



The Body as Battleground: Patriarchal Inscription and Linguistic Resistance in Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*

Eman Fatima^a, Iqra Shah^b, Muhammad Yousaf Khan^{*c}

a. Bachelor Research Scholar in English COMSATS University Islamabad, Attock Campus

b. Bachelor Research Scholar in English COMSATS University Islamabad, Attock Campus

c. Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, Attock Campus Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* (1965) remains among the most contested poems in twentieth-century American literature, generating sustained critical debate over its emotional violence, historical imagery, and ideological implications. While existing scholarship has addressed the poem through autobiographical, psychoanalytic, and broadly feminist lenses, comparatively few studies have examined how the female body and poetic language work together as instruments of both patriarchal subjugation and feminist resistance. This paper addresses that gap by applying the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous to a close reading of the poem. Drawing on de Beauvoir's (2011) formulation of woman as the socially constructed "Other" and Cixous's (1976) concept of *écriture féminine*, the study argues that *Daddy* performs a dramatic and linguistically enacted movement from corporeal imprisonment to embodied revolt. The female speaker begins as a silenced, entrapped subject whose body and voice are controlled by patriarchal authority. Through progressive rhetorical escalation, violent imagery, and rhythmic rupture, the poem transforms that silence into confrontation. The analysis demonstrates that Plath's poetic language does not merely describe liberation—it enacts it. *Daddy* thus functions as a feminist literary performance in which the body becomes both the site of inscription and the ground of resistance.

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) is an irreplaceable literary figure in twentieth-century American poetry. Her work is branded for its psychological vigour, its bold depiction of the female experience, and its thorough renovation of private anguish into literary art. Her poem *Daddy* (1965) is one of her most debated poems and a prototypical piece of confessional poetry and feminist literary expression. The poem depicts an emotionally charged and violent father-daughter relationship. From suffocation and silence, it is moving towards symbolic liberation and making a dramatic psychological and linguistic voyage that has bound the critical gaze for six decades.

* Correspondence to: Department of Management Sciences, Attock Campus, COMSATS University, Islamabad, Pakistan
E-mail address: usafmarwat@gmail.com (M. Y. Khan).



The initial critical reactions to *Daddy* tended to be autobiographical and psychoanalytic. Others, such as Rosenthal (1967), placed the poem in the confessional tradition, as a dramatization of Plath's unresolved grieving for her father, Otto Plath, who passed away when she was eight. Bassnett (1987) read the poem in terms of the Electra complex, claiming that the conflicting feelings of awe and resentment towards the father figure demonstrated strong childhood affection and resentment. These readings provided needed psychological information. They limited the poem to the scope of the personal biography, however, and mostly overlooked its ideological aspects. In *Daddy*, the father figure is not just an inner figure that exists in private. He represents a cultural and structural context that constructs, constrains and excludes the feminine subject.

A more fruitful literary interpretation was opened by feminist literary criticism. In their book, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) similarly held that rebellion and resistance are often conveyed in symbolic literary language, as images of entrapment and liberation allow female writers to say what is forbidden in patriarchal culture. *Daddy* is indeed an exact representative of this tradition. The imagery of confinement in the poem, the historical allusions and the explosive last statement all indicate that this poem is very much concerned with a set of ideological structures of gendered power. More recent research has confirmed this interpretation. According to Onyishi and Iloanwusi (2025), *Daddy* resists the dominant discourse in an aggressive manner through its confrontational language and iconography of violence, making a radical feminist assertion of voice and agency. In a similar manner, Suman (2025) believes that Plath's significant role in feminist literary history is her ability to embody private pain and suffering into a universal female defiant voice.

Even in this critical richness, however, there is a huge gap. There is little systematic research that has brought together the existential feminist approach of Simone de Beauvoir and the linguistic and corporeal theory of Hélène Cixous to look at how *Daddy* is both a poem of bodily subjugation and linguistic revolt. The socially constructed nature of a woman as the "Other" is explored in Beauvoir's (2011) analysis of the woman, providing a structure for the understanding of the identity of the female speaker in relation to the patriarchal authority. Cixous' (1976) notion of *écriture féminine* helps explain the way the poem's rhythm, repetition and emotional excesses are manifestations of corporeal linguistic resistance. These framings allow the reading of the poem outside the biographical and psychological to a cautious feminist philosophical inquiry of the poem's ideology and enactment.

This paper contends that *Daddy* dramatizes a transition from physical entrapment to linguistic liberation. Initially, the poem depicts the female body as a submissive object in a system controlled by masculine power. It is restricted, caged, and dictated by the father figure. However, the speaker's attitude takes a paradigm shift as the poem progresses. It now becomes more aggressive, more uneven in rhythm, and more inflated in reaction. This intensification is not merely evocative; it is, rather, an enactment itself. The poem does not only portray resistance; it itself is a linguistic resistance. Thus, *Daddy* is a feminist literary presentation that makes the body the place of patriarchy's engraving and the place of feminist revolt enacted through words.

2. Literature Review

Daddy is a critical success since its posthumous publication in *Ariel* (1965). The emotive power, historical images and a dramatic encounter with the power of patriarchy have led to the interpretation of the poem from different scholarly disciplines. These include confessional, autobiographical, psychoanalytic and feminist approaches. Every tradition has shed light on key aspects of the poem. However, each also has its own drawbacks that warrant further investigation. This review aims to overview the prevailing critical trajectories and to pinpoint the gap filled by the present study.

The most common and longest-standing tradition is to read *Daddy* as confessional autobiography. Rosenthal (1967) included Plath in the ranks of the most significant confessional poets because he believed that confessional poetry serves as a medium for the conversion of private suffering into art. In this context, *Daddy* has often been interpreted as a dramatization of Plath's unexpressed mourning for her father, Otto Plath, who died when she was eight years old. In this reading, the poem is a psychological catharsis. This idea was continued by Bassnett (1987) who proposed that the speaker's contradictory feelings of reverence and resentment were related to unresolved childhood attachment. In Bassnett's reading, the father is a figure of authority, and a figure of emotional domination. These interpretations provide genuine psychological insight, but limit the meanings of the poem to the biographical. They fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of the systematic critique of the power structures of patriarchy in the poem, which goes beyond the grief of one woman.

Alongside the autobiographical tradition there has been a tradition of psychoanalytic criticism. The poem's emotional oscillating tone, between worshipful and violent, has been cited as proof of psychological ambivalence. The father is a figure of reverence and monstrosity: "marble-heavy, a bag full of God" (Plath, 1965, line 8). This paradox has been interpreted as a representation of the unconsciously desired and the repressed. According to Kennedy and Gioia (2012), psychoanalytical criticism is a way of reading literary works as expressions of psychological conflicts that cannot be stated directly. Here, *Daddy* creates an internal struggle between obeying and challenging. However, as with biographical readings, psychoanalytic readings tend to personalize what is really a social and ideological phenomenon. They describe the speaker's psychology but do not adequately consider the structural conditions which gave rise to it.

There has been a critical controversy surrounding the use of Holocaust imagery in the poem. The iconography of Nazi Germany is used repeatedly to describe the tyranny of the father figure: “Luftwaffe,” “Panzer-man,” “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (Plath, 1965, lines 42, 45, 33). Steiner (1967) protested this appropriation, claiming that the Holocaust could not be compared to personal suffering. Alvarez (1970), however, saw the imagery as metaphorical hyperbole designed to create dramatic emphasis on the intensity of psychological oppression. These views have never been reconciled. What is remarkable for this research is that even this controversy has been discussed, and largely so, without being embedded in a sustained feminist framework. The Holocaust imagery for the female body, as a marked, persecuted, and recovered body, has been underutilized for critical examination.

Feminist literary criticism has provided the most fruitful interpretations of *Daddy*. De Beauvoir (2011) laid the groundwork for this criticism when she stated that “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself (p. 5). Biographical and psychoanalytical approaches fail to capture the way in which *Daddy* is ideologically organized by this structure of woman as a constant “Other”. Building on this, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) have stated that the female writers often embed resistance in metaphors of entrapment and liberation. *Daddy* is a perfect example of this. Plath’s “black shoe” in which the speaker “lived like a foot / For thirty years” (Plath, 1965, lines 3–4) is just the type of enclosure metaphor that Gilbert and Gubar attribute to women’s writing under patriarchy. Building on this line of thought, Rose (1992) explored how *Daddy* becomes a public and political voice of the private self. Recently, Onyishi and Iloanwusi (2025) have suggested that *Daddy* is a feminist reclamation manifesto, with symbolic patricide and linguistic violence as collective resistance. Suman (2025) also argues that Plath’s work serves as a powerful tool for redefining the female voice, making her an important figure in feminist literature.

Hélène Cixous has also been drawn upon in the theoretical aspect of engagement with the poem. Cixous (1976) made an explicit invitation to women to reclaim language, arguing that women should write themselves and that “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (p. 875). This principle has been utilized to analyse Plath’s writing, with many critics noting that her rhythmical excess, repetition and emotional fracture mirror Cixous’ idea of feminine writing as a disturbance of the patriarchal discourse. Tang et al., (2022) proposes that the image of death in *Daddy* is opposition rather than an autobiography, as is implied by Cixous’s idea of writing the body as a political act. These applications are highly informative. But they seldom link the linguistic theory of Cixous and the structural analysis of de Beauvoir in an extended and systematic fashion.

The present study is relevant here. The current scholarship is either existential feminist or *écriture féminine* in isolation. Few studies have combined both and traced the entire discourse of the poem, the structural oppression of the female body and its linguistic and performative freedom. This paper attempts to meet the challenge head-on by stating that, together, de Beauvoir and Cixous offer the most comprehensive theoretic explanation of what *Daddy* does as a feminist literary work.

3. Methodology

In the present study, a qualitative research design based on textual analysis has been used. The main text is the poem *Daddy* written by Sylvia Plath, which was published in *Ariel* (1965). The purpose of the study is not the reconstruction of biographical facts or psychoanalysis of Plath’s personal life. On the contrary, it is limited only to textual analysis. The methodology is interpretive and theoretical. In particular, the selected lines, images, and rhetoric patterns of the poem *Daddy* will be interpreted using the theoretical framework offered by two feminist theories. They are existential feminism of Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*. Simone de Beauvoir’s theory is mainly based on *The Second Sex* (2011). Hélène Cixous’s theory will be analyzed using her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). The secondary data used in the present study consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and critical essays. The analysis will be purely qualitative because it is aimed at generating the interpretive insights rather than measuring anything. This approach is most suitable for literary analyses where meaning is created through continuous critical examination of language, imagery, and symbolism (Creswell, 2009).

4. Results and Discussion

The poem *Daddy* (1965) by Sylvia Plath is quite a complex poem in terms of its ideology. Its sixteen stanzas are a continuous and intensifying struggle against the patriarchy. The poem begins with physical entanglements, then shifts to a psychological range of ambiguity, and ends with linguistic explosion. The reading of the poem in the double perspective of Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous uncovers a text that is at once a diagnosis of oppressive patriarchy and a performative gesture of feminist resistance.

The opening lines of the poem set the female speaker in a state of physical and psychological captivity:

You do not do, you do not do

*Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.* (Plath, 1965, lines 1-5)

The “black shoe” is one of the strongest enclosure metaphors of the twentieth century in poetry. The speaker is not just inside the shoe! She is a foot, an appendage, a body part that has no meaning unless it is attached to something else, only useful for moving in accordance with something else. The image depicts with a hauntingly precise manner the condition of immanence as de Beauvoir (2011) theorized it. De Beauvoir (2011) maintained that women have been denied transcendence by patriarchal culture, which has restricted them to passive and dependent roles, all determined by men. Elsewhere in this work she states, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 293), highlighting the social nature of female identity rather than its natural nature. The speaker of *Daddy* is unable to “breathe.” Her body is not her own. It is a part of an authority system that she has not chosen and cannot easily get rid of.

The father is described as a giant, godlike figure, and the daughter’s body is made to appear insignificant and small:

*Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue that has one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal.* (Plath, 1965, lines 8-10)

The “marble” statue is a reminder of the permanent, cold and institutional power. The father is not a man. He is a monument. The phrase “bag full of God” is particularly significant, because the authority of the father is not only given, but is God-given. The daughter, however, is trapped in a shoe. The disproportion is intentional and ideologically exact. De Beauvoir (2011) observed that “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself” (p. 5). The first few lines of the poem depict only that imbalance. The father is absolute and the daughter is relative.

The poem traces a second type of male domination, a more subtle and pervasive one, in which the female voice system is silenced. The next few lines make the most explicit statement about linguistic oppression in the poem:

*I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.* (Plath, 1965, lines 24-28)

This is not merely a description of emotional difficulty. It is a symbol of structured silence. Tongue is physically obstructed. For speech, a biological impasse is set up. The body has now been invaded by the power of the patriarchy, and language is now impotent. This is the very phenomenon that Cixous (1976) noted in her statement that “every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak... that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public (p. 88o). The repeated use of the German word for “I” (“ich, ich, ich, ich”) is heartbreakingly ironic. The speaker cannot assert her own subjectivity. The self, the “I”, falters and collapses. Instead of becoming a medium of identity, language becomes the location of its annihilation. Rose (1992) posited that *Daddy* becomes a public and political voice of the private self. This change, however, is not an instantaneous one. It is won by the poem’s ongoing resistance to the forces which created the silence in the first place.

The silencing of the speaker is also extended to the historical and institutional when the poem expands the authority of the patriarch. The father figure evolves from domestic to more systemic and sinister as the poem progresses:

*Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.* (Plath, 1965, lines 48-50)

The mention of fascism is no coincidence. It places the authority of the father in the same category as totalitarian political systems, which require total submission, identify and mark the bodies of the dominated, and control their identity. It is not just that the speaker is oppressed by the father. She is taken up with him, in all the political sense of the word. The poem tells of this authority reproducing itself beyond the death of the father, which is more disturbing. The speaker confesses:

*I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look
And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.”* (Plath, 1965, lines 64-67)

This is one of the most thought-provoking lines in the poem. The speaker did not break away from patriarchy by moving away from her father. In her marriage, she re-built it. De Beauvoir (2011) maintained that from an early age women were socialized to internalize the systems of their own subjugation, to believe that their value is derived from their association with male authority. The speaker's marriage to a man who resembles her father is not a personal sin. It is ideological reproduction. Rose (1992) has observed that "the name of the husband is one of the strongest insignia of patriarchal power" (p. 112). The cycle of domination is not an incidental, but rather structural.

It is here that the language of the poem starts its most dramatic turn, against this cycle of structural domination. The change is a slow but definite one. The nursery-rhyme rhythm of the poem (almost childlike, insistent, repetitive) begins to work against itself. The same formal device which marks the beginning of submission is increasingly used for the purpose of rebellion. According to Cixous (1976), "by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (p. 880). In *Daddy*, this return is made through the excess of the rhythm and the emotion, and it gradually takes over the control of the poem. The vampire image is a turning point in the reversal:

*There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.* (Plath, 1965, lines 76–79)

The vampire is a symbol of parasitism, a creature that lives off the blood of another. In these lines, the father is shown not to be a god, but a predator. The speaker who was once a foot in a shoe, now drives a stake through the heart of her oppressor. The violence and intent of the fantasy is intentional. Onyishi and Iloanwusi (2025) note that *Daddy* turns individual trauma into collective rebellion, in the form of symbolic patricide and linguistic violence. The villagers dancing at the grave of the father are a community of the oppressed. Speaker's revolt is no longer a personal one. It involves the community and is a statement.

This communal revolt is most fully and most concentratedly expressed in the poem's famous last line: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath, 1965, line 80). The term "bastard" has been a source of much critical interest because of its vulgarity and emotional power. However, its most significant role is its performance. The speaker does not mention escaping. She speaks and she escapes. Liberation is in the act of the utterance. Cixous (1976) insisted that "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (p. 875). The last line of *Daddy* is just such an act. Now the tongue is completely and violently free of the "stuck in a barb wire snare" (Plath, 1965, line 26). Plath is unique among feminist writers in her capacity for universalizing feminine resistance out of her own experience, Suman (2025) notes. The final line is an excellent representation of this transformation. It is not a confession of any guilt or crime. It is a statement. This performative aspect of Plath's language, however, is not limited to her poetry. Linguistic patterns in *The Bell Jar* also function as performances of psychological states, rather than just descriptions of them, as Bisma and Khan (2026) have shown, and so it can be argued that Plath always used language as enactment in her prose and poetry. The woman subject who opens the poem as a foot in a shoe, closes it as a speaking, asserting, naming subject. De Beauvoir (2011) claimed that women must become transcendent, abandoning the idea of being defined in relation to man. That refusal is done without restrictions in the final line of the poem. Speaker does not ask to be released. She announces it. What was once a prison, is now a platform. The voice that was silenced, has now become a weapon. The language used in Plath's poem is more than descriptive. In essence it is revolutionary.

5. Conclusion

This paper has read *Daddy* (1965) by Sylvia Plath as a feminist literary text where the female body is shown to be a location of inscription of the patriarchal structures as well as a linguistic confrontation. The analysis has outlined the dramatic renovation of the poem, from bodily confinement to personal revolt, using textual close reading, as well as drawing on the feminist concepts by Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous. The early silence, detention and subservience of the speaker can be read through Beauvoir's (2011) notion of woman as the socially created "Other". Cixous' (1976) theory of *écriture féminine* assists us to comprehend that repetition, rhythm, and emotional exaggeration in the poem are performative acts of linguistic liberation rather than only personal emotional outburst of an individual.

Analysis also indicates that the scope of the poem *Daddy* is not confined to the category of a confessional poetry. It is a well-crafted and thoroughly meditated feminist expression in which the language is the gadget of liberation. The closing statement of the speaker is not a mere "emotional ending". It is a political act. The poem exposes the working of patriarchy at the level of the body and voice, whilst also demonstrating how this power can be deconstructed by language. As such, Plath's *Daddy* is an enduring and theoretically rich contribution to feminist literary discourse, relevant to feminist scholarship today just as it was when it was published 60 years ago.

5.1. Recommendations

The theoretical framework used in this study needs to be expanded in future research to other poems in Plath's *Ariel* (1965) collection, especially *Lady Lazarus* and *Fever 103°*, in which the intersections of body, language and resistance are equally strong. Comparative reading of Plath with other contemporary feminist poets would help to throw further light on the continuing significance of *écriture féminine* as a critical concept. De Beauvoir's and Cixous's approach to the silencing of the feminine is proposed as a framework for the analysis of indigenous women's poetry in Pakistan and South Asia generally, where the silencing of the feminine is enacted in similarly embodied ways. Lastly, intersectional feminist perspectives that combine race, class, and postcolonial analysis will be useful in enriching the analysis of the current study.

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