

Elaine Showalter's Stages of Gynocriticism as Represented in Selected Poems by Sylvia Plath: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: The main concern of this paper is to examine three of Sylvia Plath's poems, namely, "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad," "Stings," and "The Night Dances" from a feminist point of view. The paper explores how Feminist critic, Elaine Showalter's three stages of "gynocriticism" are represented in these selected poems. First coined by Showalter, the term "gynocriticism" means understanding female literary works and evaluating them from a female point of view instead of stressing women's oppression in society, the difference between men and women, as well as women's rebellion. Showalter suggests that there are three main stages of female literature: the "Feminine stage", the "Feminist stage" and the "Female stage." This study proposes that Sylvia Plath's poetic career can be traced in the light of Showalter's theory of gynocriticism. Her themes and attitudes towards men differ at three stages of her career according to the time in which she wrote a poem, her psychological state, and the circumstances that surrounded her while writing.

I-Introduction:

A- Gynocriticism

The first wave of Feminism, with its feminist works, appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, and extended roughly till the end of the fifties of the next century. It intended to defend women's social, political and economic rights. When the second wave of Feminism came in the sixties of the twentieth century, it defended women's civil rights against the prejudices and oppression of a male-oriented society. In 1970s, as Paula Nunez observes, both men and women were criticized for being "culturally constrained within their repressive sexual roles (11). Eventually, Gynocriticism was genuinely introduced by Elaine Showalter through her critical book, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, in 1977. She "pioneered gynocriticism" (O'Conner 1). Such a critical feminist movement came "to put an end to the stereotypical inferiority of female figures" (Nunez 12).

Gynocriticism is a new way of looking at females' literature from a female point of view that rejects the traditional way of looking at women as inferior and oppressed. Its main stress falls not on women's oppression by men, but on their writings and female creativity. In her article, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," Elaine Showalter defines Gynocriticism as follows:

In contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (377).

Showalter claims, in *A Literature of Their Own*, that gynocriticism deals with "female writers and their place in literary history," "the treatment of female characters in books by both male and female writers," and "the discovery and exploration of a canon of literature written by women" (277) It asserts that women's literature is based on women's experience, and not on male assumptions. This critical movement comes to study not only a female's gender but her psychology as well. Neelam Dasgupta and Jyoti Sharma write: "According to Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the internalized consciousness of the female. It is exploring the female subculture and come up to a female model based on psychoanalysis" (1). Elaine Showalter suggests three stages of women's writing. The first stage is the 'Feminine Phase' (1840 - 1880) in which female poets, authors and artists stick to male standards. They imitate men and avoid themes about women's problems and situation in society. Some Female writers use male pennames at this stage. Commenting on the writing of the women writers of this phase, P. Rajendra Karmarkar remarks:

These writers imitated the contemporary male writers and tried to write like male writer or in the pseudonym of male for fear of the male dominated society that discourages a woman to become a writer. The women writers wrote "... to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female culture" (37).

The second stage is the 'Feminist Phase' (1880 - 1920) in which female artists focus on women's issues like women's oppression and their role in society. It is a period of feminist protest against male values and unequal depiction of woman in male writing. In this feminist literature, the ordeals of the wronged womanhood are dramatized. Karmarkar goes on to shed light on this phase: "Feminists including male writers championing the cause of woman rejected the text that depicts a woman as a stereotype and opposed the traditional injustice done to woman (37).

The third stage is the 'Female Phase' (1920 - onwards) in which women have proven their validity and authenticity. Commenting on the female writings of this phase, Elaine Showalter observes that there is no anger or defensive attitude in their writings because their status has been proven and their views have been accepted in society (*A Literature of Their Own* 277). Gynocriticism concentrates on women's identities as they appear in their works

from their own point of view regardless of men's opinions. It rejects imitating men or following their tradition either in writings or in criticism. It rather encourages women to have their own assumptions and theories.

B- Literature Review:

Numerous studies about Sylvia Plath, Elaine Showalter and intersectional feminism have been done lately. One of the most recent studies about Sylvia Plath was carried out by Showalter herself in November, 2017, entitled: "Sylvia Plath's Different Shades". In this study, Showalter points out the different shades of Plath's of writings and stresses the fact that the portrait of this young female artist is still open to various assumptions on the part of readers, fans, observers, and curators.

Another study was done by Paula Nunez in 2016. The study is entitled: "Sylvia Plath as Feminist Icon: Critical Analysis of Plath's Poetry". This study clarifies that aesthetically Plath does not write as a woman but as a good poet, and that studying the feminist principles in Plath's works reveals the untrue nature of the myth of Plath as a feminist writer.

In 2015 Azadeh Nouri and Fatemeh Aziz Mohammadi did a research, entitled: "A Study of Carter's *Wolf Alice* based on Showalter's Gynocriticism". The research points out that the majority of Carter's work revolves around a specific type of feminism, the radical libertarian feminism, and highlights her critique of the patriarchal role that has been placed on women.

Neelam Dasgupta and Jyoti Sharma wrote an article in 2013. This article is entitled: "Anne Sexton's Poetry Tested on the Axis of Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism". The article asserts that Anne Sexton is truly a writer of the Female category as per Showalter. Her way of leveling woman sexuality with spirituality and creativity with procreativity was a novel concept.

In their article, "Form is the Ultimate Gift: Showalter's Linguistic and Cultural Model of Gynocriticism in Adrienne Rich's *A Change of World*", which was written in 2012, Soghra Nodeh and Farideh Pourgiv find out networks of influence working in Rich's early poetry; especially in *A Change of World*.

C- Sylvia Plath

The outstanding 20th century American poet, Sylvia Plath (1932- 1963) succeeded as a writer at a very young age. Paula Nunez sheds more light on this fact: "At a very young age, S. Plath showed her incredible qualities as a writer as when she was 8 years old she already published several poems in a diverse range of literary magazines" (7). However, she suffered from depression and attempted to commit suicide but was rescued and graduated from Smith College in 1955. Plath gained fame because of her mental sickness and suicide, her marriage to the British poet, Ted Hughes (1930-1998), and her concern with feminist issues. She was affected both negatively and positively by her father who was a German professor of biology. Commenting on this relationship, Büyükokutan asserts that her father inspired her greatly, but at the same time he caused her mental breakdown because of controlling her (292). Plath's work is valuable because of its concern with the contemporary real problems; such as: broken families, gender conflicts and economic inequities. She is against women's oppression and refuses to play the role of a victim; she hates to be betrayed or powerless.

According to Pereira, Plath's poetry develops into three main stages. The first stage is illustrated works before 1962. In this stage, Plath follows the percepts of modernists and accepts the aesthetic values of dualism, precision and formalism. She finds the subject of women as challenging and restricting. The second stage starts with *The Bell Jar* (1962), which is freed from formalist aesthetics. The third stage can best be shown in works after 1962 when Plath rejects formalism and looks for a major role for women free from any restricting aesthetic vision (105). It is here that Plath opens a new window to the free, endless world. Commenting on such a state, Myra Jehlen writes: "Indeed, the female territory might well be envisioned as one long border and independence for women, not as a separate country, but as open access to the sea (582). I think these three stages, which show Plath's attitude towards formalism, can be related to Showalter's three stages of gynocriticism.

The first stage can be applied to her premature poems like 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad' (1957). They stress "typical imagery of glass, moon, blood, hospitals, fetuses, and skulls." In these poems, she imitates admirable poets like Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and W. B. Yeats (1865- 1939). (Stevenson 1). The second stage is represented by "Stings" (1962). Plath writes poems about "traumatic breakdown and suicide attempt." She investigates landscapes that stand for her "imprisoned psyche under the looming shadow of a dead father and a mother on whom she was resentfully dependent" (Stevenson 1). In other words, she describes her suffering as a female in society after the death of her parents as she became lonely in life. The third stage can better be felt in her

poem "The Night Dances" (1965). After 1962, Plath had a son and her relationship with Hughes began to break as she discovered that he had been cheating on her. Actually, her poems at this stage show her independence and freedom as she writes about beauty and art. She does not concentrate on women's issues as she used to do.

II- Gynocriticism in Sylvia Plath's Poetry:

a- "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad" (1957): 'The Feminine Stage'

From a gynocritical point of view, Plath's "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up A Dryad" illustrates the first phase which is femininity as she imitates male poets whom she admires and does not concentrate on her originality as a female poet. Besides, she does not tackle the subject of oppression or feminism; but rather she concentrates on artistic issues and objectivity in art. She is greatly influenced by her husband Ted Hughes and adheres to all his instructions in writing poetry. In fact, he inspires her and chooses for her the topics she writes about. In her use of "dryad," she is influenced by John Milton's (1608-1674) setting in "Paradise Lost" (1667). Both poets consider gardens as settings and nymphs as characters in their poems. Plath is also influenced by John Keats' (1795-1821) "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819). Keats, also, uses a garden at his house as a setting for his poem. Both of them speak about the conflict between reality and imagination as well as the imperfection of art and love.

The title tells us that the poem is about nature; Sylvia uses "Dryad" to symbolize nature. According to Edward Butscher,

The impossible perfections of both love and art lured Sylvia's divided mind into poem after poem; the tension of strict opposites provided her with most of her literary material. Miming Stevens, she often turned to writing poetry about poetry: art confronting its own impulse and being. Two complementary pieces, "On the Plethora of Dryads" and "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," approached the creative process typically from two different sides. In both works the plant represents art's fecund possibilities, and it is accepted as a magical power. Dryad as cognate of druid reflected Sylvia's definition of the artist as a medicine man of sorts (180).

As Butscher remarks, Sylvia does not trust the full glamour of love and art. Besides, she considers them as imperfect factors that can never be fully accomplished in real life. Her poetry is rich with contradicted facts like the beauty of art including poetry and inspiration, and, at the same time, the imperfection and defects of art. She always contrasts art and reality as well as love and art. In this poem, she dramatizes the fertility, productiveness and abundance of nature as represented by the dryad or the fairy nymph of trees. Nature here stands for art which is in Sylvia Plath's belief magical and unreal even if it is perfect. She, actually, stresses the unreality of the perfection of art, and considers dryad as an ancient priest or magician who comforts people and spreads love among them.

She starts the poem, stating her belief:

Ravens through the persistent bric-à-brac
Of blunt pencils, rose-sprigged coffee cup,
Postage stamps, stacked books' clamor and yawp,
Neighborhood cockcrow—all nature's prodigal backtalk,
The vaunting mind
Snubs impromptu spiels of wind
And wrestles to impose
Its own order on what is. (*The Collected Poems* 65)

She simply believes that it is hard to draw a painting for a natural scene with a fairy nymph. Even after exhausting the mind, memory and hand to draw the painting and even after spending some time selecting the pencils, colors and papers, an artist fails to mimic nature perfectly; the painting will be insincere. He even fails in enacting the sight of dawn, sunrise and the slightest details of nature. The mind of the artist insults nature in trying to imitate the effects of the impulsive natural wind in the painting. The mind tries hard to control the universe but it is difficult because fantasy always prevails. It is more practical to imagine the sight instead of seeing it in the painting which distorts it. Hence, from the very beginning of the poem, it is noticed that the idea of the poem is not concerned with women, feminist themes or proving women's identity.

Plath believes that the mind should be proud of its ability to use the power of imagination. She contemplates:

'With my fantasy alone,' brags the importunate head,
Arrogant among rook-tongued spaces,

Sheep greens, finned falls, 'I shall compose a crisis
 To stun sky black out, drive gibbering mad
 Trout, cock, ram,
 That bulk so calm
 On my jealous stare,
 Self-sufficient as they are.' (*The Collected Poems* 65)

In other words; it is through fantasy that one is able to create a mental image of the "rook-tongued spaces," "Sheep greens" and "finned falls." All the elements of nature that are represented by rook spaces, moors and great falls can be seen more lively in a mental image than in a silent painting or any piece of art because in the mental image objects are true. The mind is personified as a person, telling us that he is able to give life to the image of the sky that seems to be powerless in a work of art. He can also change the calm fish, chicken and sheep in a painting into wild mad free animals by an eye stare that gives the imagination a space to work. In fact, Plath offers an invitation to use the faculty of imagination and contemplation that always leads to reality and truth.

Plath thinks that it is difficult for a logical person to use the power of imagination as he cannot live in a fantasy world away from reality. This fact might make a person unhappy as he sees things as they really are in reality. The speaker wishes if he can use the magical words "hocus-pocus" to conjure a nymph. It is a common term that is used by magicians when bringing about some sort of change or when conjuring a spirit. Plath muses:

But no hocus-pocus of green angels
 Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye;
 'My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,
 And that damn reliable tree won't practice charms
 To hypnotize sight:
 E.g., by insincerity of light
 Fabricate a Daphne;
 My tree stays tree. (*The Collected Poems* 65)

The speaker speaks to a doctor explaining his problem, saying that he sees a real tree that encourages reality and does not allow him to imagine the presence of a "Daphne" which is a nymph in Greek mythology that is transformed into a laurel tree to escape the pursuing Apollo. He cannot be insincere to himself, and imagines the presence of a nymph that is painted in a "Damaskas". It is an artful work which is made of a shiny fabric with smooth patterns. It cannot hypnotize the sight or help him imagine the presence of a nymph because it vitalizes the power of reason not the power of imagination.

Although the speaker tries hard to see the shape of the different parts of the tree in a work of art, he fails. His mind rejects the idea of believing in the appearance of the nymph as its shining shape cannot be perceived. She confesses:

'However I wrench obstinate bark and trunk
 To my sweet will, no luminous shape
 Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip,
 To hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank
 Spurns such fiction
 As nymphs; cold vision
 Will have no counterfeit
 Palmed off on it. (*The Collected Poems* 65)

Plath wants to assert, here, that logic cannot accept imaginative ideas like nymphs, fairies and nonexistent creatures. Natural landscapes can never be imitated in a work of art like a painting or an image.

However, Plath sheds light on the issue of life versus art aesthetic in the final stanza. She concludes:

'No doubt now in dream-propriety fall some moon-eyed,
 Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man watches
 My jilting lady squander coin, gold leaf stock ditches,
 And the opulent air go studded with seed,
 While this beggared brain
 Hatches no fortune,
 But from leaf, from grass,
 Thieves what it has.' (*The Collected Poems* 65)

The poem exemplifies Plath's concern with the conflict between art and life. It is one of the poetic assignments that Ted Hughes used to give to Plath as a kind of training. She tries to prove her assumption that art controls life. A reader of this poem agrees with Pereira that:

Although the poem opens with domestic details "blunt pencils, rose-sprigged coffee cup,/ Postage stamps, stacked books' clamor and yawn," they are not accorded aesthetic value; rather this lively profusion is mere "backtalk," requiring a "vaunting mind" to "impose/ Is order on what is" Even if formed into art, the domestic details would not satisfy the artist figure of the poem, who craves to create art by "fantasy alone" (66).

The artist figure that has been unable to conjure up a dryad ironically is contrasted to an ordinary insensitive man who is familiar with practicing this aesthetic trick of conjuring up dryads by fantasy. Whereas a realist artist, like the speaker in the poem, cannot depend on imagination as he cannot imagine or conjure the nymph; an imaginative insincere artist can do that by means of imagination. Plath criticizes the other kind of artists calling them thieves and insincere. In other words, Plath advocates reality and objectivity in art and rejects imagination and fantasy. Hence, it is obvious that in this phase Plath discusses an artistic issue away from feminism. She is actually influenced by her husband Ted Hughes.

b- "Stings" (1962): 'The Feminist Stage'

In this stage, Plath concentrates on the criticism of women's oppression and role in society. In "Stings," Plath criticizes women's situation as being oppressed, under the influence and control of men who dominated them. Light is also shed on the hard role of women in marital life and in life, in general; as they are compared to bees. Besides, Plath shows how women are the victims in any relationship even if they try to seek revenge against men; still they are harmed and badly affected. In a marital relationship, for instance, if a woman kills her husband or gets rid of him, she will undergo the tragic consequences of her deed because she will suffer alone in shouldering the responsibility of her children and their upbringing.

In "Stings," she compares the relationship between a man and woman to that between a bee and the honey farmers. She starts the poem, indicating that the relationship between them starts well as they cooperate in order to produce honey:

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.
He and I (Plath *Collected Poems* 214-5)

"He and I" may refer to Sylvia Plath and her husband, or to any man-woman-love relationship that can be symbolized by the bee and the honey farmer. The bee is kept in the hives or boxes by the honey farmer to be used for producing honey. Although the honey farmer does not own the bee but he controls her as it needs his hives, so they return to him as he offers it a clean, warm shelter where it can live. In the same way, "the man in white smiles" attracts the "neat and sweet" woman, and she falls in strong love with him as she needs the emotional feelings he provides. The Hive is a symbol of that strong love relationship between them as they spend a good time together there. The honey farmer is by the hive, guarding the bee and the bee is inside the clean cells, producing honey and organizing the cells. The hives, as Plath observes,

Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight combs of yellow cups,
And the hive itself a teacup,
White with pink flowers on it,
With excessive love I enamelled it (*Collected Poems* 214-5).

The hive is a place for fun as it is compared to a white cup of tea "with pink flowers on it." In the same way, the house where a man and a woman live is a comfortable place for them where they spend a good time, drinking tea and chatting together. However, here Plath refers to the fact that the woman tries hard to keep the smoothness of the relationship between her and her husband while he is passive since "With excessive love" she fills it.

However, women give so much in their relationships with men, believing that is the right way. They think that the more sweetness they add to their relationship the more successful it will be. However, Plath suggests that this is a

mistake because when a woman gives so much, a man becomes bored, and the whole relationship is destroyed. She compares such relationship to buying old furniture full of worms, being deceived by its appearance. She remarks:

Thinking 'Sweetness, sweetness.'
 Brood cells gray as the fossils of shells
 Terrify me, they seem so old.
 What am I buying, wormy mahogany?
 Is there any queen at all in it?
 If there is, she is old,
 Her wings torn shawls, her long body
 Rubbed of its plush
 Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful. (*Collected Poems* 214-5)

"Brood cells gray" are symbol of weak relationships that became unattractive because of the passage of time. The woman does not even feel a queen in such a relationship. She might dominate the relationship and control it but after a lot of suffering, being exhausted and having lost her enjoyment of life. Plath rages against women's oppression by men as the latter control the former and limit their freedom. As she believes, a single woman enjoys life more than a married or engaged one.

There is a great disturbance and confusion inside Plath that is shown in the following lines:
 I stand in a column surface
 Of winged, unmiraculous women,
 Honey-drudgers.
 I am no drudge
 Though for years I have eaten dust
 And dried plates with my dense hair.
 And seen my strangeness evaporate,
 Blue dew from dangerous skin. (*Collected Poems* 214-5)

She considers herself as one of the exhausted women who suffer in life and who work so hard to satisfy men and to keep their relationships successful. However, there is a sudden change in her attitude as she no more tries to satisfy a man. She reaches to a level in which she seeks her freedom and independence away from men. She rebels against men's authority and tries to prove her identity. She wonders:

Will they hate me,
 These women who only scurry,
 Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?
 (*Collected Poems* 214-5)

Plath, here, assumes that there are some women who enjoy sacrificing themselves in favor of men. There are some women who prefer to depend on men and to be controlled by them. She mocks these women and makes fun of them, believing that they might be angry at her rebellious attitude and might hate her. The poem reflects Plath's resentment towards men who are keen on subjecting women to their will, and towards women who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of men.

Sylvia Plath refers to the fact that, at this stage, she finally gets her freedom. She announces that she is in full control over man; she is no more dominated by him and does not accept his authority. She compares her productivity and fertility to a bee's as she will have her own mind, thoughts and identity. She is also against the criticism of anybody because she wants to do what she wants, regardless of others' opinions. It seems as if there was a change in attitude in the middle of the poem; she has freed herself from others' interference in her life and personality. It is now that any weakness that has been in her character as a result of an outside male influence no longer affects her. Although she has enjoyed such influences and considered them "sweat", yet now she hates them, and is happy to be free from them. She joyfully announces:

It is almost over.
 I am in control.
 Here is my honey-machine,
 It will work without thinking,

Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin
 To scour the creaming crests
 As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.
 A third person is watching.
 He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.
 Now he is gone
 In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat
 Here is his slipper, here is another,
 And here the square of white linen
 He wore instead of a hat.
 He was sweet (*Collected Poems* 214-5).

Plath believes that men's influence is charming and might change a woman's miserable life into a nice enjoyable one, but in this case a woman must sacrifice her freedom and independence. However, some women go in such exhausting relationships, and suddenly they recognize that their freedom is more valuable than the enjoyment they share with men. Consequently, they start to destroy their relationships and harm their partners whether physically or emotionally. In both cases, the women themselves suffer even if they seek revenge against their male partners. Exactly like the bees that die after stinging a beekeeper. Plath exposes her belief in the following lines:

The sweat of his efforts a rain
 Tugging the world to fruit.
 The bees found him out,
 Molding onto his lips like lies,
 Complicating his features.
 They thought death was worth it, (*Collected Poems* 214-5)

Plath even thinks that a relationship with a man is not worthy all these efforts, pain and sacrifices. She prefers to be free, independent and superior like a Queen. She claims that she has the strength of a lion, and can live alone without any help from men. She asserts:

..... but I ,
 Have a self to recover, a queen.
 Is she dead, is she sleeping?
 Where has she been,
 With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?
 Now she is flying
 More terrible than she ever was,
 Scar in the sky, red comet a
 Over the engine that killed her—
 The mausoleum, the wax house. (*Collected Poems* 214-5)

Paradoxically enough, Plath still feels she is weak but she is eager for freedom. She is soft and transparent like a bee that has "wings of glass". It is true that she is free and "flying", but she still suffers. She concludes the poem with the statement that she has had enough of men at this stage and that she is badly hurt. She will stop rebelling and calling for equality. Rather, she asks all women to enjoy their life away from masculine relationships that might be a prison or a grave for them. Women should not be like hard working bees that sacrifice their freedom and stay in "the wax house." From a gynocritical point of view, this poem is a turning point in Sylvia Plath's career as she rebels against women's oppression at the beginning of the poem, and at the end she announces that she has gained her freedom and independence. This poem is considered a preparation for the next stage in her career as she is ready to discuss universal themes, and will no more be concerned with women's issues.

c- "The Night Dances" (1965): 'The "Female Stage'

In this stage, Plath no more tries to prove her identity and views. She believes that she is independent and her works are genuine. She is more stable and is no longer concerned with women's issues. This poem was published

after Plath's death in her book *Ariel* which includes all the poems she has written before her death. In this poem, Plath shifts from feminist topics to other universal themes that might be tackled by a poet or a poetess. She talks about mother-child relationship, impermanence and transience of happiness as well as happiness versus reason. The poem seems to ruminate on the quicksilver passing of tender things.

The setting of the poem is a child's room, where the child sets in a cradle on a green carpet. The mother happily watches the child, moving and smiling. Plath remarks:

A smile fell in the grass.
 Irretrievable!
 And how will your night dances
 Lose themselves. In mathematics?
 Such pure leaps and spirals ----
 Surely they travel
 The world forever, I shall not entirely
 Sit emptied of beauties, the gift
 Of your small breath, the drenched grass
 Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies. (*Ariel* 7)

She thinks that this smile is such a pure rare thing that is impermanent. She wishes if these moments of the baby's smile continue, but unfortunately time passes, the baby grows and the smiles will not have the same purity and innocence. All these pretty smiles will be lost when reason dominates the child's thoughts, and he acquires more experience in life. According to Raza, in "The Night Dances",

the tender world of the child stands contrasted with the frail world of the mother. The poet feels the smiles and "small breath" of the child in the grass....The drawings and vague figures the child makes are "Pure leaps and spirals" which "travel" "The world forever." The company and experiences of the child constitute beauties and are a source of pleasure for the poet. They are like "lilies, lilies. (75)

The poet wants to show the beauty of the innocent world of the child as contrasted with her world or rather the world of the grownups to which he will move. She gets pleasure and happiness while watching her baby moving in the cradle and at the same time feels sad as she knows that he will grow up and be in her world that is dominated by reason, logic and reality.

Plath sees a great difference between the world of children and that of adults. She highlights this contrast in the following lines:

Their flesh bears no relation.
 Cold folds of ego, the calla,
 And the tiger, embellishing itself ----
 Spots, and a spread of hot petals. (*Ariel* 7)

The contrast between the two worlds is represented by a contrast between two flowers; the white calla and the tiger flower that is spotted with different colors. The white calla is similar to the pure innocent world of the child, while the tiger flower is similar to that of the grownups as it carries many colored spots like grownups who get wisdom and experience as a result of the situations they face in life.

Raza comments on the difference between the two worlds, asserting that the world of the child abounds in "beauties," "lilies" and "grass", while the world of adults abounds in "Cold folds of ego," "the tiger, embellishing itself" and the "comets" that have to pass through such an infinite space (75). I agree with Raza because when the child grows up all his smiles fade away as a result of the experiences, coldness and dullness of the world of the grownups. All those pleasures, affectionate movements and beauties are forgotten as the following lines show:

The comets
 Have such a space to cross,
 Such coldness, forgetfulness.
 So your gestures flake off ----
 Warm and human, then their pink light
 Bleeding and peeling
 Through the black amnesias of heaven. (Plath *Ariel* 7)

Plath is pessimistic as she sees the “pink light” of innocent pure childhood changing into red “bleeding and peeling” and finally fading out into “the black amnesias of heaven” disappearing into the world of forgetfulness. Raza observes: “The pathos in the poem is touching” (75). The mother can see the child, watch his movements and touch his soft skin but she is worried because all these blessings are momentary. The child’s innocent pure world disappears quickly and changes into the rational sensible world of grownups.

Plath stresses her sadness and sorrow in the following lines, regretting the loss of these childhood “blessings.” According to Mitchell, “the ontological crisis that is provoked by the speaker’s inability to comprehend her maternal role in “The Night |Dances,” her helplessness to reconcile the “pink light of her baby with the “back amnesias of heaven,” is encapsulated in the poem’s final word/ line; “Nowhere.” (164) In other words, the memories of childhood stick in a person’s mind but cannot be felt again. She wonders:

Why am I given
These lamps, these planets
Falling like blessings, like flakes
Six sided, white
On my eyes, my lips, my hair
Touching and melting.
Nowhere. (*Ariel* 7)

It is clear now that this poem represents the last phase in Plath's career (the female phase) since she does not discuss any feminine or feminist issues like those about women’s oppression or inequality with men. Rather, she discusses a universal issue that is tackled by both male and female poets; such as the closeness and transparence of mother child relationship, the temporariness and shortness of happiness as well as happiness versus reason.

III-Conclusion:

Through a feminist analysis of selected poems by Sylvia Plath, this study has highlighted Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism and its three stages of development. Gynocriticism is a new feminist approach that looks at females' writings from a female perspective. It is against the traditional feminist approaches that seek the equality between men and women. Showalter stresses the importance of female writers, their literary status, female protagonists as represented in literary works in general and the examination of literary works written by females. She concentrates also on women's identity, assumptions and theories as represented in their works from their own point of view, regardless of men's opinions. The three stages of gynocriticism suggested by Showalter are the "Feminine Phase" in which women writers imitate men and do not write about women's problems and situations in society, the "Feminist Phase" in which women writers tackle women's issues like women's oppression and their role in society as well as the "Female Phase" in which women's position has been proven and they no more produce angry or defensive works.

This paper has found out that Showalter's three stages of gynocriticism can be applied to Plath's poetry. The first stage is exemplified in her premature poems like "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad" (1957). In this "Feminine phase", Plath imitates admirable male poets like Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and W. B. Yeats (1865-1939). The second stage is represented by "Stings" (1962), where Plath examines landscapes that reflect her suffering as a female in a male-oriented society after the death of her parents. The third stage is illustrated in her poem "The Night Dances" (1965). In this "Female Phase," Plath shows her freedom, writes about beauty as well as art, and does not concentrate on women's issues.

It has been found that Plath's early poems reflect the first stage of gynocriticism which is the "Feminine phase." In her poem, "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad," Plath uses "dryad", imitating the setting dramatized by John Milton (1608-1674) in his poem "Paradise Lost" (1667). The setting in both poems is a garden with nymphs. She also imitates John Keats (1795-1821) who addresses the nightingale as "light-winged Dryad of the trees," in his "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819). Like Plath's, Keats' setting is a garden at his house. One of Keats' themes that influenced Plath is the conflict between reality and imagination as well as the imperfection of art and love. She tackles the theme of love as well as art, and considers them as imperfect factors that can never be fully accomplished in real life. She also stresses the unreality of the perfection of art, and considers dryad as an ancient priest or magician who comforts people and spreads love among them. It is noticed that the idea of the poem is not concerned with women, feministic themes or proving women's identity. Plath is concerned with poetry, life, and art. She tries to prove her assumption that art controls life. It is one of the poetic assignments that Ted Hughes used to give to Plath as a kind of training.

Besides, Plath's poems that are composed in 1962 represent the second stage of gynocriticism which is "Feminist Phase." In her poem "Stings," Plath criticizes women's oppression and their role in society. Women are controlled by men and play a very hard role in marriage life as they are compared to bees. Women are always victims in any relationship even if they try to seek revenge against men, they are badly affected. She considers herself as one of the exhausted women who suffer in life and who work so hard to satisfy men and to keep their relationships successful. However, at the end of this stage, she finally gets her freedom and has got rid of men's control. She no more tries to satisfy a man as she now dreams of her freedom, identity and independence away from men. From a gynocritical perspective, "Stings" is a turning point in Sylvia Plath's career as she criticizes women's oppression and states that she has gained her freedom as well as independence. This poem can also be regarded as an interlude for the next stage as Plath has her own identity and will no more be concerned with women's issues.

Moreover, Plath's last poems represent the third stage of gynocriticism which is the "Female phase." In her poem "The Night Dances," Plath seems to be confident of her liberated identity and views. She has become independent and her works are genuine. She does not stress women's issues; such as oppression and equality between men and women. Instead of writing about feminine topics, she writes about universal themes that might be attempted by a poet or a poetess. The most interesting topics she writes about are mother-child relationship, impermanence and transience of happiness as well as happiness versus reason. A baby's smile is such a pure, rare smile that is impermanent. She wishes if these moments of the baby's smile continue, but such smiles will not have the same purity and innocence when the baby grows. Plath contrasts the child's pure world with that of grown ups', world of logic and reality.

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مراحل النقد النسوي لدى إلين شوالثير ممثلة في قصائد مختارة لسيلفيا بلاث:
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ملخص البحث: الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هو دراسة ثلاث قصائد لسيلفيا بلاث و هي "صعوبة استحضر جنية" و "لدغ" و "رقصات الليل" من وجهة نظر نسائية. و تناقش الدراسة كيفية تمثيل مراحل النقد النسوي الثلاثة لدى إلين شوالثير في هذه القصائد المختارة. و قد صاغت إلين هذا المصطلح و هو يعني فهم الأعمال الأدبية النسائية و تقييمها من وجهة نظر نسائية بدلاً من التركيز على ظلم المرأة في المجتمع و الفرق بين المرأة و الرجل و تمرد النساء. و قد اقترحت إلين وجود ثلاث مراحل أساسية للأدب النسائي و هي "المرحلة المؤنثة" و "المرحلة النسائية" و "المرحلة الأنثوية". و هكذا فإن هذه الدراسة تقترح أن أعمال سيلفيا بلاث الشعرية يمكن تتبعها من خلال نظرية شوالثير للنقد النسوي حيث تختلف أفكار سيلفيا و اتجاهاتها نحو الرجال في ثلاث مراحل من أعمالها الشعرية و ذلك باختلاف الزمن الذي تكتب فيه القصيدة وحالتها النفسية و الظروف المحيطة بها أثناء الكتابة.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: النقد النسوي / إلين شوالثير / قصائد / سيلفيا بلاث / منظور نسوي.