

# UNFRAMING WOMEN FIGURES IN ANNE SEXTON'S THE FIERCENESS OF FEMALE & CIGARETTES AND WHISKEY AND WILD, WILD WOMEN

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## Abstract

Anne Sexton was an American poet widely acknowledged as a challenger of tabooed themes and the adaptor of queer female personas who were considered 'abnormal' figures according to the standards of her patriarchal society. A great number of studies elaborated on Sexton's delineation of unacceptable women characters and the reversal of women stereotyping in her poetry. However, approaching those characters in light of the Foucauldian Butlerian perspective has never been conducted before. The current study aims at investigating Sexton's 'abnormal' personas, utilizing Foucault's concept of *Transgression* (1980) to re-define those women. Likewise, Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) is also utilized to examine transgressive women who refused to be gendered. Two poems are investigated, *The Fierceness of Female* and *Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women* to liberate the personas from the frames. Most likely, re-examining Sexton's constructing of anomalous women and idealizing them is noteworthy for its contribution to expanding our understanding of women's strategies and their efforts to redefine the female identity. The study concludes that Sexton's adaptation of these figures helped in demolishing Patriarchal definitions of womanhood; those women are iconic in constructing the new discourse of woman identity.

**Keywords:** Anne Sexton, Foucault, Judith Butler, Transgression, Gender Trouble.

## I- Introduction

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) introduced a constellation of female personas whose images contrast the expectation of patriarchy and confronts the binary position of male/female. With these figures, Sexton deconstructed the stereotyping of women role as a wife and a mother. Through her texts we encounter a multitude of exotic personas some of which are submissive, victims, subordinate, mentally disturbed, sexually abused, bitches, witches, even genderless, by communal standards these women are 'fallen'; as a result, viewed as 'abnormal' individuals. Researches had been conducted in relevance to Anne Sexton's portrayal of women images as in "Mothers in Masquerade: Objectification and Theatricality in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath" (2016) by Najoua Stambouli. It explores the adoption of masquerading identities in Sexton's "Housewife and Self" and manifests how those mothers subjected to objectification in presenting the role imposed on them. It also exhibits how those mothers present the inauthenticity and theatricality to enhance the sense of masquerade femininity. Another study deals with the portrayal of witches is Al-Wattar's "The Witch as Self-Representation in the Poetry of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Eavan Boland" (2013). The writer suggests Sexton's identification with negative image of the 'witch' in "Her kind and Transformations". The study examines this identification with the 'witch' as a mode of self-empowerment. The study of Sexton's theory of poetry is also discussed in Gill's "My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot": Anne Sexton and the "Impersonal Theory of Poetry". The article focuses in particular on Sexton's poem "Hurry Up Please It's Time" to show the sophisticated interplay of the 'personal' and 'impersonal' in the poem. He states that in Sexton's poetry the insights of personal introspection can be communicated, and be meaningful, only by the public display (2003). However, merging Foucault's concept of *Transgression* and Butler's concept of *Gender Trouble* to examine Sexton's personas has never been conducted before.

**II- Transgression and Subversion**

The current study is conducted in light of Foucault's *Preface to Transgression* a part of his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interview* (1980) to examine selected poems of Anne Sexton. Transgression is defined as 'a radical break of transitivity' and an indispensable revolution to destabilize power relations because for him 'wherever there is power, there is resistance, ...' (Foucault, 95). From a feminist point of view, society is normalized by patriarchal knowledge and regulated by its discourse. Feminist writers found that the sexual revolution enables women to wrestle against the prevailing discourses and construct new identities within new frames, yet, it counterbalances sexual repression patriarchy practices against women. In other words, social and cultural resistance could be fulfilled through transgression in terms of perversion. Nevertheless, Foucault believes in the language of sexuality as transgressive because 'inward proliferation' act that 'denatured' a means by which we could "recomposing the empty form" of a world without sacredness. Foucault contends that transgression fulfilled through 'excess' because it 'measures the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit' (35). Maintaining the "inner experience of the *impossible*" (32), subversive characters could transgress social norms stating that "Nothing more align to this experience than the demonic characters who, true to his nature, "denies everything" (37). Then, to transgress is to experience the limit and breaking prohibition, by so doing he/she will transform his/her identity and gains his freedom. To fulfill transgression, Foucault recommends fissures products "sexuality is a fissure" that "...mark the limit within us and designates us as a limit" (30).

Transgression, Foucault assures, is an affirmation of division that "designates the existence of difference", neither 'scandalous' nor 'demonic'. Corresponding to Foucault's transgression, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler believes that to be free from all kinds of oppression, social conventions and norms, individuals have the right and space to choose or change his/her gender. Agreeing with Foucault's notion of difference designation, Butler believes in accepting differences, negating gender distinctions, and broadening the concept of gender. For her "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (2004, 43). Hence, gender is performative and both gender and sex are socially constructed according to Butler. Both of Foucault's Transgression and Butler's Subversive identities will be utilized in the present study.

**III- Transgender Identity in *The Fierceness of Female***

Living in a patriarchal society constrains the female freedom and imposes upon her the veil of maternity as a sacred obligation. Deconstructing the patriarchal definition of women enables the subject to break free from the old-fashioned portrait. While social norms granted men wide space to popularly express their desires unashamed and proud, women were not allowed to celebrate their bodies or express their inner experiences. Employing figures hailing their inner lives, socially identified as 'immoral', Sexton desperately blurred social boundaries. For her "The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves, of overcoming our father and mother, of assuming identities somehow" (Gray, 1977: 28). Thus, women should destabilize the self/other matrix built by patriarchy.

In fact, the time before Sexton we seldom encounter a woman hails her sexual desires. In *The Fierceness of Female* (1976), the speaker is unashamed to celebrate her sexual appetite. She endeavors audaciously to reflect her inner experience, careless to defy social standards challenges the traditional view that claims it is of shame for women to confess their sexual affairs. Seemingly, the speaker felt "the need that gallops all over my skin". Through sensual love she hopes to find her solace, to redefine her identity as a woman and enhance the meaning of her deserted life, the speaker isolates her/his self and experiences love in impulses 'take up all my attention' "

and I, long into the desert,  
 drink and drink  
 and bow my head to that meadow  
 the breast, the melon in it,  
 and then the intoxicating flower of it.  
 Our hands that stroke each other  
 the nipples like baby starfish 23-29

From the above lines, we wonder whether the speaker is a male or female though it is full of rosy words but expressing blatantly incestuous love seems that the speaker performs masculinity. More importantly, the probability to redefine her identity lies in destabilizing and deconstructing gender roles. The subversive personages further to refer to the partner 'all is two' effectively identifies her relationship with the partner as 'a choir of butterflies' which gives feminine touches and expresses a queer relation similar to 'the ocean tide'. It seems that the persona finds her relief in a womanly contact because "women can only come into their true selves through alliance with other women. Man is the obstacle and alliance with him through marriage is tantamount to living in coffin" (O'Neill, 1996, 252). Elaborating on her transgressive role, the speaker catches transgression as a weapon which destabilizes masculine/feminine binary opposition after realizing that sacredness ceased to exist and that she could recompose the definition of her identity.

Motivating body language, the speaker's organs participate in reflecting her inward experience 'lips, tongues, pulses, skin, head, breast, hands, nipples, fingers, pelvis' her language is tangible as in 'spinning on the lips', 'timetable of tongues', attention, tick, etc. As a transgressive tool, women pursue sexual language to challenge the normalized discourse of patriarchy for it could demolish the ethical code that constrains individual freedom and negates his/her identity. Swiontkowski believes that "Plath's and Sexton's disturbed relations to social norms both freed them to speak of such tabooed topics and tied them to personas with great yearnings for the approval of authority figures" (Bloom, 2011, 154).

This subversive woman reflects 'deviant sexuality' and experiences the 'limit' of sexuality, O'Neill states "...the act of sex must perforce battle against the social values which condemn her to play out the "American Dream role" (1996, 252). Sexual experience transforms her into a genderless being, her 'shadow' has been 'removed', for her, it is the light that illuminates her surroundings and demolishes the 'phantom of the past' which might be a reference to the traditional society she feared to face. Sexuality for the speaker devastates the dark powers of the past.

As a result, transgression works as a two-edged weapon that deconstructs patriarchal definition and constructs an individual entity. The incestuous language the persona dwells upon to express her "inward experience"; and confess her desires, has nothing to do with gender, for her female passion is as the same as male passion.

Evidently, experiencing such womanly love is considered abnormal in society eyes. The speaker idealizes sexuality and delineates the very intimate feelings of same-sex attraction, words like flowers and petals refer to femininity. Heterosexuality, for Butler, presents subordination for women, and reminds them of their subordination to the patriarchal normalcy. O'Neill thinks that "The passivity of women in the sexual act is a metaphor for the role assigned to them in society" (252). Their relation is identified as "intoxicating flower", the attractiveness is obvious as "Our hands that stroke each other" shrinks harmonically in an imaginative world, indulged in inappropriate contact. As a transgressive persona, she is unabashed to perform a specific gender.

The subversive persona reflects the pleasure of having love passing over the rational to non-rational:

to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings  
until they are bubbles,  
our fingers naked as petals  
and the world pulses on a swing      30-33

Sexton enhances senses expressions like touching, tongues, skin, drink, etc. to reflect a state of trance continuity with the continuous tense as the case with touching, spinning, pushing, receding, yelling, etc. She lives in moments of transcendence she cannot express, while "words fly out of place" lets the body celebrate the pleasure of having love, reflecting moments of transgressing taboos.

Describing the spouse with a masculine tone is a way of empowering, the 'breast' identified as a 'meadow' in the 'desert' where he/she 'drink' the "melon in it" because there is no water that calms down her thirst. Her rejection to adhere to gender roles as well as her fascination with her same-sex spouse leads her to construct her sexual identity regardless to gender orientation. To create meaning for her bereaved life, she intentionally practices sexuality out of marriage institutions because the 'domesticity of marriage' was rendered to a desert.

Subversive identities oppose the gender categories of masculinity and femininity attempting to radically 'denaturalize' and deconstruct gender distinctions. Subverting gender roles and establishing a variety of performances, women have the right to choose their gender because it is changeable as Butler claims. Evidently, the hierarchy of gender that was for a long time stable, reconstructive, reinforced by heterosexuality had been deconstructed.

The expression of 'yelling at the reefs' is an indication for her inner power and wishes to confront the gender role barrier, yet reef comes here to mean a hazardous obstruction notes 'limit' she insists to face; a woman like that is fierce. Converted the symbol of flowers to be a destructive power 'how flowers smash through the long winter'; seemingly, a strategy of empowering and a new discourse grants the abnormal individual wide spaces. Willingly, empowering flowers by way of deconstructing its symbol flower as a weak creature to a being of fierceness, strong enough to confront the cruel environment wherein its life deconstructs patriarchal normalcy. Surely, a will-to-power strategy, the persona contemplates the fact that she 'believes in the regenerative balm of female love: 'flowers smash through the long winter' ". (O'Neill, 1996, 256)

Hence, the speaker's speech and desires in *The Fierceness of Female* are wholly performative, it is fancy to determine a clear identity. It is wondered whether the speaker is a male or female because he/she talks in the passion of love. Troubling her gender empowers her and encompasses her vision out of the matrix of patriarchy. She is fearless to depict the inward experience and transform her identity regardless of the normalized discourse of her time.

Sexton's poetry allows sexuality, the true identity, to be known by revoking and showing the fallibility of the unrealistic expectations of gender practices. Sexton promotes the biology of fluid, genderless, sexual identities as a synergetic sexuality and the way one lives their life, not through expectation of the body but through expression of the body. (Wiggins, 5)

Thus, Women can perform masculine identity and the opposite because "the loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman'. (Butler, 1990, 187)

Troubling gender by her performative acts and establishing her subversive identity as a 'will-to-power' discourse, the persona has helped in deconstructing the stereotyping of women and familiarizing genderless identities in the literary canon.

#### IV- Transgressive Woman in *Cigarettes And Whiskey And Wild, Wild Women*

Due to the cultural obligations and their roles as children carers and wives, women who indulge in 'excessive acts' viewed as 'fallen'. They are not allowed to indulge in 'vices', as such cultures contributed to the exclusion of women. New legacy has been oriented, the legacy of defending 'abnormal' individuals, extended the space for Sexton to offer a new formulation of women figures as well as deconstructing patriarchal stereotyping of women. Indeed, in *Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women* (1976), we encounter the 'wild' archetype. The poem's title is derived from the Pioneers' popular song 'Cigarettes, and Whiskey, and Wild, Wild Women' by Tim Spencer. It first emerged in 1947 within which the singer addresses men to listen to his experience. He had a 'good wife', the speaker meditated his perfect 'happy life' until the day he met a woman described as wild, she triggered him to go to the 'spree' to drink with; the male is the only speaker while the wild woman is silenced. Day explains that in patriarchy, it is normal for men to publically drink while drinking women are exposed to segregation, sexual harassment, marginalization and violence. Within the cultural context, such a woman is overlooked as a source of temptation drives men to mind loss, then she is viewed as a 'fallen woman' (2003).

Influenced by patriarchal normalcy, the singer shoulders her the responsibility of his own whims and states that the wild woman 'taught me to smoke and drink whiskey'. Popular culture propagates that because of woman's indulgent behaviors, they motivate men's sexual urges, so men fall prey. More importantly, the wild women are given an impressive role in stimulating men to fall in sin, as if the singer wants to say that men are good fellows; but women are to be blamed for committing mistakes. To redefine her personality, the wild woman justifies her 'hunger',

fearless to reflect her experiences and inner susceptibility. To skillfully deconstruct popular culture that marginalized women identity, Sexton introduced an indulgent persona who articulates her agony, be proud of her excessiveness:

Now that I have written many words,  
and let out so many loves, for so many,  
and been altogether what I always was—  
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed, 12-15

An enthusiastic and energetic woman situates herself in a position of power using the cigarettes and whiskey as deconstructing tools to express her rage against the culture that triggered her to be 'deviant'. Successfully, she exploited patriarchal discourse to unleash women's real facets, their turmoil, the reasons beyond their self-indulgence and drinking abuse.

Furthermore, Day states that women realize that 'the establishment of normative feminine roles is not helpful for women' (2003, 50); thus women are in need to present a new 'excessive discourse' through being transgressive. To confront the predominantly patriarchal normalized discourse and deconstruct women stereotyping, self-indulgence constitutes an empowering excessive weapon to make use of. Sexton's transgressive attitudes recognized not by "not only her themes or subject matter; it also had to do with the positioning of her poems' aggressively female speakers" (Hedley, 2009, 32).

A study done by Day takes into consideration the historical roots of women drinking and traces the influences of culture and society on the female abusive behaviour of drinking. Female domestic obligations, Day added, grant her no 'space' to practice her leisure, therefore, any woman indulgence categorized within the social and cultural context as 'neglectful mothers'. Day concludes that women use drinking as an excessive act, a 'pleasure discourse' maintains that drinking women considered as 'irresponsible mothers' or 'sexual deviant' in the eyes of the community (2003).

Ultimately, converting sex role, with the 'progress of things', indirect reference to her growing desires and flourishing emotions, she realizes that as a female she cannot celebrate her feelings because of the 'stockade' she is compelled by. Traces her childhood, the wild woman was 'born with a passion for quickness', yearning to the 'kiss of mercy':

born coughing on the long winter,  
born expecting the kiss of mercy,  
born with a passion for quickness  
and yet, as things progressed,  
I learned early about the stockade  
or taken out, the fume of the enema. 2-7

Both aggression and violence acted against her drive her to exhibit the 'drunken rat' dwells inside her. Although the woman 'attempts to pray for mercy' (Smith, 35: 2014) but she finds 'the efforts useless'. She contents that she is passive, thus she should overcome the social complexities. Through her positive awareness, Foucault assures that 'our positive awareness allows us to decipher it so that it may at last emerge in the dear light of language' (1980, 29). She has grasped a conviction 'learned not to kneel' to patriarchal disciplines.

Advancing in age, the persona's convince of her position in a fake environment obligates her to pretend the role of a 'perfect doll' planting her exasperation 'fire underground'. Describing the dolls as 'perfect' and 'awful' a biting critique of Spencer's song "to plant my fire underground/where none but the dolls, perfect and awful, could be whispered to or laid down to die", both fragile and attractive. In a patriarchal society, woman's creativity is measured by her domestic skills at the cost of her emancipation, the female drinks alcohol as a means of protest and taboos breaking "...women have had to swim against a tide of social norms which prevent excessive drinking" (Fillamore, 1987, 809). The wild woman contends that perhaps she is that figure who used to kneel and born to kneel but I am no longer submitting to the patriarchal expectations; captured inside 'the stockade' suffocated her will and led me to "take out" the "fume of the enema" it is a weird image which is implicitly a reference to deviant sexuality symbolized by unpleasant smell of the enema, the enema pressure is an indirect reference to persecution, and violence practiced against her animates her to divert and ignore the social conventions. Like any other woman of her

age, the persona's life story is a mixture of pain, desires, and passion. The act of averting her eyes from the mirror is her denial to the existence of the limits which indicates her inability to cope with 'the damage she has wrought into her personal life'. (Smith, 2014, 35)

Treated like an animal, her desires have been prisoned beyond the 'stockade', animalized and estranged. The wild woman should transgress the 'limit' as a 'woman of excess', experiencing the limit leads to transform her identity and, enforced her to 'take out' the nastiness of the 'enema' to be in a status of power and to be audacious enough to write them down in words "I write many words" she is seen as abnormal because excluded, outcast and marginalized. Seemingly, transgression is an entire matrix of defence for the estranged and marginalized people that "forces a recognition of exclusion" (Allan, 2008, 93). After all, by articulating her excessive discourse, the persona is socially seen as a 'demonic' figure who is for Foucault 'true to his nature, "denies everything"' (Foucault, 1980:37). Realizing her merciless culture, the wild woman will never yield 'kneel'; the word has religious and cultural connotations:

I kneel one more  
in case mercy should come  
in the nick of time. 23-25

As a transgressive persona, she reflects a world without sacredness in need to be recomposed, to find a nick is to find a 'space' and broaden the female understanding of her feminine identity, for Foucault reflects the vital role of transgression that does not mark "positive meaning in the sacred" (Foucault, 1980, 30)

Sketching transgressive portraits of women, confronting patriarchy and deconstructing the traditional stereotyping of women roles, Sexton indeed carved her path of transgression to audaciously construct the modern female identity and grant women power to exhibit their 'inner experiences', and desires that enable them to transform themselves and redefine their identities and in return to change their status. As a result, Sexton granted the feminist movement icons of women who were pioneers and revolutionaries to defend women's affairs and proclaiming their freedom. Through the wild drunken woman, Sexton established her feminist discourse in the "uninterrupted domain" of her hungry desires and through limit experience. This figure recaptured her essence and fulfilled the endless 'gratification' of her need (Foucault, 1980,40). Though negatively portrayed, Sexton contributed to breaking the rigidity of the convention that portrayed women as passive and persecuted their freedom for centuries. Yet, constructing women 'who broke new ground, shattered taboos,...' and described as 'abnormal' and 'fanatical', women especially poets "owe a debt to Anne Sexton". (Kumin, 1981, xxxiv)

## **V- Conclusion**

Through her poems, Anne Sexton created transgressive images of women audacious enough to experience the limits imposed on them and carve by their impossible experiences an act of transgression by which those 'demonic' characters constitute an experience of the 'infinite'. As a woman writer, Sexton delineated figures of women at a time women were not allowed to pronounce their inner lives due to the patriarchal frames imposed on them. Women grasp the knowledge and power of their bodies and realized the limits normalized on their identities. The subversive persona in Sexton's *The Fierceness of Female* transgressed the definition of gender and destabilized the masculine/feminine binary opposition, which gave her a chance to recompose the definition of her own identity. Through performing the desired gender, and profaned language, she liberated her self from the single-minded frames imposed on women. Also, in Sexton's *Cigarettes And Whiskey And Wild, Wild Women*, the persona enhanced subversive attitudes to disrupt the stereotyping image of wild women as reckless, demonic and seductive. Being a 'woman of excess', she experienced the limits of violating the 'sacred' norms designed for womanhood by the patriarchal society. Thus, she liberated her self from the stigma and frames attached to the wild woman.

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