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Lily Myers's Slam Poetry: Performing Protest in "Shrinking Women"

Abstract

"Shrinking Women" by Lily Myers is a slam poem that won the best poem at the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) in 2013. The poem is a strong expression of protest against the existing gender discrimination in all spheres of a woman's life, with special focus on the issue of maintaining the right weight, perfect figure which defines their relationship to food and their bodies. She highlights the issues by giving the example of the women of her family, her mother and her grandmother and how she is accidentally inheriting the same relationship, the effect of which can be clearly seen on her self esteem and the confidence of her body as she is taught to accommodate. The present paper aims to study by a feminist approach the gender stereotypes and expectations that exist in the society and how Lily Myers uses poetry to protest against them. The paper will also study the unrealistic expectations placed by the patriarchal society on women for maintaining their bodies, unable to do so, often leads to body shaming which directly leads to shrinking of their confidence and self-esteem. It will highlight the patriarchal process that ultimately leads to internalisation of ideas about beauty, space and silence, which are accidentally absorbed by the younger generations of the family.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Body stereotypes, Gender inequality, Silence and Lineage.

"To lose confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself."

— Simone de Beauvoir

Slam poetry or the spoken word poetry is a kind of performance poetry, stressing on the oral performance of the poem. The original poem is read and performed on the stage in a

competition, without any music or accessories and judged by a panel of five judges from the preselected audiences. It is also called poetry slam or simple slam. It is a type of art that celebrates the victory of the oral word and performance and suggests an interaction between the poet and the audience. Spoken word poetry is a phenomenon of pop culture, and is highly democratic and egalitarian in nature. Slam poems are usually written in the first person perspective. The “I” in the poem belong to the performer, who describes certain personal life experiences. The themes of Slam poetry involve societal problems like discrimination, inequality, injustice, hate, racial crimes and queer dialogues etc. The dominant feature of such a kind of poetry is the confessional note that initiates a kind of proximity between the poet and the audience. Aleksandra Szymił notes that “The first poetry slams were notable for their strong emphasis on social discontent and criticism of the existing situation. Voices of opposition to the current reality dominated as poets frequently expressed anger in their poems. The thematic range of poetry performed at slams in recent memory is broader, with poets often resorting to grotesque or comic subjects” (106).

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes state that a performance “carries a transformative seed, a seed that nests in the psyche of the audience and slowly grows in the weeks and months following the event,” (qtd in Endsley 29). Thus, these poems sow the seeds of transformation as they are comments on contemporary events involving matters of social importance, and the performances that leave lasting impressions on the minds of the audience. According to Mehroz Baig, “Slam poetry offers the ability for a performer to connect with his/her audience in a deeper way, and allows the performer to articulate a set of emotions and thoughts succinctly using the power of voice and words. It’s also a platform that goes beyond creative expression. Just like any art form, slam poetry and spoken word allow the artist to talk about social issues and social change” (Huffington Post). Jerzy Jarniewicz criticises slam for lacking in innovation and its commercial nature. According to him, “Slam is the quintessence of the culture of impatience, in which I perceive a need for [...] clear, unambiguous hierarchies...the poetry of instant gratification, is an escape from time, at brings it dangerously close to such spectacles of contemporary culture as karaoke, botox, boy bands, or bio-renewal laboratories.” (qtd in Aleksandra 108).

Marc Kelly Smith (a constructor worker) is considered as the founder and the grandfather of Slam Poetry, who started the traditional slam style in 1984 in a Chicago Green Mill Cocktail Lounge jazz club, when he felt that poetry is losing its charm among the young people. According to Smith’s reason of started this festival was, “The very word ‘poetry’ repels people. Why is that? Because of what schools have done to it. The slam gives it back to the

people.... We need people to talk poetry to each other.” (Verses Festival). The roots of slam poetry can be traced back to in Harlem Renaissance and the poetry of the Beat Generation. In the present day, America holds an annual five days National Poetry Slam Competition, in different city every year. Poets from all over the United States and Canada participate and compete.

Lily Myers is a poet and novelist from Washington. She competed in the Slam poetry competition at 2013 College Unions Poetry Slam, where her poem “Shrinking Women” won the Best Love Poem. Her works are feminist in nature advocating body confidence and self-love. Some of her famous works include, *This Impossible Light*, *I have Always Eaten the Bread*, *To a Girl Who Doesn't Yet Know*, and *Notes on Womanhood*.

The present day society is patriarchal, where the rule of the father is the final word. Everything that enhances the power of the patriarchy is rational, logical and justifiable. Adrienne Rich in her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an experience and an institution*, comments that, “we live in a patriarchal society in which patriarchal principles have been ceased to be valid...power, energy, ambition, intellect, the interests of the combative male, no more achieve the fulfilment of his being than they can of themselves build up a human society” (Rich 90). There are various ways in which the patriarchal society control women. One way by which gender hegemony is achieved is the socially constructed nature of gender roles that limit women to the vicinity of her home and with the role of a mother and the caretaker. One such norm, by which men suppress women is the beauty myth, which is achieved by concepts like hour glass figures, anti-ageing techniques etc. Naomi Wolf in her book, *The Beauty Myth* remarks that, “The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance.” (14). Such behaviours are limiting to the psyche of women, as they are hidden behind the veil of appearances. “Women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies” (Rich 14). The lashing can be in the form of describing roles such as becoming a mother or setting standards as beauty myths.

Rich states, “The women’s body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numerous figure and the incarnations of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture” (Rich 102). The rounded body when holding a man’s baby is praised for its fertility and its reproductive power, that will continue the legacy of the man, but the same round body without a baby, but with remnants of fat and food in it is shamed and mortified. The forthcoming result of this body shaming is development of concept of zero figures. One

way of achieving which is constraining our relationship to food. Thus, women's relationship to food and its quantity is limited by patriarchal norms. Women are found inhering these norms and further passing on the same legacy to their daughters and granddaughter, that Lily Myers terms as accidental inheritance.

Women are also taught to be silence, even in their protests. Silence is a quantity that man hunt for in women. A silent woman is submissive and is more likely to fulfil the needs of the man of the house. Any protest that breaks the chain of silence is punished, maltreated and often; left handicapped. This great silence is a legacy that is passed on by women to younger generations. Rich stresses that,

As women our relationship to the past has been problematical. We have been every culture's core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one-half, and are now are a majority, of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves. Confronted with this "Great Silence", we have apparently have two paths to follow: The path of anatomising our oppression, detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us; and the path of searching out those women who broke through the silence, who, though often penalised, misconstrued, their work neglected or banned, or though tokenised in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self-determination; who were, in short, exemplary (Rich 84).

Lily Myers's poem "Shrinking Women" is an example of women's unfavourable relationship with food and their bodies. She expresses her indignations at the restrictions that women pose on themselves for being women. She gives example of her mother, who is shrinking day by day because she measures everything that she eats, even her wine. She is protesting this relationship and explains that why it is important for women to reject the impositions of the dominating patriarchal society. She highlights the gender discriminations inherent in the society by citing examples of her own self and her brother, by comparing the world of a girl and a boy. Finally, she elaborates on the fact that how she has accidentally inherited the same relationship that her mother and grandmother had with food and beauty and silence. She starts the poem by stating that:

*Across from me at the kitchen table,
my mother smiles over red wine
that she drinks out of a measuring glass.
She says she doesn't deprive herself,
but I've learned to find nuance in every movement*

*of her fork, in every crinkle in her brow
as she offers me the uneaten pieces on her plate.
I've realized she only eats dinner when I suggest it.
I wonder what she does when I'm not there to do so. (Lines 1-9).*

The poem starts in the kitchen, a place where women are supposed to be and carry out their work that is cooking. Lily Myers describes that her mother is drinking wine, however, its is measured before, so as not to drink much. Her mother's refuses constraining herself in all matters, but the poet says that she, however knows that it is a white lie. The movement of her fork has slowed down, so that it takes in less food. Her mother often offers her the food she leaves behind, signalling by her brow that she has eaten too much. However, Lily says that she has however, learned to read those expressions. Also, she tells that her mother only eats dinner, when she suggests it. Skipping meals are the new trends in dieting that the women have adopted. They often starve themselves so as not to put on weight, unaware of the fact that these kinds of eating habits can lead them to develop eating disorders and other health issues.

*Maybe this is why my house feels bigger
each time I return; it's proportional.
As she shrinks, the space around her
seems increasingly vast. (Lines 10-13).*

The most evident result of her mother's eating habits is her shrinking body. Lily says that she knows understand why every time she returns, she finds that her house has grown bigger. However, it is not the house that has grown, but her mother who has shrunk.

*She wanes while my father waxes. His stomach
has grown round with wine, late nights, oysters, poetry.
A new girlfriend who was overweight as a teenager,
but my dad reports that now she's "crazy about fruit." (Lines 14-17).*

Lily's mother has been shrinking, contrarily; her father is becoming fuller by the day. His belly has grown round because of the wine, which is not measured before he drinks, his late night excursions, oysters and poetry. In fact, he even has a new girlfriend, who was fat before her dad met her, but now only eats fruits. The word overweight is important, as how much weight is considered overweight? who sets the standards of being overweight?

*It was the same with his parents; as my grandmother
became frail and angular, her husband swelled
to red round cheeks, rotund stomach.
I wonder if my lineage is one of women shrinking,
making space for the entrance of men into their lives,
not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave. (Lines 18-23).*

Lily cites the example of her grandmother and grandfather, who has the same relationship with their bodies. She suddenly is worried about her matrilineal lineage being one where the women shrink, so as to make space for men to be in their lives. The words making space are important, as it symbolises that women have constant shrinking in all aspects of their lives, so that they could make space for men to live by shrinking their bodies, their needs, their desires and also their voices.

*I have been taught accommodation.
My brother never thinks before he speaks.
I have been taught to filter. (Lines 24-26).*

She says that she has been taught to adjust both by the patriarchal society and as a matrilineal bequest. Rich says that women have been taught “be natural and play the part”--- that impossible contradiction demanded of women” (Rich 41). She compares herself to the position that her brother enjoys in the same house. She says that he can speak whatever he wants, however, it’s not the same for her, she has been taught to think before speaking, to filter and choose wisely her words. She is highlighting the gender stereotypes that exist in the society, where a girls worth is known by her silence. A lot of importance is laid on a women’s silence. Her silence is not just limited to her speech, it’s also means a silencing of her desires, needs and even silent to the violence that patriarchy commits on her.

*“How can anyone have a relationship to food,”
he asks, laughing, as I eat the black bean soup
I chose for its lack of carbs.
I want to say: we come from difference,
Jonas, you have been taught to grow out
while I have been taught to grow in.
You learned from our father how to emit,*

*how to produce, to roll each thought off your tongue
with confidence. You used to lose your voice
every other week from shouting so much.
I learned to absorb. I took lessons from our mother
in creating space around myself.
I learned to read the knots in her forehead
while the guys went out for oysters.
I never meant to replicate her, but,
you spend enough time sitting across from someone
and you pick up their habits. (Lines 27- 43).*

She carries on the comparison with her brother, highlighting the gender discrimination to which she is limited. She is eating bean soup, which she has chosen to eat because it is a low calorie food. Her brother jokingly asks her, "How can one have a relationship with food?" The next line of the poem defines the central theme of the poem. She says, "I want to say". As women, she wants to say something, but she cannot. She cannot because, she has been taught to remain silent. As a woman, silence is expected from her. She is highlighting the fact that women have wants but have no voice to express them. She writes, "We come from difference", not only physical, but gender difference that is ingrained in the society. The difference here refers to the difference gender rules and norms laid out for men and women. Lily accentuates these differences by comparing herself to her brother. She says, as women she has been taught by the rules of the society to grown in, to shrink, to hide, to suppress and not express. However, his brother has been taught to grow out, to express, to have a voice, to wane. Grow in also symbolises the private sphere of the house. Women have been taught to stay inside the boundaries of their homes, but men have been taught to go out. She also wants to tell her brother that he has learned from his father to voice everything with confidence, to express, to shout. On the other hand, she has learned from her mother, a woman. Nancy Chodorow says "The mother is the early care giver and primary source of identification for all children.... A daughter continues to identify with the mother"(292). As such, she learns and imbibes all her habits. Similarly, lily has learnt to absorb everything that men throw at them. She has learnt to accommodate by making space around her. She also mentions that she never wanted to become like her mother, but as she is forced to stay at home, she has picked up her mother's habits.

*This is why women in my family have been shrinking
for decades. We all learned it from each other,
the way each generation taught the next how to knit,
weaving silence in between the threads which I can still feel
as I walk through this ever-growing house,
skin itching, picking up all the habits
my mother has unwittingly dropped
like bits of crumpled paper from her pocket
on her countless trips from bedroom to kitchen
to bedroom again, nights I hear her creep down
to eat plain yogurt in the dark, a fugitive stealing calories
to which she does not feel entitled,
deciding how many bites is too many,
how much space she deserves to occupy. (Lines 44-57).*

Lily says, the women in her family have also learnt from each other to shrink. There have been a matrilineal legacy that passes on the next generation. As a result, she has learned how to knit, to make a house by remaining silent. She compares these habits as crumpled wasted paper, that her mother has dropped on her way from her bedroom to the kitchen and vice versa. Lily emphasis that women are bound to just one route in their life, that is from bedroom to kitchen and back. Simone de Beauvoir comments that, "Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly" (352). She says that her mother cannot decide how much to eat, as it is already decided for her. She in fact can not decide how much space she deserves. As Naomi Wolf stresses that, "Sadly, the signals that allow men and women to find the partners who most please them are scrambled by the sexual insecurity initiated by beauty thinking. A woman who is self-conscious can't relax to let her sensuality come into play. If she is hungry she will be tense. If she is "done up" she will be on the alert for her reflection in his eyes. If she is ashamed of her body, its movement will be stilled. If she does not feel entitled to claim attention, she will not demand that airspace to shine in. If his field of vision has been boxed in by "beauty"--a box continually shrinking--he simply will not see her, his real love, standing right before him." (177)

Watching the struggle, I either mimic or hate her.

*I don't want to do either anymore, but the burden
of this house has followed me across the country.
I asked five questions in genetics class today
and all of them started with the word "sorry."
I don't know the requirements for the sociology major
because I spent the entire meeting deciding
whether or not I could have another piece of pizza,
a circular obsession I never wanted but
inheritance is accidental,
still staring at me with wine-stained lips
from across the kitchen table. (Lines 58-70).*

Lily says as a woman she has no choice but either to imitate her mother's habits or hate them, however, she doesn't want to do any of them. As Rich comments, "Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other--beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival--a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other" (Rich 220). She says that her matrilineal bequests are like a burden to her, which unwillingly she has carried across the country, in her university class. She tells that she had asked five questions in her class, all of them started with a word sorry, suggesting that she is not supposed to ask questions, as she has been taught to remain silent, to filter. She uses the term accidental inheritance, for all the habits that she has inherited from her mother. One such habit is called circular obsession, which she never wanted to inherit, but she could not help. This circular obsession means fixation for remain thin, for shrinking, and not becoming round and circular like her dad and because of this obsession, just like her mother, she cannot decide how many slices of pizza are enough for her.

Lily Myers in her poem voices Rich's opinion that, "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications" (Rich 40). Citing biological differences male dominating society has laid out gender rules that have limited the scope of a woman's life. "The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Rich 55). Patriarchy stresses on the beauty of woman's body because of its thin structure. The thinner the body, the beautiful the woman. These rules then go on to describe women's relationship to food, as they measure everything they eat. Naomi Wolf cites, "A cultural fixation on female thinness

is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience.” (97). Similarly, her mother obeys all patriarchal rules. She accommodates her space, remains in the domestic sphere and has learnt to be silent. Lily Myers stresses that because of the gender discrimination present in the society, women are forced to shrink, to be silent, to accommodate, but men are taught to express, to process, and to increase. Rich stresses that, “A woman who has respect and affection for her own body, who does not view it as unclean or as a sex-object, will wordlessly transmit to her daughter that a woman’s body is a good and healthy place to live. A woman who feels pride in being female will not visit her self-depreciation upon her female child. A woman who has used her anger creatively will not seek to suppress anger in her daughter in fear that it could become, merely, suicidal” (245). However, Lily’s mother transmits her relationship to food and her bodies to her daughter, who has inherited them similar like her mother. However, Lily Myers realises the hidden hegemony behind the gender roles and stereotypes present in her society and she raises a voice against them by the medium of her poem. Carol Gilligan in her book, *The Birth of Pleasure* comments “Both love and democracy depends on voice -- having a voice and also the resonance that makes it possible to speak and be heard.”(233). Thus, Lily Myers is protesting for a democratic world in which enjoy equal rights, freedom and spaces like their male counterparts. She raises her voice against the prevalent gender norms that silence women and make them a puppet at the hands of men.

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