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Feminism and feminine culture in modern women writers’ works: with special reference to Anne Sexton and Audre Lorde

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a developmental and comparative study of feminist concerns expressed through the poetry of the two female poets during contemporary feminist movement: Anne Sexton and Audre Lorde. Sexton and Lorde’s background and their poetry within its historical, social and cultural context during feminist movement are investigated. Present paper examines how the selected modern women writers treat feminism and female identity in their works and how women writers’ movement, their techniques and thematic works attempt to help modern world to understand women’s issues and feminine concepts. It is also proposed to study whether they are successful in transferring their senses, emotions, experiences and issues because they write about their same sex and are from women community. In conclusion, the results show that feminist trends in Lorde are much stronger than Sexton and Lorde can be called a feminist writer but not Sexton.

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1. Introduction

Feminist criticism is a late 1960s phenomenon. Although ‘Feminism’ as awareness began with Simone Beauvoir’s ‘The Second sex’ (1949) with Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room one’s own’ (1929), it has been interpreted variously so as to become ‘Feminism’ today. The impact of various critical theories, such as structuralism, post-
structuralism, Marxism and Psycho-analysis, have created various offshoots ground could be traced in these feminist manifestations. Feminist criticism opposes patriarchy and all the male-centered and male-dominated critical theories. It believes so as to reject reigning patriarchal ideology as superior. It believes that concepts of gender are cultural constructs; they are not product of nature. An authentic picture of female experience, feminine sensibility and its oppression be analyzed afresh, is the insistence of the feminist critics today. Despite of all varieties in feminism, feminist criticism has become to stay a homogenous critical theory. Women writers embraced language as a means of liberation in a more comprehensive way: Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘The Second Sex’ and Betty Friedan’s ‘The Feminine Mystique’ helped establish basic feminist beliefs that laid the foundation for women’s organizations fighting for equality and basic rights. In addition to providing an intellectual framework for feminist thought, these texts helped inspire and unify women in their political objectives. In this respect, women’s bookstores served as centers for feminist thought and provided a forum for exchanging ideas about women’s issues (Freedman, 1993). Even political women’s literature and poetry played an important role in the history of feminist thought, because it helped develop a language for the expression of women’s experiences and thereby increased public awareness of the issues raised by women’s writing. The women’s movement also drew attention to linguistic differences that reflect gender inequality, for example the use of “men” to refer to people in general. This linguistic insensitivity to gender even among social activists led many radical feminists to conclude that “the language of liberation was spoken on behalf of everyone who was oppressed—but not for women” (Albert & Albert, 1984, P.48). Feminism has become a dominant force in contemporary literary criticism. It has made considerable advancement during a small period of time. It is difficult to define feminism accurately as there are arguments among feminists. Feminism can be called a mode of critical discourse which emphasizes culturally determined gender differences in the interpretation of literary works. Feminism generally focuses on the history of male dominance and oppression in all aspects of life. There is a greater diversity of women writing now than in any period. These writings differ in class, ethnicity, race, age, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. More educated than their precursors, they also have the advantage of drawing on the works of a rich tradition of male and female writers.

The objective of present paper is to study feminist concerns expressed through the poetry of the two female poets from two different races during contemporary feminist movement in the American society: Anne Sexton and Audre Lorde. The study aims to address Sexton and Lorde’s innovative genre and technique for their writings on contemporary feminist thought and explore modern and traditional − cultural and social issues on women in their works.

In present study, Anne Sexton and Audre Lorde, two modern women’s writers from different race with their unique feminist trends are discussed. This paper is organized as follows. First, Sexton and Lorde’s background and their poetry within its historical, social and cultural context during feminist movement are investigated. How the selected modern women writers treat feminism and female identity in their works and how women writers’ movement, their techniques and thematic works attempt to help modern world to understand women’s issues and feminine concepts are then examined and the detailed methodology described. The results are discussed next, followed by gender participation in literary expression. The limitations of this research are outlined and future research directions are provided in conclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted on two American modern women writers from two different race and literary genre. Data were collected through analytical-descriptive surveys. Their genre and technique are identified from the literature review helped in the analysis of Feminism. Since a variety of feminism definition exists, a distinct definition of feminism is presented which is considered in existing study. These women writers’ background and works within its historical, social and cultural context during feminist movement are examined. The collected data through the resources of libraries, relevant research papers, and interviews with Sexton’s daughter, knowledgeable literati, feminist critics and critics help the researchers to have better understanding of the writers concerned. While the selected writers both are contemporary ones, all required materials, reviews and comments
don’t exist and the researchers had to focus on the selected writers’ original works. Although, this matter is the limitation of this study but this limitation helps to reach the originality of the works.

3. Discussion and Results

Anne Sexton who is known for her highly personal, confessional verse is considered among the most talented representatives of the first generation confessional poets along with Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. She is widely praised for the forceful imagery, compelling associations, affective elegiac tone, and meticulously arranged tonal patterns of her best verse. Her poetry encompasses issues specific to women such as menstruation and abortion, and more broadly masturbation and adultery. She is a famous and trenchant poet whose frank discussion of sex and mental illness offered liberating honesty for many. Sexton as a confessional poet remains among the most important female poets of her generation. In her poetry, Sexton discusses subjects that had always been taboo. She discusses womanish and female issues, mixed feelings about motherhood, and many other topics that women were supposed to ignore or they used to belong to underground literature. Sexton was one of those rare female poets whose work was cherished by a wide public, in part because her voice gave such strong expression to the anger and pain of women at a time when anger and pain were sparking modern feminism. Some evidences of feminism within her study. Sexton’s works, major themes, historical perspectives, and personal issues focus on feminism. A balanced presentation of Sexton would include mention of her major themes, most of which are touched upon in the selection of poems here: religious quest, transformation and dismantling of myth, the meanings of gender, inheritance and legacy, the search for fathers, mother-daughter relationships, sexual anxiety, madness and suicide, issues of female identity. Female issues illustrates with strong images with all details in which the reader can imagine them clearly on the mind. In Sexton’s poetry there is a strong focus on the female body. It is possible to study her works in the light of French feminist writers who feel that a woman writes with her body in the most major poetry. Her highly emotional, self-reflexive verses are characterized by preoccupations with childhood guilt, mental illness, motherhood. Female sexuality is distinguished for its stunning imagery, artistry, and remarkable cadences. An unlikely latecomer to the literary scene, Sexton underwent a rapid metamorphosis from suburban housewife to major literary figure in the early 1960s. Sexton’s art and life culminating in her suicide converged with the convictions of the contemporary feminist movement, drawing attention to the oppressive. They circumscribed existence of women in middle-class American society. Critics frequently comment on the dual nature of Sexton’s poetry as a cathartic process and destructive urge. While many find courage in Sexton’s willingness to transmute painful experience and taboo topics into art, others have condemned such themes as exhibitionist and inappropriate. Despite the limitations of Sexton’s unabashed self-scrutiny, many critics discern profound archetypal motifs in her work, particularly allusions to the Oedipus myth in themes of incest and the relentless search for forbidden truth and her complex handling of her own search for spiritual meaning. In addition, Sexton takes the classic Grimms’ fairy tale and rereads it from a modern point of view and looks at what meaning this tale might hold for women. When reading a classic fairy tale from a feminist viewpoint, a reader will find that women characters are important are chosen because of their beauty. Sexton, as a feminist, ignores this point and goes directly to talk about the issues and problems facing that a woman character must face. What the woman thinks, feels, and experiences is far more important than her appearance. Sexton delved in the school of feminism with Transformations and retelling of popular Grimm’s fairytales. Most important is her gift for unique imagery, often centering on the female body or the household.

Audre Lorde is a Caribbean-American writer; poet and activist. Lorde’s works extend her discussion of difference not only on differences between groups of women but between conflicting differences within the individual. She described herself both as a part of a “continuum of women” and a “concert of voices” within herself. (Lorde, 1980) Lorde criticized feminists of the 1960s, from the National Organization for Women to Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, for focusing on the particular experiences and values of white middle-class women. Her writings are based on the “theory of difference”, the idea that the binary opposition between men and women is overly simplistic: although feminists have found it necessary to present the illusion of a solid, unified whole, the category of women itself is full of subdivisions. Lorde identified issues of class, race, age, gender and even health; this last was added as she battled cancer in her later years, as being fundamental to the female experience. She argued that, although the gender difference has received all the focus, these other
Lorde stated she received no reply. (Amzon, 2006) This fervent disagreement with notable white feminists occurred in a scathing open letter addressed to radical lesbian feminist Mary Daly, to which scholars and within the context of conferences sponsored by white feminist academics, Lorde stood out as an outsider: “in the institutional milieu of black feminist and black lesbian feminist scholarship of white feminists served to augment the oppression of black women, a conviction that led to angry confrontations and within the context of conferences sponsored by white feminist academics, Lorde stood out as an outsider: “in the institutional milieu of black feminist and black lesbian feminist scholars and within the context of conferences sponsored by white feminist academics, Lorde stood out as an angry, accusatory, isolated black feminist lesbian voice”.( De Veaux, 2004) The criticism did not go only one way: many white feminists were angered by Lorde’s brand of feminism. In her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, (De Veaux, 2006) Lorde attacked the underlying racism of feminism, describing it as unrecognized dependence on the patriarchy. She argued that, by denying difference in the category of women, feminists merely passed on old systems of oppression and that, in so doing, they were preventing any real, lasting change. Her argument aligned white feminists with white male slave-masters, describing both as “agents of oppression” (De Veaux, 2004, p.26) In so doing, she enraged a great many white feminists, who saw her essay as an attempt to privilege her identities as black and lesbian, and assume a moral authority based on suffering. Suffering was a condition universal to women, they claimed, and to accuse feminists of racism would cause divisiveness rather than heal it. Sexton and Lorde could develop an especially female framework while dealing with various issues and find a place in literary anthologies. As a matter of fact, they are successful writers who have a firsthand experience of patriarchy who write about themselves, their problems, experiences and various other issues. Also, they are successful in transferring their senses, emotions, experiences and issues because they write about their same sex and are from women community. These writers retell and recreate themselves and the crucial issues to women’s lives are reflected in their works. Contemporary feminist critics generally agree with the fact that even the greatest male writers in literary history who wrote about strong women characters (such as Chaucer’s The Wife Of Bath and Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth), could obviously never precisely convey what it is to be a woman and their character illustration was thus probably based on the social codes of their period and their own male perspective of women. Consequently, there is an obvious distinction between the male and female discourse, relating to the attitude and point of view of women in literature; a poetry written by men speaks a totally different language from that written by women. Women’s poetry, when treated as a gendered artifact, involves, in a close study of feminine poetry of the 19th, 20th, 21st centuries, a scrutiny of culture related issues such as power relations between the sexes, male dominance, domestic chores and responsibilities and others. It also focuses rather often on issues that are generally associated with the female body such as sex and sexuality, body image, childbirth and other female related topics. Sexton’s Poetry shocks to the senses. It also hurts. Audre Lorde and Sexton were passionate women who attempted to be
wife, mother, and poet on the eve of the women's movement in the United States. Lorde and Sexton's lifetimes spanned a period of remarkable change in the social role of women in America, and both are female poets with feminist trends caught somewhere between the submissive pasts of their mothers and the liberated futures awaiting their daughters. With few established female poets to emulate, Lorde and Sexton broke new ground with their intensely personal, confessional poetry. Their anger and frustration with female subjugation, as well as their agonizing personal struggles and triumphs appear undisguised in their works, but the fact that both Sexton committed suicide inevitably colors what the reader gleans from their poetry. However, although their poetry deal with the authors' private experiences, they retain elements of universality; their language cuts through a layer of individual perspective to reach a current of raw emotion common to all human, but especially female, understanding. Sexton and Lorde brought new talent and perspective to the art of poetry, breaking into a field dominated by men since ancient times. Though they wrote about their own personal experiences in the confessional style, their poetry spoke for millions of women whose feelings, abilities, and problems were being ignored. Sexton's confessional poetry is more autobiographical than Lorde's and lacks the craftedness Lorde's earlier poetry exhibit. Sexton's poetry appeals powerfully to the emotions, however. They thrust taboo subjects into close focus. Often they daringly introduce female topics such as childbirth, the female body, or marriage seen from a woman's point of view. The researcher believes that feminist trends in Lorde's poetry are stronger than Sexton's. Sexton's death has become legendary because they have changed the way critics interpret Sexton's work. They had a profound impact on the relatively new genre of confessional poetry. Much of Sexton's poetry fits within the confessional tradition of "killing the beasts within," since both poets wrote extensively about their depressions, their neuroses, and their long-term fascination with death, particularly self-inflicted. However, in a broader sense, confessional poetry describes any writing that focuses on intimate personal experience. Both Lorde and Sexton describe the experience of being women in intimate detail, making the themes of motherhood and womanhood another dimension of the confessional mode in their poetry. However, Lorde's and Sexton's attention to themes of womanhood transcends questions of genre and literary categorization by contributing to and being influenced by changing gender roles and feminist activism.

Lorde and Sexton addressed many feminist themes simply by writing extensively about being women. At the time, most female poets accepted the notion that to write well and be recognized as a writer required adopting standard poetic forms and acceptable themes that had already been determined by their male predecessors. By making women's issues acceptable within the context of mainstream literature, Lorde's and Sexton's writing questioned the role of the poet as "the masculine chief of state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths" that apply to men and women alike. Instead of trying to adopt the tone of dispenser of "universal spiritual truths," Lorde and Sexton represent a distinctly feminine voice in a male-dominated field. They adopted and expanded the language of feminism to allow for fuller expression of women's experiences, and, by making these experiences acceptable themes within mainstream literature, they contributed to the goals of the women's movement. However, Sexton's suicide inspired the creation of a posthumous legend that unduly influenced critical interpretations of their work and ultimately undermined their constructive contributions to the feminist cause. Understanding Sexton's poetry requires deemphasisizing legends constructed after their deaths and returning to the writing itself. Despite Lorde's and Sexton's significant literary contributions to the women's movement, the mainstream media and many literary critics ignored their influence on the language and ideas of feminism. Media coverage of the suicides promoted Sexton as suicidal artists, an image that has grown into a legend and influenced literary interpretations of her work to the point of overshadowing other themes. Consequently, Sexton's suicides and the public reaction to her death undermined her contribution to the feminist cause, because critics and readers tend to focus on suicide and madness in this poet's work while ignoring their writing on being women. After Anne Sexton's suicide on October 4, 1974, media coverage of her death set the tone for her poetic legacy. The placement of two published articles in the New York Times in the obituary section and the focus on her suicide with little mention of her writing implied that it was Sexton's death that made her noteworthy, not her poetry, and thus began the trend of considering her role as a suicide victim more important than her role as a constructive artist. Literary criticism of Sexton's work frequently emphasizes themes of suicide and mental illness over feminist themes. This emphasis on suicide as the primary subject of Sexton's poetry fails to recognize that suicide often works as a literary device for examining other issues, including the affirmation of a woman's power over her own body and psyche. Suicide becomes a way of protesting the human condition, and more specifically the female condition. Although suicidal rhetoric may serve as a literary device
for expressing anger and frustration about women’s social roles, society does not consider suicide itself a feminist act but rather an act of insanity and violence. Consequently, the close relationship between suicidal imagery and feminist themes in Sexton’s work poses a problem for feminists. Because of this problematic relationship between feminism and suicide, Sexton’s legacy as a suicidal artist undermines the effect of her work in ways that extend beyond the recognition of feminist themes in her work. The tragic legend of Sexton creates an equally problematic relationship between creativity and suicidal ideation. The effect of Anne Sexton’s suicide on the interpretation of their work is part of the larger debate about the extent to which the readers should rely on biographical information to interpret a writer’s work. This question becomes particularly relevant when considering the work of the confessional poets, who wrote so extensively about their personal lives. Biographical information and popular myths about Sexton’s suicide influence the interpretation of her poetry to the point of detracting from other themes in their work and making their poetry read like an extended series of suicide notes. However, examination of the poetry themselves reveals feminist themes expressed both forcefully and subtly through the presence of a distinct female voice, descriptions of women’s bodies, and attention to women’s experiences. Sexton’s poetry is not directly political, but it complemented the goals of the women’s movement by giving women a place within the poetic tradition and by contributing to a foundation of feminist thought and expression.

4. Conclusion

Modern women writers particularly Lorde and Sexton reflect feminism and elaborate female identity in their works; of course, writers’ movement, their techniques and thematic works can help modern world to understand women’s issues and feminine concepts in different situations and stages of their life. Lorde and Sexton could develop a female framework through figurative languages e.g. symbol, image, metaphor, simile, allegory, myth, etc. while dealing with various issues and find a place in literary anthologies. Lorde and Sexton are successful writers who have a firsthand experience of patriarchy who write about themselves, their problems, experiences and various other issues. These two selected writers fictionalized themselves in details in various stages of their life like childhood, period, marriage, pregnancy, and different difficult moments of their life including divorce, diseases, death and health. The crucial issues to women’s lives are reflected in their works. Although feminists attempted to prepay many women writers especially at the time of feminism movement including Sexton as feminist poetesses but female writers in 1990s are not both necessary feminist writers. This poet illustrates women identity and issues and creates a direct and close touch to them. After a careful study on their original works, the author finds out Sexton believed they are a poetess first and a feminist, a woman, a confessionalist, second. But it should be acknowledged that feminist movement and social changes were effective on modern women writers’ attitudes and views towards feminism, women and literary work in 20th and 21st century. Feminist trends in Lorde are much stronger than Sexton and Lorde can be called a feminist writer.

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