

The Witch as Self-representation in the Poetry of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Eavan Boland

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In every culture and throughout time, witchcraft and witches have been found. The word "witch" has always identified men as well as women; it was used for the first time, in a text of 890 C.E. that refers to a male figure. The witch trials of Europe and America of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which extended over most of the early modern period, indelibly assign the term "witch" to women.¹

The witch trials have been analyzed by Jeffrey Burton Russell (1984) as "...an episode in the long struggle between authority and order on the one side and prophecy and rebellion on the other....The witch was a rebel against church and society at a time when they were wholly defined". While Maria Mies sees the witch-hunt as "the reaction of the male-dominated classes against the rebellion of women".²

Hence, the gendering of witchcraft is seen as the product of a patriarchal ideology of suppression. It helps to establish firm criteria for the socially accepted woman and the prescribe gender roles of the woman as a wife, mother and caretaker. At the same time it leads to the formation of the witch stereotype.

Indeed, such attempts ultimately led to the suppression of females' voices whether in real life or even in literature. As Virginia Woolf notes in *A Room of One's Own*, when "one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs [...] I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet". Woolf goes on saying that any woman "born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at."³ So, if any woman behaves outside of the approved social scripts, or if she distinguishes herself by being brilliant, active, enthusiastic and wise, or simply if she exceeds expectations, she is usually labeled as witch, monstrous or nonhuman.

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To ascribe the witch stigma to gifted and creative women paves the way for women's persecution and suppression. Also, it reflects the escalating anxiety over the influence of the charismatic talented, creative, and distinguished women.

Traditionally, women were not expected to be creative or ambitious, they were taught that they do not need education or successful career or even aspiration to be true women. The woman has to be beautiful, obedient, and silent and to willingly embrace the man-made prescribed gender roles of wife and mother. In brief the woman should be an angel. However, women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they will be monsters.⁴

Sandra Gilbert, in her essay 'My Name is Darkness: The Poetry of Self-Definition', states the problem of the creative woman that men "tell her she is the "angel in the house," yet she doesn't *feel* angelic, and wonders, therefore, if she is a devil, a witch, an animal, a criminal."⁵ So, being disobedient, clever, or intellectual and not angels or silent as good girls, creative women have often been damned and were usually categorized as fallen angels, demonic creatures, witches or even devils.

Women writers' identification with demonic creatures, devils and witches has been belittling and marginalizing all women authors of the time, as well as any woman who tries to break free from the historically prescribed gender role of the woman. It proves to be an influential means for suppressing and silencing women.

However, feminist strategies for liberating themselves and breaking the silence are varied. An outstanding, yet very unconventional, one is the feminist poets self-fashioning as a witch, which becomes a substantial part of the international second-wave women's movement that started in the late 1960s.⁶

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar pointed out in *The Madwoman in the Attic* "all the nineteen- and twentieth- century literary women who evoke the female monster in their novels and poems alter her meaning by virtue of their own identification with her. For it is usually because she is in some sense imbued with interiority that the witch -monster-madwoman becomes so crucial an avatar of the writer's own self."⁷

It is the actual history of the witch persecution that motivates women poets to embrace the negative identity of the witch in their constant strife to create their own distinct identity and to liberate themselves

from the paralyzing effects of a male literary tradition that debased woman's creativity.

The witch is usually portrayed as a powerful, mysterious, yet creepy figure, one that attracts a good deal of attention. However, from this image of the traditional witch, women poets ingeniously derive a new image of a feminist witch, reshaping the public concept of the witch as a demonically possessed woman to something utterly different.

So, for women writers in general and women poets in particular, to embrace the identity of such an uncontroversial and much-frowned-upon figure, the witch, may serve many ends. The poet may use it to emancipate herself from patriarchy's constraints, being social or literary, to break silence, to transform stereotypical figures, and to find means to express herself freely. In brief, such women are simply those who seek to find their own voices. So, this identification empowers the poet herself, helps her to find her own voice and to survive her marginalized status as a woman poet.

In brief, as Anne Sexton puts it "a poet/ a lady of evil luck"(CP, 429)⁸, so being a woman and a poet created a sense of split identity, and women poets who suffer from the loss of identity or the split of identity chose to identify themselves with certain figures whether mythical, historical, biblical or even notorious like the witch. The main reason for such identification is clearly to seek power and authority. The first intriguing identification with the witch figure is that of Anne Sexton⁹, an outstanding American poet who had a huge impact on the history of poetry, especially women poetry.

Anne Sexton is an astonishing poet whose place in the history of American poetry is indubitable. It is really challenging by itself for a woman poet to write poetry in the twentieth century when the poet is deemed to be "the masculine chief of state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths". Yet, Anne Sexton writes openly and subjectively about her own life and experiences, as she was able to break free from the social and cultural confines and liberate herself from women's "clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom"¹⁰. She is truly an iconic figure, as Maxine Kumin, a friend and fellow poet, argues that Anne Sexton has paved the way for the coming generations

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of women poets, as she "broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring." She wrote openly about nonconventional topics like death, suicide, female rage, ambivalent mourning, abortion, adultery, drug addiction,

and menstruation.¹¹ Moreover, she is well-known for her flirtation with one specific taboo subject, namely witchcraft.

Anne Sexton was fully aware of the fate of the creative woman poet in her age, and she strived to create her own identity as a woman poet. For her, to be a creative poet is to possess a kind of power, magical or supernatural over words. Hence, the woman who exerts this power is made to feel like as if she was performing witchcraft and, accordingly, she is nothing but a witch.

In the process of discovering or defining her *self* as a woman poet, and due to the "anxiety of authorship"¹² that she suffers from, like many women poets of her generation, Anne Sexton identifies herself with many powerful figures. Yet, her identification with the figure of the witch is amazing. Usually, a witch is a strong female figure; one would not dare to rival her power, nevertheless, Anne Sexton's witch is powerful but harmless as she wants to change the readers' perception of the figure of the witch and consequently the figure of the gifted woman in general.

Her self-fashioning as a witch is complex and evolving. Her early use of the figure of the witch, especially in her well-known poem "*Her Kind*", is different from that in her later, more mature poetry like in her volume entitled *Transformation*. The first identification shows a conflicting and not exact *self*, it was a little insecure. She presents the witch as, literally, every woman, not so powerful but isolated, misunderstood and an outcast.

The poem, "*Her Kind*", is so important as Anne Sexton used it to define her public identity as a poet. She constantly began her readings of this poem, regardless of what poetry she had on an evening's agenda,

telling the audience that it would show them what kind of woman, and what kind of poet she was.¹³ It is emblematic of the poet's anxiety of being a creative woman poet and her intention to empower herself. She declares frankly that she is a 'possessed witch' who is 'not ashamed to die'. Her lines indicate a "... willingness to be public about things the culture usually shames its members into silence about."¹⁴

Moreover, the poem presents the idea that a woman has the right to claim power and to have a different identity and role than the one imposed on her by the patriarchal society. Also, it suggests that women show dual capacities for goodness as well as evil, domesticity and freedom.

In "Her Kind", Anne Sexton depicts three roles of woman the "possessed witch," the "housewife" and the "adulteress". The poem opens with the following lines :

*have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.* (CP,15)

The speaker in the poem is different as she courageously speaks out her mind admitting that she is a "possessed witch" who goes out flying at night, when she is "braver" than when she is by day, and who is "dreaming evil". She is not a timid, gentle, quiet, or passive housewife, like the women who live in the plain houses below her sweeping dust with their brooms. Such a woman is, naturally, feared and opposed by society as she is unwilling to conform to social expectations and norms.

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Consequently, the witch is presented in the second stanza as an outcast, who lives separated from society:

*I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.* (CP,15)

She imagines herself as a housewife living in "the warm caves in the woods," serving "the worms and the elves" and rearranging "the disaligned." The witch's attempt to rearrange and fix what is conflicting in the cave recalls what the poet is trying to achieve in the society in general, and that is to make a change in the social perception of the liberated and creative woman. Yet, a "woman like that is misunderstood".

The last stanza tells of the fate of this witch:

*I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.* (CP,15)

The witch is burned at the stake after being publicly embarrassed, which is the same fate of the women of the European Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Yet, the speaker of the poem "...is not ashamed to die." Moreover, women like the speaker of the poem, including the poet herself, "do not die of shame; instead they contest the rule of shame that

has enforced the age-old silence about female experience and about the life of the body... "15

The poet declares that she " [has] been her kind." She is just like the speaker of the poem "*a possessed witch*", a "*lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind*" She is even "*not a woman, quite*" who is "*rearranging the disaligned.*" Also, she is "misunderstood" and "not ashamed to die." Anne Sexton, and within few lines, has cleverly portrayed the real and problematic situation of women in the society.

Anne Sexton , like the witch in the poem, is a liberated and powerful woman who is trying to live an independent, free life, but she had been subject to rejection, suppression and even alienation by the society. The yearn for freedom and liberation is something inherited in all human beings, particularly females, as society recoils from the idea of an independent and powerful woman. Hence, the witch Anne Sexton embraces for herself is one inherent in all women. As Diana Hume George points out in her book *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*, Anne Sexton speaks the "unspeakable for us." She has indeed "seen into our darkest selves".¹⁶

Furthermore, the identification with the witch is essential because if Anne Sexton remained herself she would never be strong enough. In her search for power, authority and freedom, the poet had to transform herself in her poetic lines.

What is really fascinating about the poem is the way the poet steps from person to persona, and the subjectivity in the poem, which "insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman with magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton's creativity." ¹⁷ She was fully aware of the fact that the woman poet's power over words marked her as witchlike, and she tries to use this magical power to alter the reality and to make a change in the society.

Despite the importance of the witch figure in "Her Kind", she is somewhat a vulnerable persona. She is deformed, "twelve-fingered, out

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of mind”; a woman who is not quite a woman, that is to say, to be a witch is to have a self that is not exactly a self. Yet, in *Transformations* (1971), the witch figure is totally different. Also, it is noteworthy that the poet herself is far more confident and more at ease with the role of the witch in this volume where the witch is presented not only as a powerful woman but also as knowledgeable and eloquent whose voice is heard in the poem.

Transformations is a witty but dark modernist retelling of seventeen fairy tales based on Brothers Grimm's collection of fairy tales. In classic fairy tales the witch is usually presented as a demonized woman who possesses a supernatural power, and an agent of evil and the master of black art. However, the witch in Anne Sexton's poetry is “a desirable version of the self”¹⁸, she is not evil but harmless and gifted.

The narrator in *Transformations* is Anne Sexton herself “*The speaker in this case/is a middle-aged witch, me —*”(CP,223). The poet declares herself to be “the new source of folk wisdom and of oracular authority” as she is a witch, the “master of the arts, of an opaque art of illusion, and also as a disruptive force, a figure of anarchic energy who subverts conventional cultural wisdom.”¹⁹

In this volume Anne Sexton “focuses on women cast in a variety of fictive roles: the dutiful princess daughter, the wicked witch, the stepmother.” It was “a logical extension of the material she dealt with in the confessional genre, but this time with a society-mocking overlay”²⁰ Hence, *the middle-aged witch* turns out to be the embodiment of female voice. The witty narrator, in *Transformations*, is deemed to be the poet's most notable storytelling witch whose “revised fairy tales constitute a cultural critique of sex-role stereotyping... the witch-narrator reveals how trapped these heroines are in their prescribed gender roles.”²¹

It is noteworthy that creative and ambitious women in the fairy tales are always portrayed as ugly and evil witches, who are always scheming to hurt others, just like the wicked stepmother in “Cinderella,” and the witch stepmother in “Snow White”. The poet revised the typical figure

of the ambitious woman by portraying the witch as a literate and knowledgeable person. Moreover, the poet gives the witch storyteller the power to rewrite and revise the fairy tales which had been written by males. This revision is essential as it leads to change the roles typically assigned to women in fairy tales

What is remarkable, however, is that the witch figure was a source of strength for Anne Sexton; as if the witch transformed her power and valor to her. As the witch manages to overcome her marginalization and isolation, the poet's work reflects a new imaginative boldness, she exhibits a unique self-confidence and power when she wrote to her friend *Maxine Kumin*, a year after the publication of *Transformation*, inscribing a copy of *The Book of Folly* for her in 1972, "Dear Max — From now on it's OUR world."²²

Rather than being "possessed by special occult powers of femininity," Anne Sexton's witches "might be said to be possessed of a special access to poetic authority in opening up the repressed (occulted) feminine to public view."²³

Like her contemporary poet and friend Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath is undoubtedly one of the most iconic modern American women poets. She wrote in, what is deemed to be, a woman's voice, reflecting, through her poems, women's aspirations, hopes, feelings, and problems. She wrote in a confessional style about her personal experiences and her inner world as a woman, a wife and a mother, as well as, about the problems she encountered as a woman and a poet in the mid-twentieth century.

Despite her early death(she committed suicide at the age of 30) she left behind an accomplished and powerful body of work that continues to inspire women poets for generations to come. She brought to the art of poetry a formidable new talent and perspective. Her poetry, which is often about feeling betrayed and powerless, foreshadowed feminist writing in later years.²⁴

Sylvia Plath's poetry endures due to her "mastery of language" as well as "her willingness to use poetry to express the need, as Diane Wood Middlebrook wrote in 1998, for love, work and—above all—

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recognition in a man's world".²⁵ Sylvia Plath tried to break into a field dominated by men long time ago. Like many of her contemporary women poets, she sought the power to free herself from social conformity and to create a distinctive poetic identity in the male dominated literary realm. However, Plath was plagued by a "split between a publicly acceptable persona and a . . . creative and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous".²⁶

So she was torn between two identities, her identity as a writer and her identity as a woman. Hence her 'self' was not a real self but a split self and in her poems she strived to construct and empower her exceptional 'self' that ultimately shapes her poetic identity. Actually, the dilemma of the split self of the poet and her struggle to find her true voice distinguish her poems and give them power and individuality.

In the quest for a poetic identity, and even before women can write, as Virginia Woolf argued, it is essential for them to "kill" the "Angel in the House", that is to break free from their conventional and socially prescribed gender roles. Plath managed to 'kill' the 'angel' in her and she skillfully, yet steadily, integrated her identity as a writer with her identity as a woman, shattering the 'double bind' for women and women poets in the male dominated literary realm.²⁷

It is really intriguing to trace the development of the 'self' in Sylvia Plath's poetry. Early in her poems, the poet tried to create her own voice and identity. The first volume of poetry *The Colossus* (1960) contains many poems which tackle the themes of "creativity and self-creation"; others are "implicitly about the process of constructing and defending an identity." While a number of the poems in this collection register "the attempt to find poetic language and thus some form of identity."²⁸

The poet evolved wonderfully in her poems and eventually she successfully overcame the fragmented and divided self. Her self-consciously constructed 'self' transcended her real identity as a woman and a poet. In the Foreword of *Ariel* (1965), Robert Lowell argues that in the last few months of Sylvia Plath's short life, she "becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created—

hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess', but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines".²⁹

To create such an exceptional 'self' and to obtain the power to speak of her true 'self', the poet "tries on the various guises, masks, avatars, personae of her poems--witch, mermaid, lover, wife; mushroom, dead mole, grain of rice; mother, daughter, barren woman, fertile woman, dead woman; hospital patient, beekeeper, poet, and vengeful goddess."³⁰ However, being a confessional poet, it is almost obligatory to regard Sylvia Plath's female personas in her poems as a mere reflection of the poet herself. Hidden beneath her various guises, masks and personas lies the true 'self' of the poet. Her identification with creative, powerful and unconventional personas is essentially an act of self-empowerment. To embrace the figure of the witch, goddess, or even a ghastly mythical creature, the poet actually seeks to be powerful, free, independent, self-determined woman poet. In "Witch Burning", she identified herself with the figure of the witch.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Witch Burning" (1959) echoes Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" in theme, language and imagery, and it is considered as a look back to "a tradition of modern poetry by women (including Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" and Amy Lowell's 'Witch-Woman') which embraces the figure of the witch-woman as an emblem of resistance and transgression."³¹

The poem inflames a sense of self-empowerment by using a female persona who has to go through a hard struggle throughout the poem, yet she ultimately triumphs over adversity by regaining the self that had been lost before the struggle. In this poem the burning of a witch is the central theme. The poem opens with the following lines :

*In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks.
A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit
The wax image of myself, a doll's body.
Sickness begins here: I am the dartboard for witches.
Only the devil can eat the devil out.
In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire.*

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*(The Collected Poems, p135)*³²

The persona, the witch/ poet, lingers on the margins of society. She lives as a kind of monstrous ostracized. She is plagued by the feeling of the loss of self-identity, she is not even a woman, but a wax image and a doll, who has no real 'self'. The witch/poet reveals "a sense of dislocation or self-alienation since she sees herself as though from the outside and identifying herself as misfit."³³

The poem portrays the witch/poet's anguished search for identity and the struggle to get an identity that is uniquely her own. However, she tries to free herself first from all social and patriarchal restraints, as she determined to" ... fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth." This quest for identity involves intolerable suffering and sacrifice, yet in the process, the speaker marvelously grow into a powerful and determined woman who rejects her victimization and demands forcefully "*Give me back my shape.* "

She rejected the feelings of loneliness, depression, fear, and unworthiness in favor of power, authority, and liberation. The final act of the burning of the witch/poet, when she willingly "climb[s] to a bed of fire ", is seen as an act of liberation and triumph as death for Sylvia Plath is a liberation and an empowerment of the 'self'. The fire of the pyre that is devouring the body of the witch/poet is freeing her as she is filled with light and brightness: "*My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs./ I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light*" (*The Collected Poems, p135*). Death gives the witch/poet fulfillment, and through death she transforms and a new self is born. Jo Gill argues in his book *Modern Confessional Writing* (2006) that "Plath ... uses burning and conflagration ... as a means to and metaphor for self-transformation".³⁴ The self-transformation is actually a search for power, independence, and even authority.

However, to trace the development of the personas Sylvia Plath created in her later poems, it becomes obvious for us that her personas grow in power as the poet herself. The poet developed tremendously so when the time came to write her remarkable poem "Lady Lazarus", she

was able to present a true and powerful self. Noteworthy is the persona in "Lady Lazarus" which is really amazing as she reflects the fiery true self of the poet, and the astonishing progress of the poet and her growing confidence in herself and her work. It becomes very clear that Sylvia Plath finally takes control of the main forces that control her identity to create an identity that is uniquely her own.

The prominent burden in feminist verse is obviously the duality of woman and poet. Both poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, overcame the crisis of identity and empowered themselves and their personas in their poems, usually through the identification with strong female figures, including the witch.

Likewise, in Ireland the poet Eavan Boland, the first great woman poet in the history of Irish poetry, went through the same agonizing struggle to create her poetic identity as a woman poet. In her poetry, Boland developed a female image and voice steadily and skillfully. Her poetry shows a remarkable growth and courage. She aspires to "recover the lost voices of Irish women whose real historical presence has been shrouded by romanticized representations of "Mother Ireland" in literature and in song. " Since Ireland is a "country where a nationalist tradition has often recurred to the symbolic identification between Ireland and a passive Mother, and where the precepts of the 1937 Constitution have relegated women to the exclusive roles of mothers and housewives"³⁵

This burdensome idealization of the woman creates a real and profound conflict, the conflict between being a woman and being a poet. Boland discusses this conflict and the problem of being a woman and a poet in "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma," an essay published in 1987. One of the three points that make up the essence of a woman poet's 'dilemma' is "the inherent conflict between being a woman and being a poet [that] makes it difficult for women to grasp the conflicting identities of being both a female and a poet with confidence, which in turn affects the authenticity of their writing."³⁶

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Hence, to create an identity that is uniquely her own, it was essential for the poet to overcome this conflict, as well as the marginalization which Irish women in Ireland were to experience in the mid-to-late nineties and their confinement to the roles of wife and mother. One of the most powerful and outspoken protests against the debasement of women and their creativity both in Irish culture and literary tradition is *In Her Own Image*, a collection of poems Boland published in 1980. *In Her Own Image* is truly a breakthrough not only in the contemporary Irish poetry but also in Boland's career as a writer for "its subversive potential to revise creational myths that have contributed to the traditional construction of female subjectivity."³⁷

In this volume, she tackles, among other things, the issues of identity and the role of the poet. She manages to change the figure of the woman from being only an object or an icon to a creative and even powerful figure. In her poems the woman is no longer the passive figure that the male poet casts according to his own desire.

Boland challenges the traditional image of woman, reintroducing images of strong women into Irish culture and poetry. She uses "various images of women from witches to mad creatures, from sinful Eves to submissive victims of male standards, to reveal the multidimensional nature of femaleness."³⁸ She tends to explore new and even rare images of femaleness and she skilfully identifies herself with various powerful women figures to gain the power she needed to be a woman poet, and more precisely to gain authority.

The anxiety of authorship discussed by Gilbert and Gubar causes the poet, as well as many other women poets at that time, to be less confident about their creative abilities in masculinized poetic tradition. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this anxiety of authorship is what makes women poets seek power and authority by identifying themselves with powerful women figures, even if such figures were monstrous creatures, witches, socially outcast women, or what they call the "madwoman in the attic."³⁹ Thus, In *In Her Own Image*, Boland turns to be literally that figure of the madwoman in the attic Gilbert and Gubar mention, and as these critics suggest, the persona in Boland's

poems is "the author's double, because it is through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts." ⁴⁰

To start with the title of the collection *In Her Own Image*, it reveals clearly the poet's concern with the problem of identity. The poet empowered the woman by giving her the power to create in her own image, that is to say, she is the only one who can create her own identity, she does not need any one, especially a male, to define, or portray her. She is able to examine and express her own experience freely, rejecting at the same time the male-made idealized woman image in favor of her real and true self. This new woman is fully in charge of her own fate, she holds the power in her own hands and she is going to use it to free herself from male domination in poetry as in real life.

In her collection, Boland successfully revises what she herself considers as "simplified and reduced" images of women who have traditionally been only objects for male poets. She gives voice to the silenced women and empowers the suppressed and marginalized. Boland gives her silenced, suppressed and socially outcast personas a voice to tell their own painfully gained experiences. For women, the mere telling of their stories is considered as an empowering act. The poet, through her newly empowered personas, manages to create her own poetic identity, asserting her creativity in a male-created poetic tradition.

One of the exceptional women figures Boland uses in her poems is the figure of the witch.⁴¹ The combination of the disturbing yet intriguing feelings of awe and mystery creates a special appeal for this figure. Though the use of the figure of the witch is considered outdated, however, this figure remains so fascinating, especially to women poets, as it carries different meanings and interpretations. The witch, this woman who has been constantly considered a threat to the male-dominated society, has turned to be "a liberating symbol of an oppressive masculine culture" as in Boland's poems "Witching" and "In Her Own Image". Witches, for feminists as well as contemporary

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women writers, stand for" female creativity with their highest potential."⁴²

Boland's use of the figure of the witch is introduced in "Anorexic", a poem that is told by a woman who is struggling to fit the male-made high standards of beauty. Her agonizing struggle led her to despise and detach from her own body, describing it as a witch that must be burnt:
*"Flesh is heretic./My body is a witch./I am burning it ."*⁴³

The poem unveils the dark inner world of a woman and her suffering. The self-destructive act of the speaker reflects a low self-esteem and identity crisis. Her "denial of food becomes a denial and rejection of female identity altogether." The poem proves "how the pressure of the feminine iconic can produce tragic states of distorted identity in individual women." Moreover, it reveals the damage men are inflicting on women who are trying their best to emulate male's stereotypes.⁴⁴

Although in "Anorexic" the woman is portrayed as an emblem of submission, she is not completely powerless. Boland empowers the poem's speaker by giving her a voice to express her dilemma. Yet, in "Witching", another poem from the same collection, the speaker is not a vulnerable woman with a distorted identity.

In "Witching", the speaker is a witch/poet, Boland uses the figure of the witch for the woman poet figure. The speaker seems to be a little more confident and she is fully aware of her own dilemma. She rejects male's stereotypes and the confinement of women in the prescribed roles of wife and mother. She wants to set herself free from stereotypical images of women, even if that means to be a socially rejected witch.

Customarily, witches were condemned by the patriarchal society and doomed to be burned at the stake. However, Boland's witch/poet is different, she seeks revenge, so she imaginatively burns herself as well as her persecutors, punishing them before they have the chance to condemn her :

*I will
reverse
their arson,
make
a pyre
of my haunch
and so
the last thing
they know
will be
the stench
of my crotch. (In Her Own Image,63)*

It is remarkable that this witch/poet has a full authority over her body and she is responsible for her own fate, she is no longer a passive victim. By the self destructive act of burning herself, she becomes "a figure of her own creation: she turns out to be a self-burnt witch, rather than a witch burnt at the stake by others."⁴⁵

The witch/poet's act reveals her attempt to free herself from the roles and identity imposed on her and to pursue her aim to create her poetic identity as a woman poet. By burning her own flesh, and her own persecutors, the witch/poet is actually defying male's authority and power. This act reveals the witch/poet's effort to empower herself, not only by telling her story with her own voice but also by creating her own image and identity other than those imposed on her by the patriarchal society. She challenges the inherited idealized roles of the woman as a wife and a mother by rejecting motherhood.

Being an Irish woman, Boland suffers from the debasement and the curb of women's abilities, creativity and talent. Woman's real value is to be a good wife and a mother. The idealization of the role of the mother in Ireland was highly supported by the state and the church alike. So to prove herself as a creative poet, and to create her own distinctive poetic identity, Boland had to defy this idealized image of the woman through her poems and her personas. It is worth mentioning that the poet demonstrates a strong attachment to her personas and she frequently identifies herself with them .

So in "Witching", the witch/poet defies the idealized image of the woman as mother by rejecting motherhood. Her act of burning herself, and making a pyre of her haunch, a symbol of motherhood as it is the place where a woman usually carries her child, is her reaction against this inherited stereotype. As González Arias (2000: 150) suggests "the act of

rejecting motherhood does not necessarily imply a rejection of female procreativity, but an escape from the traditional role of mothering that women have been subjected to."⁴⁶

The problem of the poem's speaker is the women who passively embrace the role of the mother imposed on them by the society. Those women were idealized in real life and Irish literary tradition, so for the speaker, women's submission puts her at odds with her male persecutors, as she refuses to submit like other women around her. Those iconic female figures are for men like muses who inspire and inflame the imagination of the public and the writers for years. They are presented as perfect, great, and ideal women, so their influence is really damaging, especially on the individual women who aspire to fulfill their dreams of becoming something other than a wife and mother. The speaker criticizes such iconic figures angrily, saying:

*You'd think
you'd think
the bitches
couldn't reach me here.
But here they are.
The nursery lights
they shine,
they shine, (In Her Own Image, 63)*

For the speaker, those "nursery lights" are marginalizing and overshadowing her light. Motherhood is not something desirable, she presents it negatively when she addresses "nursery lights", saying :

*these my enemies [...]
who breed*

*and breed,
who talk and talk –
birth
and bleeding,
the bacteria of feeds. (In Her Own Image,63)*

Childbirth, bleeding and nurturing all are scorned by the speaker. Apparently, what others consider as "harmless lights are constraining images of womanhood that "shine", "multiply", and "douse" the witch's own light." So, only "by burning her own body can she create her own light, a light which is not the reflection of any "nursery light".

Therefore, the burning of her flesh turns to be the only solution of the witch/poet's dilemma, she concludes:

*smell
how well
a woman's
flesh
can burn . (In Her Own Image,63)*

Her last words convey a sense of triumph, one can almost visualize the laugh of the avenger on the witch/poet's face. The smell of the burning flesh of the speaker indicates the destruction and end of the stereotyped image of woman.

Moreover , the speaker is finally free and she manages to get her own voice, to tell her own story and express her suffering :

*Flaming
tinderling,
I'll singe
a page
of history
for these my sisters
for those kin
they kindled. (In Her Own Image, 63)*

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The speaker wins at the end ; though she destroyed herself in the process, she claims the power to create her own exceptional identity and to destroy the old inherited image of passive woman. The power the witch claims is actually the power Boland herself, and many other women poets, needs to create her own poetic identity, so she identifies herself with this figure to be able to obtain this power.

Thus, the significance of this power or strength is in "the ability to overcome adversity. Boland acknowledge[s] the unrelenting adversity that has plagued women's lives throughout time, as well as currently", yet, she never takes a defeatist position, as her poetry testifies.⁴⁷ Boland creatively reshapes the image of the witch and the poetic identity of creative and talented women poets as a whole.

To sum up, the gendering of the witchcraft by patriarchal society and the ascription of the witch stigma to gifted and creative women motivate women poets to embrace the negative identity of the witch in their constant strife to create their own unique poetic identity and voice. Also, the witch figure helps the poets to emancipate themselves from the paralyzing effects of patriarchy's constraints, being social or literary.

The witch, in feminist eyes, has become essential as this figure empowers women poets, helps them to find their own voice and to survive their marginalized status as women poets. Women poets ingeniously derive a new image of a feminist witch, reshaping the public concept of the witch as demonically possessed women to something utterly different.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2009), p.427.
2. Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar and Yu Xiaogang , " Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Struggles to Change Gender Relations", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(44),(Oct,1998), pp. WS-59.
3. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1945), pp.50,51.
4. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press,1979) , p. 53.

5. Sandra M. Gilbert, "My Name Is Darkness: The Poetry of Self-Definition", *Contemporary Literature*, 18(4) (Autumn, 1977), p.448.
6. Qinna Shen, " Shedding, Witchcraft, and the Romantic Subject: Feminist Appropriation of the Witch in Sarah Kirsch's *Zaubersprüche* (1973)" *Neophilologus* , 93(2009),p. 676.
7. Gilbert and Gubar, p.79.
8. Anne Sexton, ***Complete Poems*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001),p.429. All quotations from Anne Sexton's work, unless otherwise noted, are from this edition, and will be indicated by **CP**, and only pages' number will appear in parentheses.
9. The first notable use of the witch figure is that of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge in her poem "The Witch", however, the poet's identification with the witch figure is not definite .
10. Maxine Kumin, "How It Was", an introduction to Anne Sexton ***Complete Poems*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), p. xxxiii.
11. Kumin, pp. xxxiv,xxxiv.
12. See Gilbert and Gubar, p.79.
13. Linda Wagner-Martin (ed.), ***Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*** (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), P. 72.
14. Jo Gill (ed.), ***Modern Confessional Writing*** (New York: Routledge,2006), p.41.
15. Gill, p.41.
16. Diana Hume George, ***Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*** (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1987), n. pag'.
17. Diane Wood Middlebrook, ***Anne Sexton: A Biography*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,1991),pp.113-114.
18. See Diane Purkiss, ***The Witch in History : Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations*** (London:Routledge,1996),p.23.
19. Maria Tatar(ed.), ***The Classic Fairy Tales*** (New York : Norton Critical Edition, 1999),p..xvi.
20. Kumin, p.xxviii.
21. Catherine Cucinella(ed.), ***Contemporary American women poets : an A-to-Z guide*** (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002),p. 332.

22. Kumin, p. xxx.

23. Gill, p.41.
24. Carol Kort, *A to Z of American Women Writers* (New York : Facts On File, Inc., 2007), p. 253.
25. Kort, p. 254.
26. Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson",
in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.), p.114.
27. SIT Wai-ye, Agnes "The poetic quests of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath" Master's Thesis, (The University of Hong Kong, 2007),
p. 49.
28. Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.40-41.
29. Lowell, Robert. Foreword. *Ariel*. By Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1965.), p. (vii).
30. Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance In Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p.1.
31. Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p.36.
32. Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1981), P.135.
33. Jo Gill, *Women's Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.61.
34. Gill, *Modern Confessional Writing*, p. 78.

35. Pilar Villar Argáiz, " Witchcraft And Evilness As Sources Of Female Potential: Eavan Boland's Representation Of A New Eve In Irish Poetry", *The Grove*, 14(2007), p.1.
36. Sarah Maguire, "Dilemmas and Developments: Eavan Boland Re-Examined" , *Feminist Review*, 62 (Summer, 1999), p.61.

37. Laura Ma Lojo Rodríguez , "Female Iconography and Subjectivity in

- Eavan Boland's "In Her Own Image", *Atlantis*, 28 (1)(June, 2006), p.89.
38. Argáiz, p.12.
39. See Gilbert and Gubar's second chapter in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship", pp.45-92.
40. Gilbert and Gubar, p.85.
41. It is worth mentioning that at least two other contemporary Irish women poets use the witch as a figure for the female writer: Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Rita Ann Higgins, however, Boland's utilization of the this figure is really outstanding and intriguing .
42. Argáiz, p.3.
43. Eavan Boland, *In Her Own Image* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1980), P. 63. All quotations from Boland's work are from this edition, and will be indicated by the volume's title and pages' number will appear in parentheses.
44. Jody Allen-Randolph, "Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland's Poetry 1967-1990" *Irish University Review*, 23(1)(Spring Summer,1993), p.13.
45. Argáiz, p.5.
46. Quoted in Argáiz, pp.5-6.
47. M. Louise Cannon, "The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *South Atlantic Review*, 60(2)(May, 1995),p. 35.

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الساحرة تجسيدا للذات في شعر أن سكستن وسلفيا بلاث وآيفن بولند
م. شيماء زهير الوتار
المستخلص

على مدى عصور أسرت شخصية الساحرة مخيلة الشعراء الذين تناولوا هذه الشخصية بطرائق مختلفة فمنهم من عدها شخصية شريرة وآثمة وحتى شيطانية تجرأت على تحدي المجتمع فكان لزاماً على المجتمع أن يدينها ويعاقبها بشدة. في حين كانت هذه الشخصية لآخرين وخصوصاً الشاعرات تمثل رمزاً لإبداع المرأة وكذلك لتقييد المرأة المبدعة والمفكرة والمتحررة من مجتمع ذكوري ذو أيديولوجية عمادها اضطهاد المرأة .

أدركت الشاعرات قوة شخصية الساحرة وتأثيرها فقمن بتوظيف هذه الشخصية لتحقيق ما يسعين إليه وهو التحلي بالقوة للتعبير عن أنفسهن بحرية، فقد كان هدف الشاعرات من استعمال شخصية الساحرة تمثيلاً للذات هو الحصول على القوة والثقة والقدرة على التعبير عن أنفسهن في الوسط الأدبي الذي يهيمن عليه الرجال . ويتناول البحث ثلاث شاعرات مبدعات وهن: أن سكستن، وسلفيا بلاث، وآيفن بولند لشخصية الساحرة تمثيلاً للذات .

فتوظيف شخصية الساحرة في شعرهن هو استعمال اسر لتلك الشخصية إذ أسهمت بتحريرهن من قيود المجتمع الذكوري وساعدت على بناء هويتهم الشعرية المميزة ، وساهم بتقديم هذه الشخصية وفهمها بطريقة جديدة ومختلفة تماماً.