

**Electra Complex in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath: A Yardstick of Gender Politics**

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**Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore that the Electra complex in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is a barometer of their gender politics, for 'their Electra complex is not marked by Freud's notion of physical, sexual desires but rather by a longing for the father's approval and social power'. Hence, the excessive attachment towards and obsession with the father figure in their poetry are an exertion to uphold their position in a phallocentric society and to protest against the female oppression. Their Electra complex that results from childhood repression and frustrated experience is inherently linked with penis envy, because in a patriarchal society, a penis (phallus) is not a biological organ only; rather it is a signifier, a symbol of power, a social recognition and a social identity. So, both the poets, being oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal gendered attitude, decisively express their Electra complex to represent their female voice. Therefore, this paper attempts to say that their Electra complex is a yardstick of their gender politics.*

**Keywords:** Electra Complex; Gender Politics; Anne Sexton; Sylvia Plath; Poetry

**I**

Both Sexton and Plath are widely recognized for writing poetry in a confessional mood by which they express the sufferings, anguish, private humiliation, patriarchal domination and so on. The confessional poetry of many women poets including Sexton and Plath opens up a new vista for them to express their "self" and uphold their identity. Hence, the Electra complex in the confessional poetry of Sexton and Plath can be claimed as one of the approaches of declaring their gendered 'self', for their Electra complex "results from

childhood repression or from frustrated experience” (Chung 91), and “is not marked by Freud’s notion of physical, sexual desires but rather by a longing for a father’s approval and social power or influence” (Kriel 23). Through the Electra complex, the poets, in fact, inscribe the female sexuality and female voice into the text: “with their autobiographical works, they write themselves into the canon and represent and deconstruct cultural images and linguistic codes of woman and suggest alternative modes of self and identity”. (Carmen 11)

In the realm of literary criticism, Electra is traditionally considered a heroic character. But, Freudian psychoanalysis judges Electra as the symbolic embodiment of potentially serious psychological difficulties. The term Electra complex is, as said by Freud, the ‘feminine Oedipus attitude’ or ‘negative Oedipus complex’ which was coined by Jung in 1913. It refers to “a type of arrested development in an older female child or woman, in which the daughter adulates the father and scorns the mother” (Swiontkowski 31). While Freud sees the complex from anatomical and sexual point of view, Jung sees it from a symbolic point of view where a biological father is often absent. If we read the poems of Sexton and Plath identified with the Electra complex, we will observe that both the poets exhibit a make-believe image of the father to symbolize patriarchal power what they want to accomplish. Their exposure of Electra complex in their poetry is closely connected what Gale Swiontkowski says in *Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich, and Olds on Life with Daddy*:

[F]emale poets desire the father’s creative potency, often symbolized in cultural terms by the phallus, and not the actual father in his physical, personal manifestation; in the poetry of these women the father is used as a symbol of his own social powers. Sexton’s poetry seeks her father’s power to protect and affirm her; much of Plath’s poetry seeks the father’s power to advance her ambitions, to accept her as an equal. (33)

Sexton and Plath demonstrate this tabooed topic overtly in their poetry and threaten the patriarchal custom by violating the restriction, exploring new possibilities and exposing individuality.

In Freudian theory, Electra complex is basically a psychosexual phenomenon which gives almost no attention to social issues. Contrary to this, Jung emphasizes on social factors responsible for Electra complex. But, in both cases, Penis envy is common, and it is a “girl’s lack of a male sex organ that leads to the ‘penis envy’ which in turn leads to the Electra complex” (Abou-Seif 15). In a patriarchal culture, a father having a penis / phallus is a factor of power and authority. In this regard, Swiontkowski rightly says that “the power of the father is symbolized in the phallus, the primordial symbol of unrestricted growth and desire – the absolute desire of being against which no human can compete” (71). It lies at the direction of her inferior position which eventually brings about the disempowerment for

women. Father's phallus is no longer a physical organ only; rather it becomes a signifier of the cultural and economic advantage of men. Subsequently, it has quite a logical ground for a girl to wish to possess a phallus. Luce Irigaray defines penis envy in *This Sex Which Is Not One* as follows:

It [penis envy] is to be interpreted as a defensive protecting the woman from the political, economic, social, and cultural condition that is hers at the same time that it prevents from contributing effectively to the transformation of allotted fate. "Penis envy" translates woman's resentment and jealousy at being deprived the advantages ... "autonomy", "freedom", "power", and so on; ... it also expresses her resentment at having been largely excluded, as she has been for centuries, from political, social, and cultural responsibilities. (51)

Therefore, the girl, who sees her father's authoritarian figure in the family and can connect his totalitarian image with the common nature of man, wants to grab power in the possession of penis, for it is "a manifestation of the little girl's need to establish a sense of her own identity". (Moi 28)

A female child appears at her psychic complex at the Phallic stage (3-6 years) when she feels the attraction to her opposite gender and replaces her attachments from mother to father. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says:

If the father shows tenderness for his daughter, she feels her existence magnificently justified; she is endowed with all the merits that others have to acquire the hard way; she is fulfilled and deified. It may be that she nostalgically searches for this plenitude and peace her whole life. If she is refused love, she can feel guilty and condemned for ever; or else she can seek self-esteem elsewhere and become indifferent—even hostile – to her father. (312)

From the extract quoted-above we can discover the reason why both Sexton and Plath describe a daughter's urge to establish her identity in a society through depicting the theme of Electra complex in their confessional poetry. Generation after generation she is regarded as the least important member in the family and is suppressed. It is cultural bias which pushes her to be passive and deprives her of her rights. Every decision of her life is dictated by her father, brother or her husband. Her position is just like a doll in the family; "she is treated like a living doll and freedom is denied her" (Beauvoir 305), because she has to conform to "his requirements, his expectations, his needs, his desires" and undergo "his threats, his power, his laws, his religion, [and] his gods," (Schwartz 4). Besides, a father is the "mirror images of security, consistence and presence" (5) to a girl; no doubt, the patriarchal cultural structure has made the situation like that. She observes that he can provide her with a doorway to the world and help her establish individuality. It is unnecessary to mention here that both Sexton and Plath are from patriarchal culture. Like any other daughter of the 1930s, Sexton and Plath

could discover the dominant position of the father, and the submissive state of the mother. The position of a father i.e. a male figure in patriarchy is always on the top since the “ritual, tradition, laws and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor” are in favour of him and he determines “what part women shall or shall not play” (Rich 57). Even the language through which women describe them is not free from his authority. Hence, this paper attempts to say that by exploring the theme of Electra complex in their poetry, Sexton and Plath want to grasp the power of the father to secure their identity as women and to reconstruct the stereotypical attitude of the men. The paper also aims at evaluating the Electra complex as a means of the female voice in the confessional poetry of Sexton and Plath supplementing the popular and much-debated theory of Electra complex expounded by Sigmund Freud.

## II

Anne Sexton is considered by many critics to be the best writer on women issues. For Example, Middlebrook hails Sexton’s voice as “distinctively female” and femaleness in her apprenticeship as “an aspect of identity that had, with great difficulty, been assimilated to the sense of authority necessary to mastery” (503). The Electra complex, in Sexton’s poetry, which is mostly associated with reconstructing the past memories of the father figure, is an approach to delineate her sense of authority. She demonstrates the father-daughter relationship from diverse perspectives in her poetry through which she endeavors to express her ‘self’. Many of her poems are abundant with the lost or relinquished father figure. The theme of “The Bells”, for example, is the loss of childhood innocence and fatherly love. In this poem, the speaker remembers those times when her father would take her to the circus. The past memories of the poet with her father still appear in her subconscious mind, and thus she connects herself with the father figure. So, the father-fixation is not physical, rather it is psychological which is an approach of getting relief from psychological crisis emerged from patriarchal subjugation, for she feels empowered with this psychic connection with the father figure. The poet says:

I remember the color of music  
and how forever  
all the trembling bells of you  
were mine. (27-30)

In the above lines, the poet reveals her oppressive Electral feelings. She exposes an idealized emotional union, a symbolic marriage between the father and the daughter and hunts for affirming her own emotions and experiences in the male authority. The lost father figure also reappears in “The Moss of His Skin” where the Electra theme is elucidated with the inclusion

of the mother. In this poem, the speaker is a young girl who is buried alive next to her dead father's body. The incident, besides reminding us of the old Arabian young daughters' alive burial with their dead fathers, rings a bell to the burning of the *Sati* which was once (before the 1930s) practiced in the Indian Subcontinent. The poet like an Arabian girl or an Indian *Sati* is furtively content "to lie down beside him / and rest awhile" (3-4). These two lines demonstrate psycho-sexual image, for the word 'rest' can mean to take a break at the time of sexual intercourse in order to rejuvenate and grow. This psychological father-fixation intensifies the poet's obsession for power with her emotional attachment to the father imago. With the progress of the poem, the poet-daughter compares between the father and the mother and values the father more than the mother, for she believes that he can protect her from the socio-political attack as he himself is the symbol of a ruler, a protector whereas the mother is the symbol of a victim. The daughter's psycho-sexual fixation with her father in this poem is to strengthen her position in society and to affirm her 'self' in patriarchy. The last two lines are striking to point out her deep inclination to violate the tabooed topics and to illustrate her father fixation like Electra: "I hold my daddy / like an old stone tree" (23-24). In these two lines, the speaker of the poem "explicitly employs a simile, an old stone tree to symbolize a phallus" (Chung 92). Therefore, her attachment to the old stone tree signifies her longing for empowering herself to raise her voice against the female subjugation.

The poet further demonstrates her childhood memories of intimate relationship with her father in "The Death of the Fathers" where she "seems to accept the right to sexual intimacies in the father she has always lived with, but not in the man who claims to be her biological father" (Swiontkowski 39). She looks forward to the father figure with whom she cherishes an enduring emotional attachment. The father-daughter relationship expressed in this poem is an embodiment of emotional involvement. In "Friends", an important part of Sexton's one of the longest poems "The Death of the Fathers", the poet is condemning the biological father to abuse her and make her sexually matured. The comparison of the poet with Charlie McCarthy "To pick me up like Charlie McCarthy" (22) reveals that the poet is just like a puppet to her biological father, which signifies a daughter's inferior position in the family. The tongue "and his tongue, my God, his tongue" (26) is a metaphor for the phallus, and this incident suggests sexual assault on the daughter-speaker. The poet does not find any similarity between the father she possesses and the father she meets. The two phrases 'dragging me up' and 'pushing me down'; "dragging me up and pushing me down/when it was you, Father" (36-37), are also suggesting sexual assault on the daughter-speaker. With these images, the poet portrays sexual abuse of a child. Here, the father-daughter relationship is the relationship between the rapist and the raped, because the daughter is sexually battered by the biological father. The poet's differentiation between the biological father and the

emotional one shows her disregard to the sexual attachment to the father in person and heightens her extreme obsession towards the father who she psychologically imagines. With the exposition of the Electra complex, the poet now unveils how a daughter-child is abused and maltreated in the family where “she first discovers the hierarchy of sexes” (Beauvoir 312). The Electra complex thus becomes a medium of exposing the poet’s gender consciousness.

The poet again explores the theme of Electra Complex in “How We Danced” which is another section of the poem “The Death of the Fathers”:

You danced with me never saying a word.  
Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.  
The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me.  
like a great god and we bent together  
like two lonely swans. (25-29)

The image of the serpent in the extract is an archetypal symbol of the phallus. The serpent is also the symbol of seduction and lust. The speaker in this poem once again describes the Electra complex in terms of seduction theme. The father seduces the daughter. The very negative image of the father, who is compared to a serpent, suggests that the theme of Electra complex expressed in this poem is not the daughter’s physical or bodily obsession towards her father. On the contrary, the poet shows her anguish for being seduced by the father figure. Thus, the rendering of the Electra theme, at this stage, exhibits how a daughter in a patriarchal society is physically tortured and becomes a victim of incestuous lust. Hence, father fixation described in this poem reveals the feminine voice of a victimized daughter.

Sexton works more with emotions than with facts. It is, however, impossible to separate the emotional experience from the historical one in her confessional poetry. Her poetic persona, like Electra, seeks affirmation of her own emotions and experiences in an idealized and externalized male authority. In “Mother and Jack and the Rain”, Sexton shows that a daughter’s regular identification with her mother leads her inevitably towards the father. She feels inferior, submissive and castrated which is socially constructed because of her resemblance with the mother. The poet vividly describes the frustration of Electra thus:

On my damp summer bed I cradled my salty knees  
and heard father kiss me through the wall  
and heard mother’s heart pump like the tides.  
.....  
The fog horn flattened the sea into leather.  
I made no voyages, I owned no passport.  
I was the daughter. (16-18, 20-22)

The poet is talking about the tie existed between father and daughter which is symbolic or spiritual, and not physical: “The imagination is the real world, and the father-man who can penetrate and impregnate that world brings light to the sun and music to the world. He is her beloved. Here is where her intimate intercourse is. Here is where incest is permitted” (Woodman 48). So, the daughter’s relation with her father in the position of the social power is a movement of abstraction and generalization and it is often better captured in symbols than in histories of actual experience. The poet reminds us of this in one of her untitled poems about a dream of a soldier who aims his penis at her and says, “Don’t take this personally” for “It’s my job” (Quoted in Swiontkowski 40). The poem, in this way, highlights the power relation between men and women in society which prioritizes the dominance of men over the passive women.

Sexton articulates the symbolic, universal Electral experience in *Transformations* with exceptional discernment. Here, the poet intensifies the modern reinterpretations of traditional fairy tales. This new approach in which the poet sees and judges everything from a girl’s point of view opens up a new horizon for her to see the world from the feminine perspective. The poet’s deviation from the traditional view of the tales suggests her self-esteem and her individuality. In “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)”, the poet discloses such a relationship between a father and a daughter that exists on the passionate love between two lovers. The speaker-daughter, ‘Briar Rose’ puts across her subconscious Electra complex towards her father:

I was forced backward.  
I was forced forward.  
I was passed hand to hand  
Like a bowl of fruit.  
Each night I am nailed into place  
and I forget who I am.  
Daddy?  
That’s another kind of prison.  
It’s not the prince at all,  
but my father  
drunkenly bend over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish. (145 -158)

In the lines quoted-above, the poet speaks from the first person point of view through which she tries to draw the attention of the audience to her personal experience. The traditional tale



of 'Sleeping Beauty' has been restated to convey the disillusionment of the adult woman who has discovered the world quite different from what she first learned to expect in hearing those fairy tales. The speaker imagines an incestuous relationship with her father imago but not with the actual father, so Freudian notion of sexual attachment between father and daughter is vague here. The daughter feels an obsessive attachment to the father imago because she wants to free herself from social castration. To her, the symbolic father is the absolute patriarch who determines the law and custom of society: "Do not think carnally, or you will be flesh, but think symbolically, and then you will be spirit" (quoted in Swiontkowski 67). In the poem "Divorce, Thy Name is Woman", she further represents a father figure who is not the biological father but a ghostly lover of the daughter:

I am divorcing daddy – Dybbuk! Dybbuk!  
I have been doing it daily all my life  
since his sperm left him  
drilling upwards and stuck to an egg. (1-4)

In many other poems including "Daddy Warbucks", "All My Pretty Ones" and "Flee on Your Donkey", Sexton describes the father fixation to foreground her gender politics. She knows that "the *sine qua non* of feminine identity in patriarchal society is violation of the incest taboo, i. e. the initial and continued preference for 'Daddy', followed by the approved falling in love with and / or marrying of powerful father figures" (quoted in Swiontkowski 45). Consequently, through the theme of Electra complex, the poet wants to create a place for her in the patriarchal gendered society.

### III

Sylvia Plath is a poet who did not have any opportunity to know her father closely as he died when she was only eight. So, her father remains preserved only in her poetry and most importantly in the extremely idealized Electral images of an eight-year-old daughter. Plath is called a 'Daddy-girl'. Her traumatic experience and patriarchal social milieu instigate her to represent the father image in her confessional poetry from varied dimensions. For this reason, father fixation emerges as a common theme in the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath through which she wants to achieve masculine power to protest against the female oppression.

Plath expresses her father fixation in much of her confessional poetry. In "Full Fathom Five", for instance, the poet depicts imaginary sexual attachment with her father: "Your shelled bed I remember. / Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water" (43-45). The 'air', i.e. the total atmosphere of her life is 'murderous', so she desires to 'breathe water' which indicates her suicidal tendency. Her obsessive desire to meet her father through suicide manifests her father-fixation. Her psychological crises make her life incredibly



arduous, so death is the only solution to throw away the murderous condition of her life. The purpose to unite with the father is not sexual here, rather it is spiritual. Hence, her purpose here is liberation through father-fixation.

The poem "Electra on Azalea Path" is a widely read poem of Plath from Electra's point of view. In this poem, she shows her rage towards her mother whom she charges for her father's death. To her, Aurelia Plath, her mother, impliedly killed Otto Plath, her father. She relies on Greek mythology to show the reader how her mother betrayed her. Comparing Otto Plath with Agamemnon, Plath not only continues to build his fabricated greatness, but also alludes to a Greek myth tainted with resentment and murder. Plath writes, "The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath/ The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth/ My mother unrolled at your last homecoming" (30-33). She alludes to this ancient tragedy, which results with the murder of a guilty mother. She further writes:

My mother said; you died like any man.  
How shall I age into that state of mind?  
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,  
My own blue razor rusting in my throat,  
O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at  
Your gate, father-your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.  
It was my love that did us both to death. (40-46)

We see that the daughter-speaker is angry and she blames her mother impliedly. The very first line of the quotation shows her detestation to her mother, for she makes her mother responsible for her father's death. She even feels her mother an enemy to her now: "In my deepest emotions I think of her as an enemy: somebody who "killed" my father, my first male ally in the world. She is a murderess of maleness" (Plath, *Journals* 433). In the poem "Electra on Azalea Path", she also embodies the endangered state of a daughter in comparison to her father. Her use of the Electra story in this poem shows her longing for death to reunite with the father figure. Therefore, her father-fixation refers to her psychological attachment by which she wants to empower herself with the phallic power of the father. The phrase 'hound-bitch' implies her inferior and subservient status. Thus, we discover that the "Electra figure is an unhappy, marginalized outsider, doomed neither to share the confidence of her mother nor to enjoy the fruits of her loyalty to her father". (Bassnett 88)

The same desire of reunion with her father through death, she again expresses in the poem "The Colossus". The poet attempts to die with the father in pursuit of love. In this poem, she describes the story of Electra with reference to the Oresteia. She tries to raise the remains of her father out of the water so that she can bring memory-images of the father up to consciousness. She is so closely connected to the dead father that she never departs her

intimate relationship with his remnants, and thus dives into the world of fantasy. She says: “My ours are married to shadow / No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing” (28-30). The poet’s life is married to the shadow in a literal sense, so she wants to reunite with her father by death. “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” is another poem where the poet represents the theme of Electra complex with the imaginary image of sex. The line “My heart under your foot, sister of a stone” (7) suggests the poet’s confinement to the imago of the death father. She further writes:

In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red  
The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings  
To father dynasties. The air is rich.  
Here is a queenship no mother can contest – (10-13)

We see that the poet regards her mother as a love rival because she is subconsciously talking from father fixation. The poet here in this context demonstrates the love-relation between father and daughter which consists of lust. The last four lines of the poem read thus:

Round, green, disconsolate as a tear.  
Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg  
Under the coronal of sugar roses  
the queen bee marries the winter of your year. (18-21)

She now identifies herself with the queen bee to get closed with her father who is a king bee. He has the control over all bees. We know that Plath’s father was an entomologist with a specific expertise on bees. Naturally, we can think that Plath is talking about her biological father but Plath’s critics Manner rightly says that Plath’s “manipulations of the Electra complex disinter the personal father – that memory of a father which becomes a fiction of the father – and simultaneously attempt to bury the father and his law” (152). The daughter-speaker certainly finds advantages in compliance with the patriarchal father figure, because she can realize “the father’s greater power, his access to that interesting wider world that is denied her mother” (Firestone 53). So, it is the power, the phallus, the signifier of every social issue with which a daughter shows her attachment.

Electra complex in Plath’s poetry has reached the zenith in its expression in the poem “Daddy”. In this poem, her approach is more violent than that of the other poems. Here, the Electra complex is illustrated in terms of restoring her power, which she has lost with the death of her father. About the poem she herself says:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two trains marry and paralyze each

other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.  
(qtd. in Hughes 293)

The speaker is torn between her ‘Nazi’ father and her ‘Jewish’ mother, which suggests the authoritative nature of the father and the submissiveness of the mother. The political issue like ‘Nazi’ and ‘Jewish’; oppressor and the oppressed portray the absolute power of her father and the slave-like status of her mother and thereby herself. She laments being a Jew, the symbol of the oppressed, subjugated, and wants to liberate herself from her Jewish identity. The two ‘trains’, which ‘marry and paralyze each other’, is her internal struggle between the father and the mother. So, Electra complex reconstructed in political terms in this poem is the direct outcome of the speaker’s subjugation. Furthermore, as physically she bears the resemblance to her mother, she criticises her mother and shows her anger towards her, since “the mother is the first image which has to be overcome in order to develop a sense of self, i. e. her individuality” (Plessis 51). She believes that submissiveness is not her nature, so she feels an urge to reunite with her father to empower herself: “I was ten when they buried you. / At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you” (57-59). The quotation sheds light on the poet’s frequent attempts to kill her and to ‘get back’ to her father. She wants to join up with her father to gain the phallic power, a weapon to affirm her position in a patriarchal society. Her father fixation is perhaps best expressed when she says: “And your neat mustache / And your Aryan eye, bright blue” (43-44). Plath further expresses, “Every woman adores a Fascist” (48) in which the word ‘Fascist’ is quite suggestive. Besides referring to the symbol of exploitation, it may refer to the indomitable strength and power of the father with whom she shows her obsession with. The comparison of the father figure with the ‘Fascist’ also advocates the connection of her private life with the public one. She finds no difference between the experience she assembles and the experience that other women meet. Therefore, her Electra complex in her confessional poetry suggests her gender politics because, through this father fixation, she tries to represent a female voice.

#### IV

In fine, we can say that both Sexton and Plath, by exploring the theme of Electra complex in their confessional poetry, lash out the existing patriarchal social structure and ascertain their feminine identity. Both the poets possess excessive obsession with the father who is “the symbol of absolute power and not a personal possession” (Swiontkowski 72). The Electra complex, for both the poets, is a means of discovering their power by which they represent a female voice on behalf of marginalized women. Hence, it is an approach to reform the traditionally castrated social position of women. The poets subconsciously or unconsciously show their fascination to the father since he [father-figure] “has the power to confer the

emblem of maleness (penis or phallus) upon her [them]” (Herman and Hirschman 57). Consequently, through their Electra complex in their confessional poetry, the poets develop “a new sense of self larger than the ego, a sense of self that is both individual and spiritual, both one alone and one of many” (Swiontkowski150), and seek a new identity which foregrounds their position in society. Therefore, the Electra complex identified in the confessional poetry of Sexton and Plath is a groundbreaking approach of their gender politics because by expressing the Electra complex, they expose conscious view of pain and anguish that women undergo within patriarchy and also try to come out of these pains and anguishes through achieving phallic power of the father.

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