Chapter 1

MODERNISM AND PATRIARCHY

Sylvia Plath and the Modernist Tradition

At Cambridge, Sylvia Plath played the part of ‘Phoebe Clinkett’, Pope’s parodic representation of the eighteenth century poet Anne Finch. While delivering an ‘excruciatingly funny’ performance (director’s comment), she reproduced the absurdities of this savagely satirized woman artist for public perusal. The irony of the situation was surely not lost upon ‘A girl who wanted to be God’.¹ Plath, then, was a sophisticated student of a twentieth century literary tradition that was constituted out of a subdued if not explicit battle between highly cultured intellectual men and their female counterparts, literary ladies like the one that Hawthorne called ‘a damned mob of scribbling women’.² What Elizabeth Barrett Browning, D. G. Rossetti and Emily Dickinson had struggled to start became a living female tradition to be confronted by men like W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Ted Hughes.

Plath writes in ‘The Disquieting Muses’ about ‘the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother,’³ hinting at an anxiety that Virginia Woolf does not
explore in ‘Professions for Women’, when she declares that writing is in some way the most ‘harmless occupation’ a woman can pursue. When Plath’s mother (Aurelia Plath) produced her wunderkind, Stein, H. D. Millay, Moore, Barnes and Woolf – many of the major female (and mostly feminist) Modernists – were publishing; a tradition that was handed down to Sylvia Plath along with that of the major male (and mostly masculinist) writers. The female Modernists were further divided into a less cultivated group (Teasdale, Millay, Olive Higgins Prouty) and a more cultured, but presumptuous group, even labelled dangerous (H. D., Stein, Woolf, Moore).

Plath saw herself oscillating between these two, or rather three, unprecedented male and female poles. She clearly expresses her reverence for her ‘beloved Yeats’, Lawrence, Joyce and Thomas. At the same time there is a hint of rivalry at the declaration: ‘I am learning and mastering new words each day, and drunker than Dylan, harder than Hopkins, younger than Yeats in my saying’. About her poems she says they are ‘not quailing and whining, like Teasdale or simple lyrics like Millay’. While sending poems to her mother from college, she expresses her admiration for female precursors – ‘any resemblance to Emily Dickinson is purely intentional’, and ‘I get courage by reading Virginia Woolf’. She observes that she felt ‘very akin to Woolf’, and that, ‘her novels make mine possible’. She was careful to scrutinize the work of women whose sexual habits were at odds with hers: ‘… am reading Elizabeth Bishop with great admiration. Her fine originality, always surprising, never rigid, flowing, juicier than Marianne Moore who is her godmother.’
At this juncture, it is important to record the hostility of the male Modernists towards women writers who not only usurped the literary marketplace (like Olive Higgins Prouty) but the scene of writing itself. Joyce satirized the ‘namby pamby jammy marmalady drawesy’ style of writers like Maria Cummins. In his ‘Notebooks’ he celebrated that in his misogynistic ‘The Waste Land’, ‘T. S. Eliot ends idea of poetry for ladies’. Ernest Hemmingway, though a close friend of Gertrude Stein, attacked literary women as fat or sterile or drunk or nymphomaniac or all those reprehensible things together. In ‘Portrait d’unne Femme’, Ezra Pound told a chaotically cultured woman : ‘Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea’. While Maude Gonne’s erstwhile lover praised strong women like Lady Gregory, Dorothy Wellesley and Maude herself, he denounced the ‘vague utopia’ of feminism dreamed of by Eva Gore Booth, observing that ‘she seems / When withered old and skeleton-gaunt / an image of such politics’, and prayed that his own daughter ‘become a flourishing hidden tree’. Plath must have internalized this implicit or explicit misogyny of these male modernists who also served as a model. One wonders at the self definition of an author arising out of divided loyalties, ambivalences and ambiguities. Initially, Plath’s reaction was to affirm her strength: ‘I am making a self, in great pain, often, as for a birth, but it is right that it should be so’; ‘by reforging my soul, I am a woman now the like of which I could never have dreamed’. Even after her marriage to a rising poet her mood seems to be celebratory: ‘And here I am, Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a published poet… We will publish a bookshelf of books between us before we perish! And a batch of brilliant healthy children… I am so glad
Ted is first… It is as if he is the perfect male counterpart to my own self….¹¹

In her thirtieth year, however, the tone is different:

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.
You hand me two children,
Two roses.

(‘Kindness’, 1st February, 1963)¹²

Plath’s stories ‘The Wishing Box’¹³ and ‘Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams’¹⁴ sum up the double-bind of the woman poet in a male literary arena. ‘The Wishing Box’ is the ‘comic’ tale of a young married couple – clearly surrogates of Ted and Sylvia – who meet at breakfast to discuss his dreams which are visions of aesthetic triumph. Agnes, the wife, who has few dreams herself (mostly nightmares) finds herself ‘wrestling with the strange jealousy which had been growing up on her like some dark malignant cancer ever since their wedding night’.¹⁵ She thinks that ‘It was as if Harold were spending one-third of his life among celebrities and fabulous legendary creatures in an exhilarating world from which [she] found herself perpetually exiled, except by hearsay’.¹⁶ Agnes tries to restore her ‘shaping imaginative powers’¹⁷ by reading novels, cookbooks, home appliance circulars and Freud on the sly, to fortify herself with ‘a vicarious dream tale’. Language, however, is the ultimate foil, for the very letters she looks at writhe ‘like malevolent little black snakes across the page in a kind of hissing, untranslatable jargon’.¹⁸ Ultimately a ‘wishing box’ of sleeping pills is her only possible escape. In
'Johnny Panic’, however, the female narrator becomes a dream connoisseur. Compared to the innocent poetic dreams of ‘The Wishing Box’, the nightmares of ‘Johnny Panic’ are intricate, metaphysical poems, they are the Plathian nightmares – ‘dark glowing landscapes peopled with ominous unrecognizable figures’ – that Agnes had rejected in the earlier story. When the clinic director of the ‘Adult Psychiatric Clinic’ shocks the transgressive dream connoisseur out of her mind, he is doing so because this dedicated transcriber’s appropriation of dream books offer a challenge to his authority over them. Sandra M. Gilbert suggests that Johnny Panic ‘is a revision of one of D. H. Lawrence’s most ferociously misogynist tales “The Woman Who Rode Away”’. This stay recalls the misadventures of a bourgeois woman who ran away from a miserable marriage only to be captured, tortured and sacrificed by five Indian priests so that they could recapture ‘the mastery that man must hold, and that passes from race to race’. Lawrence’s story gave Plath a terrifying summary of male Modernist reactions to the transgressing female writer.

It is the aim of this thesis, to identify the split within a woman between her biological entity and her literary self and explore how the latter is found to disintegrate among the commonly accepted aesthetic ideals that are relegated to ‘modernism’ and are often used to define Modernism. We must remember that Sylvia Plath committed suicide in a house that had once belonged to William Butler Yeats, in spite of her earlier confidence: ‘…in the house of a famous poet …my work should be blessed’. It is impossible to gauge the extent of Plath’s struggle without an investigation of the Modernist
tradition and its ambivalences, for such scrutiny clearly exposes Modernism’s antagonistic relationship with women.

**Patriarchal Discourse**

Modernism is not a movement. It is a term that masks conflict and upheaval and any number of contradictory positions.²³

The diverse practices and contrasting theories that flourish from the second half of the nineteenth century and continue till the second World War contain movements such as Symbolism, Imagism, Futurism, Feminism, Cubism, Vorticism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Anarchism to name only a few. An examination of their manifestos reveals irreconcilable differences of perspectives and priorities. A homogenization of these critical categories occurred in the 1950s by virtue of what Raymond Williams calls 'the post-war settlement and its accompanying, complicit academic endorsements'.²⁴ This selective canonization was thereafter known as ‘High Modernism’ and the essence of this Modernist impulse was the spirit of formal experimentation.

Indeed an interest in language would seem to define the Modern, and certain linguistic practices (evident in the work of Eliot, Joyce, Pound and Williams) would characterize Modernism. Hugh Kenner’s reading of Modernism uncovers its classical roots and recovers in the contemporary word the echoes of an historical and patriarchal past.²⁵ The men of 1914 were
schooled in the classics; men of the previous generation, of Henry James era, had participated in the ‘classical Renaissance’ that began in the 1870s with Heinrich Schliemann’s discovery of Troy. Pound, Eliot and Joyce shared – as Kenner points out – knowledge of these ancient languages and cultures. These men participated in an educational process that demanded knowledge of the Greek and Roman cultures whose classical languages would be addressed by Modernist linguistic experiments.

Another reading of the historical situation of Modernism, defines it specifically as post-World War One phenomena, emphasizing the role of war in creating a psychology of despair. Modernism is grounded in the ashes of burnt out rationalism and positivism. Against a bankrupt culture, argues Susan Stanford Friedman, only through the agency of language could culture be remade:

The search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art brought into being through the agency of language, the word or logos of the twentieth century.26
The war became the subject of the literature of the 1920s, and women, who were assumed to be on its fringes, were unlikely raconteurs of the male war experience. The subject matter of Modernism was not just the war experience, however, but the cultural bankruptcy caused by it. To stem this tide of uncertainties, men used the word with scientific curiosity to produce meanings well within the domain of dictionary and grammatical syntax. They refused to dwell upon the mystical and mysterious ways of the word, camouflaging their insecurities under an objective stance. It is possible to gauge the psychic need of a group, age, writer from the aesthetic style, and Modern aesthetics relied upon the suppressive and inorganic mode of ‘abstraction’ rather than that of a self-expressive and organic ‘empathy’. By rooting the individual author in the soil of tradition, T. S. Eliot delineates women as outsiders to the artistic experience. For, this tradition hardly allows any space to the woman artist who is a relatively modern figure. Although Ezra Pound’s commentaries on experimental writing spurred the work of his contemporaries, it was the public speeches of T. S. Eliot and his editorial direction of the *Criterion* that introduced the tenets of ‘High Modernism’, to a larger reading public. Peter Ackroyd comments that in ‘The Sacred Wood’ (1920):

Eliot provided literature with an order and certainty all the more potent because these were the qualities lacking in social and political life after the First World War: the older generation has lost its authority, and the younger had not found any… But Eliot’s stance was, in the end, more
influential. He reaffirmed that the status of literature, as a way both of understanding the larger culture and of disciplining private feelings and experience.\textsuperscript{28}

Among his contemporaries, women writers like Virginia Woolf and Edith Sitwell took exception to this emphasis on tradition and the philosophical and moral ordering of experience. Eliot’s fears were not shared by his generation, women especially might be expected to detect in this call for order, authority, discipline and moral certitude, a further enforcement of patriarchal claims.\textsuperscript{29}

One of the seminal moments of establishing this patriarchal claim is the moment of Freudian psychoanalysis, which though an essentially male Modernist’s cultural theory, made a complex deployment of gender. But to understand the full implications of the Freudian ambivalence on gender, one would have to read him alongside the revisionist version of Luce Irigaray.

In Freud’s oeuvre, the paradox of Modernist femininity is most stark. It is common knowledge that Freud developed his theories of psychoanalysis largely working on female patients. Drawing on Charcot’s treatment of female ‘hysterics’ in late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Paris, Freud subsequently worked with his own female patients. Symptomatically true to Modernist patriarchal discourse, the entire corpus of Freud’s theory relegated women to an inferior status. In the central Freudian Oedipal nuclear family drama of the psyche, which is dominated by the son as protagonist and the father as the
antagonist, the mother is a passive object of their conflicting desire, and the daughter a near-invisible afterthought. Women are, by Freudian definition, ‘castrated’, defined by and as ‘absence’ and ‘lack’, in the Lacanian-Freudian formulation; doomed to permanent moral immaturity, with a sexuality characterized, when ‘normal’ as inherently masochistic.

Despite the founding role of female hysteria in psychoanalysis, and despite the extensive presence of female patients in his practice, Freud continued to find femininity a ‘mystery’. In ‘Speculum of the Other Woman’, the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray explains this ‘mystery’ as a displacement of the central patriarchal suppression of the feminine. For Irigaray, the ‘mystery’ of man’s role in reproduction (we always know who the mother is whereas fatherhood is not crucially so self-evident) is reassigned to the ‘passive’ woman. Her terrible power to engender life is repressed and reassigned to the man, who then appropriates all ownership of reproduction and powers of naming, and therefore, of representation. The vigilant repression and exclusion of the feminine origin of life result in the starkness of the familiar normative gendered self/other dualisms of Western culture: masculine/feminine, white/black, higher/lower, culture/nature. In Freud, as in Modernism in general, the power of the maternal feminine comes closest to erupting in representation, and therefore met by an even more cruelly powerful act of re-repression. Several configurations of this repression can be read in the works of the principal male Modernist artists. Eliot and to a certain extent Pound, have already been considered, and we may now look at some others.
Henry James’ ‘The Future of the Novel’, written in the pivotal year 1899, encapsulates in a single essay the characteristic attitude of the male Modernist towards an empowered femininity. James begins with the standard Modernist attack on femininity. He links it with the social and aesthetic deterioration of standards connected to a debased feminized popular culture, by deploying the figure of flooding frequently used in Modernist fiction to represent empowered femininity:

The flood [of fiction] at present swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters, as would often seem, with submersion. It ... directly marches with the rapid increase of the multitude able to possess itself in one way and another of the book... There is an immense public if public be the name, inarticulate, but abysmally absorbent...The diffusion of the rudiments, the multiplication of the common schools, has had more and more the effect of making readers of women and of the very young...The ladies and children – by whom I mean, in other words, the reader irreflective and uncritical. 32
James appears here in the person of the Modernists as misogynist, anti-democratic elitist, a wearily familiar figure on the horizon of modernist aesthetics.

James’s essay, however, does not end on this strident misogynistic tone. As James proceeds to think about what he calls the ‘elasticity’ of fiction, his tone and political stance shifts markedly from the right to the left. The essay ends on a note diametrically opposed to that of its beginning, expressing an endorsement of feminist aims and desire for radical cultural renewal:

It would be curious – really a great comedy – if the renewal (of fiction) were to spring just from the satiety of the very readers for whom the sacrifice (to propriety) have hitherto been suppose to be made (i.e. to the “ladies”). It bears on this that as nothing is more salient in English life today, to fresh eyes, than the revolution taking place in the position and outlook of women – and taking place much more deeply in the quiet than even the noise on the surface demonstrates – so we may very well yet see the female elbow itself kept in increasing activity by the play of the pen, smash with final resonance the window all this time more superstitiously closed.33
Joseph Conrad is another Modernist whose oeuvre is profoundly masculine. He works primarily off the masculine tradition of adventure fiction. There are few women characters in his novels and stories, major or minor, and those who do appear are consistently flatter, more stereotypical, less fully realized than Conrad’s great masculine characters. Nevertheless, the empowered maternal feminine is at the heart of Conrad’s invention of Modernism. In *The Nigger of the Narcissus* the dying black sailor James Wait, is the figure of moral and narrative undecidability that pushes the text beyond the boundaries of realism. The rescue of Wait, in the storm, which is at the centre of the story, is figured very explicitly in child birth imagery: ‘He [Wait] pressed his head to it, trying madly to get out through that opening one inch wide and three inches long’. Finally, after much struggle, ‘suddenly Jimmy’s head and shoulders appeared. He stuck halfway, and with rolling eyes foamed at our feet…’ The text as maternal womb gives birth to James Wait, the embodiment of the powerful, dark complexities of Modernism. As a black and working class man, he also embodies the central conflation in Modernist figuration of the maternal with the ‘darker’ races and ‘lower’ classes implied by the crucially symbolic positioning of the womb, dark and low down. This conflation of erupting, newly empowered femininity, ‘darker’ races and ‘lower’ classes, reappears throughout Modernist configuration.

In *The Heart of Darkness*, it is Africa itself that becomes the undecidable locus of empowerment of the maternal feminine as racially and geographically darker and lower down. Incidentally the birth/rescue sequence
in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* occurs as the ship passes through a gale in the
Cape of Good Hope, at the southern tip of Africa. Conrad’s figuration of
Africa is notoriously a figural conflation of racial and female-maternal
otherness for modern white Western masculinity. In Conrad’s upriver journey
into Modernism, the Dark Continent begins stereotypically as terrifying, death-
dealing, devouring the locus of illusion. But as Marlowe shifts his allegiance
from the ‘civilized’ (actually cruelly barbaric) European imperialism of ‘the
Company’ to what becomes the ‘truth’ of the African wilderness, the heart of
moral darkness shifts in the text from Africa to Kurtz. The deepest informing
‘truth’ of the novella, a truth indissociably associated with gendered Modernist
aesthetics, with the male first-person narrator, resides in the undecidable
maternal African jungle.

Threatening and arresting – the ambiguity of these two conditional
poles pervasively inhabit the male Modernist configuration of the feminine. In
Conrad we notice this ambiguity as also in Picasso, arguably the founding
father of Modernist Art. The racially ‘primitive’ is conflated with the
empowered working class feminine in Picasso’s iconic Modernist work ‘Les
Demoiselles d’ Avignon’, 1907. Les Demoiselles is a painting of nude female
bathers, prostitutes, whose nudity is explicitly sexualized; that sexuality is
marked simultaneously by degradation and accessibility to the male
viewer/voyeur/customer. It is, for 1907, a radically stylized painting, not only
in the harsh discord of his treatment of human figures (a harshness that still
now strikes the viewer powerfully), but in its invention of the vocabulary of
Cubism: the overall composition organized by, and the contours of the figures
broken into, angular geometric shapes, the three dimensionality or depth illusion of traditional pictorial representation flattened, the figures radically stylized or distorted so as to seen splayed against the surface of the canvas, and the overtly non-realistic conventions, influenced by African tribal masks, in the drawing of the faces.

Les Demoiselles fuses the invention of these Modernist formal practices with representation of an empowered sexual femininity. The female bathers are degraded within dominant convention (nude prostitute), but are transformed here by Modernist form. It was in the painting and repainting of these women that Picasso invented his version of Modernist art. By means of that art, these women become awesome, frightening, magnificent powerful figures. They are figures of Modernist art as the release into new form of the empowered sexual feminine. The figures are just as hideous and distorted as they are powerful and riveting – of that femininity.

Thus we notice a shift in the patriarchal discourse governing the limit conditions of female expressivity within Modernism – a shift from hostile misogyny to a more complex nuanced ambiguity which implicates and is implicated in the other of the feminine. This shift also marks the decline in the emphasis on viewing male and female Modernists as members of divergent literary species, though vigilantly recognizing the effort of the male Modernist to construct its artistic self at the expense of the feminine other. However, one of the key points in this connection is the ambivalence shared by male and female Modernists towards the threat/promise of revolutionary culture and
political change within the discursive regime of patriarchal hegemony. The same ambivalence, differently inflected, characterizes the work of women Modernists.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, an inaugural work of feminist Modernism, the unnamed protagonist trapped in a dungeon-like attic nursery by her domineering doctor-husband, projects—literally—her unallowable desire for freedom, autonomy, and sexual fulfillment onto her wallpaper, only to divide the wallpaper against itself so that the figuration associated with freedom or empowerment becomes linked to an imprisoning of masculinity. At the same time, femininity reveals itself as fully abjected—a creeping, skulking figure imprisoned behind bars. All that the protagonist is allowed is to tear down the bars (wallpaper), her own self, releasing the trapped woman into complete madness. The story ends with the woman, having tied herself to the symbolically nailed-down marriage bed in her nursery prison chamber, crawling repeatedly around the perimeter of the room. She crawls over the prostrate, fainted body of her husband, but this is not a meaningful victory because it does not promise any rational emancipation for her. The desire for freedom invents the Modernist wallpaper; the fear of that desire destroys it.

Such paradigms of desire for freedom aligned with an unresolved dialectic of fear are also found in the works of many early Modernist woman writers. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, gains a pyrrhic victory over the restrictions of her patriarchal marriage. Her freedom ‘to swim far out where no woman has swum before’ comes at the cost of her
death. Gertrude Stein’s *Melanctha*, however, goes far beyond this restricted zone for female writers. Stein initiates, in all three parts of ‘Three Lives’ but particularly in ‘Melanctha’, an unprecedented stylization of the prose surface. Stein uses a flattened, reduced, simplified vocabulary, much the way Picasso and the Cubists, her collaborators in the production of Modernism, use a palette reduced to a few tones of grey and brown, in order to intensify the nuance of colour, geometric shaping and light-dark tonalities on which Cubism was founded. For Stein, this reduced vocabulary allows the repetition of key words and phrases which become open-ended, grow and acquire meanings as the narrative develops, so that in a way Stein reinvents the familiar and ordinary world of women. Stein’s reduced vocabulary is accompanied by an incantatory mode of repetition she called ‘insistence’, in order to distinguish it from the more male device of leit *motif* and mechanical reiteration. In ‘insistence’ repetition is never verbatim; rather the narrative moves forward in incremental shifts through what Stein called a ‘continuous present’. Meaning is constantly reformulated, added over, shifted, marking a clear distinction with the more stable male hermeneutic ‘logos’.

Jefferson Campbell, co-protagonist of *Melanctha* is a transformation of the autobiographical protagonist of Stein’s earlier, formally conventional lesbian novel *Q.E.D.* (1903), which was not published till her death. Stein’s lesbianism, and her long standing relationship with Alice B. Toklas, was common knowledge in Stein’s avant-garde group. The white, upper middle class, highly educated Adele of the conventional realist novel *Q.E.D.*, virtually indistinguishable from Gertrude Stein, becomes in the radical Modernist
Melanctha a heterosexual black male doctor. It is in following her lesbian
desire for Melanctha, and therefore for Melanctha’s sexual and intellectual
‘wandering’, that Stein is able to take her text out into its formal terra
incognita. Once there, Stein, went further than any other twentieth century
writer in English (perhaps in any language) in reinventing literary language
and form, undoing conventional, hierarchical, modes of signification – modes
that privilege the signified over the signifier in a way that can be considered
characteristically patriarchal – substituting in diverse stylistic modes, a rich,
open-ended, anti-patriarchal syntactical and semantic polysemy.

Virginia Woolf, the other early Modernist woman writer, was
consistently adjusted in the dominant patriarchal order with the inferior status
symbolic of her femininity. Her preoccupations were viewed as “domestic,
‘personal’, ‘private’, and therefore of less value and significance than the
classical – mythical themes of the male Modernists. Her writing, though
clearly Modernist, was seen as lightweight, insubstantial compared to theirs.\textsuperscript{40}
Woolf revised the association of Modernism with masculinity by associating it
with femininity instead. Her arguments for the subversiveness of Modernist
form, its ability to penetrate and represent the underlying multiplicitous truths
of consciousness and psyche beneath the outward, unitary, coherent
appearances of social and realist fictional convention, most notably in \textit{Modern
Fiction} (1919) and in ‘Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown’ (1924), as well as in \textit{A
Room of One’s Own},\textsuperscript{41} connect with Irigaray’s linkage of repressed maternal
feminine, to the Freudian unconscious, and also with Stein’s invention of anti-
patriarchal, polysemous literary and linguistic forms.
A Room of One’s Own makes a materialist argument for financial freedom for women from dependence on the support or approval of men. It also argues for a separate tradition of women’s writing, a history and future of literary forms and preoccupations particular to women’s minds and bodies. It is Woolf’s vision that women should not collaborate with the patriarchy, but should form ‘societies of outsiders’ to resist the configurations of male politics. In a remarkable manner Woolf was also the master of all male Modernist aesthetic practices. Woolf pushed fiction as far formally as any of the other major male Modernists, using fragmentation, collage-like juxtaposition, densely poetic language, epistemological and therefore narrative multiplicity and indeterminacy, temporal dislocations, heavy reliance on symbolism, fluidity and an utterly destabilizing, pervasive irony.

Woolf was not alone in these ambitions. She was joined by a wide range of other women Modernists. The volume The Gender of Modernism has chapters on a wide range of Modernist female writers: Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, Nancy Cunard, H.D., Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Charlotte Mew, Marianne Moore, Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rebecca West, Antonia White and Anna Wickham.

Thus we notice that though contained within a dominant patriarchal economy, shifts in gender relations at the turn of the nineteenth century were a key factor in the emergence of Modernism. The period from 1880-1920, within
which High Modernism emerged and rose to eminence as the dominant artistic paradigm in the West, was also the moment of a new awareness of the relation between sexuality and textuality, the moment of reconfiguring the gendered woman. The protagonist of this movement known as the ‘New Woman’ was independent, educated, relatively sexually liberated, and oriented more towards a productive life in the public sphere than a reproductive life at home. This New Woman inspired a great deal of ambivalent Modernist characterization from Hardy’s Sue Bridehead and Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler to Chopin’s Edna Pontellier and Woolf’s Lily Briscoe. The ambivalence on the part of the male Modernist artists, hovering between representations of terror and attraction, is found to a certain extent in the female Modernist writers eager to tap both the experiential realms of the public and the private, at once inhabiting the separate and the unified.

Perhaps this is nowhere more clear than in the character of Lily Briscoe. Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*\(^4\) ends as the New Woman and modernist artist Lily Briscoe finishes her painting, with a ‘line there, in the centre’\((310)\). The closing ‘line’ of Lily’s, and the novel’s final ‘vision’ is a line of simultaneous separation and union: separation and union of the (devastated/freed) postwar Modernist present and the (murderous/fructifying) Victorian-Edwardian realist past: separation and union of disillusioned but freer adulthood and idealized but oppressed childhood: separation and union of empowered/enchained, inspiring/inhibiting Victorian mother, and cramped /autonomous Modernist daughter Lily Briscoe.
The Politics of Objectivity and the Female Subject

Seventeenth century rationalism, notably the works of Descartes, Hobbes and Locke, established the philosophical premises of a distinction (indeed dualism) between subject and object, reason and feeling, mind and body. The impact of such rationalism can be seen in much of Enlightenment literature with its more rigid generic categories and its poetry – more didactic in manner, more denotative in language.\textsuperscript{44} The roots of subjectivity can be discerned in Locke’s warning about the dangers of the imagination. The eighteenth century saw a great concern with the subjective, the individual, and the expression of emotion. Kant is at the heart of German Romanticism, with his assertion that we can never know ‘things in themselves’ (noumena) but only as they are ‘touched by our perception’ (phenomena).\textsuperscript{45} Rousseau’s opening promise to portray ‘simply myself’, and Goethe’s representation of the intensely personal letters of a young man recounting a tragic love affair, were major continental examples of romantic subjectivity.\textsuperscript{46} The Romantic revolution loosely classified a large body of English poetry stressing the vitality of nature, including human kind, the strong expression of personal feeling combined with a search for transcendence. Even in the Victorian period, Tennyson’s call for a strongly personal poetic voice is only checked by Arnold’s warning against extreme subjectivity.
T. S. Eliot’s insistence on objectivity is thus a return to classical mimetic principles. He contends that no poet or artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. He argues that the poet has not so much a personality to express but a ‘medium’. He offers the notion of ‘objective correlative’ as the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art – a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be formula of that particular emotion. Thus a standard of judgement is introduced in the domain of poetry that reiterates neo-classical norms. Along with T. E. Hulme, Eliot exerted a powerful influence on American New Criticism. Eliot used the formula to pronounce Hamlet, an artistic failure on the grounds that Hamlet suffers from an emotion he cannot objectify. This dramatic difficulty is a prolongation of Shakespeare’s inability to express him satisfactorily by writing the play. ‘Objective correlative’ becomes a dominant tool of aesthetic judgement. When we feel that an image (or any other element) in a work fails to embody the ‘particular’ emotion required, when we feel that emotion is being ‘described’ rather than ‘presented’, we say the artist has not found an ‘objective correlative’. The requirement that a poem evoke emotion by the representation of sensory experience was conventional in the nineteenth century. Eliot’s formula reproduced a standard definition of twentieth century imagism. ‘Objective correlative’ thus marks one of the point in which twentieth century Modernism aligns itself to nineteenth century aesthetic values, which it was ostensibly designed to supplant.
Thus, if, we are to use ‘Modernism’ as a convenient critical label, it is important to reiterate certain radical departures in definition. Some of them, quoted from an anthology are:

*Literary periods…are convenient fictions, retrospective narrative of shaping authority that serve the definer’s purposes.*

*A particular aspect of Modernism stressed upon attention to aesthetic and formal concerns.*

*…tendencies towards a form-seeking and contemplative self-control, towards separation of self from world and from other selves, and towards fragmented hyperawareness and a kind of cerebral self interrogation.*

Though certain readings of Modernism stress its purely formal or aesthetic properties, as though these and related functions are intrinsic to the text of Modernism, something to be found in such works rather than a reading imposed on them – one has to bear in mind that:

*Conceptions of modernism…are shaped by factors that go well beyond narrowly aesthetic concerns. These may include among a welter of other*
Modernist aesthetics is overwhelmed by the paradox of meaning and form. It apparently marks the shift of perspective from the artist to the spectator/reader without completely subscribing to either. While the observer’s subjectivity opens up the possibility of plural meanings, the form being non-committal, the signifier/signified relationship remains unchallenged or unexplored – its opacity intact in the garb of transparency. The possibility of several meanings does not offer emancipation from authorial primacy but reaffirms the artistic purpose. Sign and meaning (their distance camouflaged by the regulated agenda that pretends to banish mediation) close upon each other in a vicious circle and any attempt to get over it would force us beyond the limits of metaphysics. Modern aesthetics not only would be the determination of the work of art from the ‘sensible’ apprehensions of the spectator, but also would include from the beginning an examination of the work of the art as the opus of a particular and irreducible operari (working). Modern aesthetics does not mask deliberate ‘construction’ but uses it to transcend the politics of construction. This duality of principles governs the history of aesthetics and it is here that one must seek its speculative centre and vital contradiction.

The entire opus of Plath’s works – which includes her short stories, novel, poems, journal and letters – is haunted by the sense of spectacle. The
artistic purpose is constantly belied from the angle of the dispassionate observer. It creates the simultaneous sense of being both the observer and the observed. This, in fact, is the concept of the ‘bell jar’ - where one can not only be the eternal observer condemned to isolation, but one also has to constantly survive with the sense of being under observation. Plath herself connects this exile with her traumatic breakdown in the summer of 1953, which she felt was like a barrier between her and the normal world. However, this is the pathological situation of the woman-artist who is artist, observer and the observed at the same time.

Her letters indicate that she wrote prose with increasing difficulty though initially she dabbled with the idea of being a journalist and story writer, a fact explored in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar.*\(^{50}\) She did participate and win accolades in story writing competitions. The story and novel seem more suited as genres for female protest. She herself acknowledges Virginia Woolf as a source of inspiration. The stream-of-consciousness technique allows a form of writing which records details of the objective and subjective whims without any discrimination – which allows co-existence without imposing a hegemonic unity or universality. It circumvents the danger of being ensnared in a particular situation. The poem being more exclusive and esoteric in nature is basically rooted in a tradition of male abstraction. Modernism with its formalistic agenda is, contrary to popular perception, recalcitrant to multiple interpretations. While it pretends to refrain from any subjective comment, it simultaneously throws a challenge to subjective analysis. Precision and order impose the structure of metaphor through
impressive images and seem to arrest a metonymical slide of meaning. In ‘A Comparison’ (1962), Plath Says ‘How I envy the novelist!’ Talking specifically about ‘woman’ writers she says, the novelist ‘…has all the time in the world’. The poet on the other hand has, ‘So little time!’ and ‘become an expert on the packer of suitcases’ (the reference is to lyric poetry).

Although critics often trace a disjunction between Plath’s early prose writings and her mature collection of poems, the uneasiness of the female writer trapped in her own subjectivity without being granted the privilege of being a subject, can be traced throughout the entire body of her works. The choice of recording dreams instead of interpreting them is significant in ‘Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams’ — analysis and judgement belong to the realm of male abstraction. Dreams, though relegated to the unconscious, are interpreted in terms of a preconditioned formula based on the concept of a fixed ‘other’ that indirectly condones a monolithic concept of reality. To simply browse through other people’s dreams without engaging in any sort of critical enterprise exposes the protagonist of the story to the danger of being judged as mentally unstable. Though the dreams are describe as vivid images, authorial hegemony is ruled out for it is clearly declared that they are ‘borrowed’ images with no claim to originality. Yet the narrator’s experience is highlighted rather than the cohesive identity of the dreamer’s and ‘Johnny Panic’ is the ironic name for a subjective experience. An endless stream of minds trickle into the large lake at night to ‘one borderless common reservoir’ – this nightmare of the female narrator ‘cannot be written’. If ‘the Unconscious is structured like language’, it is only possible to copy dreams and not to
write them. The narrator declares, ‘this is my real calling’. There is no room for agency in this vast library of dreams. The woman can only gain and illegitimate entry to this dream repertory. The punishment for getting caught is the ‘treatment’. The narrator claims, ‘In our clinic, the treatment doesn’t get prescribed. It is invisible.’

It is not surprising that the clinic started the year the narrator was born – the woman is born into an already structured world where people are doctored to sanity – ‘…in those cubicles, each with its desk, its two chairs its windows and its door with the opaque glass rectangle set in the wood’. It is a world governed by statistics, records, health and money where those who have channeled their drives towards these set norms are the people who conduct the treatment. The physicians differ from the patients only in their ability to mould subjectivity according to a collective objectivity. The difference lies in the fact that the victim is controlled by desire, while the doctor’s desire is moulded according to the existing power structure. The latter thus becomes the objective subject while the former’s subjectivity is under constant vigilance and observation. The consenting group has the power to punish the individual who nourishes the desire of recording dreams which has no material value or utility. The narrator, in fact, is a victim twice over. She is torn between the sly uncontrollable subversive power of Johnny Panic (male), which can be camouflaged but cannot be suppressed, and the all-pervasive objective reality which is inimical to Johnny Panic. Even the woman’s subjective world is not free from patriarchal discourse. Torn between mutually hostile worlds, the woman - narrator has to surrender to self-destruction.
The female subjective position cannot be adjusted into the accepted structure of rationality, because it does not have any productive utility. It can only be a subversive protest maintained by guile and secrecy. Her existence is pre-destined to be schizophrenic without any easy transition from the subjective to the objective. It is not that she does not try to relate to the objective world – but she simply cannot belong to it. She is the chosen one. Plath is haunted by the awareness of her difference, even with other women. In her letters, novels and short stories, she expresses a desperate and futile desire to belong to the existing cultural milieu, whether it is domestic or literary. At the same time, we perceive a strong apathy against assimilation in her writings. In ‘Mothers’ (1962), Esther joins the Mother’s Union meeting and invites the rector to her house, in an attempt to be more English. She is very much conscious of being an outsider in the close knit community of the quiet country place. She does not want to make a statement by avoiding the church, yet secretly nourishes the desire to be a Jew. This tendency to identify herself as an outcast is reflected in both The Bell Jar and in many poems like ‘Daddy’. There is a basic distrust of benevolent institutions with their moral agenda and both the church and heterosexual institution of marriage fall under this category. Her attempt to embrace the existing regime inevitably ends up to be abortive. Her effort to join the righteous congregation of motherhood becomes a fiasco. It starts with the guilt of dumping her child with her husband and ends with the forlorn figure of Mrs. Nolan. A divorcee cannot participate in the group of hungry mothers, who suddenly seem to be predators devouring the tea laced with moral dressings. It is as if the narrator is constantly placed in a
nexus of guilt and suffers from a performance anxiety. This awareness of being a performer in a codified society disturbs the protagonist’s sense of identity.

Whether it be an academic detail like facing departmental interview at Smith College\textsuperscript{58} or being a professional interviewer\textsuperscript{59} (where she has difficulty identifying with the roles of interviewer and interviewee distinctly), the sense of being on display (as if in a bell jar) persists. An effort to conform is simultaneously frustrated by an inability to participate. The person whether in fiction or reality is condemned to exile. Both fiction and reality become part of an all-pervading performance. Since this persona extends from the work to the larger text it is perhaps symptomatic of the woman who has opted for ‘pensmanship’. This is a predicament which alienates her from her own sex and makes it impossible to identify with the other. Sex and gender are pitted against each other in a deadlock where the creative output is an accidental emergence of the subject in its fidelity to a particular event.

For a woman whose doctoral thesis was based on ‘The Double’ in the works of Dostoevsky, there is almost a Kafkaesque obsession with being the ‘outsider’. This existential crisis results in an anomaly of subjecthood in her work. In today’s critical milieu, the lack of an essential subject is an accepted condition, but in the post-war hegemony of objectivity and formalistic agenda – where the essential subject and all possible perspectives are compulsively codified – such subjective anomaly becomes politically self-destructive. Since the very idea of the self is structurally codified, the woman-poet is destined to
be an outsider. For Plath the persecution complex stretches from the characters in her fiction, the persona in her poems to the larger text of her existence.

Every image of the benevolent individual is based ironically on an inimical homogeneity of established norm. Strangely enough, man or woman, character or person, husband or wife, father or mother, child or parent, virgin or whore, all become faces of the inimical other – part of a gendered patriarchy. The conspiracy is all-pervasive. Hence the subject becomes the eternally hunted object in Plath’s case this friction or anger does not find release in writing initially, since language, (structured and codified) exists \textit{a priori} to the individual. Identification with the body or the physical realm is hardly a statement for it is an alternative position allowed by the existing cultural mode. On the other hand ‘abstraction’ as an exercise is entirely futile as it belongs to the gendered ‘other’. It is as if the alternative position is equally mapped and cannot be converted into a privilege.

Foucault points out that juridical system of power ‘produce’ subjects that they gradually and subsequently come to represent.\textsuperscript{60} The female subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation.\textsuperscript{61} Although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did, the notion of a generally shared conception of ‘woman’, the corollary to that framework, has been much more difficult to displace. This is crucial to representational politics. Yet the construction of the category of women as a coherent and
stable subject is an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations in an essentially heterosexual matrix.

‘Holocaust’ imagery in poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’, ‘Daddy’ and ‘Mary’s Song’ have been criticized by poets such as Seamus Heaney and critics like Harold Bloom as being too simplistic in its association with a general category of the oppressed. While Plath’s ‘Bee Sequence’ presents powerful poems that seem to emphasize flight and rebirth from patriarchal restrictions, poems like ‘Lesbos’, ‘Medusa’, ‘The Tour’ and ‘Eavesdropper’ locate the speaker’s private torment and disturbance and their metaphorical development in the context of certain social facts. Linda W. Wagner sums up the critical perspectives on Plath over the last twenty years, the ‘bitch goddess’, ‘martyr’ and chronically ‘mad poet’ and counters them with the idea of Plath as a culturally determined woman, an idea substantiated by the publications of the Journals: perhaps one of the most supportable views of Plath is none of these, but rather that of the fifties, caught in the pervasive cultural rise of conformity. Concentrating on the short stories Plath wrote specifically for women’s magazines like The Ladies’ Home Journal, Wagner explores the way they reflect the ‘confirming 1950 Patriarchal structure’.

Influenced by Luce Irigaray’s understanding of ‘woman’ as a culturally constructed sign, Gary M. Leonard states:

That fashion magazine sell products by persuading woman that they need various accessories to be
‘feminine’ is common knowledge, but what Plath explores in her novel, journals, letters and poetry is the extent to which these commercial products persuade a woman’s personality until that ‘personality’ is nothing more than a package designed to catch the eye of the discussing masculine consumer.  

Plath wrote in ‘The Applicant’ about the ‘new woman’ of the fifties as ‘a living doll, everywhere you look’. The ambivalence in Plath is substantiated in her story ‘The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle’ where the narrator is overwhelmed by distaste both at the sight of the blood-stained tattoo made by the male artist and at the sight of the unblemished body of Laura, the tattoo-expert, Carmey’s wife. ‘Perfection…cannot have children’ as Plath writes in ‘The Munich Mannequins’. She observes in one of her last poems: ‘The woman is perfected / her dead body / wears the smile of accomplishment’ (‘Edge’ 1963). The use of ‘the smile’ instead of ‘a smile’ emphasizes the meaningfulness of such a universal category. The ‘perfect’ women can only be a corpse. Both in her early stories and late poems the only possible sense of identification for Plath occurs with the dead and ailing. The idiot boy is transformed into the stature of a tragic hero by his accidental death in ‘The Daughters of Blossom-Street’.

Pamela J. Annas points out that as Plath wrote fiercely and determinedly out of female experience, in a post-World War II and pre-
feminist United States, she had not yet resolved the separation between personal and political or seen her poetry as a direct and conscious way of connecting the two or mediating between them, in her earlier works. Annas perceives Plath’s late poetry as attempt to resolve this separation between ‘personal and political’.  

As Plath moved towards the *Ariel* poems, rather than an outward projection of self (she no longer becomes in her poetry some aspect of animate or inanimate nature), she begins to feel trapped inside the self. The change in Plath’s poetic voice and the transformation of her central image are both tied to a change in her conception of self-image. This developed awareness of self is exemplified most clearly in Plath’s suspicion of language.  

If language is a reflection of one’s culture, its structure is based on the assumptions of that culture, a poet uncomfortable with the assumption is likely to feel uncomfortable with language. Language structures our conception of self and other. It tells us what to see and what not to see; through its syntax, it tells us what the relation are between the things we do see. As a woman poet trying to work out a redefinition of self through poetry, ‘Plath found herself in a linguistic trap’. In both imagery and attitude towards language, in these transitional poems, the sense of entrapment is crucial. Annas states that Plath creates her own system of mythology based on modern historical images and events, a mythology whose central figure is a protean female protagonist, hero, victim, and goddess. She offers a feminist cultural materialistic approach, reading the hospital setting as a metaphor for
contemporary society, which expresses feelings of ‘impersonality, depersonalization, loss of control of one’s own body, sterility and flatness.’

The centre of Plath’s art is a tension between word and wordlessness, stasis and movement, entrapment and potentiality. Her dramatic piece *Three Women* is about what stands in the way of creativity – biological and aesthetic – in a bureaucratized society that confuses the word with the thing, the signifier with what is signified and in a capitalized society that alienates the producer from what is produced including babies and commodifies most products, including poems. The failure of communication within the formal structure of the poem is an important aspect as Sylvia Plath’s developing image as woman and poet in relation to the World. The significant factor of the *Three Women* is the isolation of this woman inside her own experience and more specifically inside the social definition of that experience. The form of the play, three monologues, is a direct reflection of its content. The secretary’s speeches connect and oppose the world of bureaucracy (her office) to her own pregnancy, the social to the biological. Plath makes a similar connection in ‘The Applicant’ where relation between men and women are equated with the personnel office matching of employer and employee. The secretary feels that she has imbibed some quality from the flat world of men and machine like cardboard which symbolically causes her recurrent miscarriages. The paper imagery in the *Ariel* poems (‘Lady Lazarus’, ‘Cut’, ‘The Applicant’) describes a self that lacks substance depth and colour. The Secretary in *Three Women* lives in a patriarchal world and has begun to take on those qualities of flatness, abstractness, rationality, and rigidity which Plath
has in post-\textit{Colossus} poems, consistently seen as being directly inimical to sensuality, transcendence, roundness and the possibility of change and creativity:

\begin{quote}
The letters proceed from these black
\hspace{1cm}
keys and these black keys proceed
\hspace{1cm}
From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,
\hspace{1cm}
Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.
\hspace{1cm}
I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
\end{quote}

\textit{(`Three Women’, 1962){73}}

As in \textit{`The Applicant’}, Plath uses metonymy here to describe the woman artifacts. This problem of creativity is dealt with in \textit{`The Wishing Box’},\textsuperscript{74} where Harold can easily describe his dreams in their fictive glory. Agnes, on the other hand, cannot escape her immediate reality so easily. In fact, she does not understand the margin between reality and dreams.\textsuperscript{75} She nostalgically recollects her childhood when dreams yet have the promise of reality. Harold teaches her to vividly imagine scenes and takes her through a step by step mythology of dream manufacture. This makes Agnes feel all the more alienated as she is rooted in the existing reality. If Harold didn’t like the scene at hand `he would change it to suit his fancy’. Agnes tries to emulate him in vain:

\begin{quote}
seized by a kind of ravenous hysteria, she raced through
\hspace{1cm}
the novels, women’s magazine, newspaper and even the
\hspace{1cm} anecdotes in her Joy Of Cooking, she read travel
brochures, home appliances circulars, the Lears Roebuck Catalogue, the instructions on soap flake boxes, the blurb on the back of record-jackets – anything to keep from facing the gaping void in her own head of which Harold made her so painfully conscious. But as soon as she lifted her eyes from the printed matters at hand, it was as if a protecting world had been extinguished.  

The literal and material as the domain of the feminine is no consolation for Agnes. Neither the realm of materiality nor of abstraction is home for her. The former imprisons her; the latter is alien to her. If the ‘unconscious is structured like language’ then dreams become as much a taboo for her as any experiment with language. ‘A rose’, she found herself repeating hollowly, like a funeral dirge, ‘is a rose is a rose’, as if to close the gap between the signifier and the signified.

Speaking as a woman, of woman’s oppression, is extreme because the language – the credible stories – is written by patriarchy. ‘Plath’s extremity is a necessary and necessarily limited strategy of the oppressed.’ For similar reasons, Sandra M Gilbert argues that woman find themselves writing extravagant, mythic, gothic and fairy-tale plots, a thought also reiterated by Alicia Ostriker and Elaine Showalter. If Plath’s poetry appears hysterical, that is because the power of naming is Adam’s and women who want to tell a different story must either adopt to prevailing discourses or force a way
through. Juliet Mitchell locates hysteria as ‘the woman’s simultaneously acceptance and refusal of the organized sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity.’\textsuperscript{81} Plath, however, though she vacillates between, a celebration of the ‘essentially feminine’ and a keen awareness of inhabiting a gendered space, is initially reluctant to participate in ‘language games’. Her early poems have the effect of hysterically beating one’s head against the wall without ‘using’ hysteria as a tool of escape.

Plath is well aware of being a misfit in a world of forms which, through apparently open to interpretation, absolve the necessity of meaning in art. Unlike the male artist who is absolved of the necessity to communicate ‘meaningfully’, by the casual shift to the observer’s stance, this change of form does little to reduce her sense of responsibility. Being the literary ‘other’ she becomes both observer and observed. The sense of irony that masks the subjective ‘I’ in Modern poetry with a deliberately formalistic agenda, imprisons the woman poet and forces her into a ‘tragic’ objectivity. The convenient shift from artist to observer in Modern art does little to alter the male gaze and this patriarchal positioning becomes a clever move to wipe out alternative positions and evade all questions of artistic/political responsibility.

For the woman-poet, with her newly found political agenda and fresh awareness of a female literary canon, it becomes impossible to be assimilated into this aesthetics of non-commitment. Such an agenda would rob her of her own voice. Under the hegemonic umbrella of post-war literary Modernism,
this smothers all dissenting voice with its formalistic regime; the woman artist is exposed to an invisible all-pervasive panopticon. The Bell Jar ends thus:

the eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me,
and guiding myself by them as by a magical thread I stepped into the room.\textsuperscript{82}

The images of the hospital and the clinic with their neatness and formal order, routine medication and shock treatment dominate her short stories, novel and poems. ‘The white light is artificial and hygienic as heaven / the microbes cannot survive it’ (‘The Surgeon At 2 am’, 1961)\textsuperscript{83}. In ‘The Wishing Box’ Harold’s imaginative powers is a result of his non-fidelity to his surrounding reality. It is the power of the agent of abstraction, leaving the onus of interpretation (which is regulated) to the reader of dreams. In contrast Agnes wishes that ‘her eye was not merely an open camera lens which recorded surrounding phenomena and left it at that.’\textsuperscript{84} The woman is condemned to the position of the observer and cannot play around with the restricted social order, since she did not create it.

The male game of abstraction has made them experts at casually dabbling in forms without disturbing the hegemony of meaning. It camouflages a dominant agency by positioning an open-ended narrative apparently open to multiple interpretations. By engaging the observer in his own game the formalist lays out the already encoded cards of meaning, and
gives an illusion of choice. By involving the observer in this dialectics, he rules out any challenges to the process of interpretative abstraction.

In this hegemonic and monolithic structure of meanings, the woman cannot turn artist through the process of emulation. That is an easy trap. The rebellious suicidal patient in Plath’s novel and short stories thus chooses death and silence as the ultimate protest and victory. Her own experiences at a mental hospital, the autobiographical portrayal of Esther Greenwood in ‘The Bell Jar’ and the tragedy of Agnes in ‘The Wishing Box’ all reflect a pathological fear of the inability to perform meaningfully. While under treatment the patient hankers for a normal life and the freedom of choice, but once outside, the sense of exile never seems to release them. The abstract structures of social and aesthetic norms and the concrete structures of the hospital merge, so that the neat transition from the ‘observed’ to the observer is never made.

In Modern aesthetics, the observer’s position is probably less privileged and more mapped than that of the artist. By camouflaging the overt subjectivity of the artist, the observer’s subjectivity is also rendered redundant in a formal text. The romantic ‘I’ of poetry functions now without any social responsibility in a world riddled by post-war chaos – where all structures are bereft of meaning and hollowed out. Yet an attempt is made to preserve those structures to stem the tide of changing ideas. This cosmetic adherence to structure, this emphasis on form rather than the agent, in which the observer is a mere pawn, robs alternative art-forms of political agency.
It opens up the possibility of multiple meanings and cancels the necessity of ‘a’ meaning from the observer’s perspective. The male artist remains invincible as operari since he is invisible. Under such conditions, any possibility of alternative meanings would require an investigation into the domain of female subjectivity, psycho-social and aesthetic/representative. The next two chapters will undertake this exercise.
NOTES TO CHAPTER 1


10. Ibid., p. 188.

11. Ibid., p. 167.


15. Ibid., p. 35.

16. Ibid., p. 36.

17. Ibid., p. 40.

18. Ibid., p. 41.

19. Ibid., p. 36.


24. Ibid.


32. Ibid., p. 242.

33. Ibid., p. 250.


48. Ibid., p. 70.


52. Ibid., p. 3.


55. Ibid., p. 6.

56. Ibid., p. 7.

57. Ibid., p. 97-108.


59. Ibid., p. 78.


68. Ibid., p. 272.


71. Ibid., p. 143.

72. Ibid.


75. Ibid., p. 48.
76. Ibid., p. 59.


