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Unmothered Daughters : Anorexic Hysteria in Women's Poetry

Atsuko Kawano

With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me.... I'm hungry. I wish I had the energy to walk. To run all by myself, near or far from you. To go toward what I love. You've prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate.

...why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us.... There was, is in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defence.¹

Until very recently, eating disorders including anorexia and bulimia have long been interpreted as the rare disease of particular women. Only adolescent girl was the anorexic who battles against the adult development of her body. The bulimic on the other hand was mocked as poor woman without heterosexual love. There is, however, its widespread diverse populations of women evidences that this disorder is now very rapidly changing. With the new approaches, rich and complex analysis by feminist theorists and clinicians, we have come to know it reflects very ills of our society.

Very simply put, anorexia and bulimia have the very

cultural origin, that is, the misogyny; the male anxiety for the female autonomous power in both physical and psychical sense. And mostly what we need to recognize is that such deep-rooted misogyny in our culture causes the crisis of mother-daughter relationships, Adrienne Rich's 'essential female tragedy'. No doubt this disorder is more than just the obsessional neuroses; it is the modern manifestation of female hysteria with the bodily utterances without voice.

Even more disturbing fact is that it takes the same complicated form of a masquerade of femininity;² it grotesquely exaggerates and ridicules the uncanny femininity, or the female standards of beauty set by the male-imaginary. But we should note that the women with anorexia undertake the unconscious feminist protest hunger strike angry at the cultural stereotypes of woman; in case of bulimia on the other hand, they devour their own feminine selves forced by the patriarchy. For all their surface dissimilarities, anorexia and bulimia, the phenomenon of retreat-reticence and resistance-protest, are in fact the one and the indivisible; these two subversive attitudes are arisen from the same anger toward the woman's unrepresentable condition under the male-dominated world, and more correctly, the same desire for the lost pre-Oedipal mother.

The very astonishing fact that the anorexic feels invulnerability only when she is near to death by killing off her appetite completely bears out the the vulnerability and dependency of the female body in our culture. Firstly, we should focus on such body politics, the politics of sexualization and objectification of female body. Consider "the tyranny of slenderness"³ most, overwhelming assault of the misogyny on today's women. Clearly it indicates the

superiority of male slender body with muscles over female fleshy one with fat. Since it has immense compulsive power, like Foucaudian 'disciplinary powers', to fix successfully misogynous ideas on women, it leads to notorious 'penis envy' or the wrong deconstruction of sexual difference, as Irigaray repeatedly warns. But actually we find ourselves still corseted or foot-binded under tight constraints of male-centered value; as Rich's remark "I learned to make myself/unappetizing" suggests, woman's body is untamable stuff difficult to cherish. Jane Kenyon confesses, "Sometimes it is my favorite child.... And sometimes my body disgusts me. / Filling and emptying it disgusts me." Constantly invaded by the tyranny, her body has fallen into the alienated product with strange detachment with frozen stasis: "The body lying beside me like obedient stone."⁴

Turning to the other women's poetry, the male figures often emerge as tyrants, who deny the physical pleasure of women. They embody the evidence of wrong diagnosis; women with eating disorders need heterosexual love. Or more fundamentally they reveal the 'lies' of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Marianne Moore complains, "Men are monopolists...unfit to be the guardians / of another person's happiness." Or Marge Piercy observes a husband who tries to control his wife's appetite by deformation of her body: "he said, cut off your hands, / they are always poking at things.... / Food grew cold on the table." It is nothing new that women are warned that gluttony would degrade their appearance and ruin their marriageability. Here is a father, far from Kristevan 'imaginary father' with love, whose main concern is to send his daughter to 'market place':

...we were
 silent before you like that, bowing
 backwards, not speaking, not eating unless we were
 told to eat, ... did you
 suddenly want to hear our voices, did you
 start to rethink the darkness of our hair,
 did you wander if perhaps we had deserved to live,
 did you love us, then?⁵

Most poignant point this quote tells is that the father forbids daughters' oral pleasure, 'jouissance' of woman's lips⁶ which are constantly 'speaking' and 'eating'. The defiant remark, "*But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'?*" is completely robbed of from these obedient daughters, 'angel in the house'. At best, they are only allowed to murmur, "I eat men like an air" or to be an infant on oral sadism phase in Kleinian observation: "My fritter, my bubbler, my chicken biddy.../it is but one turn in the road and I would be a cannibal!"⁷ Conditioned to lose her source of 'jouissance', 'the lips that never lie', what daughters need to recover is touch with female-maternal power⁸:

we shrink from touching
 our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves
 and each other, we're scared shitless
 of what it could be to take and use our love

Alongside the notion of 'sexts'⁹ the texts of women's poetry too have become changeable by the surgery; like stern dieters, many women poets put deformation, 'linguistic torsion'¹⁰ on their texts by scragging off their fat, excessiveness or diffusiveness known as the characteristics of *écriture* feminine. Such excessiveness is what women poets dread like dieters; their common style of the intensity and articulation

through silence evidences their fear to be excluded from existing linguistic system, based on the male imaginary derived from male morphology or desire.

In H.D.'s case the surgeon was Pound: "But Dryad," (in the Museum tea room), 'this is poetry.' He slashed with a pencil. 'Cut this out, shorten this line....' and he scrawled 'H.D. Imagiste' at the bottom of the page." And moreover, as many biographers admit, H.D. performed 'the perfect imagist' identifying herself as actresses such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich. Thus she imposed the stoicism both to her body and her works until she developed her *écriture* feminine in her later works.¹¹

For Louise Glück, the anorexia is the central theme and metaphor of her works and also the means to pursue her ideal of the perfection as woman poet. She calls her eagerness to perfection in her corps as 'dying disorder':

It begins quietly
 in certain female children:
 the fear of death, taking as its form
 dedication to hunger,
 because a woman's body
 is a grave; it will accept
 anything. I remember
 lying in bed at night
 touching the soft, digressive breasts,
 touching, at fifteen,
 the interfering flesh
 that I would sacrifice
 until the limbs were free
 of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
 what I feel now, aligning these words—
 it is the same need to perfect,
 of which death is the mere byproduct.¹²

In this section, Glück seems to link the anorexic speaker's need to be perfect with her own as same as H.D.'s case. Closely described above is the solitude of 'wildly unmothered' daughter who is perfectly hunger for maternal 'touching'. The image of her act of 'touching the soft, digressive breasts' surely indicates her pursuit for her mother's breasts, primal breast milk echoing Elizabeth Bishop's 'agic ink' or Hélène Cixous' 'white milk', or more arguably, Kristevan milk of mother-abjection.¹³ Here are the samples of dry images of maternal nutrition:

Take. Eat. This is my body,
this real milk, thin, sweet, bluish,
which I give for the life of the world..
an honest nourishment
alone able to sustain you.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get.

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn¹⁴

The 'thin', 'bluish' and 'little' milk which is 'squeezed' from 'stonish', 'rocky breasts' is well described for 'déréliction' of mother and daughter.¹⁵ Although "women poets need strong mothers" and "in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness and approval", daughters must confront the helplessness of their mothers. Sometimes unfortunately, this discovery — mother's power-

lessness, her subjugation, same infrastructure they suffer — leads to their internalization of mother-blaming. To turn back to the quote above: “why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us.” Ultimately, however, they demand mother’s help: “Mother I need/mother I need mother/I need”. There is the happy case that they share the same problems such as this disorder; the daughter-poet Amy Lowell found mother-poet Emily Dickinson’s anorexia: “Emily hoarded—hoarded—only giving/Herself to cold, white paper. Starved and tortured”. Or here goes the case of the bulimic daughter: “Did this happen to your mother?.../Did your sister throw up a lot?”¹⁶

My argument here, of course, is open to further exploration. Especially the fact that many women poets and theorists derive their inspirations from Eleusinian Myth — the story of mother-daughter configuration — needs more insightful perspective. Indeed, the reconstruction of female genealogy—the vertical mother-daughter bond and horizontal Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’—as the the remedy of modern hysteria seems to be the most emergent issue. Today’s foremost investigators of female disorders, Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach stress, “each woman’s cure will depend on constructing an endless genealogy of daughters struggling against mother-blaming by blunting generational differences.”¹⁷ This remark resonates with the notes of two daughter-poets whose favorites are Eleusinian mysteries of mother-daughter dyad:

If I could walk to Delphi, I should be healed.

When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 Luce Irigaray, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," trans. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel. *Signs* 7/1 (Autumn 1981): 60-1. / Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1986), 225.
- 2 It is "the social practice of 'being' woman through mimesis and parroting." *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* ed. Elizabeth Wright. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 242-5. Michèle Montrelay, famous in her analysis of masquerade, says about anorexia who self-willingly "diminishes her body dissolving the flesh and reducing the body to the cipher... the women's act of defenses... women's imaginary simulation of lack." Michèle Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity," *m/f*, 1 (1978):89.
- 3 Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
- 4 Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-84*. (New York: Norton, 1984), 162. / Jane Kenyon, "Cages," *From Room to Room* (Cambridge, Mass.: Alice James Books, 1978), 33-4. / Louise Glück, *Descending Figure* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990), 32.
- 5 Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. (New York: Norton, 1979). / "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence," *Signs* 5/4: 631-60. / Marianne Moore, "Marriage," *Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 62. / Marge Piercy, "The Friend," *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 39. / Sharon Olds, "The Departure (to my father)," *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality* ed. Marilyn Sewell. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 36.
- 6 See Irigaray "When Our Lips Speak Together," *This Sex Which Is Not One* trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). The motif of lips, analogous to the labia, are the keyterm in Irigarayan poetics.
- 7 Irigaray, "Commodities among Themselves," *This Sex*, 196. Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," *Collected Poems* ed. Ted Hughes. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 247. / Anne Sexton, "Hensel and Gretel," *Complete Poems*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 286-90.
- 8 Emily Dickinson, "A Still—Volcano—Life," *Complete Poems* ed. T.H. Johnson. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 601. / Irigaray contends the priority of touch over sight in female

jouissance. / Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe*, 231.

- 9 This suggests the conflation of woman and textual body as French word *corps* implies. See Hélène Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Sign*, 1 (Winter 1974): 875-93.
- 10 Steven Yenser, "Recent Poetry: Five Poets," *Yale Review* 71, no.1 (Autumn 1981): 97-103.
- 11 H.D. *End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1979), 18. But earlier enough, she had already confessed that she could not fully express herself in such a tight and hard form, 'crystalline poetry'; "poety is only part of myself" or, "No, my poetry was not dead... Ezra Pound have destroyed me and the centre they call 'Air and Crystal' of my poetry." (*End to Torment* 35), "I grew tired of hearing these [early] poems referred to, as crystalline." ("H.D. by Delia Alton" [Notes on Recent Writing], *The Iowa Review* 16.3 1986: 184.)
- 12 Glück, "The Deviation," *Descending Figure*, 32.
- 13 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 226. Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)
- 14 Robin Morgan, "The Network of the Imaginary Mother," *Lady of the Beasts* (New York: Random House, 1976), 88. / Elinor Wylie, *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 33. / Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses," *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 66.
- 15 This term explains the difficult condition of women in phallogocentric world including female unrepresentability, non-symbolization of woman-to-woman relationships. See Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* trans. Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 126-7.
- 16 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 16. / Audre Lorde, "From the House of Yamanja," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), 6. / Amy Lowell, "The Sisters," *Complete Poetical Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 461. / Alice Walker, "Did This Happen to Your Mother," *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 2-3.
- 17 Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983),

268.

- 18 Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 216. For H.D., 'the Pythoness of Delphi' was the dominant figure. See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.'s Fiction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 19. / Irigaray, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," 67.