

# Subverting Traditional Gender Roles in Contemporary English Poetry: The World's Wife by Carol Ann Duffy Mike and Honey by Rupi Kaur Ariel by Sylvia Plath

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## ABSTRACT

Generally speaking, male poets depict women in their poetry as typically seen as frail, weak, and reliant on males. However, in this paper we will examine the how women are portrayed in the same way in the poetry written by female poets, which is shocking. The purpose of this article is to examine how women use poetry to create their own gender identities. The language used by female poets to establish their own identities and the themes they chose for their poems reveal how they see themselves in relation to the other gender. The article 'data are derived from an analysis selection of three English-language poems written by female poets: the world's wife by Carol Ann Duffy, Mike and Honey by Rupi Kaur, and Ariel by Sylvia Plath. To thoroughly examine how gender identity is constructed.

**Keywords-** Gender roles, feminist literature, Ann Duffy, Rupi Kaur, Sylvia Plath.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The literary critical theory called feminism examines and evaluates literary works within the conceptual context of feminism. Feminist theory can be applied to fictional literature to assist illuminate the reality faced by women in patriarchal cultures (Eagleton 2013; Wiyatmi et al., 2020:19). The goal of feminist literary criticism is to critically analyze literary works within a culture while challenging the assumptions made about the relationships amongst power, gender, language and sexuality (Karimah 2017:16–17).

The Western literary and historical traditions have long been male-centered that is, they focus entirely on men and men's sexual activities. From Homer's Odyssey to Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Western canon is full with tales of men and their deeds and victories. Women have only ever been portrayed as the spouses of well-known males, making them supporting roles. The implied message is that women are simply the wives and that men rule the world and women are portrayed as submissive dependent creature. However some writers

and poets swayed away from this conventional image of women such as Carol Ann Duffy in his work "The Worlds Wife" and Rupi Kaur in his Mike and Honey, and Sylvia Plath in her work Ariel.

Today, there is a lot of discussion about prejudice against women everywhere in the world. British feminist author Carol Ann Duffy addresses the deeply ingrained idea of patriarchal ideology and raises This topic is in her writing. She opposes not only men's control over women's lives and all their activities, but also all kind of superiority, even when that power is exercised by a woman. "We've moved beyond that," she argues, "but the poetry of feminist played a significant role in the seventies" (Dowsen 1999:15). Sylvia Plath's literature addresses the damage caused by male dominance over females in themes and genres. In an effort to give women a more equal voice and space in literature, feminist writers re-wrote famous works of literature that are mostly focused on men. In her well-known essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), French post- structuralism feminist Hélène Cixous states that

women need to write for themselves, write for women, and bring women into the world of literature.

Fiction writers and poets who identify as feminists have written extensively on women's daily fights for equal rights and their positive contributions to society. Because of established sex stereotypes, men are viewed as having greater privileges than women in our patriarchal culture. In these gender roles, males are seen as strong, powerful beings that are there to defend women, while women are seen as sentimental and vulnerable humans. Because of this misconception, women are also subjected to objectification. Here is where feminist writers enter the picture, hoping to dispel patriarchy and challenge stereotypes by speaking out in favor of equal treatment for women in their works.

The World's Wife by Duffy portrays the female characters in the collection, nevertheless, as more than just spouses. Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* was published in 1999 challenges the traditional gender roles in history and literature. The book, which is based on myth, fairy tales, and well-known historical people, gives voice to the previously voiceless women by retelling the lives of renowned men through the eyes of their wives and lovers. Every poem focuses on a female character that either had a minor or nonexistent role in the main narrative; these individuals have never been given a voice before, therefore Duffy portrays them in a novel way in an effort to challenge the stereotypes about women. In fact, Duffy dissects famous characters from literature, mythology, history, and fairytales in his collection in order to create female-dominated perspectives and long-ignored voices that simultaneously question the fearless, exceptional, and macho perceptions of those well-known husbands. For example, in his poem "Mrs Midas" Duffy offers an updated account of King Midas's tale told from a female perspective. This was the classic Greek tale about a someone who could turn anything into gold with a single touch. This poem examines the heroine's anguish about not being able to touch her husband and draws attention to the fear, irritation, and agony she harbors for him because of his greed. Feminist critics find this poem particularly fascinating because it suggests that Mrs. Midas is a strong-willed individual who refuses to let him ruin her life and instead separates herself and lives on her own. However, an alternative interpretation suggests that her husband controls her emotions and sentiments, and she prefers a caring spouse rather a conventional one. Duffy gives Mrs. Midas's voice, who recounts the eagerly awaited tale from her perspective, priority right away. Feminist critics also believe that women are occasionally silenced or just oppressed by men in writing. But it's clear that Mrs. Midas is in charge and that she's telling her own story in a rather independent manner. Duffy employs a variety of metaphors and comedy in this poem to help us comprehend Mrs. Midas's marriage breakdown and the idea that "wealth is not everything" in a different way than the original

story tells us. It is also evident that Mrs. Midas's character subverts the expectations of the society of the feminine behavior. This behavior indicates a lack of passion for the idea that women are not meant to be dolls. The poet tells us:

*"It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine..." (Line:1) "It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine..." (Line:1)*

The female figure (Mrs. Midas) recognizes that her partner is "pure[ly] selfish" and shows "lack of thought" for her, but she still hopes to "bear his child." Mrs. Midas is a symbol for many women who want a child but are not given the same treatment or consideration by their spouses because they follow social norms and identify primarily with what society deems to be "happiness" and "good relationships." By highlighting Mrs. Midas' desire to become a mother, Duffy has exposed Mr. Midas as a villain. A couple often respectfully decides whether or not to have children, so when Mrs. Midas says that they were "passionate then," it is reasonable to assume that Mr. Midas would have been aware of this dream.

Rupi Kaur is another poet who subverts the traditional gender roles of women. Rupi Kaur is well-known on the Instagram application. Through this social media platform, the Rupi Kaur has gained recognition on a global scale and soon got the chance to publish a collection of her poetry online. Her writing has been translated into more than 42 languages, sold over eight million copies, and appeared on the New York Times Bestseller List. *Milk and Honey* is readable by a broad audience due to Kaur's use of language that is used by the common and current poetry (Kao and Jurafsky 2012:14–15). Known for her innovative and thought-provoking feminist perspective, she is the author of the best-selling poem "Milk and Honey" (2015). Both are divided into four chapters and each one discusses the challenges that face women in a male – dominated society from a social perspective. In addition to challenging cultural norms around women, she actively advocates for female equality within her South Asian neighborhood. Furthermore, Rupi Kaur has chosen not to give a title to her poems in an effort to deviate from conventional poetry. However, in a few of the poems, the final line is italicized, maybe to draw attention to the poem's main idea. Her poetry is accessible to all readers since she writes in a simple, honest style that is simple to understand. Her poetry makes it clear that she has profound objections against the societal roles assigned to women.

*Milk and Honey* effectively captures how male family members suppress women by telling them not to voice their own opinions. The reader is made aware by a visual representation that these types of incidents occur not just in society but also in our own households and

communities. Rupi Kaur uses a simile in her poem that may be read in both literal and figurative terms to compare the women who are making room within society by using their voices to writing with their left hand. It also shows how society has shaped women's ideas to the point where they feel guilty even for doing the right thing, like sticking up for themselves. There are five sections in Kaur's second collection: wilting, falling, rooted, rising, and flowering. As implied by the title, the names of these chapters are metaphorically utilized to depict the life cycle of a sunflower. When readers examine the sections and look for a deeper meaning, the reader learns that like the rebirth of flowers, each part depicts a distinct stage in the lives of women. In the final poem of the second portion, "Falling," Rupi Kaur also summarizes the five stages of life:

*As she held me in her arms as i wept  
Think of those flowers you plan  
In the garden each year  
They will teach you  
That people too  
Must will Fall  
Root Rise  
In order to bloom*

Rupi Kaur attempts to address women's difficulties in society in literary works. 2015 saw the publication of *Milk and Honey*, a poetry collection by the Canadian poet Rupi Kaur. Poetry and pictures together draw attention to the relationships between oppression and sexuality. Illustration highlights the visual aspects of poetry and its links to daily life in addition to being a means of poetic expression (Kooistra 2014:135). In the collection of poems *Milk and Honey*, Kaur narrates the story of an unidentified speaker who describes the poems as being about healing, trauma, abuse, love, loss, and femininity. The poems in *Milk and Honey* tell the story of the speaker's life, reflecting her views on women's sexuality and criticizing patriarchal behaviors in her daily existence. The poems in each of the four chapters "the hurting," "the loving," "the breaking," and "the healing" have a different theme and are presented chronologically.

Kaur's *Milk and Honey* exposes prevailing patriarchal patterns, notably how gender stereotyping views women and their sexuality.

Feminist literary criticism aims to challenge patriarchal practices in literature. A patriarchal society places a lower value on women. The interaction between men and women is impacted by the patriarchal culture that is governed by masculine norms. Inequality in gender relations is brought about by patriarchy, which gradually normalizes women's subjugation. The following poem illustrates how women are treated at their homes:

*When my mother opens her mouth  
To have conversation at dinner  
My father shoves the word hush  
Between her lips and tells her to  
Never speak with her mouth full*

*This is how the women in my family  
Learned to live with their mouths closed*

Families typically meet together to eat together at the dining table, which is also thought to be a private place for them to do so. However, the poem suggests that the speaker feels empty when eating with her family by showing empty seats and no food on the table. The poem itself goes into further detail about this connotation.

In the same vein, Plath, a famous poet, overcame all obstacles, limitations, and ethical issues to produce works of exceptional brilliance. She wrote during a period when men still occupy a dominant role over women. Women were expected to play specific responsibilities in the patriarchal society, stay in the kitchen, and never express their opinions. Because of this, Plath and the women she writes about in her poems felt trapped in these domestic jails and were longing to break free from the dominant sexist role. She was aware of the extremely complicated circumstances, prejudice, and conventional restrictions imposed on women. Plath's *Ariel* poems depict the range of emotions and a disordered mental condition, the anxiety and tensions of a woman writer's identity, and her knowledge of her body. In poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," Plath attempts to portray the repressive male design.

Plath's responses and challenges to masculine domination are portrayed in these poems. She constructs a father figure model to represent the dominance of the patriarchy. She plays the victim because she is a spokesperson for women. By projecting the victim's emotional state onto her father, she creates a male archetype.

The poet's hatred of the brutal patricide against the feminine body and the repressive construction of society is expressed in the poem. Plath uses the wounds endured by abused women as a springboard for her own expression of their emotions. In order to give structure to the patriarchal culture, she becomes a sacrifice object in this poetry by bringing back the image of a deceased father. She challenges the body and psyche that have been repressed by reshaping the father figure. It's an attempt to reclaim the female body and imaginatively seize control of the male universe. As a result, it turns into a means of escape into independence. She punishes the father for the injustice and brutality she endures with a brazen harshness and fury. The exaggerated image of the father takes on the shape of a monster when the woman is crippled by a male-defined position, and a longing for freedom arises: "Daddy, I had to kill you." Her father's sudden collapse slows her development. She despises her father for putting her at inferior position. She chastises this male demon, saying, "Daddy, I had to kill you".

In her poem "Daddy," Sylvia Plath conveys her childhood experience of tyranny and the challenges that many women encounter in a culture that is ruled by men.

This poem pits a woman's right to govern her own life and be free from male dominance against the power of men. The father needed to be the head of the household and have a strong hand. The speaker in Daddy presents her father with an image of a tyrant. The personal emblem of dominating, controlling power is the tyrant figure. Plath might be discussing not just her father's tragedy but also the patriarchal culture she lives in:

*Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the  
face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you. ("Daddy" 48-  
50)*

## II. CONCLUSION

The new feminine concept of woman is portrayed in the three poems that I have briefly examined as being imprisoned and devoid of subjectivity. Its objectification, which was seen as normal in the 1950s and the early 1960s, is called into question in three collections of poems where liberty is attained by the subversion of the traditional gender roles, which is interpreted as the murder of the masculine

body. The masculine body must die if the feminine voice is given the opportunity to be heard.

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