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## WOMEN AND WORK: PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECT AMERICAN POETS

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### ABSTRACT

The realm of workplace for women, domestic or professional is imperative to the understanding of their individual identity as well as plays a great role in its formation. Patriarchy provided for the circulation of constructed views which limited women to sexual objects and domestic workers. Women writings are an outright expression to define an identity for themselves—sexual, intellectual, professional, etc. free from the clutch of patriarchal viewpoint. The aim of this paper is to study the association of work with identity through the poetry of four American Twentieth century American poets- Hilda Doolittle, Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath and Rita Dove. It focuses on the understanding of work, the struggle of shaping one's identity, stresses on the importance of work in a woman's life and also attempts to highlight the experiences of black and white women in this regard in a white male dominated American society.

**Keywords:** Identity, Work, White women, Black women, Patriarchy.

The sexist stereotypes often tied women to only certain occupations, for instance, sewing and cooking. The male dominated society regarded women as intellectually, incapable of creativity or any other work outside the domestic domain. This biased attitude have been pointed out and challenged strongly by the feminists. A woman's willingness to explore one's own self often faces the hurdles of the ideological trap of the so called "family values." This paper is an attempt to explore both the domestic and the professional fronts in contributing to a woman's identity as reflected in the poetry of Hilda Doolittle, Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath and Rita Dove.

In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she questions the tradition which historically excluded women from the literary field on the ground of intellectual incompetence. Women writing were not new to America; poets like Emily

Dickinson tried to lend successfully distinctive female voice to American poetry at a time when there were extensive writings from male writers like Emerson and Whitman. This was not a question of expression by women in literary field but of representation, there existed less women writers. Woolf points out the politics of such reality. She explains, "It is far more important to know how much money women had and how many rooms to theorise about their capacities." (Woolf, 1530) However, there emerged more women writers in the Twentieth century in terms of representation and expression, with more financial security rejecting the definition of their identity from a man's tongue or pen.

In comparison to a black woman, a white woman's life is more secured and protected in a patriarchal society as the former have to undergo a patriarchal as well as racial challenges. However, the

security acts as fetters. They are the mistress of the household, restricted from gaining access to the world outside the four walls. Hilda Doolittle mostly deals with silenced women in Greek mythology but in "Sheltered Garden," she offers a perspective on the secured yet suffocating life of a modern woman. These poems deal with a life of protection without any freedom. The speaker struggles to escape the protected world, to experience the outside world. The sheltered garden has offered no room for the speaker's personal growth. There is nothing new in the garden that has left to be explored or experienced.

Every way ends, every road,  
Every foot-path leads at last  
to the hill -crest –  
then you retrace your steps,  
or find the same slope on the other side,  
precipitate.

The garden is diminishing the speaker's potential to bloom by providing no way for exposure. The speaker has no opportunity to experience anything new and is also unable to share her experiences with the outside world.

Have you ever seen a fruit under cover  
that wanted light—  
pears wadded in cloth,  
protected from the frost,  
melons almost ripe,  
smothered in straw?

H.D. has represented the garden as the patriarchal world's prison. This conventional protection is a disadvantage for a woman's growth. She has brought to the notice of a reader a woman's life, which is seemingly that of bliss but in actuality, is a stagnant one.

Woolf essentially deals with the position of a white woman, who has access to reading and writing, though not allowed to cross the threshold. She does not address the position of a black woman, repressed by the institution of slavery. Alice Walker shifts the attention to the impoverished life of a black woman, deprived of reading and writing. She replaces Woolf's concept of "room" by the concept of "garden" in her prose piece "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden." She ponders upon the obstacles

in the way of a black woman's creativity. It is important to understand that a black woman was always at work as a slave worker in a white man's household or the fields but without any individual identity associated to the work. Therefore, work was always an integral part of a black woman.

Walker traces the past and creativity which existed within mothers and grandmothers. They had no access to reading or writing, leave alone the question of room and money. In her essay, she links creativity not only with writing by drawing in artists like Phillis Wheatley but also with other forms of work. It can be argued that work translates as skills in all the fields, without neglecting the skill involved in works understood to be related to only domestic area, for example, embroidery, sewing, etc. Creativity, in this regard, cannot be seen as something to be expressed only in writing, painting, etc but also in our daily routine, such as cooking. She illustrates with an example of a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. made by an anonymous black woman. The quilt as she puts it is a work of art, "In fanciful, inspired, yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of Crucifixion Though it follows no pattern of quilting, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling." (Walker, 5)

In Maya Angelou's poem, "Woman Work," she depicts the typical routine of a person who is engaged in different kind of works. The speaker has a busy schedule and it includes from attending children to picking cotton.

I've got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop...  
Then see about the sick  
And the cotton to pick.

Amidst these activities, she yearns for a break, a little time for herself. At such times, she seeks strength and comfort from the elements of nature. She draws from her environment and perceives the work of nature by connecting it to the desire of her inner self. Nature provides her a

moment of relief as she reflects her imagination of solace in communion with nature.

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow again

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the sky  
'Till I can rest again.

Her being which is lost in the daily activities is regained in the lap of nature. She is observant and aware of her surroundings perhaps, also wants to capture the movements of nature but her schedule do not allow her much space and time required for such an endeavour. This echoes Woolf's idea of "room." Woolf declares that both both men and women require time, space and money to produce a work of art, "...that five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate. That a lock on a door means the power to think for oneself." (Woolf, 1547) Woolf focusses on the conditions necessary for the work of art, historically denied to women.

Walker puts forward that though domesticity is a burden for the white women in their way of artistic quest, for a black slave woman, domesticity was the only option to order "...the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty." (Walker, 6)

Angelou's poem, "Momma Welfare Roll" is a comment on the topic of poverty, oppressions and a woman's fight against these odds. The speaker in the poem is trying to support a family on very meagre earnings. The speaker is the provider of her family. It also offers a critique of the institutions of democracy, which denies her welfare scheme. There is no evidence of the presence of a father. The scenario of poverty and their condition is evident in the following lines, where children become the victims.

Her children, strangers  
To childhood's toys, play  
Best games of darkened doorways,  
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of  
Other people's property

This explains the challenges of a mother distraught by crime in her community, a common phenomenon which exist in poverty stricken areas. Angelou's portrays strong women characters, surviving amidst a struggling environment and still maintaining a touch with their inner self. They do not give up and in this attitude, their strength appears invincible. They reflect the importance of work for sustenance and find a meaning in their existence. In the same manner, Walker draws a link between creativity and survival in order to understand the work and creativity encircling a black woman's life.

In Sylvia Plath's poems, there is a reflection of her personal life in which a male figure is understood as a hindrance to a woman's mental and creative progress. Her intense love for her husband, Ted Hughes divided her focus between her family and her act of writing. The love life in which she invested much her time was regarded by her as a halt to her artistic capability. Her poem reflects how the halo of romantic love consumes a woman's time and diverts her from her artistic vocation.

The poem "Elm" is a dramatic monologue. Sylvia Plath uses three pronouns, "she," "I" and "you," which can be read as the divided selves of one identity as well as three separate roles. The powerful image of an elm tree is weaved with a protean identity. The main focus is the feeling of fragmentation of the artistic power.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would  
drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.  
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have  
caught her.

I let her go. I let her go  
...I am incapable of more knowledge.

The line "I let her go" suggests that the artistic potential was always in her which she departed with at present. She feels "barren" as she thinks she is not in a position to produce a work of art. In this poem, Plath reflects on the feelings of artistically gifted women becoming a pawn of romantic love and trapped in family life.

In "Apprehensions," Plath addresses the issue of domestic worries taking up the power to write. The speaker in the poem interprets her life in the four walls, each with a different colour. The colours are white, grey, red and black.

There is a white wall, above which the sky creates itself-

Infinite, green, utterly untouchable.

Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also.

They are my medium.

The sun dissolves on this wall, bleeding its lights.

The white wall is symbolic of perfect environment for creating a work of art. The pleasant images suggest the creative state of consciousness. The white wall stands for a calm state of mind, uninterrupted by the accompanied worries of life. The other colours which later appear in the poem—red, black and grey, these walls are suggestive of depressed, painful and cold state of mind.

Through these poems, Plath reflects on the conditions necessary for a woman to express her artistic side fully and step towards a new identity. She brings out the problem faced by a woman to express her worldview in an environment, where her life is occupied by other works, expected of a woman.

A woman's position within a patriarchal system determines the issue of merit rather than an individual capacity. Therefore, Woolf insists on improving the position in economic terms. The restricted role of women to domesticity has denied her the chance to step out and earn for herself. According to her, the visible bitterness in most of women's earlier writings was due to this restriction despite the inherent potential in them.

Woolf's insistence on the necessity of a woman's economic domain can be found in Rita Dove's poetry where the importance of identity gained through work, outside the four walls is emphasised. Self-reliance as an important criterion for a woman to follow her will and free herself from the clutch of controlling factors is seen in her poetry.

To begin with, "Daystar" addresses the "room" desired by the speaker for her individual being. She does not want herself to fully cut off from her domestic life but a "little" space to reflect on and capture the surroundings through her imaginative eyes.

She wanted a little room for thinking:

but she saw diapers steaming on the line,  
a doll slumped behind the door.

The household though consumed much of her time, she would not give up on her moments of reflection. The short period of personal time is the time, when the speaker had no roles to play but her individual self, to watch "the pinched armour of a vanished cricket/ a floating maple leaf."

Another poem of Dove titled "Exit" is a heralding of a modern woman, who is content to leave her present unsatisfied life behind in order to explore her potential in a wider world. The speaker is tired of the everyday routine without any prospect for a change and is therefore, ready to leave.

The windows you have closed behind  
you are turning pink, doing what they do  
every dawn.

There is no feeling of regret. Moreover, the speaker's attitude is positive. She is not satisfied to limit her identity merely to the domestic domain but find personal space in a larger world.

In "My Mother Enters the Workforce," Dove brings in the idea of home and a mother, the skill that a woman possess in excelling in both domestic and professional fronts. It is the working mother, who brings home the basic amenities and the accompanied needs.

no more postponed groceries,  
and that blue pair of shoes!

Apart from the mother's role as the provider of the family, the speaker also shifts the focus of the reader to her mother being adept in her job. She is a seamstress and she is highly skilled in her job. She has perfected herself in every chance that has come her way. In her job as a seamstress, apart from her identity as a mother-provider, she also figures as an artist to the speaker.

Dove further highlights the required self-confidence through her poem, "Lady Freedom Among Us," which is employed by Dove as a representative of the latent potential in every woman. She endeavours to instil confidence in each and every woman in advancing their feet forward guided by their personal will and not according to prescribed roles.

don't lower your eyes  
or stare straight ahead to where  
you think you ought to be going

don't mutter oh no  
not another one  
get a job fly a kite  
go bury a bone

These lines acts as a solidarity message to all the women who feel restrained to follow their dreams. The speaker emphasises the need of a woman to gain self-confidence and inspires as she simply "will not retire to the potter's field." Therefore, such strong personality will leave people "no choice but to grant her space/ crown her with sky." It is made clear that every woman has a potential to excel in variety of career options, women are capable of taking charge of any job which were traditionally secured by men. Through these poems, Dove finally widened the identity as diverse by stepping out of gendered roles and by exploring the latent potential.

In an attempt to study H.D.'s, Angelou's, Plath's and Dove's poetry, the patriarchal definition of women as suffering from intellectual deficiency is challenged. These poets represent this definition as merely, a construct. Though women lived in a confined identity, these poets explains how creativity, imagination and skill permeated even in a limited existing conditions and more importantly, the wish to find an identity for oneself. The improvement in financial conditions and favourable environment create more dimensions to one's personality and lifts self-worth, are strongly echoed in these poems. The cry or message in these pieces is carving an individual identity.

Walker and Woolf brought out important aspects of the conditions and the existing artist

within them. On their individual level, both have reflected on the obstacles faced by women in the way of her effort to find an artistic expression. Woolf ponders upon the conditions necessary for the growth of a woman artist. The absence of the right environment should not be mistaken for incapability. Walker shows how even within a limited space, referred to by her as "garden," the artistic endeavour of a woman and her work of creativity is expressed in her everyday life and work. Their limited space did not stop them for expressing themselves artistically.

It can be argued that women in an American society, despite the differences in history or race or struggle or colour, are fighting and aspiring to express themselves by creating an individual identity outside the patriarchal expectations without seeking any form traditional validation regarding their roles in a respective society as a woman.

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