Mothers in Masquerade: Objectification and Theatricality in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

Drawing on John Rivière’s view that female masquerade could be considered either as submission to dominant social codes or as resistance to patriarchal norms, my research paper seeks to represent masquerade as women’s submission to the patriarchal constructions of the feminine and the institution of motherhood in modern American poetry. My paper adopts the first view of masquerade and applies it on Sylvia Plath’s "Lesbos", "Three Women", and Anne Sexton’s «Housewife" and "Self in 1958". Indeed, mothers who live to the American ideals of womanhood and motherhood usually enact the masquerade of the ideal mother in order to represent a good self image and, hence, to gain social acceptance. Yet, by putting on the mask of the good traditional mother masquerade turns them into submissive women or rather objects with no identities and no wills. My study, which explores the constructedness of mother identity in modern American literature, describes how masquerade exposes mothers’ objectification and victimisation. It illustrates how masquerading mothers are objectified as spectacle and gives an insight into the motif of theatricality to convey by that the concept of masquerade. My research paper also shows how disguised mothers use authentic voices to react to the inauthenticity of their mothering experiences and to the artificiality of the ideal mother image.

Keywords: masquerade, motherhood, objectification, theatricality
The concept of masquerade is worthy of critical investigation because it represents an important notion that prevails not only in the medieval literary works but also in the contemporary ones. Many pieces of writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries foreground questions of masquerade and its correlated terms of mask and disguise. Sylvia Plath’s and Anne Sexton’s poems, for instance, are among the modern American works that throw the light on the motif of masquerade and draw a particular attention to its inextricable relation to the concept of identity. Indeed, "the earliest sources in Western civilisation mark the mask as closely connected to the notion of the person" (Tseëlon 4); in other words, as tightly related to identity and to its "even vaguer terminological twin, the 'self'" (Garodiner 347). Masquerade in Plath’s "Lesbos", "Three Women", and Sexton’s "Housewife" and "Self in 1958" masterfully explores the establishment of mother identity in modern American culture. These works speak volumes about the way the mask of motherhood is imposed by the Western patriarchal system to define good mothers’ identities and roles.

Modern American poetry is filled with sentimentalised images of the naturally passive and unambivalently loving full time stay-at-home mothers who conform to the nineteenth century American ideals of womanhood and motherhood. A good traditional mother is the housewife, the child bearer, as well as the child rearer. She is the angel -at -home figure who works blindly and selflessly for the sake of her family. Yet, almost often the ideal mothers emerging from contemporary American poetry are mothers in masquerade. Indeed, in "Hiding behind a Façade of Normalcy to Preserve Self" Carolyn Westall and Pranee Liamputtong argue that "Women hid behind a mask to give the impression of being good mothers" (86). They put on the mask of the good traditional mother and show to live up to the ideals of good motherhood in order to be socially accepted. Otherwise, they would fall apart from the script of the good mother and good mothering and would be socially designated as deviant mothers. "Douglas and Michaels say that as mothers we learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self- sacrificing mother and wear it all times to save maternal shame or humiliation" (Feasey 6). To represent an acceptable self-image, and hence, to avoid social stigmatisation and marginalisation mothers engage in a masquerade of femininity and motherhood. The maternal personas in Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry are hidden behind a mask to conceal their real identities and to guard that constructed image of the good traditional mother.

Masquerade is used as a means to mask the real identity and to assume a fake one. Along these lines, it has been argued that "the view of the mask as antithesis to the authentic person is a phenomenon of the middle ages" (Tseëlon 5). In fact, it is "from medieval times onwards [that] the mask […] has come to connote disingenity, artifice and pretence in contrast to original identity, which connotes truth and authenticity" (Tseëlón 4). Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry provides a good opportunity to look at how maternal personas speak truthfully and authentically about their artificial and theatricalised selves. The motif of theatricality is overwhelmingly present to express the artifice of the ideal mother identity. Mask, role-playing, stage performance, masquerade costume, and unreal appearance are all related terms that pertain to the lexical register of theatricality, and hence, portray the fake self.

The ideal mothers in Plath’s and Sexton’s works are merely masquerading mothers who mask themselves in disguises of submission as the sexual object and the doll. Their
masquerade reveals the bitter truth of women’s submission to social laws, and especially, man-made laws. The mask of motherhood in Plath’s "Lesbos", "Three Women", and Sexton’s "Housewife" and "Self in 1958" exposes the passive submissive nature of the female. In her book *Masquerade and gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth- Century Fictions by Women*, Catherine Craft-Fairchild asserts that "The controversial aspect of Rivière’s pioneering study has spawned at least two currently circulating notions of masquerade— one that views the inevitable female disguise as submission to dominant social codes, and another that sees masquerade as disruptive and as resistance to patriarchal norms" (51). Women’s masquerade in the above-mentioned poems corresponds to the first circulating notion of female masquerade.

Accordingly, it would be significant to investigate how women’s masquerade in modern American literature unveils female subjection to patriarchal rules. Equally important, it would be crucial to examine how in their submission to dominant social codes mothers are turned into puppets and objects of desire. Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry, indeed, candidly explores how women’s subjection to the other is mingled with their objectification as well as theatricalisation. The research paper seeks also to shed the light on the dramatic aspect inherent in the act of masquerade and on mothers’ reactions to their status of submission and objectification that brings forth discomforting and painful feelings.

In Sexton’s "Housewife"(1962), from *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, the persona assumes the character of the good mother by wearing the mask of the passive submissive stay-at-home mother. Sexton, known as a middle class suburban housewife, "speak[s] lines uniting the buried self with her social stereotype, the suburban housewife" (Colburn 12). During a specific period in her marital life, Sexton buries her real self and shows a fake one that preserves her social image as an ideal housewife. As confessionalist, she projects her lived experience of masquerade in "Housewife".

The maternal persona in the poem understudy enters into a masquerade of womanhood and motherhood. She responds to one of the basic requirements of the institution of motherhood through displaying the role of the intensive stay-at-home mother. The hyperbole used in the opening line, "some women marry houses", serves to criticize women’s utter submission to the feminine ideal of the domestic mother. This poetic device emphasises the extent to which some women, haunted by the social stereotype of the ideal mother, show off a strong attachment to their homes that the mother-home relationship becomes a conjugal one. Nevertheless, such a marriage confines and restricts them within the limits of the home which "walls are permanent and pink". "The walls of the house are ‘permanent’ suggesting a rigid prison and ‘pink’ [suggesting] feminine, perhaps even cute" (Haralson 661). The pink colour of the walls emphasises the well-established traditional belief that the home is the natural and real sphere of the mother. Yet, what is still worth noting in the poem is how woman’s submission to the prevalent cultural demands consigns her to mere objectification.

"Housewife" is written in the voice of a full-time stay-at-home mother whose domesticity turns her into a mere object. She stages herself as an object of desire for man. Such a woman yields herself to the power and possession of man at the very expense of the
self; its own needs and desires. In this context, it could be assumed that "Housewife" represents masquerade as it is defined by Luce Irigaray:

Masquerade must be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' in spite of everything ... a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the masquerade of femininity ... [has to enter] into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men. (Fairchild 54)

A whole scene of theatricality is constructed in the poem to highlight the concept of the mask of motherhood and to stress women's submission to the dominant economy of desire. In order to become a normal woman, the persona enters into a masquerade of femininity and displays her role as an object of desire for men. The mother "marr[ies] [her]house" and "sits on [her] knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down" while "men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah / into their fleshy mothers". The stage action emphasised through the verb "enter" and which lays in opposition with the static physical image of the mother highlights man’s status as spectator while mother’s status as spectacle. The scene of the passive mother sitting on her knees faithfully while men enter forcefully and aggressively expresses theatricality and enhances women’s condition as a show. Along these lines, it has been declared that "masquerade would hence appear to be the very antithesis of spectatorship / subjectivity…Masquerade would seem to facilitate an understanding of the woman’s status as spectacle rather than spectator" (Fairchild 55). Interestingly enough, Sexton’s "Housewife" conspicuously represents a spectacle of female objectification. The woman "desires to be desired; by catering to male fantasies, she becomes objectified as a spectacle" (Fairchild 55). Still, "The endless loop of this mother as object is summed up in the final lines [...] 'A woman is her mother. / that’s the main thing'" (O’Reilly 1113). A woman, like her mother, is deemed to an object like status and to live up to fully satisfy men’s needs and desires.

The notion of objectification and the motif of theatricality are also suggested in the poem by the description of the home which is put on a deceptive and striking appearance. In addition to its pink colour that is generally associated with femininity and sweetness, the house has "another kind of skin; it has a heart, / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements". Obviously enough, the mother who is disguised as the sexual object dwells in a fictional house that is masqueraded as a human being. It seems that the mother’s inextricable attachment to her domestic sphere, the home, associates the latter with human attributes while endows the former with object features.

The masquerade of the mother as an obedient housewife who "marrie[s] [her] house", "sits on [her] knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down" reflects gender inequality in western society. The masquerade of the good mother in these lines masterfully dramatises the condition of women as objects of sexual desire and victims of gender inequality. The poem emphasises how through imposing the archetype of the ideal mother, the patriarchal institution of motherhood had in a way enfeebled mothers. This is made quite clear in the poem through the act of "sitting on [the] knees all day" which denotes weakness and
subjugation. This act of submission is antagonised with men’s act of force and power; "men enter by force". This opposition serves to highlight gender stratification in western society. The mother in "Housewife" is represented as a "hegemonic form" (2) that is "aware of her part in the reproduction of gender inequality, yet remain very much subject to her" (Goodwin and Huppatz 2). Even though she feels enfeebled and oppressed by the patriarchal culture, the mother passively participates in man’s needs and desires at the price of renouncing her own. Notably, "Housewife" intensifies the extent to which masquerade functions as an unpleasant and oppressive play for women.

Plath’s "Lesbos", from Selected Poems of Sylvia Plath, is one of the modern works that reveals a lot about the mask of motherhood and the bitter realities associated with it. A whole scene of theatricality and fictionality is visualised in the poem to convey the theme of masquerade. This is revealed through the objectification of the mother figure to a "little unstrung puppet". In addition to being "devoured by their children, effaced; [mothers] are subjugated by men, imprisoned, mutilated, made into puppets or toys, hollow or blank with no identities and no wills" (Dobbs 13). The good patriarchal mother in this poem is compared to "a puppet" stressing by that the frozen image to which the mother is doomed. It shows how the image of the ideal mother is no more than a fake image; a masquerade that stresses women’s subordination to male power and desire. Women’s submission to the dominant economy of male desire is further highlighted in the poem through the following lines; "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. / I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair" (29-30). These lines stress the image of the mother as an object of desire for men. The "tiger pants" form the masquerade costume that the woman has to wear in order to fulfil her role and participate in man’s desire.

The masquerade of motherhood is also underlined in the poem through the description of the suburban home. The home, "the site of domestic labour" (Gill 113), becomes a theatre; a stage for dramatic play. "The theatricality [of] [the] [home] indicates that it is not a place of authentic selfhood. The home is as much a place for masks as the theatre of public life" (Nelson 32-33). Theatricality is further conveyed through the theatrical imagery used in the poem; "Hollywood", "the fluorescent -light”, "stage curtains", and "puppet". The suburban domestic home is no longer a "natural environment for an idealised femininity" (Gill 72); it becomes instead an artificial environment where the mother is condemned to put on the mask created by the patriarchal system and "compelled to act [her] part" (Nelson 32-33). The home becomes a stage where the housewife mother, the dramatis personae, performs her theatrical presentation. She acts as "a pathological liar" on that stage. It is noteworthy to mention that behind the equation of the domestic home to a theatrical stage and the mother to "a pathological liar" lays an attempt to refer to the inauthentic identity as well as the dramatic condition of the mother.

"Lesbos" shows how a woman reacts to the patriarchal constructions of femininity and motherhood. It challenges the ideal of the stay- at-home mother who is imaged as a "pathological liar" enacting the masquerade of good motherhood. Along these lines, it has been argued that "lesbos exposes and explodes this ideal. The relentlessly end-stopped lines spit out a catalogue of anger, resentment and despair. [Kitchen], children, animals, husband and self- all are bitterly indicted" (Gill 72). From the poem’s first line, "viciousness in the
kitchen!, we learn that the mother comes to terms with the disguised role of the ideal housewife. The suburban domestic kitchen, compared to a theatrical stage, becomes a hellish place. "The poem is filled with images of domestic space as hell: 'the stink of fat and baby crap', the 'smog of cooking', lit by a migraine- including 'fluorescent light'" (Gill 113). "The potatoes hiss" and "the smog of cooking" create viciousness in the kitchen, which endow the speaker with "silence", "thick[ness]", and "hat[red] up to her neck". Using a bitter despondent tone, the speaker reveals:

Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hand potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats. (66-70)

The device of parallelism used through the repetition of "I am packing" expresses the image of the mechanical woman to which the mother is reduced and describes the monotonous and boring life to which she is doomed. "Potatoes", "babies", and "cats" are to be packed silently and hatefully. In another instance, the speaker desperately says:

. . . . I should drown the Kittens. Their smell!
. . . . I should drown my girl.

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I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair. (20-21, 29-30)

In addition to "drown[ing]" the "kittens" and her "girl", the mother has to fulfil her part as an object of desire for man. The parallelism which is made obvious through the repetition of "I should" achieves a specific effect. "I should" is purposefully re-used to express obligation and to emphasise oppression. Again, the device of parallelism used throughout the poem serves to highlight the extent to which "[the] mother has been established as a normative construct, a mechanism through which women do what they 'should'" (Goodwin and Huppatz 4). Such a device significantly reflects "the discrepancy between the idealised expectations and the harsh realities of motherhood" (O'Reilly 51). Whether through the repetition of "I am packing" or "I should", these lines in "Lesbos" affirm that "masquerade is not …a joyful or affirmative play but an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture, a position which is potentially disturbing, uncomfortable, and inconsistent, as well as psychically painful for the woman" (Fairchild 54). Nevertheless, in spite of her awareness of masquerade as a disturbing and painful experience the mother remains engaged in such a play and keeps submissive to others’ needs and desires.

Sexton’s "Self in 1958", from Selected Poems of Anne Sexton, is another important work that deals with the theme of masquerade and highlights the fact that masquerade does form neither a joyful nor an affirmative play. The poem, indeed, explores the feelings of oppression and alienation that accompany such an act and draws attention to different dualities like image and reality, objectivity and subjectivity, and fakedness and authenticity. It gives prominence to what Susan Mushart calls "the gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, [and] [which] has resulted in a peculiar cultural
schizophrenia about motherhood" (Feasey 7). This poem is written against the mask of the good mother and unveils the inauthenticity of such an image.

"Self in 1958" dramatises the condition of the good traditional mother as a victim of mere objectification. Again, Sexton’s poetry stresses how in masquerade women are made into puppets and dolls with no identities and no wills. The good patriarchal mother is objectified as spectacle. She is, indeed, reduced to a "plaster doll" and a "synthetic doll" with "eyes that open, blue, steel, and close", "nylon legs", "luminous arms" and "some advertised clothes". This fictional character "live[s] in a doll’s house" with "four chairs", "a counterfeit table", "a flat roof", "a big front door", "an iron bed", "a cardboard floor" and "windows that flash open on someone’s city". The home is equipped in a way that is suitable for theatrical presentation. The "counterfeit table" reflects the fictitiousness of the house. The self is staged as an object and the home is described as a theatre for the interplay of female objectification. The images of the "plastro doll" and "synthetic doll" living in a "doll's house" filled with fictionality and artificiality suggest the idea that the ideal mother is a mere artefact. The self becomes aware that the archetype of the ideal mother created by the patriarchal system is a fake image, or a masquerade, that condemns the mother to objectification and puts her in the periphery.

What distinguishes the mother figure in "Self in 1958" from that in "Housewife" is that this mother revolts against submission, passivity, and objectification and embarks on search for a new identity and on a quest for reality. It is clear from the beginning of the poem that the speaker is haunted by the question "what is reality?". The speaker’s awareness of the artificiality of this patriarchal model gives her an incentive to pose the question "what is reality?" twice in the poem. She asks:

What is reality
To this synthetic doll
Who should smile, who should shift gears,

And have no evidence of ruin or fears? (31-33, 35)

In this vein, in their essay "Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities" Marie Porter and Julie Kelso argue that:

The understanding of reality has changed since second wave feminists first argued for research to be based in reality. Previously, when women’s experiences had been researched and theorised at all, it was usually from a male viewpoint - women’s reality interpreted by a man. Most women realized that such knowledge was an inauthentic representation of their experiences. (X)

"Self in 1958" foreshadows second wave feminists’ question about women’s reality that is obviously still unsettled at Plath’s and Sexton’s time. The poet’s query "what is reality" is wonderfully effective in the way it undercuts the common reality of mothers as mere objects. It revolts against that kind of objective reality interpreted by men and calls for a subjective reality interpreted by women, and mothers, themselves.
"Self in 1958" is an oppressed and alienated self that seeks liberation from the shackles of the patriarchal ideology. It is a revolutionary self that strives to deconstruct her objectification and construct her subjectivity. For the maternal speaker, subjectivity is what forms women’s reality. To represent reality, mothers should unmask themselves. The "synthetic doll", the product of patriarchal culture, should "smile", enjoy a life free from "ruin or fears", and particularly "shift gears" or what she names her "advertised clothes". She has to throw off all those masquerading costumes designated for displaying the role of the ideal traditional mother and to reject all forms of oppression and control imposed on her by the Western traditional system.

The first voice in Plath’s "Three Women", from Winter Trees, represents another face of the good mother which is that of the highly protective, unambivalently loving, and emotional salvager. The mother embodies a great source of love, protection, and goodness for her husband and children. Yet, the mask of ideal motherhood is lived as a disturbing and uncomfortable experience since masquerade enables her to provide her family with comfort and happiness at the price of renouncing her own. Because disguise is found as a means working against the mother, the role of the mother as an emotional supporter of man and children is questioned and devalorised in Plath’s "Three Women". The latter brilliantly illustrates the mother’s inability to truly uphold such an image and doubts that such a role should be considered as part of the mother’s real and natural experience:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?
How long can I be a wall around my green property?
How long can my hands
Be a bondage to his hurt, and my words
Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?
It is a terrible thing
To be so open: it is as if my heart
Put on a face and walked into the world. (289, 296-302)

The image of the mother as "a wall keeping the wind off" ensures the protective role the good mother has to play for her family. She has to put on the mask of the loving protective mother all the time. In another instance in the poem, she reveals, "I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting. / I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be!". Once again, the repetition of "I shall" emphasises the constraints imposed on mothers by Western patriarchal system. "O let me be!" reflects the mother’s painful submission to dominant social codes and suggests women’s adaptation to their self-objectification. Indeed, the images attributed to the mother especially those of "the wall" and "the roof" denote mere objectification.

The image of the mother as an emotional salvager whose "hands are a bondage to [his] hurt" and whose "words [are] consoling [ones]" is found as a fake and "terrible thing". What is terrible is that exaggerated openness of feelings of love and care toward others which converges to be inauthentic. Indeed, "to be so open" to others’ anxieties is endowed with theatricality and inauthenticity in the poem. The mother’s "heart put[s] on a face" in order to be "so open" to others’ sorrows and hurts in spite of her own injuries and troubles. The speaker finds it terrible to disguise the heart for the sake of others at the very expense of the
self. The frequent display of interrogative marks and the repetition of "how long can I be" throughout these lines serve to emphasise the mother’s intense emotion, and in particular, her frustration with her role as an emotional salvager. Plath’s recurrent interrogations react against what "institutionalized motherhood demands of women.... [like] [the] relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich 42). These lines establish the way the masquerade of ideal motherhood stipulates that mother love should be altruistic rather than selfish.

To conclude, modern American poetry highlights recent critical debates about women’s identities and their representation in Western culture. Via their confessional mode, Plath and Sexton go to the heart of the matter and candidly expose how masquerade functions as a real obstacle against their authentic selves. Their poetry offers a grotesque take on related themes like those of objectification and theatricality which help to establish their artificial identities. Being burdened and enervated by the patriarchal system, mothers, to whom subjectivity is denied, react against their submissiveness and their objectification. Masquerade is found as an arduous role and an uncomfortable experience imposed on them.
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