

From Verse to Voice: A Comparative Study of Anne Sexton and Contemporary Songwriting

Sadiya Sarkar, Dr. Avneet Kaur²

¹*Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce Pune*

²*Co-Author, Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune*

Abstract—As a poetic device and a need that is psychological, confession has played a long role in human behavior. The paper at hand discusses the psychoanalytic origins of the confessional expression in terms of a comparative analysis between the poems by Anne Sexton and the songwriting by Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish. Based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory and feminist revisions of repression, the paper claims that confession is a very form of sublimation whereby unconscious guilt and anxiety and suicidal thoughts are converted into aesthetic expression. The poetry of Sexton expresses the death drive and split feminine psyche in explicit and confrontational terms, whereas Swift and Eilish transform the exact same psychic materials into restrained and introspective lyrics by the influence of celebrity culture and digital presence. Though the medium, tone, and audience are different, all the three artists perform the so-called talking cure by Freud, as they transform silence into verbal expression and personal pain into mass sympathy. This paper uses close analysis in both textual and lyrical reading of the substitutive power of songs and perspectives of lyrical and emotional commitment to reveal the role of modern song lyrics in maintaining the psychological work and concentration of the confessional tradition and their role as lawful offshoots of the conceptual process. Placing songwriting and poetry into the context of psychoanalysis, the study questions the hierarchical difference between literary and popular texts and asserts confession as a prolonged human reaction with repression, guilt and emotional survival.

Index Terms—Confessional Poetry, Psychoanalysis, Anne Sexton, Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, Mental Health, Sublimation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The genre of confession is one of the most drastic changes in the direction of contemporary art. Confessional writing emerged as one of the dominant

trends in American poetry in mid-twentieth century, breaking the tradition which held that literature exists in impersonality, detachment, or even beauty all by itself. Rather, it prefigured the inner world of the poet where the thoughts of mental illness, guilt, sexual anxiety, family trauma, and suicidal thoughts were introduced to the literary realm without masquerading themselves. Poets like Anne Sexton made poetry a place of psychological ventilation, not a voice that spoke behind the veil of an abstract symbol, but one that stood squarely behind its nakedness. Yet, confessional writing cannot be taken as the autobiography. The confessional I as it has been critically discussed in the confession poems is not the same as the biographical self. Instead confession is a constructed aesthetic technique, which dramatizes psychological truth. The poet never merely unveils experience, she transforms it. Language turns out to be the way in which inner anarchy is organized, as it helps the writer to face pain without being degraded by pain. Confession is therefore something that works as exposure and control, intimacy and discipline. Confessional poetry values the rise of psychoanalysis as its historical good fortune. Mental illness, therapy, and unconsciousness were more culturally aware in the mid-twentieth century. The poetry has turned out to be a place where a person could express the psychological struggles publicly when such issues were usually a taboo. Here the confession poetry may be interpreted as a parallel of the psycho poetic method: they are both dependent on the process of articulation in terms of transferring suffering into a form of understanding. The poem serves the purpose of the analytic session because speaking also turns out to be therapy. Although confession poetry is well embedded in the literary canon, it did not only serve poetry. The confessional impulse entered the field of

modern day songwriting in the late twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. Pop music became a significant cultural force of self-expression of the emotional condition, especially among the young generations. The lyrics serve to discuss anxiety, guilt, depression, self-doubt, and suicidal thoughts with a candour that is more akin to those that confessional poets express. Most of their lyrics are often themed around inner struggle, emotional burnout, and broken selfhood- theological motives of confessional literature. Nevertheless, the lyrics of songs are usually not included in the literary study. They are often disregarded as market products or diminished as cultural fads instead of being perceived as sophisticated literary works. Such rejection is an ongoing assertion of estrangement over published poetry in favor of staging or popular poetry. This kind of a hierarchy does not take into account the psychology and the formal intentionality of the modern songwriting process, especially when the lyrics are read without the musical background. This study contests that pecking order by placing the modern-day song writing in the confessional custom. It claims that the confessional mode in the modern song lyrics is not watered down, it just spreads into other cultural and technological settings. The page to performance adjustment does not change the basic psychological outfit of confession, but only increases its scope. Where confession poets used to have a solitary listener, the songwriters now have a group of listeners, and personal suffering turns into collective emotionality. The psychoanalytic model is key in explaining this continuity. The repression, sublimation, and divided-psyche theory by Sigmund Freud gives important means of taking critiques on how confession functions as an artistic and psychological act. Confessional writing, poetry or lyrical, can be defined as a sublimation of destructive urges and suppressed feelings where they are turned into a figurative form. By confession, the inner struggle is projected, made sensible and more or less controlled. This is further expounded by the feminist psychoanalytic perspectives. Repression is cultural and gendered besides being psychological as Juliet Mitchell posits. Confession is a very transgressional practice and most women are socialized to be silent, guilty and scrutinize their emotions. Confession is personal therapy, and cultural resistance to women writers and performers. Such a two-fold role is

particularly clearly present in poetry of Anne Sexton, Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish, who express vulnerability in a setting that examines and controls the male emotional expression. This paper thus discusses confession as a transcendental medium psychoanalytic practice. It claims that confession is a continuous human reaction to suppression, conscience and emotional pain through a comparative analysis of poetry of Anne Sexton and current songwriting of Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish. Using Freudian psychoanalytic approach and feminist interpretations to both poetic and lyrical texts, the paper shows that songwriting can be viewed as a valid extension of the confessional literary tradition. Thus, it will not fall into the problem of confusing poetry and music, but will acknowledge the psychological base and expressiveness that they all have in common.

Psychoanalytic Approach: Repression and Sublimation and the Confessional Performance.

The confessional mode of writing and songwriting is simply incorrect to comprehend without connecting with the concept of psychoanalysis, specifically the concepts of Sigmund Freud on the repression, sublimation, and divided psyche. Confessional expression comes not as a form of style but a form of psychological need, an effort to identify what the conscious self has difficulties holding. Psychoanalysis can give us words to describe why confession is conducted in the forms thus, why it continues through generations, forms, and mediums. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the focal point is the concept of repression. According to Freud, human beings bury desires, impulses as well as memories that carry a social stigma or are psychologically dangerous. These suppressed aspects do not fade away but still, they put a strain on the psyche and have to find an outlet by finding other ways. Then, one of the best methods through which the repressed may be expressed is creative activity, especially literature and art. Unlike the repressed or the forbidden thoughts made to be given back into the consciousness in a structured way, confessional writing works as a return of the repressed. Closely related to repression is the idea of sublimation that Freud developed and that can be used at the center of understanding confessional literature. Sublimation can be described as diversion of the impulses of destruction or other socially unacceptable types into more socially acceptable forms of work which may be art. A good example of such a process is confessional

poetry which trains psychic distress on guilt, despair, even suicidal thought, into aesthetics. The poet does not do what his destructive impulses dictate but gains control over them in language. This transformation is not destruction of pain, but makes the pain something understandable and controllable. Sublimation will therefore help the person to overcome psychological conflict by making it artistic. The other important concept of Freud which is relevant to confessional works is the death drive (Thanatos). Freud argues that, in addition to the instinct of life (Eros), people have the unconscious self-destructive, repetitive as well as dissolutionism drive. In confessional poetry, especially when it comes to the poetry of Anne Sexton, death drive is not perceived as an abstract far-off thought but an immediate, frequent occurrence. But, the writing process breaks the completeness of the death drive. Confession is an element of negotiation with self-destructive wantonness instead of its satisfaction. The poem allows the poet to postpone death, make it different and buy time before he loses control of it by writing on the subject. The therapeutic aspect of confession is also well explained in the concept of the talking cure developed by Freud. In psychoanalysis, therapy is realized through articulation: by talking about the repressed one can look into it, make sense of it and to some degree put it in the conscious mind. Confessional writing is a reflection of this procedure. The poem or the song turns out to be a perceived analytic session whereby the speaker is addressing an absent yet intended listener. Using language the conflict in the writer is externalized and as a result both the writer and the audience can work with the inner conflict. Confession is, then, not a simple exercise of self expression but psychic labour. Whereas the theories developed by Freud portray a theoretical baseline to the field, feminist contributions to psychoanalysis like Juliet Mitchell have made fundamental amendments to explain gendered repressions. Mitchell believes that the problems of women in the field of Psychoanalysis and Feminism can not be interpreted beyond the frameworks of patriarchy. Women are socialized to be silent, emotionally withhold themselves and to experience internalized guilt. Consequently, women are repressed differently thus confession is a very transgressive thing to do. By expressing anger, desire, or despair, women are breaking cultural norms of feminine viewpoint. In this view, the confessional

writing of women serves as a source of psychological liberation and release as well as cultural defiance. The poetry of Anne Sexton is an example of such a two-fold role. Her confessions not only question personal oppression but also the social processes according to which women are also required to remain silent on the matter of mental illness and self-destructive desire. The confessional voice is a place of intersection of the personalized pain and the wider system of gender oppression. Another aspect that Feminist reinterpretation of Freud by Mitchell points to is that the subjectivity of a female is usually structured by the internalized surveillance. Women are trained to keep their emotions, bodies, and desires under surveillance based on external standards. It is seldom pure transparency, then, that conclusion is, but a performance that has undergone much negotiation between the speaker and the listener. This observation is especially pertinent when analyzing female song writing in the present-day where the female musicians are subject to great personal pressure. In this regard, Confession is a matter of the unceasing tailgating between authenticity and performance, vulnerability and control. The relationship between mental illness and creativity is another issue that supports the psychoanalytic view of confessional art, which is discussed by the work of Kay Redfield Jamison. In the book, Jamison discusses how the suffering experienced by humans psychologically is usually turned into energy by artists. Notably, she refutes the romantic ideas about mental illness as productive. Rather, she theorizes that the role of creative work in art is that of survival- an imposing control over disorder. This perception resembles the mode of confession, wherein writing is made a way of dealing with some extreme emotions. The analysis provided by Jamison shows that there is no glorying of the suffering but it aims to put it in check. The confessed artists do not indulge in self-exposure per se, but they are trying to redefine control of those experiences that threaten psychic balance. This outlook plays a vital role in interpreting confessional poetry in the middle of the twentieth century and modern songwriting. Confession in both instances is a survival and not an exhibitionist tactic. Collectively, Freud, Mitchell and Jamison offer an in depth exploration of the ways of analyzing confession as a psychological, aesthetic and cultural practice. Freud describes the inner working of repression and sublimation, Mitchell describes the

gender specifics of confession and Jamison describes creativity as a survival strategy. According to this theoretical base, confession can be seen not as a failure of the artistic boundary, but as a disciplined approach to the psychological reality. In this context, confessional poetry, as well as modern songwriting becomes a similar answer to the state of psychic distress. The two modes are based on the articulation to control repression, both project the inward struggle into symbolic form, as well as both bringing the audience to a collective position of acknowledgment. The distinction between them is not a matter of psychological performance, but rather medium. A poem and a song are manifested according to other formal limitations, but perform the same task of psychoanalysis: they transform the silence of speech and solitude into dialogue and interaction, respectively.

Applied Psychoanalysis Analysis: Confession in Poetry and Song.

Close text and lyrical analysis is the most compelling form of expression of the above psychoanalytic framework. Analyzing the works of Anne Sexton, Taylor Swift, and Billie Eilish through the prism of repression, sublimation, and gendered subjectivity, one will confront some thought-provoking parallels in the ways the process of confession is presented in poetry and music. Although the medium and cultural background varies, common to all of the three artists is the tool of confession as a means of psychological negotiation to counter guilt, anxiety and self-discontinuity.

Sexton Anne: Writing as the Survival of the Death Drive.

Confessional poetry by Anne Sexton is one of the best examples of Freudian sublimation in poetry. The suicidal thoughts and psychic extremity prevail in her work again and again, but writing is always in the potential way between the wish and its manifestation. Sexton describes her familiarity with death in *Wanting to Die* in a way that is disturbing due to its composure. Suicide as a violent breakage is not an elucidation by the speaker, but a familiar and domestic way of existence. This closeness is correlated with the idea of the death drive as proposed by Freud who does not only portray the concept as chaos, but as repetition and desire of nothingness. Nevertheless, the poem by

Sexton does not end in destruction. Rather the confession itself has become the primary means of survival. Giving a name to the yearning to die, the poet postpones it, turning it into a form of language. Such a process is the product of sublimation: under the influence of a disruptive impulse, the latter is not practiced but transferred to the symbolic order. The poem creates a place of psychic danger that can be held back without being fulfilled. According to Jamison, such acts of art give a form to emotional disorder, which enables the writer to survive and not succumb. Sexton *Her Kind* also goes an extra mile to prove how the shared self operates as a dramatization of the split self. The speaker associates herself with the socially marginal characters- the witch, the misunderstood woman, the outcast, each of them is a part of the feminine identity that has been suppressed or reprimanded. The multiplicity is an expression of the split psyche as Freud acknowledges desire fragmentation with conflicting urges which are never resolved. Compulsion to repetition is also strengthened through matters of repetition in the poem because the speaker comes back to the repeating identities associated with exclusion. In terms of feminist psychoanalyticism, the confession that Sexton does is also resistant. Women of color need to be encouraged to speak out as Mitchell proposes since the demands of culture to remain silent and maintain self-control worsens their psychological pain. Sexton breaks such expectations by addressing these mental illness and suicidal desire verbally. Her confession is consequently personal and political which exposes the price of repression which is put on female subjectivity. Taylor Swift: *The Guilt Case of Confession and the Picture of the Judge* inside.

The writing of her songs by Taylor Swift provides a modern spin of the confessional mode influenced by restraint and self-surveillance. Swift cries out feelings of emotional poverty and guilt quietly, in a rather introspective tone in *This Is Me Trying*. The lyric, they all told me all my cages were mental, reflects one of the concepts proposed by Freud neurosis in which repression is internalized as opposed to being socially applied. The speaker knows that she is bound, but psychologically, which does not necessarily set her free. The confessional voice of Swift is controlled by the superego which is the moral authority within the self that Freud defines as source of guilt and self-criticism. Throughout the song, the singer criticizes

herself because she feels a failure and she is comparing her own value to the internalized standards. As opposed to the confrontation of death Sexton faces, the point of Swift's confession is rather tranquil, with restraint in it, as opposed to acuteness. This distinction is not a loss of psychological richness and is more of a change of context: confession in a culture of visibility needs to be negotiated. Swift elaborates this investigation of the split psyche in *The Archer*. The double role of predator and prey is a metaphor that implies a loss of self division between agency and vulnerability. The repetition of questions and images of exposure brings about compulsion of repetition because there is no resolved conflict and there must be constant articulation. Confession in this case is not an ending of anxiety, it is a continuation of communication with them. This continuous articulation is in line with the Freudian talking cure in which the healing process is not realized by a process of closure but rather by a process of continued expression. Swift is a songwriter who shows how the mechanism of confession works in the present day celebrity culture. Performance and social scrutiny shape the confessional exercise but the heart of this exercise remains psychoanalytic in nature. Handing over guilt and imperfection, Swift turns the embarrassment at an individual level into the one on a social plane. The audience is included in the confessional game and the role of vulnerability of the speaker is confirmed by the fact that he/she is one of the listeners.

Billie Eilish: *Daydreaming*, *Repression*, and *Minimalist Confession*.

The style of confession employed by Billie Eilish serves using restraint, minimalism and dream imagery. The story of the song is as follows in *Everything I Wanted*, where the person dreams about suicidal death, and a loved one comforts the individual. The fact that dreams according to Freud are just a disguised manifestation of repressed intentions is especially pertinent to this case. The dream structure enables coexistence of anxiety and wish-fulfilment, which means that the unconscious indirectly talks. The tonality of Eilish performing and feeling and minimal production is a reflection of repression. There is emotion, but subdued, not being proclaimed directly, and instead, it is expressed through the tone. This restraint may be interpreted as an act of internalized

self-surveillance particularly in a feminist psychoanalytic context. Women tend to devote a lot of time to control emotional expression as Mitchell talks and in that case, it becomes a learned control to speak less, or to remain silent. The lyric of the song is *If I knew it all then would I do it again?* practices a self-conversation of guilt and self-interrogation. Similar to Sexton and Swift, Eilish does not work through her psychic dilemma; she makes the statement. Confession is not a solution and turns into communication. By such articulation the anxiety becomes transferred into a collective emotional arena where the audience is welcomed to participate empathetically. The songwriting of Eilish is an excellent example of how the confessional mode can find a way of changing to fit the modern-day reality and retain the psychoanalytic role. The song is not sensationalized about suffering but aestheticised vulnerability using minimalism. Such strategy goes in line with Jamison explanations on creativity as survival whereby form gives evacuation to emotional excessiveness.

Pity but Not Metamorphosis.

In the writings of Sexton, Swift and Eilish, confession turns out to be an artistic tool of psychological technique as opposed to a historically localized literary movement. Both artists are in the face of psychic distress, be it in suicidal thoughts, in guilt feeling, or in anxiety, turning it symbolically. The variations of the medium and setting of culture are depicted in the difference between poetry and song rather than the psychological role. Sexton makes an anti-silence argument in a culture that stigmatises mental illness; Swift and Eilish sing in a culture that publicly debauches vulnerability. However, in all three instances, confession is a sublimation/ talking cure. Language-poetic or lyrical becomes the tool with the help of which the process of repression is negotiated and partially controlled. This eternity questions the line of critical defense that draws the line between modern songwriting and confessional poetry. Analyzed on the basis of the psychoanalytic theory, both of these forms satisfy the same human need; to express inner conflict, to transform pain into meaning, and to bring people into the space of recognition.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper has also discussed confession as a psychoanalytic and aesthetic practice that is not limited to the reels of poetry in the mid-twentieth century into the realms of the present-day songwriting. The paper has shown that confession is a recurring psychological tactic where repression, guilt, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability are turned into symbolism with the help of placing the confessional poetry by Anne Sexton in dialogue with the song lyrics of both Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish. Based on Freudian psychoanalysis, it has been demonstrated that confession functions mostly by use of sublimation. The interaction of the sex drive with the death drive demonstrates that self-destructive desires are turned into words and not deeds and thereby enable the self to survive the mental extreme. But this process continues into the modern day songwriting in which Swift finds a way of expressing guilt and self-surveillance through the restrained confession and Eilish manages anxiety and suicidal thoughts through the dream-like and minimalistic lyric forms. However, regardless of medium and difference in tone, all three artists fulfill the Freudian process of the talking cure turning their inner struggle into articulation. Confession as gender activity is also explained with the help of feminist psychoanalytic knowledge. Juliet Mitchell is right asserting that the subjectivity of women is predetermined by the mechanisms of repression and self-observation, and confession represents both a personal and a cultural intervention. Expressed in the confessional voices of Sexton, Swift and Eilish, the mental expenses of enforced silence are recovered, along with a reclaiming of vulnerability as a kind of agency. This work defies the hierarchy which exists between literary and popular in establishing a distinction between a poem and a song lyric by using psychoanalytic theory in both literary and the song lyric. It shows that, nowadays, the psychological nuance, self-exploration, and emotional sincerity of confessional poetry is also present in songwriting. Confusion not only is a literary movement that emerged at a particular time and place but is also a consistent response of humanity to psychic suffering, which will constantly adapt to new forms of expression but still serves a fundamental purpose helping to transform silence into words and isolation into empathy.

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