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**Écriture Fèminie in Anne Sexton's Selected Poems****A B S T R A C T**

Écriture féminine, or "feminine writing," is a prominent theoretical concept in feminist critique, particularly in France. It describes a distinct feminine style that deviates from standard male styles. This paper aims to highlight the concept of écriture féminine in a selection of Anne Sexton's poems. She bravely tackles topics like pregnancy, the female body, and marriage from a feminine perspective. Her works can be analysed through the eyes of French feminist writers such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva because of their strong emphasis on the female body. Sexton enters a traditionally male-dominated field, bringing new talent and perspective to the craft of poetry

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## الكتابة النسوية في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة آن سيكستون

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### الملخص

"الكتابة النسوية" أو *Écriture féminine* هو مفهوم نظري بارز في النقد النسوي ، لا سيما في فرنسا والذي يصف الأسلوب الأنثوي المتميز الذي يخرج عن الأنماط الذكورية التقليدية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز مفهوم الكتابة النسوية في مجموعة مختارة من قصائد الشاعرة آن سيكستون. تتعامل الشاعرة بشجاعة مع مواضيع مثل الحمل والجسد الأنثوي والزواج من منظور أنثوي. وبذلك يمكن تحليل أعمالها من خلال منظور بعض الكتابات النسويات الفرنسيات مثل هيلين سيكسوس ولوس إيريجاراي وجوليا كريستيفا بسبب تركيزهم على الجسد الأنثوي. تدخل سيكستون مجالاً تقليدياً يهيمن عليه الذكور ، حيث تضيف مواهباً ومنظوراً جديداً إلى حرفة الشعر .

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الكتابة النسوية، آن سيكستون ، الجنس ، الجسد الأنثوي، "العملية"، "احتقلاً برحمني" ، "الحبض في الأربعين".

## *Écriture Féminie* in Anne Sexton's Selected Poems

*Écriture féminine* is first proposed by the French literary theorist and feminist Hélène Cixous. It refers to writing that is generally and typically feminine in style, vocabulary, tone, and feeling, and that is wholly distinct from and in opposition to male language and discourse (Cuddon,2012,p.225). Abigail Bray (2004,pp.70-71) defines *écriture féminine* as "avant-garde textual practice which challenges and moves beyond the constraints of phallogocentric thought [.....] a path towards thought through the body." In her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter defines *écriture féminine* as

the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text...[It] provides a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the value of the feminine and identifies the theoretical project of feminist criticism as the analysis of difference (1981,pp.185-186)

*Écriture féminine*, or body language, is a practise associated with French feminism and a discourse based on subjectivity, sexuality, and language. Its concepts are heavily influenced by deconstruction and post-Freudian psychoanalysis. According to these theories, all systems of representation, particularly language, always position femininity outside of symbolisation, as if it is either above or defying representation under patriarchal laws (Lebihan, 2004,p.107). *Écriture féminine* is a feminist response to the binary thinking that underpins Western culture. People, particularly women, who live in a society that adheres to this duality find themselves unable to connect with their bodies as a result of the alienation of the body that occurs under a capitalist system (Rodgers, 2017,p.29).

French feminist critics Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are concerned with how the masculine-dominated language system seeks to marginalise or erase women's voices. According to these critics, women can rebel through *écriture féminine*, which is a type of language based only on female subjectivity, physical impulses, and physiology. The French feminists reject the concept of an ultimate meaning as well as the concept of an author-god and his message, and hence any fixed meaning. According to French feminism, the pleasures (jouissance) of living in and writing out of a female body through the mother's body and voice are associated with the *écriture féminine* (Hoeveler,2003,pp.45-46). Hélène Cixous addresses women, "...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (Cixous 1976 ,p.880 ).

Cixous's 1975 essay "Le Rire de la medusa" or "The Laugh of the Medusa" is a feminist manifesto that emphasises the connection between body, sexual difference, and language. According to Cixous, women have been silenced. As an opposition to masculine reason and discourse, they are made to assume the role of physicality and materiality (Lindsay,1986,pp.47-49). The Laugh of the Medusa promotes new ways of thinking about women and literature. In this article, Cixous argues that women should use writing to reclaim their bodies and, hence, their ambitions and identities. Cixous contends that a woman must "write herself" and "put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875).

"The Laugh of the Medusa" is filled with intellectual issues and humorous rebuttals to Freud and Lacan's gender and women's-related theorizations. The title of this essay is a parody of Freud's brief article "Medusa's Head." Sigmund Freud regarded the figure of Medusa as a metaphor for the castration complex in men during the Oedipal stage, when the male infant recognises the absence of the penis or phallus in the mother, causing him to connect with the father out of fear of being castrated (Berger 2014). According to Freud, the sight of Medusa "stiff with terror, turns him to stone" (Frued, 1941, p.69).

Cixous employs the myth of Medusa to dismantle the assumptions that a woman is a harmful object, a passive creature, or a being without a body . Cixous develops a theory of woman that is multiple in culture, unstable in form, polyphonic in self, devious in design, and textured in a variety of ways using Freudian and Lacanian theories (Al-Mahfedi,2019). Cixous begins "The Laugh of the Medusa" by urging women to write themselves and develop their *écriture féminine*, clarifying "When I say "woman", I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (Cixous ,1976 ,pp.875-876). Cixous challenges women to write themselves out of the world males have imposed on them. Women are encouraged to use body language as a means of expressing themselves (Tong and Botts ,2017).

According to Morag Shiach, Helene Cixous employs two distinct techniques while attempting to alter sexual and cultural institutions. First, she performs a deconstructive analysis of how sexual difference has been talked about in the past. She criticises the notion that the masculine is superior to the feminine and that this is unavoidable and natural. Second, Cixous investigates "the subversive, and the political, possibilities of a writing practice that sets itself up in opposition to such cultural categorization" (Shiach 1999,pp.9-10).

Écriture féminine seeks to undermine the hierarchical, phallogocentric system that exists in literature. Feminist language differs from patriarchal language in that it emphasises the woman's body and sexuality rather than the phallus. It is possible to define *écriture féminine* as the language of a mother's or woman's body. As a result, the writer is liberated from patriarchy by writing via the feminine body, breaking social standards and breaking taboos.

In recent years, much theorising has been centered on the body, challenging classical dualism's subordination of the body to the intellect. Rather, the body is seen as the essential object through which power relations are created and challenged. Such arguments are taken up by feminist theorists, who argue that examining the body is especially important for women because they are traditionally linked with it. Men celebrate the apparently "superior" category of mind, whereas women's bodies are distinguished by biological processes such as menstruation and pregnancy (Gamble, 2006, p.95). The subject of *écriture féminine* presents a chance for transformation. Women are encouraged to express themselves in writing and to break the boundaries of masculine norms. Subjectivity is reconfigured in unexpected ways through writing that follows the rhythms of the body and infuses life into the text (Verma, 1997, p.277).

Great male writers can never properly express what it is like to be a woman, so their character portrayals are almost certainly influenced by social codes of the time as well as their own masculine perspective on women. As a result, male and female literature has quite distinct attitudes and viewpoints; male poetry speaks an entirely different language than feminine poetry. Women's writing helps create a language for talking about women's experiences and makes people more aware of the issues raised by women's work. The American poet Anne Sexton is one of the female poets in American society whose poetry explores issues that women face and different ideas about motherhood.

Anne Sexton, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet, was born in Newton, Massachusetts, on November 9, 1928. In the year 1953, she was diagnosed with postpartum depression, had her first mental breakdown, and was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a neuropsychiatric hospital, where she would return for therapy several times. In 1955, after the birth of her second daughter, Sexton had another nervous breakdown. On October 4, 1974, she committed suicide. Sexton gives her readers a realistic view of the misery that marked her life. Her poetry focuses on the female experience, and while she has been criticised for addressing issues such as menstruation, abortion, her brilliance as a poet overcomes the controversy surrounding her subject matter (Sexton and Ames, 1977).

The poetry of Ann Sexton investigates womanhood and the struggles that women face, as well as contradictory notions on the sexuality and fertility of women, in addition to a wide range of other issues that women were traditionally expected to avoid. Her voice so powerfully reflects women's wrath and suffering. Her poetry represents millions of women whose feelings, abilities, and concerns are overlooked. Her work appears at a period when the majority of female poets believe that in order to write well and be recognised as a writer, they must adhere to the established conventions of poetic form and subject matter established by their male counterparts.

Sexton connects her poems to her personal growth. The body, in her opinion, is a crucial element in one's identity, which she celebrates and accepts. Many of her poems praise and show off the creative qualities of her female body (McSpadden, 1984, pp. 7–14). In the introduction to *Anne Sexton's Complete Poems* and under the title "How It Was", Maxine Kumin writes:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry[..... ]her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail. Time will sort out the dross among these poems and burnish the gold. Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon (1981, p .xxxiv

Sexton uses all of her creative skills in her poem "The Operation" (Sexton, 1981, pp. 56–59) from *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) to make a statement of disturbing, even scary beauty. The poem is written in a simple story format. It starts with a description of her visit to the doctor, where he tells her she has hereditary womb cancer, which killed her mother the year before (Jones ,1965, p.27).

After the sweet promise,  
the summer's mild retreat  
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,  
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,  
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath(II.1-5)

Melanie Waters (2015, p. 386) says that Sexton takes the metaphor of exposing the body to its logical conclusion by putting it on display for the reader to see. The readers are not only invited to imagine the speaker's naked skin but also the most inaccessible parts of her body. As she lies down in the "sterile" space of the clinician's surgery, unaware of the "oily rape" of the doctor's glove "I, who must ,allow the glove its oily rape"(l.6), the reader is put in a position where he or she may almost see more of the speaker than the speaker does. She is exposed, vulnerable, and unable to explain what is going on inside her body, so she has little choice but to trust the doctor and "nod" in agreement with his decision to operate. In this hospital world, where "the body is dumb, the body is meat," (l.44), the speaker struggles to keep her identity as "citizen and boss of [her] own body" (II.67-68). She is shaved "like a shorn lamb," injected with drugs with "mysterious" needles, "hung up like a saddle," cut open, and "tied" back together; her "stomach laced up like a football/for the game" (II.121–122).

Sexton contributes to a new agenda in women's poetry by writing so bluntly and honestly about this normal female experience of disease, such as vaginal inspection, "I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape" (l.6). Her obsession with sickness, which she plainly equates with femininity in her poetry, is troubling. Disease appears to be the stereotypical feminine condition. Physical and psychological symptoms convey rage and impotence, desire and need (Little, 1990, p.133).

In "In Celebration of My Uterus," from *Love Poems* 1969, the poet celebrates her body's capabilities and her sense of oneness with all other women. This topic exemplifies a frequent element in Sexton's work, one that critics either admire or condemn, namely her fondness for writing about disturbing issues. She covers some of the more private parts of being a woman long before it became mainstream or acceptable. So, even though she is not part of the feminist movement, she gets a lot of support from women looking for a new definition of what it means to be a woman in the twentieth century. This is because she is willing to talk about taboo topics like gynaecological surgery, masturbation, breasts, incest, and lesbianism (McSpadden, 1984, p.14).

They wanted to cut you out  
but they will not.  
They said you were immeasurably empty  
but you are not.  
They said you were sick unto dying  
but they were wrong.(ll.3-8)

In the lines above, Sexton says that "they" (probably male doctors) say she should have a hysterectomy because she can no longer have children. They believe that a uterus that is "sick unto death" is infertile, a conclusion reached by valuing or devaluing a woman's biology based on her ability to have children. Sexton's response is clear: "You are singing like a schoolgirl./You are not torn" (lines 9–10). This portion of Sexton's body that her male physicians refer to as "torn" provides her with strength and value (Kircher, 2019). Instead Sexton sees her uterus as:

Sweet weight,  
in celebration of the woman I am  
and of the soul of the woman I am  
and of the central creature and its delight  
I sing for you. I dare to live.(ll.11-15)

She praises her uterus in this poem, describing it as a representation "of the woman I am /and of the soul of the woman I am/ and of the central creature and its delight." (ll.12-14).The uterus is described as a cup, a cover, and a container, all of which are archetypal female symbols (Michie, 1990, p.146).

Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.

Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain

Hello to the soil of the fields.

Welcome, roots.(ll.16-19)

This organ in a woman's body helps her accept herself as a body. Through this organ, she can connect with "the soil of the fields" and her roots. As a result, the earth-like woman, like the earth, is a source of creative energy and rebirth. Also, each uterine cell gives other women a way to identify themselves: "There is enough here to please a nation" (l.21). The uterus is hard to put into a box and hard for male doctors to diagnose and describe because patriarchal metaphors do not do it justice. Sexton breaks the rules of traditional poetry to show a woman's body that is free of patriarchal structure (Michie, 1990, p.146).

Sexton's rhetorical choices in "In Celebration of My Uterus" strengthen her position. Sexton opposes both the patriarchal perspective of female bodies (she finds power in sexual organs that patriarchy perceives as "torn" or "dying" when they are no longer active for reproduction) and a binary, linear connection to pictures or ideals through her usage of "either/or." in this passage. Her choice of language conveys a non-linear, "both/and" understanding and worth of her body as well as the goals she sets for herself.

When the uterus and other obviously feminine bodily organs and functions are represented, the poet views it as a chance to fight patriarchal language that would normally give the woman's body a limited or framed place, or no place at all. The titles of her poem and her collection, *Love Poems*, which is a love song to her uterus, reveal that Sexton has a positive perspective on women's bodies. In this situation, Sexton does not view her uterus as a source of weakness, but rather as a constant source of strength.

In "Menstruation at Forty" a poem from Sexton's collection *Live or Die* (1966), she examines the biology of being a woman. A male reviewer responds to this poem by saying, "but if a woman alone, in the physiological sense, could have written a poem like 'Menstruation at Forty'" (McDonnell,1987,p.136).

"Menstruation at Forty" is about a woman's desire for sex, her longing to be a mother, and her guilt about being too old to have children. It also disagrees with the common biologist view of Sexton's time, saying that a woman's worth is not only based on her ability to have children. "The womb is not a clock/nor a bell tolling, but in the eleventh month of its life/I feel the November" (ll.1-4). Her use of the word "clock" here could be a reference to the "biological clock," which is the time in a woman's life when her eggs are no longer good enough to be fertilised. Sexton does not want a bell to ring, just like the clock. She would rather talk about how the female body is like a calendar. Change does not happen as quickly as with the clock and the bell. Over time, the changes are almost impossible to tell apart. Because the change is slow and fades, it is hard to tell when the season suddenly changes. Sexton is talking about both how her womb is changing over time and how time is moving through her whole body,

not just her womb. She does not think of the body and the womb as one thing. Instead, she thinks of the body and the womb as two separate things

(Kircher, 2019).

The association of the womb with physical decay is perhaps the first thing to notice here. The speaker says her best years are over ; it is now "the November / of the body as well as the calendar,"(l.5-6) and "the earth is done with its harvest"(l.8). She blames her pessimism and eagerness to die on the unique biology of women, "This time I hunt for death / [...] It was all along in the womb"(ll.9,14).

Sexton also considers the child's sex, combining male and female characteristics—a reference to de Beauvoir's rejection of any scientific or factual basis for preferring one sex over another. Sexton appears to be envisioning a child who possesses both female and male characteristics:

Will I give you my eyes or his?  
 Will you be the David or the Susan?  
 (Those two names I picked and listened for.)  
 Can you be the man your fathers are—  
 the leg muscles from Michelangelo,  
 hands from Yugoslavia  
 somewhere the peasant, Slavic and determined,  
 somewhere the survivor bulging with life—  
 and could it still be possible,  
 all this with Susan's eyes?(ll.20-29)

In the lines above, Sexton looks at how the body of a child is connected to many different things. From a genealogical point of view, Sexton sees the child as a part of many different groups. She talks about "your fathers," which is a reference to the people who lived before her. She is talking about places when she says that Michelangelo is from Italy and that "hands from Yugoslavia," Then, she applies this idea that a child's body is part of a bigger whole to the child's sexuality (as opposed to a binary). A child can have both male and female traits, like Michelangelo's strong legs or the rough, strong hands of the Yugoslav peasants. On the other hand, the child will have feminine eyes in addition to the characteristics of a man (Kircher,2019,p.18). Sexton's "Menstruation at Forty" is a big step forward for women's honesty and a fight against old taboos.

**Conclusion**

French feminism has a big impact on changing traditional gender stereotypes in patriarchal nations. That the female body can be used to develop new language has become an important characteristic of feminist texts. Because patriarchal ideology has confined female biology to a few traits, French theorists want a feminine writing style, which Cixous defines as "écriture féminine". Whereas the phallus is a masculine metaphor in Freud and Lacan's phallogocentric language, the female body provides meaning in "écriture féminine." Thus, Anne Sexton's poetry rediscovers the female body and female experiences through what Cixous calls "écriture féminine," or female writing. Sexton creates a safe space for other women to reconnect with their own bodies after being savagely torn apart. By analysing her own experiences, Sexton empowers women to tell their own tales. Writing and reading stories creates new discourse. Women's stories and experiences that contradict dominant male thinking begin to transform, as shown in Sexton's poems.

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