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CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH AND AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY

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Abstract
This paper argues that British and American women's poetry has suffered critical victimization in terms of the canonization of great writing. It recognizes and exposes some examples of great women poets and shows how the work of such women has been neglected, slighted or at least not given enough critical attention. The paper investigates the hypothetical contention that British and American Women's poetry continues to suffer critical victimization at a set of values and concepts of poetic vocation set by men with the assumption that all poets are men. It also does a comparative examination of the appreciation of women's poetry in Britain and America and surmises that American women poets have been more critically received than their British counterparts. On the whole, the paper shows that women's poetry has not yet received the appropriate critical acclaim that it deserves. Rather, it has been neglected, denigrated, and misread, being judged by the inappropriate standards of a literary establishment put in place by and for men. It is for this reason that no definitive history of women's poetry has yet been written.

Keywords: Women's Poetry, Marginalization, Critical reception

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Criticism of British and American women's literary creativity began as far back as with the works of such renowned literary giants of the Romantic period like Madame de Stael, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Virginia Woolf. This was followed during the Victorian era by works of equal importance by women poets like Emily Dickinson. The critical treatment of women's poetic creativity at this time was highly misogynistic as it emphasized both female incapacity for poetic invention and women's inferiority in matters of experience, knowledge, and education. Women's image as poetess was satirized in male texts, and this seems to have had an effect on continuous female creativity, resulting in a silence of women on the art of poetry. Margaret Homans has argued that women experienced an incompatibility between femininity and poetic subjectivity in the twentieth century that hindered their success.

In Acheson and Huk's *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Criticism,* Claire Buck's essay, "Contemporary Women's Poetry in the British Women's Movement" locates a difference between women's poetry in Britain and that in the United States: "The cultural location of feminist poetry in Britain emerges as most clearly different from that of poetry in the U.S. even despite the influence of the United States Women's Movement on British Feminism" (99). Buck notes the confidence that American women have had in the important part that poetry plays in the Women's movement and attributes this confidence to "the professionalization of the poet's role within the academy in the United States" (100). This professionalization, Buck remarks, is a much more recent and limited development in England. According to Claire Buck, the odd split in British politics between a more progressive social policy and a model of good culture has been very limiting to women. Her allusion to this split is reminiscent of the Victorian

insistence on decorum and high culture, and as she insinuates, this tradition is perpetuated in modern British society by an aristocratically inflected nostalgia for recognized forms of high culture, designed for the edification of the middle class. In *Contemporary Women's Poetry,* edited by James Acheson, several of the essays take up the issue of the influence of feminist discourse and action on women's poetry and identify differences evident in practice with regard to poetic models of representation, self and expression. They are a reminder of how little women's poetry has been accepted or recognized in any of the camps of British poetry.

In a critical survey of British poetry since 1970, Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt believe that "the 1970s notably lacked defining and unifying social issues with imaginative content" (xii). This assertion seems to demonstrate a total oblivion on the authors' part of the vibrancy of the feminist movement as a social issue at the time which most critics think has had far-reaching effects both on literature and on the way the totality of life has had to be conceptualized. It was at this time in the literary world that a flurry of literature and poetry by women burst into existence. Even in Britain at this time, many female poets had started writing distinctly feminist poetry. A whole collection of about fifty of such poets is published in *One Foot On The Mountain*. The fact that critics are totally oblivious of this shows that British women poets were being silenced. . This tendency to ignore women's poetry is demonstrated in Peter Jones's and Michael Schmidt's *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, in which no single chapter is dedicated to women poets, and the few women poets mentioned are usually described in single paragraphs or pages. These editors describe feminist poets in general as a disaffected group:

> Another disaffected group whose opposition to a purportedly male-dominated literary culture has led many numerous women poets to retreat into small workshop groups…a good many feminist poets are more interested in furthering the women's movement than in the distillation of their art. (146)

The above assertion shows that British Women poets' inability to get the acclaim they deserve stems not from their lack of ingenuity but from an act of silencing imposed by the dominant patriarchal male literary establishment. But according to Jones and Schmidt, the choice is the woman's: "women who might in the past have published with larger houses have begun to prefer the readership of the committed few" (146).

In *Poetry Today: A critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1995,* Anthony Thwaite describes feminist poetry as 'flat declarative stuff about the awful vanities of men and the unsatisfied lusts of women" (149). In a two-and-a-half page section entitled "Some Women", a few women poets are discussed in a book which critically examines over forty male poets. When women are mentioned anywhere else in the collection, it is to show how the work of male poets is "the *animus*- the male principle, backing unto the female principle or *anima* [in the women poets] as two sides of the same coin…'' (160). This implies the impossibility for women poets to stand on their own merit.

In general, British women poets suffered exclusion from the literary canon from the 60s to the 70s and even as recently as 1982, Bale Morrison and Andrew Motion's edition of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* contained no woman poet. In response to this marginalization cum silencing of the British woman poet, Tillie Olson Writes in *Silences* that:

> The fear of reprisal from the publishing and critical arena is a looming obstacle to the woman writer coming to her own authentic voice. Fear –the need to please, to be safe- in the literary realm too. Founded fear. Power is still in the hands of men. Power of validation, of publication, of approval, of rejection…. (257)

The focus on women's poetry in this study is therefore partly a desire to disavow the male critics claim that women's poetry is only concerned with "women's unsatisfied lusts and sardonic reports from the sexual battle front calculated to make the reader snigger and fidget with embarrassment" (Thwaite 149-150). The work falls in line with Alison Marks and Deryn Rees Jones' point of view that,

> It is worth the risks re-inscribing the gender divisions or perpetuating the category of the 'woman poet" in order to provide a critical perspective on the work of a range of women whose work is in the main critically neglected. (xxii)

The present work also agrees with Larrissy's assertion in *Reading Twentieth Century Poetry* that "the objectification and belittlement of women is of universal interest, and even the association of male dominance with fascism poses a more disturbing *prima facie* plausibility than many would like to think" (145). Many women poetry anthologies began appearing in the literary market from the mid-eighties, beginning with *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* 1985.

Criticism of the poetry of individual British women poets before the eighties followed the same derogatory pattern. Criticism of Sylvia Plath, for example, can bear this

fact out. Ted Hughes, the estranged husband and literary heir of Sylvia Plath, pre-emptively disavows the public appeal of her work, insisting that he alone can interpret and write about her accurately. To write on Sylvia Plath, according to Ted Hughes, is to join "the wretched millions who have to find something to say in their papers"; it is, according to Churchwell, to participate in the commercialistic "'reinvention' of Hughes own 'private experiences and feelings' " (Churchwell 2). Hughes seems to ascribe Plath's success to the fact that she married him since he claims that "Plath's real self had showed itself in her writing" and that this self was "the self (Hughes) had married after all, lived with and knew well" (Churchwell 3). Hughes' insistence here on the primacy of Plath's wifely, domestic, and physical identity as a necessary icon of her writing is unsurprising, yet its effects are far reaching. It establishes a reductive and gendered reading of Plath's works and demonstrates Hughes' [and by implication, men's] conflation of women's written, (public) lives with their lived (private) lives and thereby undermines women as individuals and complete human beings. Ted Hughes simply presents Plath as a body for which her poems present a voice. Responding to Critic A. Alvarez's memoir of Plath's death, Hughes writes:

> Sylvia now goes through the detailed point by point death of a public sacrifice. Her poems provide the vocal part for that sort of a public show. Your account… completes and concludes the performance. Now there actually is a body. (18)

In *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes,* Janet Malcolm compares the controversy that surrounds Sylvia's name to a detective story. Reviewing the film for a paper, *The Nation,* Anna Fels comments: "The Silent Woman is

about crimes that people commit against one another…murder, burglary, brutal attacks, women brought to their knees… (67). Malcolm uses this title for an analysis of Plath as a metaphor for the real "crimes" committed against her life - crimes of adultery, abandonment, murder, slander, libel and so on .Paul West in "Crossing the Water", attributes the great critical acclaim accorded the poet to her femininity and her womanly charms: "Had Sylvia Plath been ugly, and not died in so deliberate a manner, I wonder if she would have the standing she has" (46). Similarly, foregrounding her body instead of her genius, Peter Davison who wrote of Plath that she "hardly waited to be asked to slip into my new bed" declares elsewhere that Plath was a "greatly but unevenly gifted woman"(170). This claim of knowing her body as a key in understanding and writing about her genius is reductive in the sense in which it continues to view women as nothing more than sexual partners of men. This reading of Plath besides being over-assuming is part and parcel of an ideology about women's poetry deeply rooted in the notion of the woman poet as dangerously alienated.

On his part, Robert Lowell in his foreword to Plath's *Ariel* writes that:

> In these poems written in the last month of her life, and often rushed out at the rate of two or three a day, Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, widely and subtly created— not a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess' but one of those super-real hypnotic great classical heroines. This character is feminine rather than female… (vii)

Like most male critics, Lowell seems unable to distinguish between the poet and the woman. He seems to believe that

Ariel is Plath and by the phrase "becomes herself", Lowell is in fact saying that Plath becomes the 'text' for men to analyze. He fails like much of the criticism on Plath in particular and on women in general to understand the various ways in which women have responded to various forms of patriarchal oppression.

Tillie Olson has shown in her work entitled *Silences* thatrepression of the woman poet can push her into silence. In this kind of silence, the woman writers' feelings find vent only in suicide. In this regard, her book, *Silences,* lists a number of women writers who attempted or actually committed suicide and also shows the internal and external factors which led up to the act. Critical silencing of British women poets has resulted into a tendency for the women poets to refuse the label of "women poets" because of the fear of marginalization and ghettoisation, since the appellation is seen not as a description but an accusation by the traditional literary establishment (Jacobus, 173 & 175; Day and Docherty, 254). This tendency of British women poets to shy away from their identity or from the clear identification of subject matter and themes of their works with feminist experience has led Jan Montefiore in *Feminism and Poetry: Language Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* to expose the ironies inherent in the women writers literary tradition. She describes this tradition as one in which "women's poetry never officially belongs or has been excluded by forces beyond the writers' control" (38).

In the American context, Alicia Ostriker's*Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and The Erotic* celebrates the kind of poetry which aims at changing society through engagement with politics. This, she thinks, can be done by re-imagining the world and re-inventing new relationships with tradition. Although she defines the

difference between poetry and propaganda in this collection of essays, she however surveys the accomplishments of the women's poetry movement and describes such poetry as the "poetics of ardor." This view is a modification of her earlier views expressed in the earlier but major study, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's poetry in America*, in which she proposes that women writers must be "thieves" of language, in order to achieve self-definition in the context of literary traditions designed to repress the female voice. The poetry of American women poets of the 19th and 20th centuries seems more fairly well received than that of British women poets. Nevertheless, American women poets like their British counterparts have had either to combat or shun resistance of their works. In the introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Feminist studies /Critical Studies,* Teresa de Lauretis argues that institutions have the ability to neutralize resistance and transform it into liberal opposition that proves the democratic inclusiveness of the institution. Her caution is that women must become self-conscious and use strategies that push against discursive boundaries in order to create a "new aesthetic, a rewriting of culture" (ix).

In his article entitled "Race and Gender in the Shaping of The American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties," Paul Lauter shows that American women writers have been marginalized in the American literary canon on the basis of their race and gender:

> Although we cannot ascribe to a literary canon the decline in attention to the concerns of women in the 1920s, the progressive exclusion of literary works by women from the canon suggested that such concerns were of lesser value than those inscribed in canonical books and authors. The literary canon is in short, a

> means by which culture validates social power. (Newton and Rosenfelt 21)

Though new movements into urban areas and the crowdedness of urban ghettos favoured the flowering of African American literature in the 1920s, this was neither represented in the literary anthologies nor reflected in the teaching of American literature. The position of white women writers is even more complex as more credit was given to the novelists whom Fred Lewis Pattee considered in his 1919 anthology, *Century's Reading for a Course in American Literature* as having elevated the novel to its highest reaches. Very few poets apart from Emily Dickinson were praised. In editing *The Heritage in American Literature* in 1950, Lyon Norman Richardson, G. H. Orians and H.R. Brown therefore recommended that special attention should be given to a "reconsideration of the works of our women authors" (iv).

Criticism of American women's poetry has also come from African American women, who, like Barbara Christian, believe that race impacts on gender and accuse American women poets and feminists of their silence on matters of racial and class oppression. In *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition*, Christian delineates a variety of Anglo-American images of black women to articulate powerful arguments regarding the social and historical role such images have played in supporting the status of the white American woman and the ruling class. She concludes that black women writers had to sweep away Anglo-American cultural norms to open up their own representations of African American culture. Though the study is very insightful, it totally ignores the poetic genre.

As far as African American literature in general and African American women's poetry in particular is concerned, it is worthy to remark that the first writer of this

literature was a woman poet: Lucy Terry, a slave girl, who composed a spontaneous poem at age sixteen called "Bars Flight, August 28 1746." The poem is an account of her witness of an Indian raid on her village of Deerfield, Massachusetts and the massacre that ensued. It remained unpublished until 1893. This precedence was followed by other African American women poets like Phyllis Wheatley and Frances Harper as well as women poets of the Harlem Renaissance such as Angelina Grimke, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett and finally Margaret Walker who wrote between 1930 and 1945. This period was followed by a short pause in African American women's poetic creativity. But by the second half of the twentieth century, great African American women poets like Gwendolyn Brooks produced such high art that she won the Pulitzer Prize, and following on her heels, was Rita Dove, who even became the Poet Laureate of the United States of America. Writing about the place of modern African American Women's poetry in contemporary discourse, Barbara Christian is of the opinion that "the poetry of the sixties reflects the growing need to include women as central figures in literature, since much of it is socio-political in nature" (15). This view is shared by Deborah McDowell, who in "New Directions For Black Feminist Criticism" believes that "when Black women writers are neither ignored altogether nor given honourable mention, they are critically misunderstood and summarily dismissed" (153).

Generally, African American women writers have not been given sufficient and favourable critical attention, and it is this recognition by African American women writers that white women, white men and Black men consider their experiences as normative, and Black women's experiences as deviant which has given rise to the development of Black

Feminist Criticism. But noting the skeletal nature of this criticism in "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith attributes it to a lack of a developed body of Black feminist political theory.

In sum, as the critics above have noted, British and American Women's poetry received very little critical attention before the Women's Liberation Movement. Meanwhile, the period witnessed a flurry of literary creativity by women. But even after this movement, critical attention on women's work has not been representative enough. Deborah McDowell is, for instance, of the opinion that "women writers have fallen victim to arbitrary selection" (153), and that this is the only reason for the marginalization of their work. Louise Bernikow believes on her part that: "What is actually called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not, depends upon who noticed them and chose to record their notice" (3). This view is re-echoed by William Morgan who posits that women's writings have been "patronized, slighted, and misunderstood by a cultural establishment operating according to male norms out of male perceptions" (311). Nevertheless, it can be noted that as from the Women's Liberation Movement critics attempted a more systematic critique of literary history and theory from a feminist perspective. But even when this was done, poetry was not at the fore. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes that "the history of Women's poetry in English is marked by gaps and absences" (405). Women's poetry continues to suffer critical victimization at a set of values and concepts of poetic vocation set by men with the assumption that all poets are men. For this reason, women's poetry has been neglected, denigrated, and misread, being judged by these inappropriate standards. It is for the same reason that no

definitive history of women's poetry has yet been written. In fact, reading Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own,* gives the impression that even if Shakespeare had had a sister who was born at the same time with him and with the same genius as he, she wouldn't have been given a chance to excel, and she would surely have gone mad or killed herself without writing a word. According to Cora Kaplan, "poetry is a privileged metalanguage in western patriarchal culture… its appeal may have diminished in relation to other literary forms but its status and function in high culture continues to be important" (Cameron 54). Since patriarchal culture considers women as the inferior sex, it is not surprising then that it will want to exclude them from this high culture.

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