

**Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes in
“Her Kind,” “Hurry Up Please It's Time,” “Consorting with
Angels,” and “You, Doctor Martin”**

Mohamed Radi (*)

Abstract

This research paper aims to draw a multi-faceted self portrait of the confessional poet Anne Sexton through an in-depth analysis of her most representative poems: “Her Kind,” “Hurry Up Please It's Time,” “Consorting with Angels,” and “You, Doctor Martin.” Together, they expose the poet/speaker as a daughter, a wife, a lover, and a patient--all from a male perspective. The researcher purposefully resorts to the feminist approach to best analyze the poems, and to highlight the interrelationships between Anne Sexton and her personae. The paper finds out that Sexton’s madness and the cruelty of her misogynist society are the reasons behind her hesitation and fluctuation in portraying the liberal woman as is. Sexton’s innermost self is also divulged as she identifies with her personae. She fails to lead the conventional life of a happy housewife, the expected gender role. So, death is the inevitable remedy for a woman like her in a society which believes in sexism. Only through death does she achieve transcendence in a patriarchal world.

Keywords

confessional, sexism, gender, patriarchy, misogynist, madness, male other, death, redemption, transcendence.

*Lecturer- Department of English, Faculty of Arts, South Valley University

آن سيكستون وتفكيك القوالب النمطية الأبوية
في قصائدها "مثلك أنا" و "أسرع فقد حان الوقت" و "التعايش مع الملائكة"
و "أنت يا دكتور مارتين"

محمد راضي

ملخص

يقدم هذا البحث دراسة لقصائد آن سيكستون "مثلك أنا" و "أسرع فقد حان الوقت" و "التعايش مع الملائكة" و "أنت يا دكتور مارتين" وذلك لرسم صورة متعددة الجوانب للمرأة العصرية كما تراها الشاعرة؛ فهي الابنة والزوجة والعشيقة والمريضة. يُظهر البحث كيف أن الشاعرة تتوحد مع كل من هذه الشخصيات لدرجة كبيرة حتي أن الفواصل تتلاشى فيما بينها وبينهن. ويخلص البحث إلى أن مرض الجنون الذي أصاب الشاعرة آن سيكستون بالإضافة إلى تحيز وقسوة المجتمع الذكوري هما السببان الرئيسان في عجزها عن رسم صورة متكاملة الجوانب والأبعاد للمرأة العصرية كما تراها هي وشاعرات أخريات مثل سلفيا بلاث واليزابث بيشوب وفاطمة نعوت. ولأنها تؤمن بتحرر المرأة كما يثبت البحث، فإن آن سيكستون الشاعرة وشخصياتها في القصائد الأربع لا يستطعن أن يحيين الحياة التقليدية التي يرسمها المجتمع الأبوي لكل النساء كربة بيت سعيدة؛ بل إنها تذهب إلى أبعد من هذا فهي تفضل الموت كوسيلة للخلاص، وتحقيق الذات على أن تخضع لما يمليه المجتمع الأبوي من شروط.

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

Anne Sexton (1928-1974), a great confessional American poet, “lived the anguish of a woman who fought to feel at ease with her emotions, intellect, and body” (Reneau 6). The woman’s role in society viewed through the lens of the established patriarchy on the one hand and the feminists’ lens on the other, in her poems, “Her Kind,” “Hurry Up Please It’s Time,” “Consorting with Angels,” and “You, Doctor Martin,” is the focus of this study. Unlike the confessional poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), her depiction of the male other is inconsistent because she interprets it from a feminist perspective at a time and according to the dominant, patriarchal ideology at another. This could be justified by the fact that she had a fragmented mentality: She was a schizophrenic woman. She fluctuates between her rejection of the fake stereotypes of patriarchal society about the ideal woman, and her revolution against the established norms of society. Throughout the paper, we see her deep-rooted conviction and belief that women are liberal; they should live and see themselves the way they like. The oppression they undergo keeps them between rebellion and fear.

Anne Sexton’s poems are the sole channel through which she unveils her true identity. She believed that she could shape her identity and better understand herself by writing poetry because poetry “milks the unconscious” (Kelves 5). Through poetry, Sexton can communicate her message as she easily changes place with her personae. She better sees herself as a woman, wife, mother, daughter, lover and even witch when she draws these personae in her poems. Taken together, these different roles represent a feminist self which is seen from different male perspectives. In Sexton’s words, “I am an actress in my own autobiographical play” (189). Like an actress, she plays many roles which eventually create her polyphonic self-portrait in a misogynist society. She believes that poetry helps put things in place, and place order on her mental chaos:

The writing actually puts things back in place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again and the world is again a little more sensible and real. I’m more in touch with things. (Marx 32)

"Her Kind," a twenty-one-line poem and a Sexton's signature piece, is about woman's reclamation of self: The different facets of woman's real role which is different, in Sexton's view, from the one imposed on her by the patriarchal society. The poem is also about the great tension mirrored and captured through the gap between the sanity of the speaker and the madness which the poem delineates. Tension is, also, heightened through the reference to Joan of Arc who, in Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* (1924), is accused by the society of being queer, simply because she hears voices. They consider her mad, while she is the sanest among the people who condemn her to death on the plea that she is mad.

"Her Kind" presents three facets of the female self: "the possessed witch," the housewife and the prostitute. Stanza one reads:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

(*The Complete Poems* [CP hereafter] 15)

Sexton expresses her belief that she is feared and opposed by society. This is clear in line five, "lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind." Three accusations are directed against liberal women like Sexton herself: "Lonely thing," "twelve-fingered," and "out of mind." They don't fit in the society and, thus, lead a life of loneliness and isolation. They are weird and queer. They are mad as well. Again, "twelve-fingered" suggests that the persona is considered an outcast. Seen from a different angle, "twelve-fingered" has a positive interpretation: Sexton assures her opponent, the patriarchal society, that she is unique and different from other subservient women. She has power and individuality. "Lonely" depicts Sexton's solitariness, someone who is, as Camille Paglia says, "the self unconstrained by society" (5). Like Elizabeth Bishop who is classified by society as less than human, and is equated with a dog in her poem, "Pink Dog," Sexton is regarded as an alien or rather a freak.

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

The persona of the witch in stanza one can also be construed as an external power which controls the poet, that is, madness. A witch also refers to nature in its pure and true form without any embellishments. In contrast, society is an artificial construct. The confusion which society finds in giving an inclusive definition of Sexton and her like is shown in the last two lines of stanza one, where Sexton speaks on behalf of society: "A woman like that is not a woman, quite," and with sarcasm adds, "I have been her kind." The distance between Sexton and her personae vanishes, and together they become the liberal woman.

The internal struggle that plagues the persona is captured in stanza two of "Her Kind":

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind. (*CP* 16)

A typical housewife, the persona in "Her Kind" goes on arranging stuff in her kitchen. Yet, the stuff mentioned is weird and queer. She is arranging and fixing "suppers," not for the family, but for "the worms and the elves." Both "worms" and "elves" justify the persona's presence in "the woods." She is different from the negative stereotype which society holds for a woman and her role in the family life. She is not a normal woman, nor is the kitchen an ordinary place. Sexton's duality is pinpointed here. She has two warring sides in her, both as a woman subservient to the demands of a patriarchal society, and as a woman revolting against its dictates. She acts like an ordinary woman in that stanza, but outside the realm of society where emancipation is best achieved and secured by the rebellious woman. She plays the socially prescribed role, not in the kitchen, but in the woods.

The revolutionary woman Sexton delineates in stanza two is part and parcel of Sexton herself. Sexton identifies with her and becomes revolutionary, too. It is not her fault that she is being

Mohamed Radi

“misunderstood” by society: She is perfect and she is reluctant to change or modify herself to cope with society’s unfair demands. The stanza ends with her strong affirmation that she has been “her kind.” Like the prostitute, she breaks the imposed social roles and rules, and creates and imposes hers instead.

Sexton’s revolution against a misogynist society is heightened in stanza three of her poem, “Her Kind,” where she declares that she is a prostitute:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind. (CP 16)

The diction in this stanza mirrors the ultimate, personal freedom which a woman already has. Her “nude arms,” “thigh,” and “ribs” show her entity both as a woman and as a prostitute. The addressee is probably a man representing the prejudiced society. She calls him “driver” and “survivor” whose “flames still bite [her] thigh.” Aggression of society against liberal women is seen when their “ribs crack” under its “wheels.” This social aggression and oppression do not frighten Sexton away. She is ready to identify with the liberated prostitute, simply because she has been “her kind.”

Above all, the persona in “Her Kind,” “is not ashamed to die.” On the contrary, she sees death as a redemptive force that will liberate her from the fetters of an aggressive, misogynist society. One more point which unveils the conflicting social values inside Sexton might be seen in the passive rider or traveler who rides in the driver’s/ society’s cart. The outcome is safety for the traveler, as she dubs him “survivor.” By the end of the stanza, Sexton contradicts herself again and rejects the offer society gives to secure survival for a woman of Sexton’s kind. She is proud to die rather than to unconditionally accept society’s peace treaty. The constraints and traditional values and views that are set upon her by society drive her mad and cause her to willingly accept death instead, as it is the sole secure passage to redemption.

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

In "Hurry Up Please It's Time," the second pivotal poem examined in this study, Sexton sets up two polarities in order to enlarge the discrepancy between the dictates of society and the needs of the liberal woman. In the poem, the poet refers to the comic strip "Gasoline Alley," created by Frank King in 1918. Skeezix is the main character in the strip. Sexton identifies with him and considers him a standard for normality. Referring to the place where she lives, Middlesix, Sexton assumes that she belongs to the middle-class. These references enhance the idea that Sexton yearns to be accepted by the norms of the patriarchal society. She is eager to establish a connection between the eccentricity of her personae and the normality of the society outside. Thus, the dialogue she has with Skeezix in the poem is justified: "What is death, I ask"? He answers her with another perplexing question: "What is life, you ask"? (CP 384)

The eccentricity of the female persona, probably the poet herself, thinking of death and the negative side of the world she lives in, is drastically counterbalanced and contrasted with the optimistic Skeezix who thinks of the bright side of life:

The trouble with being a woman, Skeezix,
is being a little girl in the first place.
Not all the books of the world will change that.
I have swallowed an orange, being woman.
You have swallowed a ruler, being man.
Yet waiting to die we are the same thing. (CP 385)

Death and life are set in opposition to one another, as Skeezix is to the eccentric woman-speaker in the poem. More importantly, "Skeezix provides an initial point of contact and contrast between her and the world" (Alkalay-Gutt 55). He may be regarded as a passage to reconciliation between Sexton and her society. She is advised to give up or rather abandon her deep-rooted principles and yield to society. Astonishingly, death is the choice she makes.

Later in "Hurry Up Please It's Time," another contrast is portrayed. This time the contrast is between Sexton and the dreamer Walter Mitty. In his short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1942), James Thurber (1894-1961), an American short-story writer

and cartoonist, portrays the escapist character Walter Mitty, an ineffectual person who spends most of his time in fantasies and daydreams; a person who deliberately misleads people into accepting a reality which is not his. Sometimes Sexton identifies with Mitty. But in most cases, she does not keep a mask in her pocket to wear when needed. She has the courage to show her true color. Her mental illness might be the reason behind this fluctuation.

In "Consorting with Angels," the third poem, Sexton revolts against the established norms of patriarchal society. She captures man's lust for women as well as his little mind which reduces woman's role in society to a sexual machine. In her poem, "Consorting with Angels," she criticizes man's prescribed roles for woman as a servant who is supposed to stay in the kitchen along with "the spoons and the pots" to serve the food for the family. She also uses "my mouth" and "my breasts" to represent woman's desired body parts. The prominent and dominant image in the poem is that of the "bowl":

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.
There were still men who sat at my table,
circled around the bowl I offered up.
The bowl was filled with purple grapes
and the flies hovered in for the scent
and even my father came with his white bone.
But I was tired of the gender of things. (*CP* 111)

The "bowl" with the "grapes" inside, stand for a woman's sexual organ. As a woman in this context is reduced to a sex object, man is reduced to a creature no better than a dog. Sexton widens the web to include even her abusive father who comes with his threatening "white bone," a phallic symbol, to share and taste the ripe grapes with other preying, sexually hungry men. The father's incestuous behavior, from which Sexton suffered a lot, serves as an indictment against the patriarchal society at large.

Like Sharon Olds (1942--), Sexton makes use of a very private and personal detail. Though it is shocking and taboo, she

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

exploits it because it is inherent to understanding her identity. Olds unfolds the secret about a helpless, young girl's rape by the closest person, that is, her mother in her poem, "What if God":

What did He do when her
Long adult body rolled on me
Like lava from the top of a mountain
And the magma popped from her ducts, and my bed
Shook from the tremors, the cracking of nature.

(Olds 25)

The poem exposes a criminal mother who kills her little daughter's innocence. "The cracking of nature," in the last line, embodies a fundamental change in the daughter's identity whether the daughter is Anne Sexton or Sharon Olds. Both are turned from an innocent child into a woman. "The act committed upon her is such a violent breach of innocence that it completely redefines who she is" (Aube 24). This leads the troubled and anguished woman, Sexton in this case, to shout, in her poem "For John, Who Begs me Not to Enquire Further," "I was tired of the gender of things":

The poem moves from the mundane spoons and pots of 1960s female existence to a dream world In the dream itself, the speaker is transported to the New Jerusalem, and physically positioned between Adam and Eve. (Williams 216)

In the second stanza of Sexton's "Consorting with Angels," the speaker narrates her dream where genderless, angelic creatures appear; "no two made in the same species" (CP 111). "Consorting with Angels" continues to exemplify the neutral androgynous state of being that Sexton romanticizes, but her idealization of asexuality runs into problems" (Williams 227). Thus, Sexton claims:

I've been opened and undressed.
I have no arms or legs.
I am all one skin like a fish.
I'm no more a woman
Than Christ was a man. (CP 112)

"Consorting with Angels," "fulfills [Sexton's] desire for androgyny only through art" because she cannot achieve that state in reality.

Mohamed Radi

The present perfect in the passive voice “I’ve been opened and undressed” signifies two things in this context. The doers of the action are many and, thus, are unknown. She has undergone this horrible act several times. The reference, here, is to her father, maternal grandfather, and several male friends of her mother. In that significant line, the woman-poet is willing to be “undressed” and to be “opened” provided that she become genderless, that is, the different parts of her body mix up and turn into one piece like a fish. She is eager to be genderless. This can be compared to the case of the seal, in Robert Lowell’s poem “Seals,” which is fishy and limbless. The mutilation of the body is the target.

The male other is, also, present in “You, Doctor Martin,” the fourth poem discussed in this paper, where Sexton admires her psychiatrist upon first glance. Yet, her disdain for him grows fast when she realizes that he represents patriarchal authority. She raises him to a god-like state when she addresses him:

Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes. (CP 3)

She flatters him as all-seeing “third eye” who “lights” the patient’s lives with the hope for cure. The dichotomy in that poem is evident in the woman patient’s ability to do nothing but “counting this row and that row of moccasins/ waiting on the silent shelf,” (CP 4), and the male psychiatrist who “walk(s)/ from breakfast to madness” (CP 3). The gap between the two of them is apparently wide, as the woman-speaker uses the first person singular pronoun “I” to talk about herself. The first person plural pronoun “we” is avoided. Tension, here, is created between “you” and “I”:

The tone of the poem is cynical about the mental institution and about Dr. Orne’s profession. In Sexton’s eyes the patients including herself look like ‘moving dead’ without a soul, and her doctor deals with them only to complete his ‘business’.
(Fukuda 85)

Sexton sees a male other in her doctor exactly like the male other who lusts after her body. The former pinions her hands and enslaves her because of her illness, whereas the latter desires her

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

body. Her existence in this poem is a zombie-like existence; she is half-dead, half-alive. She does not move at her own will, she moves at his. He is the one who dictates orders and is supposed to be blindly obeyed. The woman-patient's lack of freedom is created through a number of vivid images:

...Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk
of death. (*CP* 3)

The speaker in "You, Doctor Martin," belongs to the moving dead. "Tunnel" and "dead" enact the lack of both happiness and hope for anything good the future may carry for the speaker. Sarcastically, she is a queen, but not in a palace: She is a queen in a mental hospital. In reality, she is not. "The laughing bee" suggests hope, but hope vanishes when the reader realizes that the bee is "on a stalk of death." Patients, also, sleep in "separate boxes" which remind us of caskets. Death reaps their souls in large numbers as the speaker assures her readers that "like floods of life, they fall 'in frost'." "Frost" itself is reminiscent of death.

Lack of freedom at a mental hospital is captured in the following lines of the poem, "You, Doctor Martin," where the woman-patient is helpless as the male doctor cripples her freedom by imposing a strict discipline:

We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
scratch and whine like chalk in school. (*CP* 3)

At the "madhouse," the patient-woman, along with the other patients, is ordered to "stand in lines." The gates of their wards open

at a specific time. They are moved like cattle to have their food (gravy). "Smock" indicates that the patients pretend that they are happy through their affected smiles. They are deprived of their humanity and reduced to mere figures as they are counted every time they have their meals. They suffer from that harsh discipline and, along with their "plates," they "whine" and suffer. They "chew in rows" as animals on a farm do.

Anne Sexton's penchant criticism, that deep-rooted anger towards her psychiatrist, is fuelled by her hatred of her incestuous father. The doctor is a father substitute. This is conspicuous in other poems where she expresses her rejection of what the doctor says, and goes even further to insult him in "The Doctor of the Heart":

Take away your knowledge, Doktor.
It doesn't butter me up...
Herr Doktor! I'll no longer die
To spite you, you wallowing
Seasick grounded man.

Again, the doctor in "The Doctor of the Heart," represents the male-other, the authority from which she wants to set herself free, because she cannot establish a sort of reconciliation between the two of them: herself and society. Like Sylvia Plath who does not need the "help of a male/God figure" (Bloom 74) to come back from the dead, Sexton follows in the footsteps of her predecessor. She uses the German language in "Doktor" and "herr Doktor" to declare her father a Nazi. They are the same words used by Plath earlier in her poem, "Lady Lazarus":

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (Plath 246-47)

The distance between the woman-patient's father and doctor vanishes and they become one person in "Cripples and Other

Anne Sexton and Deconstructing the Patriarchal Stereotypes

Stories.” Her love/hatred for father/doctor is reflected in the following lines:

God damn it, father-doctor.
I'm really thirty-six...
My father was fat on scotch.
It leaked from every orifice.
Oh the enemas of childhood,
Reeking of outhouses and shame!
Yet you rock me in your arms
And whisper my nickname.
Or Else you hold my hand and teach me
love too late.
And that's the hand of the arm
They tried to amputate. (*CP* 160-61)

In conclusion, Anne Sexton is a wife, mother, woman, daughter, friend and lover. She is sometimes mad, suffering, and fearful. Through her poems, “Her Kind,” “Hurry Up Please It's Time,” “Consorting with Angels,” and “You, Dr. Martin,” her depiction of the male other is inconsistent because it reflects the inconsistency of the society in which she lives. Her inconsistency to show her “buried self” (Kelves 3) is, also, due to her endeavor to interpret women's role according to the existing patriarchal ideals on the one hand, and according to a feminist perspective on the other. Frances Beverly sees her “as split in two by conflicting inner forces” and as a person “who desires wholeness more than anything else” (83). Her mental illness can be a third reason behind her conflicting attitudes. Sexton's rejection of the unfair and fake stereotypes of patriarchal society / male other is tangible. Her endeavor to criticize and eventually subvert the dominant patriarchy is the best she can secure. Her inability to reconcile herself to the dominant patriarchal ideology results in her painful and horrific death, and as she explains to Patricia Marx, “the surface cracked” (34). Death, a redemptive force, is the best transcendence she can achieve.

Works Cited

- Alkalay-Gut, Karen. "The Dream Life of Ms. Dog: Anne Sexton's Revolutionary Use of Pop Culture." *College Literature* 32.4 (Fall 2005): 50-73.
- Aube, Cory Michelle. *Through the Waves: Images of the Self in the Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, and Kim Addonizio*. MA Thesis. Emporia State University, 2010.
- Bixler, Frances Beverly. *The Achievement of Anne Sexton*. PhD Thesis. University of Arkansas, 1980.
- Bloom, Harold. *Sylvia Plath: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*. United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001.
- Fukuda, Shiho. "The Hesitancy of a 'Middle-Aged Witch': Anne Sexton's Transformations." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 13 (2008): 31-47.
- Gomez-Joiner, Constanza. *Portraying the Self: Life and Literature in Selected Poems by Gloria Fuertes, Anne Sexton, and Olga Orozco*. PhD Thesis. University of North Carolina, 2002.
- "Beyond the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Anne Sexton and her Psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 11 (2006): 81-91.
- Kelves, Barbara. "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton." *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*. Ed. J.D. McClatchy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, (1978): 3-29.
- Marx, Patricia "Interview with Anne Sexton." in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*. Ed. J.D. McClatchy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, (1978):30-42.
- Olds, Sharon Olds. *The Golden Cell*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Reneau, Valorie. *Silence to Confession: A Dialogue with the Poetry of Anne Sexton—Our "Redeeming Skins."* MA Thesis. UMI, 2000.
- Sexton, Linda Gray and Louis Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. 1977. Boston: Houghton, 1991.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. and with a foreword by Maxine Kumin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Showalter, Elaine, ed. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, Literature, and Theory*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- Williams, Ian. *The Poetics of Tone and Voice in the Poetry of Anne Sexton*. PhD thesis. University of Toronto, 2005.