MEANS OF EXPRESSING LANGUAGE AND GENDER IDENTITY IN THE POETRY BY ANNE SEXTON, SYLVIA PLATH, ADRIENNE RICH

The article deals with the issues of construction of language and gender identity in the poetry by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. It studies poets' attitude to the language and gender, it describes what motifs and images were employed by contemporary American female poets to express their vision of the language and silence. Special attention is paid to the concept of women's writing, modern theories of corporeality, sexuality and the problems of the body and the language, which have been considered as major features of women’s poetry in the second half of the 20th century.

The theoretical background of the article is based on the works of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Jane Gallop, Alicia Ostriker, in which they defined the concepts of women's writing and language, women's subject, bodiness and corporeality. The article analyzes a number of related issues: firstly, it determines how well-known theories of women's writing are consistent with the peculiarities of the female experience and its realization in a poetic text, especially on the level of the themes and motifs; secondly, it studies how the motifs of language and silence are expressed in the poetry by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, what are the similarities between their imagery and what are the differences. The article analyses modern feminist works as well as gender studies.

Keywords: language, gender, identity, language identity, silence motif, language motif, ‘women’s writing’ (‘écriture féminine’), femininity, masculinity, feminine identity, lyrical persona.
та творчості, темам тілесності, сексуальності, жіночої ідентичності та гендеру як характерним рисам жіночої поезії другої половини XX століття.

Теоретичною базою розвідки стали роботи Е. Сіксу, Л. Ірігаре, Ю. Кристевої, Дж. Геллоп, А. Острейкер, які дали можливість визначити поняття жіночого письма та тексту, жіночого суб’єкта та тілесності. У статті проаналізовано цілу низку пов’язаних між собою питань: по-перше, визначено, як відомі теорії жіночого письма узгоджуються з особливостями жіночого досягнення та реалізуються в поетичному тексті, особливо на рівні тематики та проблематики; по-друге, обговорено, як зображуються теми мови, ідентичності та гендеру в поезії Е. Секстон, С. Плат та Е. Річ, в чому полягає схожість, а у чому відміність. В роботі розглянуто сучасні роботи феміністичних студій та напрацювання у руслі гендерних досліджень.

Ключові слова: мова, гендер, ідентичність, мовна ідентичність, мотив мовчання, жіноче письмо, фемінність, маскулінність, жіноча ідентичність, ліричний суб’єкт.

В статье рассмотрены способы выражения языковой и гендерной идентичности в поэзии Энн Секстон, Сильвии Плат и Эдриенн Рич. Особенное внимание уделяется проблемам женского письма и вопросам телесности, сексуальности и языка как характерным чертам женской поэзии второй половины XX века.

Теоретической базой статьи стали работы Е. Сиксу, Л. Иригарей, Ю. Кристевої, Дж. Геллоп, А. Острейкер, которые дали возможность изучить и уточнить понятия женского письма и текста, женского субъекта и телесности. В статье рассмотрен целый ряд связанных между собой вопросов: во-первых, определено, как известные теории женского письма согласуются с особенностями женского опыта и реализуются в поэтическом тексте, особенно на уровне тематики и проблематики; во-вторых, рассмотрено, как выражаются мотивы языка и молчания в стихотворениях Э. Секстон, С. Плат и Э. Рич, в чем их схожесть, а в чем различие. В работе проанализированы современные работы феминистической теории и наработки в русле гендерных исследований.

Ключевые слова: язык, гендер, идентичность, языковая идентичность, мотив молчания, женское письмо, феминность, маскулинность, женская идентичность, лирический субъект.

The key problem of gender philosophy is the problem of text and language, an attempt to construct a language that offers a difference or at least does not imply a hierarchy [115, p. 92]. This tendency explains the aspirations of female authors of the twentieth century to challenge, openly or indirectly, the established literary forms, literary canon and poetic tradition [244, p. 33]. It should be noted that the problem of language in women’s poetry was raised long before the 20th century, for example, in the works of Emily Dickinson. However, this time period was marked by the extreme attention to the issue of language not only in poetry but also in literary criticism. The reason for this is that the poetic Tradition, at least until the mid-1960's, was a male domain. And thanks to the feminist movement, more women poets have been published and more works of female authors have been discovered.
By saying that female poets in the 20th century have demonstrated a keen interest in the issues of language and gender, I do not intend to assert that language issues were of no interest to the male poets at all. Let us mention only T. Eliot’s poetry, “East Coker,” where the lyrical persona is worried about “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” [225, p. 23]. However, we can assume that female poets, who write in a language that historically and structurally marginalized a female subject, extremely acutely feel this gigantic gap, which lies between their experience and its representation in the artistic text.

The article deals with the issues of women’s language and writing, it studies the attitude of three American female poets to language and gender in their works. The article dwells on the motifs and images which were employed by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich to express their vision of the language, identity and gender. Female language matters have attracted attention of such scholars as Jo Gill, Jan Montefiore, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Liz Yorke, Alicia Ostriker, Susan Juhasz, Wendy Martin and Sharon Becker and many others.

According to Wendy Martin and Sharon Becker, the 1950s were truly the golden age of the family in the USA. Reborn after the scrimping and saving of World War II, America was a shiny, plasticized, boomeranged, and tail-finned world in which television and advertising packaged the perfect family alongside gelatin salads and pink refrigerators [14]. Nevertheless, as this myth of familial perfection was being constructed, it was simultaneously being destroyed by women writers who resisted the lie of domesticity and the figurehead of the perfect housewife that stood in the center of that lie.

In the work of American poets of the second half of the twentieth century Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, the language problem occupies an important place, although the authors reflect it from the diametrically opposite sides. For Sexton, the problem of language is inextricably linked with the motif of faith; for her, the language is something that brings people closer to God and defines their place in the world. In many Sexton’s poems we hear an angry voice of accusation, filled with aversion to the physical, fragile world of mankind. The cycle of poetry
“The Fury of ...” (*The Death Notebooks* collection) expresses the fury of the lyrical persona, aimed at the seasons, natural phenomena, religious values and the inability of the language to convey the divine that is in human nature. According to A. Sexton, the language unites and at the same time divides the humanity. Language is not capable of conveying a single, universal, generally accepted meaning, and, according to Julia Kristeva, “is always too far, too abstract to convey the hidden swarm of our existence” [8, p. 120]. In this context, the problem of the language, as Sexton sees it, is closer to Adrianne Rich’s interpretation. She believed that by its nature the language is the product of a masculine society, and it is extremely difficult for women, especially poets, to use it to reflect their own female experience: “It is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you” (“Our Whole Life”) (*The Will to Change* collection) [12, p. 44].

Rich considers the language an important tool, and poetry is the driving force that can change the views of the entire American nation. However, the poet also agrees that the language cannot convey “true female experience” and shares the ideas of Hélène Cixous, who recognizes the importance of what is beyond the language. Cixous believes that the reference to ‘silence’ in women’s creativity can shake the patriarchal nature of the language: “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent a steadfast language that destroys distribution, classes, rules and codes ...” [5, p. 27]. Adrienne Rich often deploys a deliberate strategy of “literary negation” in her poems. She often challenges the “normative structures of perception and representation” by presenting “extreme content” by means of “formally radical techniques” [5, p. 27]. Rich’s famous “Love Poems” (*The Dream of a Common Language*) are an outstanding example not only because they declare one woman’s love for another woman, but because they transcend sex. The poems are not narrowed by the focus on lesbian love but expanded:

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own
only the thumb is larger, longer in these hands
I could trust the world . . .
such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
with such restraint, with such a grasp
of the range and limits of violence
that violence ever after would be obsolete [10, p. 13].

According to Mary J. Carruthers, this is a vision of social and moral renewal, not of orgasmic transcendence, and it indicates the precise relationship for Rich between the bonding of women and social transformation [6]. Love between women represents a new moral, social order, and it seems to have more in it than only sexuality and relations. Some of the poems tie their significance tightly to a strictly female imagery. Poem 6, for example, speaks of the beloved’s ‘small hands, precisely equal to my own.’ The speaker says that ‘in these hands / I could trust the world, or in many hands like these.’ The poem asserts Rich’s preference for women in positions of power and extends her vision of women’s capabilities. In poem 12 she speaks of ‘two lovers of one gender / ... two women of one generation.’ And in the “Floating Poem, Unnumbered,” the subject is the lovemaking between two women: “Your traveled, generous thighs / between which my whole face has come and come” [10, p. 13]. Despite a specific focus and explicitness of poems such as these, the majority of the love poems achieve a universal significance.

In the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Adrienne Rich looks to “the future when women rise, / at least as beautiful as any boy / or helicopter, / poised, still coming, her fine blades making the air wince” [10]. Rich goes on to describe a woman mindlessly polishing teaspoons, her shaved legs “gleaming like tusks”, her mind as blank as a “wedding cake.” Sylvia Plath’s recurrent theme of women silenced through marriage and domesticity appears in her poems “The Detective”, “The Disquieting Muses”, “The Courage of Shutting Up” etc. In Sylvia Plath’s poetry the motif of silence is realized in the grotesque and mystical images and is less straightforward than in Adrienne Rich’s poems. If in Rich’s “Harpers Ferry” (poetry collection The Fact of a Doorframe) lyrical persona is ‘speaking silence’, Plath would rather write about silence of a woman artist, a wife and a mother which has become an integral part of her life in American society of the 1950s-1960s. Plath expresses the motif of silence through images of muteness, shut or stitched mouth,
paralysis as in “Paralytic”: “Wrap my lips, / Eyes, nose and ears, / A clear / Cellophane I cannot crack” [9, p. 224].

Using the language to create a new female consciousness is the constant goal for Adrianne Rich. In the poem “Planetarium” (The Will to Change collection) the author compares the male language with signals transmitted from the outer space, which her lyrical persona attempts to decrypt throughout her lifetime: (“...I am bombarded yet I stand / I have been standing all my life in the / direct path of a battery of signals / the most accurately transmitted most / untranslatable language in the universe”) [11, p. 32]. In the 70s of the twentieth century the author begins to write directly about her feminine experience, about a woman’s personality. In the above mentioned poem, she adds: (“I am an instrument in the shape / Of a woman trying to translate pulsations / Into images for the relief of the body / And the reconstruction of the mind”) (The Will to Change collection) [12]. In this poem a husband speaks ‘a different language’ which a woman has ‘picked up / through cultural exchanges’ (“Two Songs”). The author calls such a language an ‘oppressor’s language’ (“Our Whole Life”) and makes an attempt to discover a new, universal ‘common language’ both for men and women. In the poem “I Am in Danger - Sir -” her persona rejects an old ‘spoiled language’, choosing ‘silence’ instead. This new consciousness, according to the poet, will reflect changes in the concept of femininity of an American woman, predicting the future of women in general. Rich outlines two specific types of ‘silence’: firstly, the silence which concerns quite a few women from the past, since they had no opportunity to leave written records of their lives, secondly, a type of silence, which is actively destroyed in the contemporary literature, a type of silence, which creative women still have to deal with in their writing [5, p. 28].

In 1963 Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” underminded the myth of the contented suburban housewife. This explosion resounded across the country, revolutionizing not only what women wanted from their lives, but also what women wrote.
Writers and activists such as Jo Freeman, Nancy Chodorow, Casey Hayden, Mary King, and Caroline Bird all brought the issues of women’s equality to the page, signaling that women were serious about ending the construction of woman as housewife [14]. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are perhaps the two best-known women of the confessional school of poetry, which emphasized the use of poetry as a mode to explore the universal through personal failings and desires.

Sylvia Plath’s poems are a study in opposition: dark yet playful, intensely rhythmic and carefully rhymed, yet far from traditional. Plath utilizes simple language and repetition to craft poems about the most difficult of subjects: the hatred for her father, her uncertainty as a mother, and her own delicate mental state. Yet she also writes poems of breathtaking beauty, elevating beekeeping and nature walks to moments of divine transcendence. Plath’s poems begin in the personal but, through the use of myth and often the metaphysical symbolism of the natural world, they become universal statements about the quest for a place in the universe.

In Sylvia Plath’s poetry “The Detective” (‘Collected Poems’) she confesses a typical attitude towards a woman in marriage, which an author calls “the valley of death”. In marital life a woman often lacks any voice and this is often considered as a norm: “...This is a case without a body. / The body does not come into it at all. / It is a case of vaporization. / The mouth first, its absence reported / In the second year. It had been insatiable / And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit / To wrinkle and dry. / The breasts next ...” [9, p. 209]. The image of the woman’s mouth, which evaporated after being hung out to dry like brown fruit, expresses poet’s anxiety about an ability of a woman to speak her own thoughts, to express herself in marriage. In the poetry “The Courage of Shutting Up” (poetry collection Winter Trees) she calls a woman’s tongue ‘dangerous’ and thus it must be get rid of: “Then there is that antique billhook, the tongue, / Indefatigable, purple. Must it be cut out? / It has nine tails, it is dangerous” [9, p. 201]. In her poetry men see women’s words, women’s language dangerous for them, as a result this language must be killed and its skin should be hung in the library to entertain men as they are entertained by animal skins hanging on the walls of their mansions: “No, the tongue, too, has been
put by, / Hung up in the library with the engravings of Rangoon / And the fox heads, the otter heads, the heads of dead rabbits. / It is a marvelous object — / The things it has pierced in its time” [9, p. 210].


Anne Sexton’s lyrical persona in the poem “Lessons in Hunger” (*Last Poems* collection) also lives in the world of silence and her questions remain unanswered: “‘Do you like me?’ / I asked the blue blazer. / No answer. / Silence bounced out of his books. / Silence fell off his tongue / and sat between us / and clogged my throat. / It slaughtered my trust”) [13, p. 610]. In her understanding of the language Anne Sexton often uses Freud’s ideas, for whom literature, as well as hysteria and phobia, originate from the same source, namely, from suppressed desires, which, being unsatisfied from childhood, exist in each of us [15, p. 27]. Freud does not see a significant difference between an artist and a neurotic. Both are trying to get rid of an emotionally uncomfortable mental state and resort to various ways to escape from themselves in the form of dreams, delusions, fantasies, artistic creativity, rebellion and alienation from reality.

Anne Sexton, who began her literary career as a therapy after a nervous breakdown, saw creativity and insanity inherent in each other. For her, the language is something focused, elliptical, and metaphorical [7, p. 120]. The language, according to Sexton, is something people use when they talk rejecting any censorship inherent in ordinary communication. The poetic program of the poet reflects her desire to penetrate the invisible veil between people, to blur the boundaries between an author and a reader. Therefore, she often uses personal
pronoun ‘you’, trying to make the reader understand the complexity of the intimate relationships of the poetic work. Whoever is the recipient of her poetry: a mother, a father, a daughter, a husband, a lover, a friend, a psychoanalyst, or even God – is always the reader whose thoughts and love have always been very important to Sexton.

Adrienne Rich’s poems reflect contemporary changing concerns of her country, such as feminism, lesbian movement, African-American rights movement, while also mirroring the transformations in Rich’s personal life from wife and mother to lesbian and political activist. Rich’s early poetry is relatively traditional with standard line breaks and rhythmical stanzas. However, by the 1970s her poetry incorporates stylistic innovations such as punctuation suggested only by spaces within the stanzas, along with traditionally taboo poetic subjects such as pornography explored in rigidly constructed couplets in order to reflect the changing place of women in the world. Though Rich commonly addressed woman as subject, her poems such as “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) are more political and the poetic process becomes a way for Rich to redress the wrongs of the contemporary world.

The motif of silence and the theme of the language in the works of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich are used to criticize the gender-asymmetric construction of the American society, condemn a marginal role of women in society, literature and poetry in particular. Authors admit that they have taken on a difficult task – to convey female experience through the language which does not belong to a woman, which is alien to all women, in which ‘a conversation begins / with a lie’ (Adrienne Rich). Rich questions existing ‘universal language’, stating that when speaking such a language every party feels helpless as if constantly being up against nature force: “…each / speaker of the so-called common language feels / the ice-floe split, the drift apart / as if powerless, as if up against / a force of nature” (‘Cartographies of Silence’) (poetry collection The Dream of a Common Language) [11, p. 13]. The language, according to Rich, is an instrument of the masculine culture, and silence is a plan which is routinely carried out in the contemporary society: “Silence can be a plan / rigorously executed” (‘Cartographies of Silence’).
The poet tries to explore the mechanisms of the language, to return its long-lost feminine nature.

In the poetry of Sexton, Plath and Rich a language problem is considered in the gender aspect. They believe that a woman-author constantly finds herself distant from the understanding of the language she wants: a language cannot reproduce women’s experience not only because of its masculine nature, but also because a language is originally unable to reflect reality. This is the paradox of the poetic interpretation of the language by all three poets, for whom a language remains the only way to express their ethical, philosophical, religious views, to convey women’s experience and to realize themselves as creative, artistic people.

References:


