



# Luce Irigaray and Women in Sylvia Plath's *Paralytic*

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Received: 11 Sep 2023; Received in revised form: 15 Oct 2023; Accepted: 23 Oct 2023; Available online: 31 Oct 2023  
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**Abstract**— This study discusses the condition of the women during 1950s and 1960s. She generalizes her state as being a woman living among a male-dominated society. Her mental state and dissatisfaction reflect her life as a female poet. This study justifies her hatred of men through some notions of the French feminist Luce Irigaray to analyze Plath's feelings and emotions regarding her hatred towards men. The motives behind her suicidal attempts are explained in this study as well as the fears that she holds in her heart about present and future.



**Keywords**— Male's domination, Irigaray, Women, Dissatisfaction, Plath, *Paralytic*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Women's roles in society were somewhat constrained in the US in the 1950s. They mostly operated in a residential setting. Because of this, Plath criticizes the unjust rules established by the male-dominated society. A woman is seen as a man's rightful property. Plath uses poetry to assert the sense of self-identity she feels she has lost. She is famous her poem *Daddy* (1962) in which she attacks patriarchy in general and her close family members, as her father and her husband, who act like first oppressors in her life. A year later, she writes her poem *Paralytic* (1963). The poem carries numerous images of male-domination of her life and her dissatisfaction with her life. Plath is beyond incensed by the situation and can no longer bear it. Sadly, it results in her final suicide attempt, and she passes away a short time after finishing *Paralytic*.

### Plath and *Paralytic*

The focus of Plath's *Paralytic* is a woman's physical inability to act. The first poetic line, "It happens.

Will it go on? (Hughes, 1982: 266)<sup>1</sup> demonstrates the unchanging nature of women's lives in the male-dominated societies. She is beyond incensed by the situation and can no longer bear it. Sadly, it results in her final suicide attempt, and then she kills herself a few days after finishing *Paralytic*. Luce Irigaray<sup>2</sup>, as a feminist, criticizes the traditional role of women in the society "The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production." (1985: 121)<sup>3</sup>. The voice of the female speaker in this poem is actually a reflection of Plath's own inner feelings. It is the exact event Plath goes through in her latter stage of life. She feels strange in her own surroundings. No matter what she does, she feels that she is lacking in the society's eyes. Her hatred of males is strongly influenced by this feeling. The female speaker's body's deliberate dissolution is overtly portrayed in "Paralytic" by Plath. Eyes, ears, fingers, lips, and tongue are some of the bodily parts used to define the female speaker. Dehumanization<sup>4</sup> of

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, T. (1982). *The Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper and Row.

Plath's husband Ted Hughes has collected all her poems in a volume called *Collected Poems* (1982). The selected poetic lines of this article are taken from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray is a well-known French feminist. s

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Trans. by Gillian C. Gill., will be employed in this study as a main source to analyze the poetic lines in Plath's *Paralytic*.

<sup>4</sup> Literature about genocide and more general dehumanization is consistently dehumanizing. It is characterized as the rejection of a person's fundamental humanity and identity, which places people beyond the realm in which moral principles, laws, and

the character is the term used to describe such breakdown of physical components.

She feels that she is highly alienated from her own society as Kenealy states "Woman... She exists detached from earth and its material needs" (2011: 129). She hears voices and sees lights as a prediction for what is coming in her life. She just wants to rest from all the burdens that the male-dominated has put on her shoulders. Plath's goals vanish as a result of male's behavior. She notices that her internal feelings and external environment have become "Dust bags in and out" (Hughes, 1982: 266). She is unable to breathe and blames patriarchy. She despises patriarchal individuals because they need to give her a safe atmosphere. She emphasizes her sense of pessimism and degradation by using the word "dust." Nobody appears to care about her as her personal experiences and inner sentiments deteriorate. She thinks that her sadness is brought on by her love for her husband<sup>5</sup>, the main reason of her hatred and the source of depression in her life. The way she makes her female speaker utters on behalf of her makes the reader aware of her mental condition that she goes through due to the oppression that she suffers from in her male-dominated society. She lives far from the life she dreamed to live it and her only wish to have freedom in her life or afterlife:

Lights,  
The soft  
anonymous  
Talkers: 'You  
all right?'  
(Hughes,  
1982: 266)

Her husband's abandoning her for another woman is regarded as one of the reasons that results to her loss of faith in men. Her suicidal attempts to end her life are clear evident in her poetry as Bassnett describes Plath as being "a pre-feminist poet, a suicidal poet" (2005: 207). The female speaker of *Paralytic* resides in a prison-like dungeon since her voice and authority have been taken away from her. Due to men's entire dominance over society, including women, her mobility is completely immobilized. She feels helpless in her own life and has a hopeless outlook on the rest of the world. She is kept in the dark and unable to control her own destiny as it is obvious in her poem the way the male-dominated society put restraints on her female personality "My mind a rock/No fingers to grip, no tongue" (Hughes,

1982: 266). She is unable to speak up and demand her rights since she is restrained in her own environment.

Plath criticizes male-dominated society for its efforts to silence women. She impersonates a female speaker in the poem who is speaking in a voice that is not permitted. To help the reader understand her predicament, Plath talks about her suffering and womanhood with no fear. Plath's level of unhappiness in *Paralytic* is greatly heightened when it comes to a dead end since she is not recognized as an influential member of the society as Irigaray states that "becoming woman is concerned-and the task will consist mainly in recognizing and accepting her atrophied member" (1985: 22). She appears to be undetectable. Only a few inner voices comfort her and inquire about her health 'Talkers.' She fears that her daughter could experience the same fate as she did with her father. She tries to ignore the fact that she has a daughter at times, but some voices constantly bring it up, "who whisper 'we're your daughters'" (Hughes, 1982: 266).

It is clear from *Paralytic* that Plath is anticipating her demise. Her passing seemed to be a release from the rigid norms established by the male-dominated society. It sounds difficult to become an independent female writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She has a history of defying the male-dominated expectations in search of her own identity. She feels dissatisfied with her sexuality and physical attractiveness as a result of how society views femininity as Irigaray describes the women of post WWII as being "quite unsatisfied" (1985: 128). Anjum uses the following lines from the feminist, Carole Ferrier, who compares her father's terror to that of a despotic figure:

"In investigating Plath's relationship to patriarchy as she observes and expresses it, I will look at her treatment of the father figure, who diversely appears as colossus, drowned man, mixed historical imperialists and tyrants from Napoleon to the Nazis, man in black, and beekeeper" (2019: 1652).

Plath has gotten to the point that she despises everything of society. a civilization where rigid male members control everything. The men in her life- her husband and her father's memories, and the males in society- are exclusively responsible for how she lives. Those who are to be blamed for her dissatisfaction are hated by her. Therefore, it is a huge disappointment when Plath's intelligence and literary talent go underappreciated because

considerations of justice are applicable to other people (Neilson, 2005: 84).

<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes, the spouse of Plath, was having an affair with Assia Wevill. When Plath learns of her husband's extramarital affair, she is devastated. Since she married him out of love, she grows

disillusioned with all guys. It is one of the factors that drove Plath to commit suicide. Wevill discovers that Hughes is having an affair with another lady, which is interesting given that they had been together for six years. She too kills herself, much like Plath.

she knows what it takes to be a woman in a male-dominated society as Irigaray describes:

“So, we must admit that the little girl is therefore a little man. A little man who will suffer a more painful and complicated evolution than the little boy in order to become a normal woman!” (1985: 26).

Plath uses her poem to better illustrate the depressing environment of her life. The word ‘night’ in “the night brings violets” (Hughes, 1982: 266) emphasizes her gloomy atmosphere that she lives. shows how she is trapped in a culture that is ruled by males. The egg's contents stand in for her emotions and sensations, which she perceives as being lifeless. Her power is taken away from her. Irigaray criticizes the idea that a male should not attempt to usurp a woman's power and think of female's sex to be “conquered over and over again” (1985: 126). The male doesn't listen to the woman's words or pay attention to her feelings. She has to face the truth of her situation. Plath describes how she feels like she is suffocating while drowning. Her lips, nose, and eyeballs are all submerged. The pressures men put on the female speaker are the cause of this suffocation. Plath is constrained by the limits of men and thus she makes it clear that she is an item coated in cellophane “A clear cellophane I cannot crack” (Hughes, 1982: 266). Here, it is understood that Plath is treated as an object – a kind of idea that she really abhors. She just wants to speak up as Irigaray criticizes this idea:

“If commodities could speak, they might possibly give an opinion about their price, about whether they consider their status just, or about the dealings of their owners.” (1985: 118).

When patriarchy ignores a woman in her own surroundings, this idea gets generalized. When Plath reaches a certain point, she starts to feel threatened by everyone. She faces a serious threat to her life from the man. She lacks the independence to defend her rights in public. Through her writing, she expresses her wrath. Since it differs from her expectations of reality, she believes she is dreaming. She lives in her recollections since she is not content with the unjust reality, memories “Photographs visit me” (Hughes, 1982: 266). She no longer enjoys life and is unable to partake in any pleasures of life, “Want, desire/Falling from me like rings” (*ibid.*). Her psychological condition has been devastated by her fear of the past, present, and future. She lacks interest in anyone and is really miserable. She feels that patriarchy has taken her hopes and aspirations. Her close family members and the patriarchal culture do not value her exceptional feminine talent and dedication. As a result, she even dislikes hearing the term

‘man’ spoken. She no longer harbors any romantic feelings for males, according to Irigaray “the little girl will, as far as her mother is concerned, pass from love to hate” (1985: 34). She is now the woman that she can speak up and attack those who are seen, according to Plath, responsible for her miseries. As the titles refers, the speaker, who is Plath herself, is paralyzed in the male-dominated society. She is unable to act in her practical life and she lives in her inner world. Her thoughts are explicitly reflected in her poem to make communicate with the reader her status. She is seen as a victim according to Irigaray's feminist ideas as explained in this study.

## CONCLUSION

This study has reached the conclusion that Plath tends to justify her hatred for men since they control her life. Her father memories and her husband's affair lead to her hatred towards every single male member in her society as Irigaray stands with Plath in this situation. The way she expresses her inner world through her female speaker in the poem serves as an excuse to escape from the male-dominated society that she lives in. It is also concluded that Plath, through her poetic talent, tends to convey a message to the reader describing her state of dissatisfaction and entrapment. She, through her female speaker in *Paralytic*, generalizes an example of woman's inability to brilliantly act, as the title clarifies, or even live the considerable life among male members of the society. This study shows the illustration of how she feels disappointed and unsatisfied by patriarchal societal standards that portray women as inferior member in the society.

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