

## Father, the Surgeon: The Representation of Father as the Source of Fear and Self-doubt in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, a Psychoanalytical Feminist Reading

Sahar Nejati Karimabad

Sylvia Plath, in her 1960s experience of a woman seeking space as a poet, fought to the point of breaking away from male poets. Plath struggled against patriarchy in her poetry. According to Alvarez, Plath's perfection was sought in death, which as Axelrod explains, is in fact detachment from a fatherless self. Axelrod believes that all Plathian features exhibit her horror at historical catastrophe, her sense of contingency, marginality and loss, "all of these transformed into her battle for textual power"(Axelrod 4). The implication is that her text is the representation of her character and self. Thus, whether she possesses or lacks autonomy can be quite visible through her work. In his book, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and Cure of the Words*, Axelrod defines the role of father in Plath's poetry as an overpowering concept. In his opinion, father is the gap that Plath has been trying to fill by her poetry. The "Father," as an image, a figure or agent rather than Sylvia's own father, seems to occupy the basis of her diction and imaginary powers.

Kantian autonomy is the capacity to impose the (objective) moral law on oneself, while according to Dworkin, autonomy is a personal trait that individuals can exhibit relative to any aspect of their lives, not limited to questions of moral obligation. Autonomy actually refers to the independence and authenticity of humane desires (values, emotions, etc.) that move one to act in the first place.

In her book *Autonomy, Gender and Politics*, Friedman refers to the term "autonomy" as being "true to myself," doing it "my way," standing up for "what I believe," "thinking for myself" and in gender-egalitarian reformulation, being one's "own person"(3). Friedman believes that self has to be a unity in order to lead to autonomous actions and choices: "The self as a whole, as the particular self she is, must somehow determine what she chooses and does" (5).

In Friedman's approach, autonomy comes from choices and actions that are performed

with self-reflective endorsement. Therefore, if actions and choices are made by self-reflective affirmation, that person is closer to autonomy. Thus an affirmation of self-reflection is basic to one's autonomy. The reflections that Plath exhibits of herself in mirrors, windows, water, glass, etc. in *Ariel*, are all different from each other. There is rarely any agreement between these reflections, for they do not follow unity in form. Moreover, the images are at times fallen or severed parts of a familiar unity, such as body, material contexts or rituals. In addition to the so-called images, the lack of unity in her poetic illustrations, show that the roots to autonomy have been abolished in Plath.

The lack of independence leads to practical aspects of non-autonomous behaviors. But the behavioral representation of being non-autonomous in Plath's real life is excluded in this study in order to avoid biographical fallacy. Lack of authenticity in desires leads to losing track of one's sketched self. When an individual does not identify with his/her values and desires, her perception of the self is blurred, which leads to reactions such as fear, self-doubt, self-distortion and sometimes paternalism. Thalberg and Friedman in agreement with Meyers and Noggle believe that if a person is manipulated or oppressed (and hence non-autonomous) it could well be that the reflective judgment she makes about herself is just as tainted by that oppression as are her primary decisions (Thalberg 123–136; Friedman 19–35; Meyers 25–41; Noggle 87–108 Noggle).

In Plath's poetry the segregation of body organs and their falling apart in different directions seem to connote her perception of herself. In "Berck-Plage," Plath draws close shuts from her neighbor in Devon's death but in fact she sketches her father allusively by using terms such as "red ribs," but soon afterwards she turns to words like "bursting," which is an act of segregating, and "surgeon," an associated image with cutting or dissecting body parts. She refers to Father as a complete being and a superior, but she also says that this is horrible. She expresses that she fears father as an ideal. After her utter expression of Father as a god, she switches to images such as flying sheets or running hills. The emergence of Father seems far from a mere coincidence. In this poem, although she is somehow sketching the death of her father, the imagery is like a festival – dresses, hat, married daughters, etc. The man is dead, but his tongue is speaking: "remember, remember" (*Ariel* 33). Plath's father continues to haunt her adulthood and poetry even while he has long been dead. The tongue that Plath refers to as dead could imply the faulty process of her linguistic growth caused by

her father's absence. Her poetry could be assumed as her redemption to and through words in her own poetic sense.

According to Freud and later Lacan, the father is the figure standing in the role of a social agent at home. In the development of a child's psyche, when the child passes through Kristevan abjection, Freudian genital stages or Lacanian mirror stages, the child segregates itself from the mother as an isolate being. This is when the father starts to play the crucial role in her development process, the agent of society to impose social norms and rules upon the child. According to Freud, the father is the person who builds the child's ego. Meanwhile, by referring to Freud, Lacan states that the father also dominates the child's language learning, and thus her use of grammar, words, and linguistic skills. Plath as a poet seems to have mastered language partially by a father's presence, and the rest of her linguistic capabilities by struggling with his absence.

Plath resorts to her fears about her father: "How far he is now, his actions" (*Ariel* 33). She yet considers him capable of acting, but he is "distant." This is when she explains death from his point of view, as if she has found the code to her abjection: "It is so beautiful up here: it is a stopping place" (*Ariel* 33). Again, she reflects upon and identifies with objects that are normally imagined as fallen and dispersed, like lime leaves and trees. In another line she mentions "the soul is a bride... the groom is red and forgetful, he is featureless" (*Ariel* 34). Here, Plath draws back from explaining the father as a corpse, and that she is ambivalent.

Plath's poetry seems to somehow consent to the fact that she cannot retrieve the self that she knows, from the Other. Pamela J. Annas suggests that fragmentations of the self in Plath's work is shown as if the woman is in a "hall of mirrors when the self is distorted, disguised or shattered into silvers of reflection" (42). Quite simply, lack of independence is equal to dependence on the Other. Just as much as the weaker in power is assumed as the subordinated other, the powerful is also understood as very alien and unauthentic to the self. The father in Plath's *Ariel* plays the role of the power which pushes anything other than itself into margins. With an inverse engineering in Friedman's theory of autonomy, it can be demonstrated that Plath, because of her distorted perception of herself and disintegrated understanding of herself, shows a deliberate symptom of her autonomy and thus authenticity in her work.

And I see myself, flat, ridiculous a cut paper shadow

...

And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself. (*Ariel* 21)

She introduces herself as a dark, dimensionless and temporary quasi-existence; thus she shows a very outward opinion of her feeling towards herself:

I am terrified by this dark thing  
That sleeps in me. (*Ariel* 26)

She is terrified because of the Other that lives in her. "This dark thing," according to Kristeva, shows itself in repugnance; as Plath also explains: "this dark thing" as malignant and feathery, like nausea. It is the very same abjection that Julia Kristeva elaborates upon.<sup>1</sup> Plath's fear comes from the present absence unknown in her, through the process of abjection. The present absence of her father results in repugnance. The symptoms of abjection, as explained by Kristeva, is visible in her text. Consequently it could be claimed that she is enduring an abjection phase (Kristeva 1-9).

Kristeva explains abjection as it happens only when an Other has settled in place instead of what will be "me." "Not at all another with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody" (*Powers of Horror* 10). The malignance Plath feels inside her is exactly the repugnance through which abjection shows itself, on the verge of "her" and the Other. As Kristeva explains, abjection is a "being there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody" (10). In Plath's case, the father's absence is the one choice out of none, as his absence is her alter ego, Plath's "Other" diabolically dissects and at the very same time unifies Plath.

Kristeva believes that in breaking off maternal connections before the child becomes authentic and autonomous, the father works as a symbolic third party. At this point, in Plath's case, the loss, or better said the fallacious presence of the father, creates a faulty cycle.

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<sup>1</sup> "The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (Kristeva 1).

Plath clearly refers to herself as possessing "the voice of nothing" (25). Although possessing no voice seems to be different from having "the voice of nothing" in a subtle way, the concept of voicelessness is considered as crucial in her text. She is "inhabited by a cry" unidentified, unassociated and meaningless, which means she has no voice, or at least does not assume herself to have one (26). The lack and the flaw that is pinpointed for the better or worse, while facing a male existence such as the father in her poetry, is voiceless and detached.

According to Kristeva, when a woman does not identify with her body due to the patriarchal attitudes about the feminine body, she switches her perception of herself. The adjective "featureless" that she uses for her face implies that she assumes herself very close to a "thing" like linen. Linen is dimensionless, and it connotes that Plath is very willing to show herself as an image rather than even a thing. This is clarified in every line of *Ariel*, and in the basic existence of Plath's definitions of her existence. She rips identity off herself by effacing herself. Plath has a feeling of nonexistence in her father's presence and therefore she peels off even that superficial quasi-identity that our phallogocentric society has given her. As a result, she remains selfless and yet abject.

They threaten  
To let me through to a heaven  
Starless and fatherless, a dark water. (*Ariel* 13)

Plath has passively given up to a place where the reader expects it to be barren. Plath illustrates it as if she has already begun to like such a barren heaven. It is "Starless and fatherless, a dark water" (*Ariel* 13).

Heaven is defined as a place where complete happiness is sought without her father. She distinctly mentions her father, especially his lack of presence as the key to her happiness. The connotation that she suggests in one simple word is that her heaven is not as light and happy as it normally should be, but it is a dark place with no stars. The darkness that provides her with peaceful ignorance is bitterly enjoyable, probably due to her self-conscious lack rather than sheer unawareness. The ambivalence or the purgatory Plath explains by using her paradoxical words or images in *Ariel* is a reference to her being in a state very close to Kristeva's abjection. Razavi, in her thesis, agrees with this idea, by proving that Plath is an abject writing subject. Axelrod maintains that "Rather than suggesting a gradual self-education or a process of change responsive to objective reality and subjective needs, Plath's

late poetry typically depicts the self as undergoing a clash of opposites" (200).

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath retreats to be an opus "That melts to a shriek" right after creating an image of the Father as Enemy. Her unique masterpiece-like appearance falls off to a shriek.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

...  
Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air. (*Ariel* 18-19)

Plath's direct reference to men in this line implies her concern about their presence. She calls herself as fire lying under ash which rises and is flamed again and assumes "men" as oxygen which she consumes to stay alive. The verb "eat" connotes consumption rather than a simple need.

In her poem "Tulips," Plath declares her assumption about self very clearly:

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.  
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

...  
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—. (*Ariel* 20)

Plath's multiple selves dissolve into more selves like a mirror breaking off into thousands of bits, each of which have a differing reflection of the truth. The Father is her nightmare that manipulates her dreams. He is like a curse which cannot be broken. In "Elm" she refers to an image of surgery quite skillfully alluding to her father again and then she admits that he is her weakness or her bad dream: "Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery" (26).

"How your bad dreams possess and endow me" (*Ariel* 26).

The horror of his absence and the fear of his existence are demonstrated. According to Axelrod, the outward expression of a disguised feeling of fear is present in her poetry, because Plath has grown up in a patriarchal society after all, and thus the role that her father is supposed to play practices power and control, the role of a God, the role that dominates. Yet, there exists horror because of the absence of her father as a power figure who is actually the

center of meaning and the self. The ambivalence that Plath represents owes to two probable reasons. One could be that the father is absent, while he should be present in a patriarchal society where he is thought to be the center of meaning and the nucleus around which language forms meaning. On the other hand, his absence is reconciled with using the very same language in which his absence was already resented. Axelrod also agrees that the absence of a father in Plath's life and psyche has left a hole in her that she tries to fill with poetry.

"If I've killed one man, I've killed two—" (*Ariel* 56).

So to kill her fear, she automatically kills the father, and thus the center of meaning and integrity and hence breaks the totality and unity of her Self.

### **Conclusion**

The vague and indistinct Selves lurking beyond and simultaneously beneath every line in Plath's *Ariel* is brought about by the faulty circulation of the big signifier: Father, and her presence to him. Kristevan abjection phenomenon and McAfee's critique finds the overpowering presence of his absence in Plath's *Ariel*. Somehow Plath takes refuge to the abject Other inside her whose subject (Father, the almighty) is absent and thus gets dissected. This absence leads to her fear and self-doubt. She never seems to identify with the Kristevan "me." She is always flowing somewhere in-between, and as a result, creating as many selves as a reality doubled in a labyrinth. She is multiplied because the nucleus of her existence is missing. She acquires parallel definitions of herself. The enormous presence of such a crucial absence leads to a lack of autonomy and the recurrence of the self in her poetry.

Consequently, she ends up with a blurry perception of her existence, and as a result, with fear and self-doubt.

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