come after it critiquing the male gaze and commodification as a whole, and enacts a fantasy of female revenge; also, it depicts a protagonist whose first and foremost adversary might be her own psyche, and whose connection to feminism as a movement is oblique.

### **Intersection and Tensions of Feminism, Plath and the Second Wave**

It is a struggle to liberate all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women and even white and economically advantaged heterosexual women. The vision of complete freedom that is less than this is not feminism but just another form of feminine self-aggrandizement [29]. This integrative compulsion places a lot of pressure on the second-wave feminism, which the text can be followed since Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). According to de Beauvoir, who states that “one is not born, but made, woman” [2]. The gender is socially constructed, not determined by biology, and the woman is the other, as she is defined in relation to man. This existential model greatly shaped the American feminists such as Betty Friedan whose *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) revealed the cultural discrimination which pervaded on the domestic life, but only as far as white and educated housewives were concerned [30].

Sylvia Plath is not a woman calling herself a feminist here, in fact, *Ariel* poems, published posthumously, by her hand, left readers stunned with a bluntness and unfiltered confrontation of death, despair, and rage related to her gender. Her fame came not so much through middle-of-the-road lifetime response as these poems of perseverance that wrote about death and despair and sang the cult of murder and suicide, which signified the start of the rehabilitation of Plath as a poet and the rise of what would come to be known as the phenomenon of serious contemporary literature. Published during a time when the second wave was in full swing on her work anticipates a second-wave agenda: the commodification of the patriarch, psychic suffocation, rebellious re-birth which made her a cult figure of feminist liberation [31].

At the heart of this connection lies one thing: Plath cannot make a distinction between life and art [32] [33] [34]. Being open to her journals, she wrote that she found her joy in wringing one out of her life, a piece of pain and beauty, and translating it into print, and be it writing she found it to be the sole way out in “*I am Vertical*” as: “I have strong physical, intellectual and emotional forces; and they must

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have outlets, creative, otherwise they go to destruction and waste..." (p. 131). This is reflected in poems such as *The Applicant*, which is a mocking of marriage as a sales pitch of a desexed it, a living doll that "willing / To bring teacups and roll away headaches and do whatever you tell it " (lines 12-14) scaled down to " It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk. it works there is nothing wrong with it" (lines 39-42). Here Plath accuses men who demand not intelligent companionship but the absolute submission of herself to his demands, just as de Beauvoir inflicts on her Other, Friedan upon her mystique, and Plath suggests on herself that Ted Hughes has been guilty as well: "The famed and fatal jealousy of professionals... Perhaps fame will make him insufferable. " (pp. 258-259).

Themes of paternal loss "I was ten when they buried you" (line 57) and oppression collide in *Daddy*, and the speaker in the poem is also a victim: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / Thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (lines 1-5) [35] [36]. The mystery of the Luftwaffe of the father (line 42) develops to fascist hatred: Every woman adores a Fascist, the boot in the face, the brute (line 48), and ends in symbolic murder: "Daddy, I have had to kill you... There is a stake in you, fat, black heart" (lines 48, 76). This frees women who are vampiric men who live off women as a foundation of sexual politics as proposed by Millett, but based on suicide to get back, back, back to you (line 59).

This is furthered in *Lady Lazarus* with its Holocaust dehumanization, namely "my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (lines 4-5), and vengeful resurrection: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (lines 82-84) [37]. The speaker, appearing bleached out like Jew linen (lines 8-9), requests money to say " For a word or a touch / Or a drop of blood " (lines 62-63), a reaction to her isolation Belsen-like, and thus, the speaker needs to be made aware of: "What the person out of Belsen... wants is... the full knowledge that somebody else been there of knows the worst" (p. 473). The end of the poems written by Plath, when she faced childcare disputes, when she attempted to write, she felt suffocated by domesticity-dominated (p. 478), and Hughes being in the shadow "Dangerous to be so close to Ted... I am apt to be electrostatically a byword" (p. 326), naked a harried mind in search of spiritual light.

Finally, Plath shares second-wave tensions: normalizing women anger and unapologetic expression at the expense of patriarchal narration, but her suicide highlights emotional turmoil and depression, an invisible, undiagnosed disease, lack of creative space. Neither complete freedom nor self-glory her legacy, which, despite brilliance, illuminates the dilemma of post-war women, is a question to feminism of finding complexity above cult status.

### **Second Wave Feminism and Feminist Labeling Limits**

Although much of the work of Plath can be interpreted in a feminist way: her emphasis on the female body, her rejection of domestic roles, her depiction of psychic torment in women, etc. it equally contains significant aspects that Plath fits ill in the second-wave feminist categories. She never made herself consciously aligned to any feminist organization or theoretical arguments and much or most of the major components of feminist criticism (including open celebration of female sexuality or collective political change action) finds little reflection in her poetry. Rather, work by Plath tends to focus upon personal suffering, mixed-up relationships, and symbolic applications of the body that goes beyond biological realism.

In terms of second-wave, this creates methodological concerns. Are thematic content like writing about women, criticizing patriarchy, self-identification, or the uses to which subsequent feminist readers make the work to justify its definition as a feminist work? The gynocritical turn focused on the value of women in texts, irrespective of their overt ideology, as an attempt to trace a female literary tradition, which may encompass writers who never heard of second-wave feminism but whose writing nonetheless sheds some light on the life of women. Plath is no exception: her poems have most frequently featured in feminist pedagogy and theory not because of her manifestos but due to the radical rhetoric of her narratives of depression, ambivalence, and defiance against feminist issues of gender, power, and subjectivity.

Therefore, instead of addressing the question whether Plath is or not a second-wave feminist poet, one could be even more fruitful in perceiving her as a pivotal point where second-wave feminism took its interpretive spirit. The role of feminist critics was to assist in making Plath a canonical figure, marginal or controversial poet, and the role of the texts by Plath was to challenge feminist theory with the issue of mental illness, ambivalence, and ethical dilemma of metaphor. This mutual relationship highlights the significance of reading Plath in historical times, regarding the progressive feminist discourses.

## DISCUSSION

The second-wave feminist theory can be essential in helping to see how the poems of Plath not only foresee feminist issues but also make them more complicated. The philosophical foundation of this was developed by Simone de Beauvoir who in her book, *The Second Sex* argued that it is the social, cultural and ideological processes that construct woman as Other and not biology [2]. The fact that she says that a woman is not born, but made underlines her emphasis that femininity is manufactured by institutions, myths and everyday practices, but not nature. In the poem, *I Am Vertical* Plath has the speaker costing herself to trees and flowers, which represent the ability to endure and be beautiful, but she is far much less and unseen, wandering among them without ever being acknowledged [34]. The de Beauvoir has the way of not-belonging resembles the position of the subject who has internalized otherness, who has the experience of her human (and implicitly female) self as incomplete in comparison to the idealized types approved by society. The wish to lie down and blend with nature expressed in the poem may be regarded as a fantasy of getting rid of socially constructed feminine self which made the speaker useless and invisible.

The *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan redirected the focus of feminists to the psychic repercussions of domestic imprisonment as well as the problem that has no name that middle-class housewives in the 1950s and early 1960s endured [38]. Friedan revealed the gap between the standard feminine role of fulfillment in marriage and motherhood and the emotions of emptiness and frustrations that women experienced. Plath life and work echo this criticism: the letters and biographical information show that she is a woman who has befriended both passionately in the literary sphere as well as the requirements of being a wife and mother and her work frequently plays staging housewife and wife roles in the stifling role. In *Lady Lazarus*, the body of the speaker is constantly placed on the display, as an object of medical, patriarchal, and public consumption [37]. This objectification of a woman as spectacle and commodity reflects Friedan in noting that the domestic angel of the house is also an image created, one which effaces the intellectual and creative demands of women. The theatrical suicides in the poem dramatize the psychic extremity that may result as a consequence of being declassified into a role, which is the main focus of Friedan.

*Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett also radicalized the second-wave feminism, by arguing that patriarchy is more or less a political system which is rooted in language, literature, and intimate relations [4]. She analyzed canonical male writers as highly replicative frameworks of domination, revealing the functioning of the so-called sexual politics via narrative, metaphor, and representation of character. *Daddy* is quite compatible with the method of Millett: the speaker in Plath builds the father as a complete patriarchal figure comparing him to a Nazi, a god, a vampire, and a Panzer-man, and then applies this image to the husband who is a model of the original. The poem exposes the way in which patriarchy is not limited to a single person as described by Millett but instead spread within the institutions and the relationships among people creating a system where men hold positions of power and women are victims. The symbolic killing of the father and his own double in a violent way can be understood as a imaginative overthrow of the sexual politics, a poetic gesture which reflects the appeal of Millett to blindfold and do away with the patriarchal dominance in culture.

The contribution made by Elaine Showalter is the change of the focus of feminist criticism to gynocriticism which is the study of women as the producers of texts and their own traditions, forms

and experiences [5]. She highlights the process of salvaging female writers and reading them through a female-centered system instead of merely evaluating them in comparison with the male norms. By making Plath a martyr of the madwoman or biographical sensation, by marginalizing her to biographical sensationalism, the critic threatens to do the same thing the patriarchal marginalization that Showalter cautions about. Gynocritical reading rather recognizes the craft of Eavan Plath, the command of her voice and her multi-layered negotiations of the female experience. An example of such depictions of oppression would be *Lady Lazarus*, which, besides being a representation of oppression, exhibits a high level of play with performance, audience and voice, placing Plath squarely within a women literary tradition that is of investigating the body and pain as a source of meaning. Likewise, *I am Vertical* also turns, under the microscope of Showalter not only to despair but to text where a woman writer explores the metaphor of nature and death in order to explain a female conscious in particular. Bringing de Beauvoir into the critique of the constructed woman, Friedan into the critique of the domestic breakdown and Millett into the sexual politics and Showalter into the gynocriticism to the table alongside the Plath poems, the second-wave theory shows that her work actually echoes and extends the scope of the feminist thought.

This research provides a new revisionist reading to *I Am Vertical*, *Daddy*, and *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath to avoid reductionist second-wave feminist interpretations of the poems as direct transcriptions of patriarchal complaint. Rather it claims that Plath enacts the essential instability of female subjectivity in which the intimacy of trauma, the ideology of the public, and the performance of literature collide violently. In *I Am Vertical*, existential alienation is disclosed outside of gender complaint; *Daddy* is a blend of political violence and psychic overdetermination in the surplus of imagery; and *Lady Lazarus* is perverse agency in the commodified spectacle. This research recontextualizes the meaning of Plath as a complicated phenomenology of gendered consciousness that is impossible to simplify into clean feminist models by showing how her canonical position is achieved by dramatizing contradictions of lived postwar womanhood.

## CONCLUSION

The article suggests the portrayals of female suffering, patriarchal authority, and defiant rebirth as used by Plath profoundly influenced the literary criticism of the second-wave feminist movement by making her a martyr figure, however, on the other hand, her writings transcend direct political communication. Confessionality changes biography into symbolic acting, psychoanalytic structures are exposures in intrapsychic struggle, and feminist readings are enlightenments in gendered power without entirely sublimating the aesthetic and existential desires of Plath. An analysis of the poems by Sylvia Plath, one of the representatives of the second-wave feminism, shows that there is a complicated interdependence between personal voice, the genre, and ideological theft. *I Am Vertical* draws out a sense of invisibility and a desire to be absorbed by the natural world by a female subject, which has been associated by the feminist of the culture of the time with marginalization and internalized inferiority that women had been subjected to in their culture. One of the most infamous poetic contexts in which this is presented as fascist authority is in *Daddy* which coincides with second-wave feminist analysis of male power though has an exaggerated and distorted approach to historical facts. The spectacle of the female body, commodification of suffering, and the fantasy of revenge, which is dramatized in *Lady Lazarus*, has led the poem to become a central text in the discourse of gender, performance, and agency. Simultaneously, the work by Plath cannot be singularly defined as a feminist story. Her allusions to the Holocaust and her interest in death and her complex psychological topographies make any effort to read the poems as straightforward allegories of female repression or emancipation difficult. According to the study, Plath eventually writes as a good poet as opposed to a woman and existential themes often take precedence over the political expression. However, Plath has become a strong interlocutor of second-wave feminism, and her poems remain a rich source of maturity and revelation about the ambiguities and successes of feminist theory.

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Nithika Ravikumar (N.R): Conceptualization, methodology, analysis, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation.

Deepa Parameshwaran (D.P): Supervision, sources, data curation, writing—review and editing.

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