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**THE ROLE OF QUEEN BEE IN SUSTAINING SELF-IDENTITY: A  
FEMINIST STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S  
CONFESSIONAL BEE POEMS**



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## Abstract

*This study examines confessional “Bee Poems” (3-9 October 1962), written by the American writer, poet, and modern woman, Sylvia Plath. Bee Poems, five in number, are selected texts from Plath’s collection of poems, Ariel (1965), such as “The Bee Meeting”, “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, “Stings”, “The Swarm”, and “Wintering”. To analyze confessions of self-identity by depicting the stereotypical role of queen bee, this paper uses Sara Mills’ Model Feminist Stylistics (1995) as a theoretical framework. The Bee Poems are analyzed at the discourse level with focus on one of its features, ‘Characterization’. The qualitative research method is used with McKee’s (2003) textual analysis based on close reading of the selected texts. This study argues that the pressure of patriarchal forces remains dominant in the life of a poet who identifies with the speaker of the Bee sequence poems and witnesses her struggles to sustain herself as a woman of identity. The male-dominancy suffocates her existence in a way that her life gets changed drastically, especially when she is cheated by her infidel husband, by being involved in an extramarital affair with Assia Wevill. This study concludes that in Bee poems, Plath, disguised in the role of a queen bee, confesses domesticity, sexuality, vulnerability, and finally suicidal thoughts, resulting in the successful suicide attempt as the extreme state of her mind that she finally chooses for herself as the only way out to freedom.*

**Keywords:** *Stereotypical Roles; Feminine Confessions; Patriarchal power; Mental illness; Infidelity; Suicidal thoughts.*

## Introduction

### Background

This research study provides an analysis of Bee Poems, chosen from Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* (1965), through applying feminist stylistics. Sylvia Plath lives in a society ruled by patriarchal figures, especially her father, Otto Emil Plath, and her husband, Ted Hughes (Larik & Mashori, 2017). Through her poetry, she confesses her struggling time with suicidal thoughts when she had to strive for sustenance after the separation from her spouse (Steinberg, 2004). Hence, being the main figure of the confessional movement, she is considered a ‘Confessional poet’ (Bassnett, 2005; Gill, 2008). The target poems, Bee Poems, are examples of her confessional writing. This research study aims to analyse the selected texts through the theoretical lens of feminist stylistics. The current study identifies characterization in these poems, following Sara Mills’ theoretical model (1995). This feature helps expose patriarchal powers exercised by the male gender, crushing the female gender under their feet.

### Introduction to Poet

Sylvia Plath, as an American author and poet, belongs to the confessional school of poetry (Larik &

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Mashori, 2017). She was born on October 27, 1932, in Massachusetts (Bassnett, 2005). Sylvia Plath was the daughter of Aurelia Frances Schober and Otto Emil Plath (Gill, 2008). On November 5, 1940, she was only eight years old, and her father passed away due to the “complications of diabetes mellitus” (Butscher, 2003; Wagner-Martin, 2003, p. 4).

Plath entered Smith College as a scholarship-winning student in 1950 (Bloom, 2011). Plath tied the knot to the English poet and Laureate, Ted Hughes, in London on June 16, 1956 (Gill, 2008; Plath, 2000). Plath gave birth to her daughter, Frieda Rebecca, on April 1, 1960 (Bloom, 2011; Wagner-Martin, 2003) and to a baby boy, Nicholas Farrar Hughes, on January 17, 1962 (Gill, 2008). In summer 1962, Ted Hughes became involved in an extramarital affair with Assia Wevill (Gill, 2008) when Assia and her husband, David, Hughes’s friends, settled in rented accommodation at their house (Bloom, 2011). Upon disclosure of this secret affair, Plath divorced from Hughes in August 1962 (Bloom, 2011). Plath attempted suicide many times but was unsuccessful. One day, early in the morning on 11 February 1963, she successfully “committed suicide by gassing herself” at the age of thirty years in London (Bassnett, 2005, p. 18; Gill, 2008, p. 12).

Plath has made available in her life publication of various collected poems, *The Colossus* (1960), an autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), her last 43 poems in *Ariel* (1965), published posthumously, sketches, stories, prose essays, *Letters Home* (1975), and *Journals* (1982) (Gill, 2008). Sylvia Plath’s writings, both feminist and confessional, are socially influenced. She “savored and purged every painful circumstance in her life in an effort to divulge the situation of the female to the female through the avenue of confessional poetry” (McFarland, 2013, p. 259).

### **Summary of Bee Poems (3-9 October 1962)**

In a period of just a week, Sylvia Plath wrote a sequence of Bee Poems; during that time, she separated from her partner, Ted Hughes. The “Bee Poems” written from 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1962 to 9<sup>th</sup> October 1962 are “The Bee Meeting” (3 October 1962), “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (4 October 1962), “Stings” (6 October 1962), “The Swarm” (7 October 1962), and “Wintering” (9 October 1962). According to Alexander (1999), this series of five poems is also termed ‘Bees’, following “the beekeeping year” (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990, p. 16).

The first poem of the bee poems sequence is “The Bee Meeting”, which consists of seven stanzas, each of five lines. The setting is a rural landscape in early summer season (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990). In view of McFarland (2013), Otto Emil Plath, Plath’s father, was a beekeeping expert; a dangerous venture that fascinated her and her husband, Ted Hughes, when they settled down in their own house in Devon, England. The second poem of the bee poems sequence is “The Arrival of the Bee Box” which contains seven stanzas of five lines each and ends with a single line. It echoes the intimacy between Sylvia Plath and her father, Otto Emil Plath, for he was an entomologist, a professional expert in the study of insects, specifically bees. The third poem, “Stings”, Plath began composing on August 2, 1962, and then left it unfinished. She completed it on October 6, 1962, as a finalized version, consisting of twelve stanzas, each of five lines (Van Dyne, 1993; Kalfopoulou, 2013). The poem on the fourth number in the bee sequence is the same in number of stanzas and structure, and completely about the swarm of the bees, and “Wintering” concentrates on “the serenity of virginity” as the last poem of the series is of five-line ten-stanza stanzas (Talarposhti, 2013, p. 2871).

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## **Literature Review**

Feminist criticism resists patriarchy by opposing all critical theories, supporting male-dominant ideology on superiority (Mehrpooyan & Banehmir, 2014), as patriarchy largely favours men's concerns (Mills, 1995). Feminism occupies a dominant place in contemporary literary criticism; it usually draws attention to the history of male-centred oppression within all phases of life (Mehrpooyan & Banehmir, 2014).

Feminist Stylistics is the sub-branch of stylistics that connects with the gender employed within the text linguistically. Feminist Stylistics introduces readers to linguistic features that identify specific gendered meanings within the text. It pertains to the ways female or male values are projected through language and how a female is viewed for a true representation of gender issues. It is the gendering of the texts through language use. Feminist stylistics enriches literary text with certain words, phrases, or sentences and discourse about sexism.

Various feminist readings inspired by Sylvia Plath's writings are those of Jacqueline Rose, Elisabeth Bronfen, Sandra M. Gilbert, Cora Kaplan, Betty Friedman, Alicia Ostriker, to name a few (Nagar & Vembar, 2017). They regarded Plath as a female representative who not only writes about women but also makes the feminine a lasting subject in her confessional writings (Nagar & Vembar, 2017). Other studies employing the concepts of universal themes such as madness, fear, and suicide, probing the psychic nature of human transformation in Plath's five bee poems, especially "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box", and "Stings" (Abdulrehman & Iqbal, 2018; Nagar and Vembar, 2017). The 'Bee Poems' are the last in *Ariel* (1965), which positions "radical feminist and existential themes and reveal a Plath on the verge of revolution" (McFarland, 2013, p. 259).

## **Theoretical Framework**

As a theoretical framework, Sara Mills' *Feminist Stylistics* (1995) is the adopted model of analysis, which suggests analysing the text at three levels: word, phrase, sentence, and discourse. This study is conducted at the discourse level through the development and portrayal of male and female characters in the selected poems. This model of analysis focuses on the stereotypical roles performed by the female characters (Mills, 1995; Darweesh & Ghayadh, 2016). According to the feminists, the gendered analysis mainly relies on larger patterns of texts (Mills, 1995). Thus, this analysis is carried out beyond the level of phrase or sentence, i.e., the level of discourse. Under this level, the selected feature for analysis is characters or roles.

According to Mills (1995), male and female characters are deployed in various ways within society; such characters or roles are merely words of which the text is made, communicating in society about how both genders are. The female character or role is determined based on bodily parts, makeover appearance, and clothing style (Batsleer et al., cited in Mills, 1995). A male character or role is "invariably introduced to the reader with a description of their head—their hair color and eyes—and a sense of overall size. Female characters are more likely to be described in terms of their legs and parts of their bodies" (Batsleer et al., cited in Mills, 1995, p. 124), mostly private parts of the lower body (Qayyum, Rahman & Nisar, 2019). For both genders, the description of hair matters differently. Females are designated with stereotypical roles and particularly to fulfill sexual needs of the male gender, as they are treated as the center or object of focus, rather than a human; on the other hand, males are only branded for the overall appearance, with face-to-face interaction. For women, the best is to stay within the four walls of the house, but if they are given a chance of doing a job, they are often opted for petty designations, underpaid jobs (Qayyum, Rahman & Nisar,

2019).

### **Research Methodology**

The current study is primarily analytical and interpretative in nature. Sara Mills' *Model Feminist Stylistics* (1995) is taken as the theoretical construct for this study. The objective of the study is the employment of characterization at the discourse level to dig out the poet's struggle for self-identity through the portrayal of her role, along with the revelation of confessions. This feature of characterization is analyzed and interpreted in texts through close reading. Close reading technique is suitable for obtaining textual meaning in the selected texts (Cuddon, 1999; McKee, 2003). Moreover, this research study is qualitative and analyzed through a close reading method. Descriptive qualitative reading is used to analyze the texts. Qualitative Research is the umbrella term, highlighting the "qualitative-as-descriptive nature of work" (Ely et al., 2003, p. 3). "This type of research is based on data expressed mostly in the form of words— descriptions, accounts, opinions, feelings, etc. – rather than in numbers." (Walliman, 2018).

For this study, the selected text was collected through library and internet research. The primary source was 'Bee Poems', selected from *Ariel* (1965) by Sylvia Plath. The secondary sources were books, articles, journals, dictionaries, dissertations, and online sources.

### **Analysis and Findings**

#### **The Bee Poems**

"The Bee Meeting" exhibits an event in which Plath witnesses the shifting of the queen bee from one beehive to another (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990). The queen bee parallels the speaker, Plath, herself, and Assia Wevill, a virgin. Plath confesses her vulnerability towards the dangers of patriarchal figures, specifically her husband, Ted Hughes. Kroll suggests that a queen bee is "the separable soul or totem of the protagonist" (Soutter, 1989, p. 247).

In "*I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?*" (*Ariel*, p. 56), being bare and naked, she is assigned the role of a traditional wife to fulfill the sexual desire of "man in black" she lost her virginity to, which confesses the threat of fixed identity through comparison of her nudity with the 'chicken neck'. She is authoritative but forced to perform the subjugated role of secretary, as in "*Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,*" (*Ariel*, p. 56). She faces loss of her identity by assuming the role of disguised identity in the form of white protective clothing, 'milkweed silk', as in "*Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.*" (*Ariel*, p. 56) and a plant with white flowers, 'cow parsley', as in "*If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley*" (*Ariel*, p. 57). The line "*Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?*" (*Ariel*, p. 56) confirms her role in the form of a vulnerable figure; the queen bee's injured body is exposed to danger under societal pressure and becomes a demeaned female body. In "*And a black veil that moulds to my face, they are making me one of them*" (*Ariel*, p. 56), a queen bee is forced to perform the roles set by the patriarchal community, under confinement, imprisoned by the dominant beekeepers. She performs the role of an escapist with the confession of isolation and emptiness as in "*The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.*" (*Ariel*, p. 57). Now she is aged and struggling for survival as in "*She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.*" (*Ariel*, p. 57). In this, 'queen' is mentioned twice explicitly. So, again she is at the verge of losing her identity firstly when the villagers intend to search her as in "*The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.*" (*Ariel*, p. 57) and secondly with the replacement of her as an old queen

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with the bride as a virgin, Assia as in “*The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?*” (*Ariel*, p. 57).

“The Arrival of the Bee Box” discusses how the poetic persona receives a box of bees for starting a beehive (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990). Plath identifies with the speaker of the poem. It is a conversation between Plath and the bees in the hive that reveals a wish to control, but in the end, she liberates herself from mental stress by committing suicide. This poem embodies her memorable moments with her father and husband, whom she keeps locked inside.

The Queen bee’s actions parallel the speaker’s identity. The stanza one depicts her dual role as a fearful daughter and mother: a daughter role in “*I would say it was the coffin of a midget*” and a mother role in “*Or a square baby*”. ‘Wood box’ is a coffin containing the dead body of her father or her dead baby. This reminds a daughter of her father’s demise when she was just eight years old and a mother of a miscarriage. In February 1961, Sylvia Plath suffered a miscarriage (Bloom, 2011; Plath, 2000). The colony of bees works under the queen bee; she rules over the hive and orders, “*I ordered this, this clean wood box*”, ordering manifests her dominating, controlling role, powerful. So, she wants to keep bees disciplined in her mind. If bees are locked, her mind is congested with mental unrest that confesses insanity and fear due to a feeling of burdensome ‘heavy’, powerlessness. In continuity, stanza two says, “*The box is locked, it is dangerous.*” as she is controlled, repressed, and threatened by the external power. However, she strongly raises her voice through her temporary identification as a queen bee. In “*It is like a Roman mob, / Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!*”, she plays the role of a weak entity, alone; she felt strong when together with her husband. She disguises herself in the form of a poisonous tree, ‘Laburnum’, as in “*There is the Laburnum, its blond colonnades,*” (*Ariel*, p. 60). Such a role of a disguised identity confesses death, insanity, a smothered and suffocated self. In “*Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.*” (*Ariel*, p. 60), she seems to play the role of a god-like religious figure, serving as a life-giver and liberator of the bees in the hive. Earlier, she controlled them, and in the end, released them. In the last single line, “*The box is only temporary.*” (*Ariel*, p. 60), she is kept inside for the time being for productivity as a sexual entity, confined and controlled, denied female identity.

The poem “Stings” is about a past event; Plath and Hughes purchased the beehive in June 1962 (Van Dyne, 1993). According to Lindberg-Seyersted (1990), it is also about the final stage of “exchanging honey” (p. 16). In her letter to her mother, Aurelia Schober, on June 15, 1962, she discloses a real happening in which the bees in the hive attacked “Ted’s hair because he neglected to wear a hat” (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990, p. 107). It is about the intimate relationship between Plath and Hughes, and the hatred she has for this fake bond. She raises her voice for the women who are forced to be sacrificial figures. She hates the time she spent with her husband and has finally separated.

The lines “*He and I / Have a thousand clean cells between us, / Eight combs of yellow cups,*” (*Ariel*, p. 61) and “*In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat*” (*Ariel*, p. 61) depict her role of wife she performed perfectly for eight years, ‘eight combs’ and ‘eight bounds’. ‘Cups’ refer to kitchen life, confessing domesticity with her role as a housewife. Fulfilling the societal demand, she also played her best part in maintaining her sexual life, a time witnessing extreme love between her and her partner, Hughes, as in “*White with pink flowers on it, / With excessive love I enamelled it*” (*Ariel*, p. 61). Her role changes from queen bee, representing female power and identity, to honey-drudger: “*I stand in a column / Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudger.*” (*Ariel*, p. 61). The reason for shifting her role is “*Is there any queen at all in it? / If there is, she is old,*” (*Ariel*, p. 61), a

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change she denies, “*I am no drudge*” (*Ariel*, p. 61). Her denial confesses fear of a new role being old: “*Will they hate me,*” (*Ariel*, p. 62). “*He was sweet,*” and “*Moulding onto his lips like lies,*” (*Ariel*, p. 62), these lines recount her satisfaction from her sexual needs with lovemaking kisses, later, discovered it was all a lie. Now, “*It is almost over. / I am in control.*” (*Ariel*, p. 62).

Referring to the lines, “*Her wings torn shawls, her long body*” (*Ariel*, p. 61) and “*With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?*” (*Ariel*, p. 61), she feels emotionally unstable in the last days of her life, though physically strong with lion-like qualities. She confesses to her fragility and downfall. She undergoes patriarchal pressure like an ‘engine’ exerts force, attempts to commit suicide as ‘red’ confesses to violence, and reaches her final bode ‘mausoleum’:

Now she is flying

More terrible than she ever was, red

Scar in the sky, red comet

Over the engine that killed her——

The mausoleum, the wax house. (*Ariel*, p. 63)

In the poem “The Swarm”, the title ‘Swarm’ is repeated twice, in lines 17 and 42. The poem narrates an event of gathering and returning to a hive of “a mass of swarming bees” (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990, p. 16). In the poem, she mentions Hughes under the guise of ‘Napoleon’ which she orated in her interview with Peter Orr on October 30, 1962:

I find myself being more and more fascinated by history and now I find myself reading more and more about history. I am very interested in Napoleon, at the present: I’m very interested in battles, in wars, in Gallipoli, the First World War and so on, and I think that as I age I am becoming more and more historical. (Fung, 1994, p. 200)

It openly reveals Plath’s rejection of male suppression and stands against all the injustices that happened in her life. It clearly shows her awareness of war and history, and its connection with her personal endeavors in pursuit of her self-identity. Queen bee stands for feminine power and energy. In “*Somebody is shooting at something in our town——*” (*Ariel*, p. 64), ‘something’ is an object, inhuman, inanimate, controlled, arrested, and harassed through the act of ‘shooting’. “*Who are they shooting at?*” (*Ariel*, p. 64) shows an anonymous who has a role as a victim, no identity under the oppression of a victimizer Hughes as a ‘Napoleon’ for whom she wishes for defeat: “*It is you the knives are out for / At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon,*” (*Ariel*, p. 64).

The poem title “Wintering” is stated in line 1 of stanza 2. The poem is associated with the last phase in the process from gathering honey to the arrangement through ‘semi-hibernation’ of the leftover bees (Lindberg-Seyersted, 1990, p. 16). In Butscher’s view, this verse depicts Plath’s ability and struggle towards survival after separation from Hughes, which shows feminine power to control under depression (Narbeshuber, 1998). The winter season is unacceptable for her as she no longer holds the ownership of bees.

In stanza 1, ‘six jars’ stand for six years Plath spent with Hughes, and she counts it a perfect time, but once she got separated from Hughes, as a female, she is unable to perform her maternal role properly: “*This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.*” (*Ariel*, p. 67). It is wintertime, and, on the contrary, she has no responsibility for taking care of bees for the time being. Stanza 2 mentions ‘winter’ is the only hurdle to play her role perfectly until spring comes, the time of freedom for survivors as in “*The bees are flying. They taste the spring.*” (*Ariel*, p. 68). Winter is a tough time for her to survive, and she faces hardships in nurturing her children. In “*The bees are all women, / Maids and the long royal lady.*” (*Ariel*, p. 68), the queen bee belongs to all women, but as a “long

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royal body” role, as an individual depicts individuality, authority, and makes the queen bee distinguished from labor or worker bees.

## Conclusion

This study discusses Sylvia Plath’s ‘Bee Poems’ as confessional poems through the lens of *Feminist Stylistics* (1995), proposed by Sara Mills. The method of close reading of the texts is used to serve the purpose of the study. Though the selected texts are analysed by numerous feminist critics, as mentioned earlier in the Literature Review section, this paper analyses them as a feminist study of how the female gender is represented and projected as a valuable part of society, contributing equally to society through the language of the text as well. In this depiction, a woman occupies many roles, which are portrayed in the bee sequence poems, performed by the poet herself, Plath, as parallels to the speaker of the poems. All stereotypical roles she, as a bee queen, is forced to perform at the stake of losing her selfhood. To sustain her self-identity, she strives hard to survive alone, but she is rejected for her real worth in one way or another.

She is observed while performing multifaceted roles such as daughter, wife, and mother. She is seen missing playing the role of an individual of self-identity, which comes up with the confession of a lack of individuality. She is supposed to act like a sexual entity, a source of productivity. Though she refers to queen bee as her disguised identity, she is assigned the subjugated roles to perform as those roles are stereotypical and are not her choice, but set by dominating, controlling, and unjust patriarchal figures who count her as replaceable if needed. Sylvia Plath, replaced by Assia Wevill as Hughes' second wife, is left alone with her two children to fight the battle for sustenance. In search of mental peace, she meets her version of a shattered self who finally finds relief in death, suicide.

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