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The Power and Gender in Sylvia Plath's Poem "Daddy": An Analytical Study

Dr. Luhaib Hamid Khalaf Salih *

University of Tikrit- College of Education for Humanities.

lahib.h.kalaf@tu.edu.iq

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of power and gender in the modern poet Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* poem. It aims to expose the way that the patriarchy authority practices power among the devalued women. *Daddy* is one of the prime poems of Sylvia Plath, which tackles the dynamic power between the supremacy of patriarchy depicted by the father and the disregarded daughter. The research is based on afeminism theory with special focus upon the power relation notion by Simon De Bouvier. The research is a qualitative one and follows a textual and critical approach. It is divided into three sections. Introduction, which tackles the introductory of power and gender, followed by literature review, Theoretical framework, which presents the background of the feminism theory and discussion which presents the power relation in this poem, followed by a conclusion.

Keywords: gender, power, patriarchy, other woman

* **Corresponding Author:** Dr. Luhaib Hamid, E.Mail: lahib.h.kalaf@tu.edu.iq
Affiliation: Tikrit University - Iraq

القوة وجنس المرء في قصيدة سلفيا بلاث دادي: دراسة تحليلية

لهيب حامد خلف صالح

جامعة تكريت - كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

المستخلص

تختبر هذه الدراسة مفهوم القوة وجنس المرء في قصيدة دادي للشاعرة المعاصرة سلفيا بلاث. تهدف هذه الدراسة لاظهار نهج السلطة الرجولية التي تمارس القوة على النساء المستضعفات. دادي واحدة من قصائد سلفيا بلاث الاساسية التي تتناول القوة الحركية بين السيادة الذكورية المتمثلة بواسطة الاب والبنات المهملة. البحث يعتمد على النظرية النسوية مع تركيز خاص على مفهوم علاقة القوة بواسطة سايمون دي بوفير. تعد هذه الدراسة على انها نوعية وتتبع المنهج النقدي النصي. تتفرع هذه الدراسة الى ثلاثة اجزاء: المقدمة والتي تتناول مقدمة عن القوة وجنس المرء يليها دراسات سابقة، الإطار النظري الذي يقدم خلفية عن النظرية النسوية والنقاشات التي تقدم علاقة القوة في هذه القصيدة ومن ثم الخاتمة.

الكلمات الدالة: الجنس، السلطة، الأبوية، امرأة أخرى .

1. Introduction

Power and gender are two fundamental concepts deeply interconnected and shape many aspects of our societies. Power refers to the ability to influence or control others, while gender refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviors, and expectation associated with being male or female. Historically, power has been unequally distributed between men and women, with men holding more power in many societies. It has led to gender inequality, where men are often seen as the dominant gender and women are relegated to subordinate roles. It can be seen in areas such as politics, business, education, and even within families. However, there is growing recognition of the need to address gender inequality and promote gender diversity and inclusion. It involves challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, increasing women's representation in positions of power and leadership, and creating more opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes. The present paper elaborates on the representation of power and gender in Daddy poem by the modern poet Sylvia Plath. Many feminists, theorists and researchers define power and gender from their own perspective. Power can be defined as the ability to influence or control the behavior of others, institutions, or events. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and expectations of being male or female. In "Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics", Raewyn Connell defines power as "the ability to make things happen, to dominate or control others or resources, or to shape events or situations" (Connell, 1987: p. 36).

Gender, on the other hand, is "the social construction of masculinity and femininity, including their psychological implications" (Connell, 1987: p. 5). Connell argues that gender is not simply an individual characteristic but a social structure that shapes power relations between men and women. Men tend to have more power than women

in many societies, reflected in their more excellent representation in positions of authority and control over resources. This power differential is reinforced by gender norms and expectations, which often assign men more valued roles and traits than women.

Bacharach and Lawler define power as "The ability to affect outcomes by controlling or influencing the behaviour of others" (1980: p. 156). In this sense, according to them, power suggests that an individual or a group with power can alter the results of a situation by regulating or manipulating the actions of others. Power can be exercised by directing individuals or groups to behave in specific ways or influencing them to follow a particular course of action. In essence, power enables individuals or groups to achieve their objectives by compelling others to act in a manner that supports their interests. This ability to control or influence the behaviour of others is a defining characteristic of power. It can manifest in various forms, such as economic, political, social, or personal power. The use of power can have significant implications for society, politics, and relationships, making it a topic of interest in fields such as psychology, sociology, and organisational behaviour.

Ridgeway defines gender as "Gender is a social identity and set of expectations associated with it that influence social behaviour" (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 444). However, gender is a social construct that distinguishes males and females and assigns specific traits and behaviours to each group. These expectations are often based on cultural and historical norms, varying across societies and over time. Gender identity is crucial to how individuals perceive themselves, and societal expectations and norms often shape it. For example, men are typically expected to be dominant, assertive, and competitive, while women are often expected to be nurturing, emotional, and supportive. These expectations can influence how individuals behave in social situations, how they perceive themselves, and how others treat them. Gender inequality arises when these expectations result in unequal opportunities and outcomes for individuals based on gender. Therefore, it is essential to recognise gender as a social identity and to challenge gender stereotypes and biases to achieve greater equality and social justice.

Power and gender notions represent in literature because they are fundamental aspects of human society, and literature reflects the world people live in. As noted by Sarah Gamble, "Literature provides a unique and invaluable perspective on the social and cultural values of a given period" (2012: p. 1). Throughout history, power has been concentrated in the hands of a privileged few, often men, while others are marginalised and oppressed. This dynamic has been explored in literature, from classic works such as the plays of William Shakespeare, which often feature male protagonists who hold positions of power and authority, to contemporary works that challenge traditional power structures and amplify marginalised voices. In addition, gender has been a central aspect of social organisation throughout history, and gender roles and expectations have been reflected in literature. As noted by Nina Baym, "Writers of every era have explored and created what it means to be a man or a woman, and what powers, privileges, and limitations come with that gender" (1993: p. 2). However, literature has also been a powerful tool for challenging and subverting traditional power structures and gender norms. Through literature, writers have been able to critique and question societal expectations and power dynamics while amplifying marginalised voices and perspectives.

1.2. Literature Review

Many critics tackle the poetry of Sylvia Plath from various perspectives, specifically

Daddy poem. For instance, the researcher Mingli Zhang in her research entitled "How Does Plath's Poem Daddy Express About the Poet's Psychological Response to the Conditions of Living in Her Patriarchal Society?"(2021), argues that Sylvia Plath used Confessional Poetry to express psychological experiences of women in the postmodern world. Her poems, such as "Daddy," use vivid imagery to articulate women's struggles and self-awareness in a society that undervalues them. The researcher concludes that, for a long time, women have been kept silent and oppressed by patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, feminist pioneers like Helene Cixous have called for women to speak up and liberate themselves. Many female writers have taken up this call and created their ways of expressing themselves. Sylvia Plath is a pioneer who used confessional poetry to express her Psychological experiences of living in a patriarchal society. Plath wrote about women's struggles and triumphs through vivid imagery and dichotomies, placing women at the center of her work. Her poem "Daddy" is a typical example of a woman's psychological journey in a patriarchal society.

Another researcher tackles the "Daddy" poem from a feminist perspective. Wendy Sambada Diakanova and Dr Arielia Yustisiana, in their research paper entitled "Patriarchy in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" (2019), argue that the way that Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" reflects patriarchy. The study had two goals: to show how patriarchy is present in the poem and examine the symbols that represent patriarchy. The researchers conclude that the unfair social system of patriarchy affects literary works like poetry, prose, and drama. Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" is used as an example to show how patriarchy is portrayed and symbolised in the poem. Four theories (ideology, patriarchy, oppressor, and symbol) are applied in the study. The research uses both ideological and structural approaches to analyse the poem. Patriarchy is shown through the father and husband figures in the poem, and the symbols represent confinement, fear, regretful loss, and unhappy marriage. In summary, the father's failure to show love to his daughter and his death causes her pain and affects her life choices, including her marriage. The present research aims to reveal the representation of power and gender notions in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, specifically the "Daddy" poem and inspect the power dynamics between men and women exemplified by father and daughter.

2.Feminism theory

Feminism is a diverse set of political, social, and cultural movements that aim to establish equal rights and opportunities for women, challenge gender-based inequalities, and dismantle patriarchy and other systems of oppression that disadvantage women and gender minorities.

Abrams, K. (2020) defines Feminism as "the belief in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (p. 7). Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement to achieve equality between the sexes. It is based on the belief that women should have the same rights, opportunities, and resources as men, regardless of their gender. Feminism recognises that gender inequality is a pervasive issue that affects all aspects of life, from the workplace to personal relationships, and harms women and society. The feminist theory holds that gender inequality is perpetuated by societal norms, values, and institutions favouring men over women. Feminists argue that these inequalities manifest in various ways, such as gender-based violence, unequal pay, and limited access to education, healthcare, and political representation. Feminism seeks to address these inequalities by advocating for policies that promote gender equality, challenging gender stereotypes and biases, and promoting women's rights

and empowerment. The roots of feminism theory can be traced back to the Enlightenment era in the 18th century when ideas about individual rights and freedoms began to gain popularity in Europe and North America. Feminism theory emerged as a distinct social and political movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, as women's rights activists and scholars sought to understand and address gender-based inequalities and oppression. One of the key early figures in feminist theory was Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued in her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792) that women are capable of reason and should be granted the same rights and opportunities as men. Wollstonecraft's work laid the foundation for later feminist theorists and activists, and her ideas continue to be influential in contemporary feminist discourse. (Tyson, 2013: 191-192a).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, feminist activism focused primarily on suffrage and other legal and political rights for women. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, organised by women's rights activists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, marked the beginning of the suffrage movement in the United States. The convention produced a Declaration of Sentiments, which called for women to be granted the same rights and privileges as men. In the 1960s and 1970s, Feminism experienced a resurgence due to the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and other social and political changes. This period, often called the second wave of Feminism, was characterised by a focus on social and cultural issues, including reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and gender-based violence. Critical feminist theorists and activists from this period include Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gloria Steinem. (Tyson, 2013: 191-192b) Since the 1990s, Feminism has continued to evolve and diversify with the emergence of new forms of feminist theory and activism. These include intersectional Feminism, which recognises the intersections of gender with other forms of oppression such as race, class, and sexuality, and transnational Feminism, which focuses on women's experiences in different cultural and political contexts. (Tyson, 2013: p. 191- 192c). In "The Politics of Power: Feminism and the Representation of Women in Literature" by Barbara Caine, the author argues that the goal of exploring power dynamics in literature, particularly in feminist literature, is to challenge existing power structures and promote social change. She suggests that feminist literature exposes how women have been oppressed and marginalised throughout history and how this has been perpetuated through cultural norms and institutional practices. According to Caine, by exposing how power operates in society, feminist literature can be a powerful tool for social critique and activism. She argues that feminist writers aim to subvert traditional gender roles and challenge cultural norms and institutional practices restricting women's autonomy and agency. Through literary techniques such as satire, irony, and parody, feminist writers can expose the absurdity and oppression of these roles and offer alternative visions of power and empowerment. (1987: p.97-106)

Existentialism and Feminism are two philosophical and social movements that emerged in the 20th century, each with its concerns and ideas. Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer, philosopher, and feminist who was crucial in developing both movements. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasises individual freedom and choice. According to this perspective, individuals create meaning by making choices and taking responsibility. This philosophy rejects the idea of an objective or predetermined purpose to life and instead emphasises the importance of subjective experience. Feminism, on the other hand, is a social movement that seeks to address gender inequality and promote equal rights for women. Feminist thought challenges traditional gender roles and norms and seeks to empower women to take

control of their own lives and destinies. Her work challenged traditional notions of gender and identity and helped pave the way for greater acceptance of diversity and individual freedom in philosophy and society. (Mahon, 2023). The following section states the representation of power and gender in Daddy's poem by Sylvia Plath based on Simone de Beauvoir's views of power relations.

3. Analysis Power Dynamics in Daddy Poem

From a feminist perspective, "Daddy" can be seen as a critique of the patriarchal system that suppresses women's voices and agency. The speaker in the poem portrays herself as a victim, oppressed and dominated by her father and later by her husband. The word "daddy" can be seen as infantilising, suggesting that women are not treated as equals but as children who need to be cared for by men. The repeated references to the speaker's father's authoritarianism and control over her can be interpreted as a metaphor for how men in power exercise control over women in society.

De Beauvoir, in her famous book *The Second Sex*, pointed out that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are not equal. Masculinity is seen as the standard for humanity, while femininity is often seen as secondary. Men usually do not have to state their gender when expressing their opinions, but women's views are often seen as biased by their femininity rather than based on objective observation. (Habib, 2005: p. 683).

According to de Beauvoir, a patriarchal society assigns power to men while oppressing women. In "Daddy," the father figure represents this patriarchal power dynamic. The poem's speaker is the daughter trying to assert her power and autonomy. She uses metaphors of oppression and violence to express her anger towards her father and the societal norms that he represents.

You do not do, you do not do
Any more black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white
(Ibid, 1981: p.222)

The poem's first stanza suggests that the speaker is reflecting on their relationship with a pair of "black shoes" that they have worn for thirty years. The "shoes" symbolise poverty and limitation, with the speaker comparing themselves to the "afoot" trapped inside them. In terms of Simone de Beauvoir's views on power relations, the passage could express how society's structures and norms can constrain individuals and limit their agency. The speaker's sense of being trapped in their shoes suggests a feeling of powerlessness and lack of control over their own life. The speaker's comparison to "afoot" emphasises their sense of being stuck and unable to move freely. The colour "black", often associated with darkness and negativity, underscores the sense of constraint and limitation. The repetition of the phrase "you do not do" creates a sense of inertia and stagnation, further reinforcing the speaker's feeling of powerlessness.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time.
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal.
(Ibid, 1981: p.222)

The speaker is addressing their father, who has already died. The speaker begins by saying they have had to kill their father, suggesting a sense of anger or resentment

towards him. However, the speaker immediately clarifies that their father died before they had time, implying they did not have a hand in his death. In terms of Simone de Beauvoir's views on power relations, this stanza expresses the complex dynamics of family relationships and how power is negotiated within them. The speaker's sense of having to "kill" their father could be interpreted as a metaphor for breaking free from the power dynamics of their family, which may have been oppressive or limiting in some way. The father's description as a "marble-heavy" and "ghastly statue" suggests a sense of his power and dominance. At the same time, the image of the "one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" emphasises his physicality, earthiness, and vulnerability in death. Simone de Beauvoir believed that power relations are ubiquitous in human society and that individuals are defined by the power they hold or lack. She argued that power is not inherent but acquired through social structures and systems. According to her, individuals can accept or resist their subordinate position, leading to social movements and changes.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook. And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You
(Ibid, 1981: p.223)

In the given passage, we see the speaker's fear of an influential figure represented by the "panzer-man" with a "neat mustache" and "Aryan eye." This figure embodies the oppressive power that the speaker fears, which may relate to the idea of power relations that Beauvoir discusses. The use of military imagery and German words like "Luftwaffe" and "panzer-man" further emphasise the fear and domination associated with this figure. The repetition of "panzer-man" and the use of alliteration in "gobbledygoo" and "bright blue" are literary devices used to create a sense of fear and uncertainty. The reference to the Aryan eye connects the poem to the historical context of World War II, known for the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime against Jews, homosexuals, and other groups deemed inferior.

There is a stake in your fat black heart, And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through
(Ibid, 1981: p.224)

The passage reveals the speaker's rejection of her father's power and authority. The "stake in your fat black heart" can be interpreted as a symbol of the father's power over the speaker. The villagers "dancing and stamping" on him further emphasise his loss of power and the rejection of his authority. The repetition of "daddy" and the derogatory term "bastard" convey the speaker's anger and frustration towards her father. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are often mystified and stereotyped by men, leading to the creation of patriarchy. From birth, women are socialised to behave and think in ways that exclude them from participating in the most highly regarded cultural activities. Beauvoir's most well-known statement from the book is, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (ibid, Beauvoir 267), highlighting the idea that biology or nature does not inherently determine our gender identity. Men are considered the standard or norm, while women are viewed as the "Other" to men, encompassing all the qualities and characteristics men are not. (Bressler, 2011: p. 149)

In her poem "Daddy", Sylvia Plath expresses her sense of oppression from her childhood and highlights the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society. The poem revolves around the conflict between male authority and a woman's right

to control her life and be free from male dominance. Plath portrays the image of a fascist as a personal symbol of controlling, dictating power, projecting it onto her father. However, this image may also represent the patriarchal society in which she lived.

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

(Ibid, 1981: 223)

In the passage, Plath suggests that women are attracted to the idea of a fascist, which can be seen as a metaphor for a powerful, dominant man. The "boot in the face" symbolises domination and control, while the "brute heart of a brute like you" suggests that this power is based on brute force rather than inherent superiority. The

passage highlights the conflict between male authority and a woman's desire for independence and control over her life. Plath's intense and vivid imagery forces the reader to confront the harsh realities of male domination and its impact on women's lives. The repetition of the word "brute" emphasises that male power is often based on physical strength and aggression rather than intellectual or moral superiority.

The passage can be seen as a critique of patriarchal power structures and how they oppress and control women, perpetuating gender inequality and limiting women's opportunities and potential. The poem contains powerful imagery that overwhelms the readers, forcing them to imagine women's oppression under a dominating male

figure. The last two stanzas paint a dismal picture of life for women who find themselves under the control of a male figure. The speaker compares her father to a vampire who claimed to be him and drank her blood for seven years, symbolising that men can strip a woman of her sense of self and vitality.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

(Ibid, 1981: 224)

In the passage, the speaker describes her father as a vampire who has drained her of her life and vitality. The word "vampire" suggests a parasitic relationship in which the father has taken from the speaker without giving anything in return. The repetition of the phrase "if you want to know" emphasises the speaker's frustration and anger with her father's actions and her desire to confront him directly. The passage can be seen as a metaphor for how patriarchal power structures drain women of their energy and potential, limiting their opportunities and leaving them feeling trapped and oppressed. The first-person pronoun "I" suggests that the speaker is taking control of her narrative and rejecting the idea that she is simply a passive victim of her father's actions. The final line, "Daddy, you can lie back now," can be interpreted as a form of empowerment for the speaker, as she asserts her agency and tells her father that she no longer needs him or his oppressive influence. The imperative "lie back" suggests a finality and closure to the speaker's struggle against her father's domination.

4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the poem "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath portrays the power dynamics between men and women according to Simone de Beauvoir's perspective. The poem highlights the mystification and stereotyping of women by men, resulting

in their exclusion from the most esteemed cultural practices. Therefore, Plath's poem reminds women to take control of their lives and resist being passive targets of male domination. It answers the questions that Sylvia Plath is widely recognised as a feminist writer who explored themes related to gender inequality and the oppression of women in her works. Her poetry and prose often delved into women's experiences and the societal pressures women faced in the mid-20th century. This poem depicts the struggles of a female speaker in a patriarchal society dominated by men and the conflict between male authority and the right of women to control their own lives. The use of powerful imagery and language in the poem conveys the oppression experienced by the speaker, highlighting the feminist message of the poem.

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