CHAPTER-V

POETRY OF THE FEMALE VOICE

Feminism is collection of diverse social theories, political movements and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women. One of the most fundamental contributions of feminists was to interpret many new questions related to women. Most feminists were especially concerned with social, political and economic inequality between men and women. This movement, also known by different names such as Women’s Liberation, Women’s movement and Women’s lib, came into full swing somewhere in late nineteenth century in the Western world and has gone through three waves.

First-wave feminism focused around the middle- or upper-class white women and involved suffrage and political equality. Second-wave feminism attempted to further combat social and cultural inequalities. Third-wave feminism included renewed campaigning for women’s greater influence in politics.

Although Second Wave Feminism, or “Women’s Lib,” didn’t gain national attention until the late 1960s, women across America were voicing protest much earlier. The prevailing domestic ideology of the 1950s not only told women that their place was in the home caring for the family, but also tried to convince them that, unless there was something wrong with them, they should find complete fulfillment in that role. For many women, these societal standards proved stifling, and as the decade progressed, some women were becoming increasingly frustrated by the standards imposed upon them and the lack of choices they could make in a culture that perceived women who were unmarried or pursuing careers as socially aberrant. Shulasmith Firestone, emphatically stated that it was ‘sexual oppression’ which was the fundamental form of oppression in Patriarchal society. Andrea Dworkin also agrees that the oppression of the women arises from causes that are fundamentally biological, that women are oppressed through their sexuality. In Dworkin’s view women choose to stay passive and subordinate by the ever present threat of male violence. Commenting on feminism, Hooks calls Feminism, a struggle against sexist oppression. It is a necessarily struggle according to Hooks to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism,
economic expansion and material desires. Some critics have argued that gendered or sexed identities between ‘men and woman’ are socially constructed. Feminists differ over the sources of inequality, how to attain equality and the extent to which gender and sexual identities should be questioned and critiqued. Thus, as with an ideology, political movement or philosophy, there is no single, universal form of feminism that represents the feminist.

Poetry proved important to the women’s movement, in part because it helped to build solidarity and a shared set of images among women of the time. In fact, poetry readings were often integral parts of rallies and protests during this time. Literary critic Michael Bibby, argues in his work on poetry in the Vietnam era that the feminist poetry written in the 1960s is characterized by a radical openness about the personal experience of women. Betty Friedan’s book *Feminine Mystique* came to the book stalls in America in 1963 and it was received quite well by Americans. Her voice resonated with women across the country. Friedan’s poignant argument brought waves in the country and made every individual think about it: If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the mind of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity… it may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home”.

Friedan’s landmark book raised consciousness about women’s roles and changed many Americans’ view of how a household should be structured. Feminist poets also responded to literary currents perceived as predominantly male. During the twentieth century the feminist criticism was almost an isolated and under-rated aspect in the studies of English Literature. Not before the Modern Era did the feminist criticism became one of the major contributing studies to the study of English Literature. It heightened the need to put efforts to reconstruct the social, political and cultural experiences of women. Together with the political activism a new type of literary analysis emerged, enriched by Marxist, Freudian and sociological concepts. Although, it was not until 1970s that it took an organized form with the creation of Modern Language Association’s Commission, on the status of women.

The Feminist Criticism may be subdivided into 3 types of literary analysis, according to its final goal.
(a) The first one is concerned with the analysis of the images of women in texts, as portrayed by male authors.

(b) The second one deals with the examination of existing criticism of female authors

(c) The third one called ‘Perspective criticism’ by Cheri Register, attempts to establish standards for what may be considered ‘good’ literature from a feminist point of view.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, one of the lead analysts of feminism in literature state in very straightforward manner that “where the traditional male hero makes his ‘night sea journey’ to the centre of the earth, the bottom of the mere, the belly of the male, to slay or be slain by the dragons of the darkness, the female artist makes her journey into what Adrienne has called ‘the cratered night of the female memory’ to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate to re-conceive and give birth” (Gilbert and Gubar 98)

Elaine Showalter pioneered the feminist studies with her work, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing in 1977. She advanced a new form of feminist literary theory under the term ‘Gynocriticism’, offering an alternative framework for the interpretation of women’s literary history. Likewise, in works such as The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980 in 1985 and Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture in 1997. Showalter constructed a branch of feminist criticism known as ‘Hystory’ an attempt to reinterpret and redefine the pejorative notion of women’s hysteria as embodied in literary and social history. Showalter rebuked the unfair critical standards applied to the work of English women writers in the nineteenth century and contends that, as a result, female artists paid a terrible price for their creative work in terms of guilt, self-loathing, and frustrated effort.

According to Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism, is the study of exploring the female subculture and come up to a female model based on psychoanalysis.

Julia Kristeva, a French feminist projected a similar concept as that of Showalter when she describes feminine character as “a secret garden that is not discovered and told yet. According to her ‘woman is someone outside naming and ideologies”.(Kristina 84)
Hence, concluding we can say that Showalter’s gynocriticism projects the pure woman character which breathes without the help of maleness. “It is all about the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female career and the evaluation and laws of a female literary tradition”. (Showalter 26)

According to some of the critics, Anne Sexton’s poetry reflected a close connection with Gynocriticism. Anne Sexton, was born and brought up in a well to do family of Massachusetts. She remained under a strict supervision of her father in her childhood and was expected to behave like decent ladies. She has been credited attention because of the themes she touched upon in her poetry. Themes which were treated as unusual and some of them were also considered a taboo in the society. Sexton’s early and later poetry engages a process of transformation and a metamorphosis in her poetry, marking a descent into darkness followed by an ascent into light. Many critics have tried to analyze Anne Sexton’s work on the principles of Elaine Showalter’s ‘concept of the gynocritics’. Sexton is one of the most important poets of the Confessional poetry. She can be called a torch bearer, as she was one amongst the awakened females who objected to the unjust treatment of males as the owner of force in society. Sexton along with other names like Sylvia Plath, Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, satirized the constrictive roles forced upon women, thereby laying the groundwork for later feminist work. Sexton’s attention to themes of womanhood poses questions of genre and literary categorization, being influenced by changing gender roles and feminist activism during the 1960s. As observed by Albert (1984), the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s was partly a continuation of the earlier struggle for women’s rights exemplified by the women’s suffrage movement, and partly a reaction to the dominant male leadership in most liberal activist groups like the Black Panthers and the anti-draft movements. In 1968, the women’s liberation movement began to advocate gender equality within activist groups and within the larger society. The movement increased awareness of female sexuality and began to question standards of female beauty and the difference between jobs considered to be appropriate for women versus those considered appropriate for men. The more moderate women’s movement continued the goals of the women’s liberation movement by promoting feminist scholarship, working to legalize abortion, and endorsing the Equal Rights Amendment. The women’s movement also drew attention
to linguistic differences that reflect gender inequality, for example the use of “man” 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. Some feminists remedied one such linguistic inequality by adopting the title Ms., as opposed to Miss or Mrs., because the traditional terms indicate a change in a woman’s marital status while the masculine title Mr. does not make a similar distinction. Influenced by this trend, Anne Sexton began calling herself Ms. Dog, a name that suggests power through the feminist title and the fact that “Dog” is a palindrome of God. Maxine Kumin writes that Sexton was becoming “increasingly aware of the Women’s Movement” and in using Ms. Dog “there was a wonderful impudence in naming herself a kind of liberated female deity” (Kumin xxx). Such minor changes in language demonstrate how words can influence self-concept and modes of thinking in ways that complement a political movement. Women writers also 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.

Sexton in her poetry projected the alienation of woman because of her male counterpart and the circumstances in which she took refuge under the realms of loneliness. In a way she brought out how male dominated society leads to obscurity of womanhood. Being a confessional poet, Sexton experimented with her personal self, in her poetry. Anne Sexton operated the hidden part of her life and made the readers witness her psychological fluctuations. Her poetry began to cover autobiographical pieces which merged with subject matters like female victimization, sexual disappointment, rage on being the loser, the disorders in the interaction of family members, tortured family relationships, researched female body, psyche and the dynamics of mother-daughter interactions.

For feminists, Anne Sexton’s poetry lies somewhere between a passionate critique of traditional feminine roles, and a desperate search for validation through paternal authority. This problematic relationship with feminism is shared by Julia Kristeva,
whose work has been variously lauded and criticised by feminists. Sexton was not a consciously feminist writer. Although, her collaborator Maxine Kumin writes that Sexton was aware of the growing Women’s Movement, Caroline Hall, states that it would probably be inaccurate to claim her as a consciously feminist writer. Sexton described herself as “not a political poet,” and while a number of critics have embraced her as such, Jane McCabe argues that they have had to turn a deaf ear to some of her best poetry to do so. Sexton’s Oedipal preoccupations, and her poetic quest for father figures through religion, romance and analysis, all problematise interpretations of her as a consciously feminist poet.

The most important aspect to be noted is, there is a large difference between male and the female reflection of suffering in their works amongst the confessional poets. Although, Robert Lowell, Snodgrass, Ginsberg, Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, all wrote in the confessional style but a marked difference could be noted in the writing style of the female and male confessional poets.

Studying the two most important male confessional poets Robert Lowell and W.D Snodgrass, it has been charted out that they differed in the treatment to the subjects in comparison to the female poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Robert Lowell in his work has written about conversations from Episcopalianism to Catholicism and explored the dark side of America’s Puritan legacy. He incorporated the political and social crisis of the sixties, wrote entries influences by personal history and obsession and also incorporated themes related to social and political significance and childhood. He wrote about the repressed memories of his family and the family conflicts which normally people like to hide. On the other hand, W.D Snodgrass wrote about marriage and companionship, themes dealing with war and conflict, voices of Nazi figures during their last days in their Berlin bomb shelter, separation and divorce, photography and film and social commentaries. There has always been a difference in a women’s treatment of a subject than a man’s way. According to some critics, there was a basic difference in the dreams of the two. It should be well understood that man and woman are separate selves. Both of them feel that they belong to two different races and do not share a common ground.

Anne Sexton’s poetry reflected many perspectives of female body. She came out with her views which were novel and the various angles projected the depth of her approach over the subject. None, among the confessional poets had ever written about the female body as Anne Sexton did. Sexton’s amazing poetry often dealt with issues
of gender, motherhood, abortion, and sexuality that made some see her work as controversial. Her poem ‘In Celebration of My Uterus,’ mimics the format of Walt Whitman’s poem ‘Song of Myself.’ Whitman’s poem celebrates the body through the male form. However, in her version, Sexton reverses this association of using men’s bodies to represent humanity as a whole and evokes images of the yoni as an entity that is powerful and beautiful on its own. Through her poetry, she represented the female body from three different perspectives- the historical, the biological and the cultural. This was a treatment which was completely unique and brought a new perspective of looking at things.

The Historical aspect specially from the background of Sexton’s poem highlights that the female organ uterus was considered no less than a machine to make babies without considering the psyche or the emotional or the physical needs of the of the women. We can pick up examples from any civilization be it Roman, Egyptian, English, French or the Indo-Aryans, the females were considered a machine for giving an heir to the kings and his soldiers. In the western world, especially in American land the women in the nineteenth century were exposed not only to, many fatal diseases like tuberculosis, cancer, hormonal imbalances but also to psychological threats. They remained continuously ill and thus became frail and submissive. According to a common feminist belief, many of the women accused of being witches in the past were actually pioneers of the feminist movement, they rebelled against the male-oriented society. As the influence of those “witches” grew, the patriarchal society so prevalent at the time came to fear them. They took fatal steps to negate their growing influences and contributed witch hunts. An eminent researcher Fukuda Shiko in his work titled ‘The Hesitancy of a Middle -Aged Witch: Anne Sexton’, says that it is not certain whether or not Sexton had already been influenced by the feminist theory concerning witches when writing Transformations. But in consideration of the feminist discourse that started to spread throughout America in the Sixties, it is no wonder that the devil may-care attitude displayed by Sexton’s “middle-aged witch” attracted such tremendous attention when the book was published. In order to experiment with a new style of writing, Sexton made a transition from traditional to a somewhat feminist manner of writing which became a subject of criticism later. In fact, Anne Sexton viewed and studied her surroundings of her times and found that America then, was under the influence of the patriarchal society on one end and under the feminist movement at the other.
The inspiration to rewrite the Brother Grimm’s stories her way crossed Anne Sexton’s mind, from her daughter Linda. As a mother, she became so curious about her daughter’s liking for fairy tales that she asked and noted down her favourite ones. When queried about that incident later in her life, Sexton’s daughter, Linda Gray Sexton said that her mother “wrote down a list of the titles of Grimm tales with black felt pen on a paper napkin” (Sexton 298). Concerning the background to this, Sexton commented in an interview that she only perceived “some unconscious message that she had something to say” while reading her daughter’s original Grimm fairy tales (144). This suggests that the themes of the Transformations may have been based on the model stories that were selected at random and based solely on the impressions they had made on her daughter’s psyche. A critic Brunyate, commented on female writing saying that, it comprise of stark examinations of the dark side of life for females in a patriarchal society, along with cynical comments on their helplessness. Transformations refer to the many aspects of being a woman, and in particular to the tormented struggle with her own demons that formed the script for Anne Sexton’s life and the key to her death. Across the globe, women were the possession of man to serve the purpose of men’s sexual drive bearing and raising children for reproduction and serving as ornaments. Women weren’t able to identify with their bodies as they were mere objects in through scientific and social spheres. The fact that she was a person and not just a human body was ignored to a large extent. The society went on suppressing their women on various grounds and in case, women became financially independent and opted to behave independent, she would then be perceived as abnormal or the one who has gone off track from the standard definition of a woman. The Biological aspect of the female body is equally well reflected by Sexton, when she speaks about the process of menstruation, ovulation, menopause, birth, fertility and reproduction in her poetry. She speaks quite candidly about the various biological processes. The cultural aspect is represented in the best way, when Sexton integrates women’s sexuality and spirituality, creativity and procreativity, praising the womb as a factor uniting woman around the world. This feeling arose in Sexton’s heart when she was advised by her doctor to get her uterus removed on account of some disease and she strongly refused to do so. She insisted on making her own decision, to keep or remove her uterus. She refused for the surgical removal of her uterus and also rejects the idea which states that, if there is no uterus there is nothing left for a woman. ‘In
Celebration of My Uterus’ she insists that the womb does not define a woman, nor does she have to keep her uterus in a woman’s body to protect her from being worthless and to protect her womanhood. Sexton puts the womb as the central image, in a bolder reclamation. She addresses the womb directly, personifying it. The emphatic ‘they will not’ asserts a woman’s control over her body. She dislikes the idea of treating her organ as an object whose future lies in the hands of the doctors.

They wanted to cut you out
But they will not
The woman in the poet asserts her right to say ‘No’, when she has been suggested to part with her organ. This could also be interpreted as declining the oppressive medical approach which was quite uncommon during that time. Her use of enjambment creates tension between the medical establishment and the poem’s female persona. The woman within the poet takes a strong step and decides the fate of her womb. She admonishes the unity of her organs and does not accept alienation of her psyche and her body. Anne Sexton further develops the tension between these two opposing forces with the lines:

They said you were immeasurably empty
But you are not

The structure of these lines parallels the dichotomy between medical knowledge, which diagnoses the uterus as unhealthy and useless, and self knowledge, which asserts that the uterus is neither torn nor “empty”.

They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong
Sexton first questions the doctors’ diagnosis and more directly undermines their authority by asserting “they were wrong”.

Anne Sexton acknowledges her, being a woman not only from the biological perspective but she adds the spiritual level. She calls the organ ‘uterus’ the soul of woman and uses words like central creature and spirit to address the uterus and further connects it with nature by mentioning the fertility of the soil of the fields.

In celebration of the woman I am
And of the soul of the woman I am
And of the central creature and its delight
Each cell has a life
There is enough here to please a nation
The line indicates that a woman’s egg cell is life in itself. It is quite alive and doesn’t depend on man’s sperm to get life. Literary critic, Natalie Angier have commented over this line saying that “it is not the quantity of the sperms of a man can produce instead it is the monthly ritual of the women’s ovulation, its celebration and then the acceptance of menstruation as the inevitable continuation of the cycle, if the egg is not fertilized.”(Angier 97)

Sexton highlights again the aspect uniting women all over the world. The poem goes on to become a celebration that helps create a feminist identity, an identity that unites “many women who are singing together” in ‘Arizona,’ ‘Russia,’ ‘Egypt,’ ‘Thailand,’ and across the world when she says:

All seem to be singing, although some can not
Sing a note

To the poet, singing is the symbol of freedom and cheerfulness. It marks the presence of women’s voice in the world they live in. It demands preserving their inner voice which can become a propeller of their actions. This new female identity represented by the image of women’s voices coming together, shows the resistance to the authority of the male-dominated medical institution. It reflects the feminist objectives of women’s empowerment and organization of resistance into a unified voice.

In the last part of the poem, Sexton celebrates being ‘The woman’ and sees the uterus as a factor uniting her with other women, suggesting female solidarity. It also represents the unity of the self and the body and not their alienation and fragmentation. This new female identity, represented by the image of women’s voices coming together and the resistance to the authority of the male-dominated medical institution, reflects the feminist objectives of women’s empowerment and organization of resistance into a unified voice. Sexton’s method of describing women’s bodies as part of the female identity led writer and critic Muriel Rukeyser to conclude that “‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ is one of the few poems in which a woman has become the center of the poem after many years of silence and taboo” (Kumin xxi).

Sexton’s poetry gathered negative reactions from critics because many of her poems were about women’s bodies. Many critics considered this break with tradition an example of poor literary taste. In a New York Times book review of Sexton’s All My Pretty Ones James Dickey wrote that it would be hard to find a writer like Anne
Sexton who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience.

In her later collection *Live or Die*, Sexton again uses bodily experience as the central image in poems like ‘Menstruation at Forty.’ Sexton describes menstruation as “two days gone in blood” and uses the image to address the feeling of emptiness that comes from losing the blood and uterine lining that had the potential to create a new life.

Maxine Kumin, in the preface to *The Complete Poems* says that the emphasis on bodily experience apparently disgusted critic Louis Simpson as well. It prompted him to write in a review for Harper’s that ‘Menstruation at Forty’ was “the straw that broke this camel’s back” (Kumin xix-xx). Such vehement reactions against Sexton’s poetry show that she broke away from literary conventions and addressed what people at the time considered controversial and taboo subjects.

In ‘Letters to Dr. Y’ constitutes “a body of poetry on suicide that is unique in modern American verse”. Diana Hume George’s interpretation suggests, that suicide may be a means for examining other subjects, including feminism and protest. George’s analysis focuses on “the connection of the death-wish to a specifically control; and deeper still, an ironic relationship of the death wish to a protest against human mortality. In this view, suicide becomes a way of protesting the human condition, and more specifically the female condition. Sexton further explained these two kinds of death in a letter to her friend Anne Wilder: “When death takes you and puts you through the wringer, it’s a man. But when you kill yourself, it’s a woman”. Sexton associates slow painful death with a male figure and quick, self-controlled death with a female figure. She sets up a choice between allowing death to squeeze life out of her or taking control over her own destiny. Presented in this context, “suicide becomes a way of claiming power when she feels powerless,” meaning that, in an odd way, Sexton uses suicide as a symbol for female liberation and control over one’s own life (George 35) Adrienne Rich, notes that Sexton was not a “self-defined feminist,” but some of her writing was “ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement” Examination of the poems 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. In examining the relationship
between women’s poetry and politics, Maxine Kumin writes that “before there was a Women’s Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton”. (Kumin xxxiii) This underground river was a steady stream of language that recognized women’s experiences and helped inspire other women to write or to organize and demand change.

Another poem ‘The Double Image’ deals with Sexton’s institutionalization and the effects of her suicide attempts on her relationship with her mother who was diagnosed to be suffering from breast cancer and she blamed her illness on Sexton. Under the influence of this, Sexton attempted suicide the second time. The poem gives a touching perspective on the relationship between mothers and daughters. She weaves together the complex narrative from her mother to her, to her daughter Joy, to whom Sexton writes, “I made you to find me”. This was the time when Anne Sexton was going through a rough patch in her life. Due to her repeated visits to the mental homes after the birth of her second daughter Joyce, the custody of both the daughters-Linda and Joy’s was shared by both the Sexton family and the Gray house, as Anne Sexton herself was susceptible to frequent and severe bouts of depression. Later, when she returned home she realized that Joy, who was very small, did not recognize her mother and did not want to leave her grand-parents who had been taking care of her. (Middlebrook 85)

The Double Image brings out the mother and daughter locked up in a symbiotic relationship. Both are aware of each other’s enmity. The hostility is so strong that when the mother gets ill with cancer, she holds her daughter responsible for it.

She turned from me
As if death were catching
As if death transferred
As if my dying had eaten inside of her
Sexton dislikes the idea of her mother getting her portrait done up as she feels that it was more important for them to look at each other and spend some time rather than getting a portrayed hung up at the wall. Sexton recognises the need for individuation, and a renunciation of the dyadic bond. Mother and daughter must go their separate ways. Kristeva claims, that the maternal is the most enduring and unstable of the abjected non-objects that continue to fascinate and repel the subject from their position at the border of the symbolic. In ‘The Double Image’ Sexton creates a
brilliant psychological portrait of pathological narcissism. The poem shows that while it may too late for the poet to work out her relationship with her mother it was not too late to work out her relationship with her own daughter. Similar to Yeats in ‘Prayer For my Daughter’, she blesses her child and in turn asks to be blessed. The state of abjection is quite prominently seen in ‘Flea on your Donkey’.

That was the winter
that my mother died,
half mad on morphine,
blown up, at last,
like a pregnant pig.
I was her dreamy evil eye.

Sexton’s deep emotional preoccupation with death, bodily deformity and pregnancy provides potent examples of abjection, in terms of both themes and imagery. Poems such as this, invite a consideration of the workings of abjection –The feelings of cast away, misery, failure state. As Alicia Ostriker observes “Maternity in Sexton’s poetry, implicates an abject threat to the self. The image of the surgical opening of “the warm eyelid” evokes the notorious image from Luis Bunuel’s 1929 surrealist film, Un Chien Andalou, in which a woman’s eye is sliced open with a razor blade.” (Ostriker 117)

Transformations were the collection of poems in which fairy tales were retold by Anne Sexton from a female perspective. It has been observed world-wide that women testify to the cultural procedures, internalize them and she also becomes the truthful dispenser of womanhood. Fairy tales as they are passed on from one generation to another as a cultural heritage show women the version of ‘femininity’ that the social norm expects from them. The Transformations is Sexton’s colloquial renditions of Grimm’s fairy tales. Transformations was the fourth volume showcasing her work. Sexton’s retelling the tales brings out the sexist and reductionist framework in which women have been cast and portrayed with the following two polarized versions of “essentials of femininity”, Innocent, submissive, fragile and angel-like like the Snow-White, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella and the other is an evil and cruel witch-like creature, self-assertive, independent like the queen in Snow-White, the step mother in Cinderella or the old woman in Rapunzel. Leventen comments that much of Sexton’s achievement in Transformations stems from her recognition of the impact of
the socialization process on women and her decision to focus on the socio-cultural context on the way her protagonists are cast into roles and proceed to play them out. According to a common feminist belief, many women accused of being witches in the past were actually pioneers of the feminist movement. They were women rebelling against the male-oriented society. As the influence of those “witches” grew, the patriarchal society so prevalent at the time came to fear them and to negate their growing influences contributed to what might be considered virtual witch hunts. The use of ‘witch’ in Sexton’s poetry actually yields power. Sexton suggests that witchcraft is analogous to the power of the woman who writes “such trances and portents!” One who transforms through language (88). Sexton secularizes the figures of Christ, Mary, God and other biblical figures. In order to demonstrate how their original and persistent representation collides with and shapes secular notions of gender. She resuscitates several female biblical figures in the poems. With a strong focus on the figure of Mary, whom she attempted to reconstruct and placed at the center of her own faith and Christian faith. A researcher Fukuda Shiko has stated having observed Anne Sexton’s poetry that it is not certain whether or not Sexton had already been influenced by the feminist theory concerning witches when writing Transformations. But in consideration of the feminist discourse that started to spread throughout America in the Sixties, it is no wonder that the ‘devil may-care’ attitude displayed by Sexton’s “middle-aged witch” attracted such tremendous attention when the book was published. In order to experiment with a new style of writing, Sexton made a transition from traditional to a somewhat feminist manner of writing which became a subject of criticism later. In fact, Anne Sexton viewed and studied her surroundings of her times and found that America then was under the influence of the patriarchal society on one hand and under the feminist movement at the other. Through these poems, Sexton stood up against the meek portrayal of the women in the fairy stories which every child is told in his childhood. Sexton in her version of ‘Cinderella’, ‘Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs’, ‘Red riding hood’, ‘Rapunzel’, ‘Frog Prince’ etc represents the society’s expectant behavior of a woman who is weak, submissive and a mute worker. She retold the tales using her own prologues, epilogues and a number of metaphors and similes. Sexton deploys her criticism mainly through a mocking tone that permeates the texts and that is intended to make the satire both subtle and incisive. Sexton demolishes one of the cultural myths in Transformations. That is the heroic characterization traditionally assigned to male
figures, by virtue of which their sole function consists in rescuing damsels in distress, bringing them back to life or, addressing women’s fundamental concern, marrying them. Fairy tales emphasize on women to consider innocence, self-sacrifice and obedience as inherently feminine virtues.

The cause and effect of Anne Sexton’s Transformations reveal as much about her, as her confessional poetry does. Contrary to what might be expected, Anne Sexton does not offer alternative solutions to the situations depicted in the stories and neither does she encourage women to take a more active stance. However, by presenting women as commodities rather than as human beings, Sexton managed to destabilize the andocentric ethos featuring in the tales, in spite of her lack of a clear-cut gender consciousness. The subversive potential of these transformed tales is made explicit in the ways the stories precipitate “a transformed view of traditional social values, particularly those associated with feminine life patterns, love and marriage, beauty, family and most radically, the idea of goodness and moral responsibility, all of which she slices through like butter” (Ostriker 66) Linda Wagner-Martin suggests, the controversial reception this volume had was due precisely to the fact that the poems themselves were more explicit social criticism than readers expected from Anne Sexton. “Although, Sexton retains the original structure, the tenor of these re-constructed tales she is a little provocative, compelling the reader to reflect on and re-examine ideas and notions firmly embedded in the collective unconscious. The prologues and interpolations added to the tales are worth highlighting since they represent an authorial voice which expects a given response from the reader, and which clearly shows the narrator’s involvement. Narrative voice is thus neither neutral nor objective, and this constitutes another deviation from the classical rhetoric of the fairy tales, whose narrators assumed an historical and universalist perspective that reinforced the supposed cultural and temporal significance of the tales’ contents. In this respect, Anne Sexton is susceptible of being inserted within a group of women poets seeking to constitute ‘an anticolonial mythopoesis’. That is able to counteract the androcentric standpoint of the tales and to give a counter-version of the stories as they are voiced by a woman. Sexton’s textual procedures conform to a narrative technique that Rachel B. DuPlessis has defined as ‘delegitimation of the known tale’” (DuPlessis 104)

In ‘Cinderella’ the story originated as oral traditions and was passed along the generations. It was retold by Sexton in her own style, contrasting the rosy images of
human happiness with that of decay and despair of everyday life. She conveys this message with a sadistic tone and modern language, while drawing upon the hardships of American culture. As a child, Anne Sexton came across a childhood where parents are busy socializing and in alcoholism and the child suffers neglect and verbal abusive nature of her parents. Later half of her life after her marriage with Kayo, she became unstable and was continually engaged in extra-marital affairs in order to get some happiness and satisfaction in her relationships.

In Sexton’s version of ‘Cinderella’ Anne Sexton sarcastically emphasizes that all the stories are mythical and unrealistic. The concept of ‘happily ever after’ that the society chases, does not actually exist. Through the poetry Sexton projected that fairy tales are not real and they do not exist in the real world. No matter how hard one tries to find a world of fantasy, it will never exist. This is a dream world and society goes after this illusion in their head that will never come true. Sexton begins the poem sarcastically saying ‘You always read…’ insisting on the fact that the current society brain wash their children saying that everything in life is always fine when in reality, it is not always great and happy. Anne Sexton insists that ‘trickery and deceit happens more often than the Cinderella story’ (Middlebrook 201). People are always trying to get revenge at other people.

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
ever arguing over the timing of an egg,
ever telling the same story twice,
ever getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story.

(Cinderella)

Sexton feels that the concept of ‘happily ever after’ is completely impossible in real life. Real life stands for discussions, arguments, calculations, give and take principle, deprivation, continuous fighting the hardships and facing the harsh realities, dealing with people who think differently and adjusting with them to maintain peace in one’s life. But still everyone in his childhood is told stories of the fairy world, a world which actually does not exist. It is something which could be preserved in museums
or better to say a place which has nothing to do with the present time and the true world.

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” depicts a young girl who has;

Cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,  
arms and legs made of Limoges,  
lips like Vin Du Rhone. She  
rolls her china-blue doll eyes,  
open and shut.  
Open to say,  
Good Day Mama. 

(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

Sexton mocks at this doll-like figure, exhibited as a lifeless being. A machine-like creature who opens and shuts her eyes mechanically, to greet her mother as good girls do. The reader’s expectations to listen to a conventional fairy tale are promptly destroyed by the sarcasm the author disperses along the narrative. Despite its length, the introduction deserves full quoting in order to observe the original quality of Sexton’s tales:

Once there was a lovely virgin  
called Snow White.  
Say she was thirteen.  
Her stepmother,  
a beauty in her own right,  
though eaten, of course, by age  
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.  
The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred  
something like the weather forecast  
a mirror that proclaimed  
the one beauty in the land.’  
It is worth noting that the conflict between the stepmother  

(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

It is worth noting that the conflict between the stepmother and Snow-White is fought out in the space where masculine culture has instructed women to be rivals. The male gaze residing in women’s subconscious removes all possibilities of a female bonding within patriarchy and in this respect the mirror represents the ‘alienation of women from each other in patriarchal culture’. Adrienne Rich has termed this phenomenon as
“horizontal hostility,” and she places the emphasis on the deterioration of women’s self-perception and the damage inflicted over other women as well.

To a lesser extent, using make-up and purchasing fashionable clothes are further indications of the functioning of a type of power on women. Significantly, Sexton depicts Snow-White as an artifact rather than as a person, and the reference to trade names such as ‘Limoges’ or ‘Vin Du Rhone’ constricts Snow-White within the bounds of woman’s socially disciplined self. She is a representative of the ideal type of woman that fairy tales construct within their cultural vision of male and female roles and, as such, constitutes a perfect personification of the notion of femininity in the terms that society and culture have established. The dangers of the outside world, the threat of defeminization implicit in public life, are embodied by the sexually menacing animals that Snow-White encounters in her way such as:

The hungry wolf his tongue lolling out like a worm
the birds calling out lewdly,
talking like pink parrots
and the snakes hung down in loops,
each a noose for her sweet white neck.

(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

Even the nice and friendly little dwarfs become “those little hot dogs” who take Snow-White as a domestic assistant. The naive Snow-White became a victim of her stepmother’s snares over and over, thus producing the exasperated tone in the narrator’s voice who calls her ‘the dummy bunny.’ Strictly following the conventions of fairy tales, Sexton’s Snow-White ‘became the prince’s bride’ as reward for her purity and virtue while the stepmother is tortured ‘with red-hot iron shoes, / in the manner of red-hot roller skates, / clamped upon her feet’ for her perversity and wickedness. The end of the tale delineates the figure of Snow-White with the same nuances of uselessness she had at the beginning; as a matter of fact she goes on ‘rolling her china-blue doll eyes’ opening and shutting them ‘and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do.’ This orthodox and rather ironic ending leaves the question of female agency open and without resolution. Through *Transformations*, Sexton has created new myths or tales of the twentieth century serving a specific viewpoint discarding, adapting the old myths. Sexton brought in the fact that myths
and rituals are often used to express the victory of good over evil and so on but eventually they become dogma and repressive.

Sexton formally identified with the women’s movement and addressed many feminist themes simply by writing extensively about them. At that time, most female poets accepted the notion that to write well and be recognized, 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, Diane Middlebrook argues, Plath’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 (Kumin xxxiii). “Instead of trying to adopt the tone of dispenser of “universal spiritual truths,” Sexton represents a distinctly feminine voice in a male dominated field. She 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 she contributed to the goals of the women’s movement. Sexton treated themes that were characteristically Confessional from a woman’s perspective. Sexton’s poetry was written before the rise of the women’s movement in America. It created a system of separatist and feminist discourse about the female body and self. Anne Sexton was unique in her personal and sustained employment of the subjective voice and in her adoption of the practice of writing “as women, toward worrier.”(Cixous 226) In words of Wakoski in his work titled Mellanic, one of the synonyms of the word confession is ‘own,’ which refers to the act of self-acknowledgement, an act which underlines Sexton’s assertion that ‘Mine is a place’ By rendering vivid feminine landscapes - mines, caves, hives, Sexton evoke regions that women inhabit and possess. “Poetry, for Anne Sexton acts as a powerful means of conflating the desiring self and the self-in-writing. And the merger, in women’s writing, of female life and the female ‘imaginary’ suggests that women’s independence, or ‘liberation,’ is not a fiction”. (Cixous 226). Her work, in the true spirit of confession, constitutes some real quality work which design pathways for the newly female culture. In her introduction to Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems, Maxine Kumin observes: “Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter.. Anne delineated the problematic” (Kumin 65)
Sexton challenges the abstract style and predominantly male perspective in traditional poetry by directly describing the female body. In “Ghosts,” Sexton writes, “some ghosts are women, neither abstract nor pale”. Although ghosts are typically portrayed as disembodied, Sexton gives her ghosts distinctly female bodies, as evidenced by “their breasts as limp as killed fish,” a phrase that provides physical description yet avoids portraying the breast as part of an idealized representation of the female body.

Anne Sexton has given her readers a full serving of female biological material in her poems. She gave description of her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion, her ‘tiny jail’ vagina, her love life, the act of eating to the way her father’s likes. The time when she danced with her father after much champagne at a wedding, even the trauma of her childhood enemas. Anne Sexton gave it all. Unlike Sylvia Plath for whom body was synonym to pain and mutilation, Sexton challenged individual’s residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public and the woman must be seen and not heard. By this it meant that people and the stake holders of the society must not only show interest in women’s anatomy but her voice and her emotions must be given priority too. She is assertively emotional and possesses an unending thirst for acceptance and care. She addresses her audience and asks them to feel what she feels, accept her, love her, and love everything about her, from her strengths to her weaknesses.

Reviewing Anne Sexton’s poetry’s contents on the axis of Elaine Showalter’s concept of Gynocriticism, one cannot disregard the unusual and juxtaposition of content and style of hers. The line in the poem ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ where Sexton says

In celebration of the woman I am
And of the soul of the woman I am
And of the central creature and its delight

(In Celebration of My Uterus)

She calls the organ ‘uterus’ the soul of woman. The words like ‘central creature and spirit’, to address the uterus takes it to a level which is beyond the subject of biology. In this way Sexton connects the woman community throughout the world into one strand and this union is divine and spiritual. Sexton’s idea successfully makes women from all parts of the world get connected to each other. This unique concept relates directly to personification of independence of women’s writing, which states that it is a phase of self-discovery. Showalter says “women reject both imitation and protest two forms of dependency and turn to female experiences the source of an autonomous
art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to forms and techniques of literature” (23) Proving her skills, Anne Sexton was the first poet who got herself qualified to be called truly a writer of the ‘Female’ category. She dared to praise and sing songs on female body and its processes, which were a restricted and unventured zone by any poet. Sexton’s way of leveling woman sexuality with spirituality and creativity with procreativity was a novel concept. Sexton writes:

You are not torn
This reflects her understanding of recognizing the unity of her body and her psyche. There is no alienation or disparity between the two. Continuing the novelty of her style she gives her readers the idea of reproductive function of a woman giving reference to fertility of the ‘soil of the fields’. Sexton gives a number of examples of different women across the world. She emphasizes that despite of the difference in their profession, ethnicity, race all women are similar as they all have this unique organ ‘the uterus or the womb’ which connects all women world-wide.

Through her work Transformations, Sexton deflates characters, pretentions, undercuts most expectations held by readers of Grimm and rebuilds in their place, her own view. Sexton criticizes the patriarchal society by revealing the falsity of it. She brought attention to the subjugation of women along with revealing the role played by women in perpetuating the stereotypes in the patriarchal society. Beauty and virginity of women was treated as a must have commodity as per the society. It was not the wit and the intelligence or the over-all personality but the virginity and the beauty which appealed more to the society. Sexton has endorsed Beauvoir’s statements that for a great many women the roads to transcendence were blocked because they do nothing. They fail to make themselves anything in a patriarchal society. Women were brought up with the feeling of not trying to rise above their circumstances or learn from their mistakes. Character of Snow-White is the best example for this statement. She does not react to anything. She does as she is told to do. The pretty girl is incompetent to make any decisions for herself. Sexton emphasizes that Snow-Whites cannot be treated equal by the patriarchal society until they themselves consider them one. It was only Sexton who brought new significance to the Grimm’s tales, extending the themes from fairy tales and bringing them into the reality.