

Elena Nistor

University of Bucharest

**"EVERY WOMAN ADORES A FASCIST":
MALADIVE ADDICTIONS IN ENGLISH WOMEN'S POETRY**

Keywords: *feminine writing, identity, alterity, language, voice*

Abstract: *Contemporary English feminine lyricism refuses the over-confidence of any kind of authority and proclaims a new rhetoric of the individual since emphasis shifts towards the genuine, the authentic, the trustworthy, as an ever more proficient aesthetics emphasizes the significant private and intimate, meaningful feminine experience. In long-unwritten personal histories, negations become part of bold statements that propose, among others, a new perspective on family relationships, particularly with the father. Protest and rebellion against the enforcing of authority displayed in fractured family relationships, as well as subversive ways of counteracting it, generate a sense of unease and disquiet initiated by Sylvia Plath in dramatic poems of psychic purgation. Systematic recollections of the self result in dispossession through direct confrontation with the everyday demons produced by imagination, in a potentially curative attempt to overcome victimisation and self-disintegration. Among other contemporary women poets, Selima Hill, Fleur Adcock, and Stevie Smith have invented personae in their poems to categorise and manipulate feelings in name-calling and broken idols through disruptive discourses, trying to retrieve identity in a ritual of survival and promote a secured, authentic self capable of integrating into the recognition and acceptance of others.*

One of the most visionary domains of self-consciousness, feminine writing, can be easily accommodated in literature, and particularly in poetry, as the activation of subjectivity – and, implicitly, personal control over the Word which arises as a supreme form of empowerment. Devised to conceptualise feminine alterity as energy undermining the patriarchal order system which guides Western thought, the writing strategies advocated by the French feminists – either as “écriture féminine” (Hélène Cixous), “womanspeak” (Luce Irigaray), or “jouissance” (Julia Kristeva) – call in question the female subject, exploring it through ways of writing that harmonise with its body rhythms and its experience of difference. This innovative proposal of “writing the body” is a celebration of the Woman at all levels (physical, spiritual, and intellectual), promoting the feminine instinct in a new form of playful symbolic plurality. Through feminine writing, the limits of western logocentrism are overcome, and a new way of emancipating the self, of authorising the ego, opens up: a place with no limits nor borders, a space of permanent renewal. Within this space, feminine identity is articulated into a confident self-centered universe escaping from conventional patterns of representation, from traditional rigid language. Women write themselves from outside the language constructed by men, and create their own writing by turning from the mere reception to the production of meanings in order to express what was previously considered unthinkable or unthought of.

Moving from fiction to poetry, women have started to call attention to such poetic conventions as voice and self-utterance, creating discursive systems with particular histories shaped by specific ideologies. Alogical, timeless, jocular, meaningless and meaningful at the same time, poetry is conspicuous by its plain honesty in articulating stories of the mind, indeed of the Mind, for all the individual experiences and emotions are eventually levelled to the common ground of human nature. Through the opening(s) provided by poetry, women learn to break free, exploring and expressing themselves without restraint, fear, or guilt; as their bodies enter the text, women start to tell their own stories in close connection with their real selves, to articulate the meaning of a subjecthood freed from

patriarchal language, to dispense with their invisibility, testing the limits of their creativity, without restrictions, constraints or inhibitions. In poetry, language is set loose: the chains of signifiers flow more freely, meaning is less fixed. The chain of repetitions and iterations of the playful signifier allows a never-ending metamorphosis into a complicated web of meanings and interpretations that are perfectly more consistent with the ebbs and flows of a woman's mind, as well as the throbs and pulses of the female biological structure.

Marked by anxiety and instability, frequently generated by a strong sense of alterity, the contemporary poems, either purely imaginary or based on real events, are often the outcome of a dramatic conflict between individualities, attitudes, spaces, and also between the facets of the self-divided personal identity which they either test or contest. The original way of delivering the personal messages highlights the privilege of difference as destiny assumed in poetry as a life style, in the Word that justifies the existence: the Word is the locus of radical change, both of the macro- and microcosm, of the outside as well as the inside. Realities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through and within the ironic and undermining plays of language – the empowering force that liberates the self, emancipates the individual who thus challenges the stereotypes and subverts hierarchies, achieving real personal freedom from frozen roles and perceptions. The Word gives coherence to the network of imaginary identifications that make up the subject.

Nevertheless, as the present linguistic phenomenon is much too limited and limiting for feminine experience, another language, another syntax, another grammar must be created in order to shape another myth, another body, another history: the history of the woman, her-story, i.e. profoundly individuated texts aiming at re-balancing the order of unity and identity. These sex-texts can fully articulate a comprehensive narrative of the female mind, body, and soul, a network of possible relationships and experiences that have previously been banned from reality. Through the perpetual process of self-mirroring and self-correction, these extremely subjective texts are aimed at telling of a reality which otherwise would not be available.

The strategy of re-imagining identity is best exploited by Selima Hill in *Bunny* (2001), an exercise of self-creation, self-deconstruction and reconstruction through language. *Bunny* is an amazing series of simultaneously baffling and dark lyrics forming the discontinuous narrative of a teenage girl suffering sexual abuse, and eventually taken away and hospitalised. The focus lies on the girl's severe dislocation of emotions and passions, her vulnerability and emotional pain displayed in delicate poetic language, richly allusive and imagistic. There is a tragic journey of dislocation of the feminine spirit, in its transition from girlhood to womanhood, and its isolation from the strange adults who amplify her feelings of exposure and helplessness. The narrative is splintered and fractured into short pieces resembling cryptic haiku – macabre meditations on the loss of innocence, reflecting the disturbed self-chart of a terrifying subterranean life of the mind.

Hill's subtle and balanced lunacy creates a strange picture of endangered innocence in a collage of snapshots of the teenage girl's life and struggle to come to terms with displacement, loneliness and shame. Bleak imagism is paradoxically brightened by Hill's poetic inventivity that creates a surreal world of "a silver spoon the size of a cold lily", "mirrors like flattened eyes", or "pimples like rare fruit". The fascinating and the menacing are reinforced by the sparseness of the poems (most of them only six short lines) – aphorisms conjuring a weird, claustrophobic world within which everything seems tainted with the sinister and the corrupt, as in Hill's poem *Chicken*: "He's roasted her a little golden chicken" (Hill 27).

The simple depiction of an apparently benevolent male character cooking a meal for the protagonist hides, in its simplicity, the depths of a personal drama: the banal action of roasting, in the image of naked exposure to open fire, suggests the torture of the defenceless victim to the fire of guilty passion. The impossibility to escape fate is further amplified by the extirpated personality of the maltreated teenager, relocated in the dead bird, a reminder of crude innocence – the "little golden chicken"

whose crunchy breasts he's skilfully removing
and laying on her plate like roasted crocuses (Hill 27).

The almost ritualistic stripping off the flesh unequivocally points to bodily (and, implicitly, mental) fragmentation, brutal depersonalisation and alienation under the pressure of abuse. Somehow, it is obvious that the young girl is identified with that chicken: the lodger will cook and serve her up with the same fastidious relish.

There are repeated instances when the sophisticated and rapacious sensuality of the lodger is juxtaposed with the girl's pubescent blossoming, causing her retreat into a private universe. Her communication with the outside remains basically visceral, as her anatomy (painfully inscribing her body to her destiny, in a purely Freudian sense) appears to be the only means of establishing common grounds, through the lips she "carries... discreetly" and which seems to become, at the same time, the destructive forces that paralyse her spirit as the lodger "crams them down her throat / like broken glass" (Hill 22).

Through objects and associations, Hill tells oblique tales where silence and absence count for as much as what is visible and explicit. The entire atmosphere is pervaded with desolation, simple needs for affection and security unmet and betrayed, and horrors that can be alluded to only glancingly, through metaphor and symbol. The formal composure and restraint of the verse replicates the contained chaos of the girl's solitary life. There are terrifying traumas that can hardly be exorcised, in a place like *Home*:

When she thinks of home, the word *home*
echoes in her mouth (Hill 45).

For Hill, there is no conventional home, and no interaction in the real sense: dislocation is acutely revealed in harsh terms of denial which result in indifference and hopelessness. The impossibility to find refuge for the spirit within the walls of what should be the residence of the self is tacitly confirmed in echoes of real sounds: "like the dead/ echoes in the mouths of the living." (Hill 45)

The only refuge is self-sublimation and the retreat within a personally constructed microcosm, until the ego becomes unable to differentiate between the borders of its own world and another world. If the in-depth view reminds of Buñuel or Almodovar's surrealist worlds, it is because Selima Hill's mirror of imagination distorts and reveals, at the same time: in the end, nothing is certain, except that there is cutting pain leading to estrangement from her sister, and splitting laughter that helps her survive the breakdown of marriage. Nihilism turns into an obsessive attachment to the ideal of solitude, preserved through viole(n)t sarcasm and bitter tantalisation from a distance – anyway, preferable to the impulses of literally tearing the flesh of the wrong-doers. Protest and rebellion against the unreasonable and petty enforcing of authority, as well as subversive ways of counteracting it, generate a sense of unease and disquiet amongst often traditional and softly-spoken lines.

The same difficult relationship with men, though somewhat more defensible given the clearer family hierarchy, is emphasised and analysed by Sylvia Plath in her courageous "Daddy" – a poem of total rejection of family and society, modern world and, finally, the self. The sequencing of her recollections of childhood is a dramatisation of psychic purgation: the persona's systematic recollection of all the mental projections of her father amounts to dispossession through direct confrontation with a demon produced in imagination, in a potentially curative attempt. Through the heavy cadences of nursery rhyme and baby-like words ("chuffing", "Achoo", "gobbledygook"), a child gives world and life a mythic dimension: its inner voices map the landscape, both within and outside. Words are dissolved into infantile patterns of sound regressing to childhood fantasies, where every German is a potential father and the German language seems an engine. As the past is pathologically connected to present, regression requires minimal distance for the adult woman, unable to relinquish the childish perspective:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal. (Plath 49).

As the string of memories excludes baby talk, developing a more exclusive vocabulary of venom, there is a change in the method of dealing with the father image, moving from childhood projections to a complete abjuration of the paternal picture, in a derisive commentary of the idealised father figure. The virulence of statements encodes a ritualistic attempt to transform childhood – and childish – attachment into adult hatred and, thereby, need to decimate the haunting image. The poem has a strong auditive effect – one can almost hear the gradual release of suppressed anger, building to the triumphant dismissal:

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –(Plath 49).

The turning point in the poem, and in the ego coming to maturity points to the subject's effort to purge herself of the psychological significance of the father image:

And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look.(Plath 50).

The baffling statement (“I made a model of you,”) suggests her forging of a prototypical man, the result of her merging the father with the husband. Thus, the image of the “man in black with a Meinkampf look” is given the dimension of two realities to be destroyed. After failing to escape predicament through attempted suicide, Plath married a surrogate father who obligingly was just as much a vampire of her spirit – the one who “drank blood”, so, when driving a stake through her father's heart, she exorcises not only the demon of her father, but also her husband's (and, implicitly, all men's):

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –
The vampire who said he was you.(Plath 51).

Finally, the only way to achieve relief and become an independent self is to kill the father's memory by metaphorical murder. The father, further echoed in boyfriends, lovers, and husbands, is recognised as an agent of destruction, both mental and physical. For sexual fascination of cruelty is strenuous, as

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute...(Plath 50).

This maladaptive addiction is revealed by both Selima Hill and Fleur Adcock in what might be read as openly autobiographical poems. Hill's “My Life with Men” is a painful account of alien dominance over the imagination of a monomaniacal daughter/girlfriend/wife fighting against her victimisation. Her tone of rebellion and anger, attempting to supplant grief and depression, is the outcome of the drama of female language silenced by the destructive, prompting patriarchal discourse. The significance of gender and self-recognition is of particular importance in unfolding the story of the abused body, amputated mind and soul, instinctively covered in shame:

The first man I attracted
was my father...
Next, the man who called me
Schlobovitz...
And then the man I found upstairs in bed,
who said he was my

Unexpected Brother.

Why do people have to lie like that? (Hill 117).

The carefully measured irony, matching the tempered pace of the poem, reveals the hysterical need for complete control. The simple, incantatory monologue is the perfect vehicle of expression for an orderly disordered mind. The sincerity of language matches the simplicity of thinking that has, in fact, subsumed all feelings and thoughts. The conversational mood of the poem is a demonstration of a mind confronting its own suffering and striving to gain control in a world governed by the masculine principle:

And later on I met his friend The Man.
And then another...
I never loved them but I wanted to...
So much, in fact, I even married one,
and went to live in Manland, among Men...(Hill 117).

“Manland” is a hideous dystopia of dead flowers, headless animals, weapon-children, where women seem to indulge in masochism, subject to “long machines” that accentuate neurosis and remind of the Plathian engine “chuffing off” the female personality that finds no escape from its increasing neurosis. The same sense of incapacity to avoid the nightmarish world pirated by male patrons is reflected in Fleur Adcock’s *Bogyman* – an overt reference to the mysterious character, vague in appearance, the usually malevolent shape-changer. A man of no distinct habitat, Bogyman can appear out of nowhere, haunting individuals and whole families. This time, it is a Bogyman re-encountered at a mature age (a sort of Plathian “daddy” having lost his magical power to dominate and terrify):

He is not as I had remembered him,
though he still wears the broad-brimmed hat,
the rubber-soled shoes and the woolen gloves.
No face; and that soft mooning voice
still spinning its endless distracting yarn. (Adcock 209).

Fearsome and piratical, associated with blackness, he still inhabits the tenebrous depths of the spirit, bringing to surface all the personal terrors of the worst that can happen. The grotesque inflation of private anguish and fear might pertain, again, to the monstrous relationship between father and daughter, for the distress of past obsession is quite perceptible:

He was the risk I would not take: better
to make excuses, to lose face,
than to meet the really faceless...
But I met him, of course, as we all do. (Adcock 209).

There is an intense and painful inward state, translated into a quietly vengeful voice, that suggests that the psychic torture of the past resulted in the self’s stepping outside the real, into the land of imagination. This has given the self a dimension of detachment and impersonality as, it seems, otherwise the subject could have been destroyed by self-pity:

Well, that was then; I survived; and later
survived meetings with his other
forms, bold or pathetic or disguised... (Adcock 209).

The fearsome Bogyman metaphorically extends from father to other men – slivered carvings of appearances to be feared of most, sometimes irrationally. But, unlike Hill, here arises an ethics of non-victimisation and survival through the articulation of a distinct personal history deeply rooted in the

subjective case of self-consciousness, as the ego and its maturity seem to be the only salvation for the present and, hopefully, for a future of self-situatedness and anchorage in the reality of English life:

...Shall I be grandmotherly, fond
suddenly of gardening, chatty with
neighbours?... Or sipping Guinness in
the Bald-Faced Stag, in wrinkled stockings?... (Adcock 210).

The self appears to control its personal terrors by forcing them into images, and thus achieving an understanding of the confusing projections created by its wild imagination. Developing memories of past torture, the ego can categorise and manipulate feelings in name-calling and broken idols, thus recapturing the sense of self in a ritual of survival, without being able to elude the sense of betrayed expectation and deceived faith.

The same chronic disappointment can be detected in Stevie Smith's relationship with authority, this time with the Supreme Father. As she seems to have already acknowledged the divine ways, she acknowledges the presence of no guardian angel, no hope, no Adonai. For Smith, nothing is ventured, and nothing is gained: her songs of rebellion reject the promise of salvation and resurrection – there is no forgiveness, no understanding in her harsh rhythms of disbelief. Although in her childhood Smith is reported to have loved the ceremonies of the church, somehow she gradually became less certain, and eventually agnostic. Taking the liberty of becoming a non-believer, she rejected the illusion of living on a promise, commonsensically dispelling the grounds of expectation for future achievements in another realm than the Earth. The habitat of God and His angels seems to have no appeal to her:

What care I if good God be
If he be not good to me,
If he will not hear my cry
Nor heed my melancholy midnight sigh? (Smith 18).

Stevie's choice – and bravery – lies in the constant irony of mighty mercilessness, supreme indifference, and absolute silence from above. For her, there is nobody to perform the order of the world: each is responsible for his/her own fate and living. Her repetitive existential question reflects her overt neutrality, lack of interest and attention for divine creation (the lamb, the "golden lion", the "mud-delighting clam", sun, moon, and stars, etc.). The mosquitoes and biting midges, as well as the large African antelopes are seen with the same lack of interest: "What care I if skies are blue,/ If God created Gnat and Gnu..."(Smith 18). It is, however, absurd to expect God to have created the universe to satisfy any one individual's desires, and the idea is greeted with ridicule: "What care I if good God be/ If he be not good to me?" (Smith 18)

The goodness of God is acknowledged in recovery from illness, or escape from harm, or victory in a battle – not in deliverance from personal failure, pain or sadness. Nevertheless, God may well be a human construct, and thus a comfortable response is not possible, as simple dialogue is not satisfactory for the self, as long as it cannot find gratification in that similar otherness. Basically, all questions of identity are dealt with through logos codifying a mode of self-expression that is cyclical, emotive, rebellious against rigid, pre-established definitions, and that can help the spirit live with oneself at peace.

Contemporary British feminine lyricism refuses the over-confidence of any kind of authority, and proclaims a new rhetoric of the individual. The wide diversity of race and place, gender and age gives rise to a revised politics and polemics of self-mapping in terms of long-unwritten personal histories. The emphasis shifts towards the genuine, the authentic, the trustworthy, as the ever more proficient aesthetics emphasizes the significant private and intimate, the meaningful unique and inimitable feminine experience.

The recent decades have marked a shift in the centre of British poetry, as it becomes more and more celebrative of the newly acknowledged pluralism that grants greater diversity in terms of age, race,

and gender. The new re-mapping of identity is forging the rhetoric of self-revaluation within an environment of open dialogue based on congruent turn-taking. This anti-isolationist ideology balances differentiation, and promotes a heterology aimed at integrating the natural and personal values of the self, secured in its recognition and acceptance by the others. Perpetual mobility and change find expression in artistic codes that explore highly subjective histories, as with the ever-flourishing contemporary domain of poetry written by women, particularly in the specific multi-dimensional configuration of British culture. The literary productions of British women poets engage in a demise of the collectivist model, encouraging self-sufficiency and self-reliance in disruptive discourses.

The traditional roles and culturally received stereotypes are exposed and challenged in a plain multitude of voices and tones, in perfect tune with the natural rhythms of feminine anatomy and psyche. The recently adopted strategy to speak up the female body and mind, increasingly advocated by postmodern feminist and theorists (particularly the French feminists H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva) translates into a unique mode of writing – fluid and cyclical, highly emotional and sensitive. This non-linear, polysemantic logos provides an effective means to interact with, and incorporate, the simultaneity of life, in clear opposition with the pre-conceived order of the modern age.

Protean and profuse, the current poetic discourse of British women artists repudiates the rigid and intransigent canon of fixed verse, rarely employed to convey feminine subjectivity. There is a strong attachment to blank verse, as feminist aesthetics is located in content rather than form, insisting on the importance of accessible reportage and authentic personal testimony.

Other poetic techniques are added to enhance the vigour of the contemporary feminine-feminist poetics: intense sound patterns such as alliteration and assonance, internal rhymes prevailing over traditional end-rhymes, as well as a vast range of metaphors (from sad to angry, from pensive to bemused, from complaining to wondering, etc.) whose power illustrates all the aspects of identity, from highly intimate to overtly social experience. Silence and laughter are often added to legitimate ideas, and control particular situations or contexts. Restrictive power structures are subverted and discarded by ridicule and derision that reformulate interaction and settings, as well as by mock-ironic or paradoxical arguments that weave a texture of linguistic surprise, a baffling composition that energises the feminine lyric.

By the linguistic devices and strategies they employ, and the generosity of the English language as their advantage, British women poets refreshen old structures and syntagms forging a previously untried mode of expression. The intention and importance of language reside in dynamism and inventiveness as words are summoned to create a linguistically innovative writing. These mechanisms are intelligently set in motion in women's poetry whose key feature is unsparing multiplicity, the chameleonic nature of their heteroglossia asserting not only the textuality of sex, but also – and more importantly – the sexuality of the text. Dispensing with the linguistic taboos and rejecting inertia and monotony, the poetry written by women incorporates an ideological diversity, together with an awareness of a public of certain social, moral, ethnic, racial and sexual affiliations, and audaciously approaches an audience undivided by ambitions and unrestricted by stereotypes.

In this context, the distinct individual discourses permanently yield other meanings and significances, new personal codes and systems – all these expressing the pressures and conflicts of the ego caught between dispersion and re-creation. Marked by anxiety and instability, frequently generated by a strong sense of alterity, the poems written by women, either purely imaginary or based on real events, are often the outcomes of a dramatic conflict between individualities, attitudes, spaces, and also between the facets of the self-divided personal identity which they either test or contest. Poetic productivity and richness generate significant specific identities – regional or local, racial or ethnic – but, above all, gendered –, the narcissistic reshaping of the canon building a more accurate understanding of the natural and social character and its accomplishments. The ultimate achievement is a more intensely cultural definition of the self, a psychosomatic exclusion of tribal belonging in favour of individual thinking.

Under the auspices of the New Millennium, and the new realities that encourage the dissipation of borders and backgrounds, lifestyles and aesthetics, personal logicity asserts the importance of non-exclusive subjectivities, and the acceptance of a rather hyphenated identity. Thus, Woman-Poet arises not as

an arbitrary concept, but as direct derivation from the physical, social, and cultural experience of post-postmodernism, as messenger, invigilator, and timekeeper in a time of increasingly urgent self-communication and demandingly positive mutual understanding. As Mimi Khalvati, one of the most talented exponents of contemporary British feminine-feminist poetry, asserts,

We need, as women poets, to be vigilant, generous, supportive and celebratory. We also need to set our sights continually higher, to be ambitious, self-critical and brave in our self-belief. (*International Notebook of Poetry* 165).

Works Cited

- Adcock, Fleur. "Bogyman". *Bloodaxe Bood of Contemporary Women Poets. Eleven British Writers*. Ed. Jeni Couzyn. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1985. 209-10.
- Hill, Selima. "Chicken". *Bunny*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2001. 27.
- . "Home". *Bunny*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2001. 45.
- Khalvati, Mimi. "What does it mean to be a poet today?". *International Notebook of Poetry* No 5/2004, Poems in Translation: East and West. Essays on Poets and Poetry, LiterArt – XXI. Norcross, GA, USA. 165.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Daddy". *Collected Poems Reissue*. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1981. 49-51.
- Smith Stevie. "Egocentric". *Selected Poems*. Ed. James MacGibbon. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978. 23-4.