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**ABJECTION AND THE FORMATION OF FEMALE
SUBJECTIVITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY
COLLECTION *ARIEL***

This paper analyses the function of abjection in Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel*, with particular emphasis on its role in the formation of female subjectivity. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and taking into account Adriana Cavarero's relational conception of subjectivity, the paper examines how selected poems establish the boundaries between self and other, purity and impurity, life and death. The analysis shows that abjection in *Ariel* does not function merely as a thematic motif, but operates as a structural mechanism in the production and destabilization of the female subject. Within this framework, four interconnected registers of the abject are considered: the maternal and female body, death and bodily decay, religious motifs, and historically coded otherness. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Plath transforms abject images of the body, food, violence, and the sacred into a poetic space of resistance to patriarchal symbolic structures. The paper concludes that the female subject in *Ariel* is not formed through the simple rejection of the abject, but precisely through its appropriation, performative enactment, and the simultaneous disruption of the boundaries of identity.

Keywords: *Sylvia Plath, Ariel, abjection, female subjectivity, body*

1. Introduction

The poetry collection *Ariel* by an American writer Sylvia Plath is one of the central works of confessional poetry of the 20th century, but also a text that has continuously stimulated different interpretive approaches, especially within the framework of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism. The collection, published posthumously in 1965, occupies a special place in the author's oeuvre, and the fact that the poems were written in the period immediately before her death has contributed to the tendency to read them biographically. Such an approach, however, ignores the ways in which the subject is textually constructed in the poems, as well as the elaborate symbolic and intertextual structures that go beyond biographical reduction.

In this sense, *Ariel* opens the question of how the lyrical subject is formed on the border between body, language and symbolic order that simultaneously determine and destabilize it. Criticism often emphasizes that Plath's lyrical subject is not a stable instance, but a place of tension between body, language and identity (Gill, 2008; Rose, 1992). Starting with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this paper examines the role of the abject in the shaping of female subjectivity in selected poems of the collection (*Fever 103°*, *Mary's Song*, *The Applicant* and *Daddy*). In Kristeva's theory, the abject signifies that which disrupts the boundaries of identity and order – the space between subject and object that produces abjection but is at the same time necessary for the establishment of the self. It is precisely because of this ambivalence that abjection constitutes a key analytical framework for understanding the way in which Plath constructs a subject that does not stabilize, but constantly oscillates between establishment and dissolution. The analysis focuses on several interconnected registers of the abject: the female and maternal body, the death and dissolution of the corporeal, religious motifs, and historically coded otherness. The selected poems are representative examples in which these registers intertwine, creating a complex space in which the subject is constituted through the tension between the symbolic order and its edges. The methodological work applies a psychoanalytic and feminist approach, using Kristeva's theory as an analytical model for examining textual strategies, rather than as a pre-given interpretative key.

2. Theoretical framework: abjection in Julia Kristeva

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), literary theorist Julia Kristeva develops the concept of abjection as a fundamental category of psychoanalytic and cultural analysis. The abject is neither a subject

nor an object, but rather that which is rejected – that which the subject must expel from himself in order to establish himself as an „I“. It is a phenomenon that simultaneously evokes disgust, horror and fascination because it denotes a place where the boundaries of identity and order are violated. The abject thus denotes the space in between, a zone of ambiguity and mixture in which the clear distinction between self and otherness breaks down.

Abjection is not only an individual psychological process, but also a fundamental mechanism for the constitution of the subject. The subject is established through the rejection of the abject, but this rejection is never complete: the abject remains as a threat of return, as a reminder of the fragility of the boundaries of identity. In this sense, abjection precedes the stabilization of the symbolic order because it denotes what is not fully symbolized, the remainder that escapes language and appears in the form of a bodily reaction, discomfort, or horror. Kristeva also connects abjection with phobia: the phobic object becomes a place of projection of the anxiety that arises from the dissolution of the boundaries between the inner and the outer (ibid., 35).

At the heart of Kristeva's theory is the body as the primary site of abjection. Examples such as corpses, blood, feces, and bodily secretions provoke disapproval because they violate the boundary of the body and expose its materiality and mortality. The corpse occupies a special place as the ultimate form of the abject: not because it represents death in itself, but because it shows a body devoid of identity, a boundary where the distinction between subject and object is erased. Precisely for this reason, the encounter with the abject is not only an experience of disgust, but also a confrontation with one's own materiality.

The maternal body plays a key role in the process of abjection. In the early stages of development, the child does not clearly distinguish between himself and his mother, which is why one of the fundamental moments of the constitution of the subject is precisely the separation from the maternal, or primary abjection. The maternal body therefore becomes an ambivalent place: it is the source of life, but also a threat to the loss of the boundaries of identity. In cultural and religious systems, this ambivalence often translates into the designation of the female body as impure, especially in the context of blood, childbirth and corporeality. It is important to emphasize that the abjection of the female body is not its inherent characteristic, but the effect of symbolic and social structures that seek to stabilize the boundaries between the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden.

The social order seeks to contain the abject through taboos, rituals, and religious norms that define the boundaries of what is acceptable. In the biblical context, for example, the distinction between the pure and the impure is

organized through strict laws that regulate the body, food, and sexuality (ibid.: 90–91). The abject thus appears not as an external threat, but as something that disrupts the internal order of the community. In the New Testament, there is a shift toward an internal dimension: impurity is no longer primarily associated with the material, but with thoughts, words, and deeds, further destabilizing the boundary between the inner and the outer (ibid.: 113–114). Such transformations show that abjection is always connected to the ways in which culture organizes the body and identity.

Along with religion, art and literature represent another way of dealing with the abject. While rituals seek to limit and control the abject, literature allows it to be expressed in language. Kristeva therefore recognizes in modern literature a space in which the abject is not removed, but articulated through style, rhythm, and linguistic strategies that enable the unbearable to become bearable (ibid.: 17–18). In this context, literature can be understood as a space of constant movement on the border between meaning and its dissolution, between attraction and horror.

Such understanding of abjection is particularly significant for reading Sylvia Plath's poetry. In the collection *Ariel*, abjection appears not only as a motif of decay, death and corporeality, but as a mechanism through which the subject is formed on the border between establishment and disintegration. Kristeva's theoretical framework therefore enables an analysis of the ways in which Plath uses images of the body, blood, food, religion and violence to construct a female subject who is not stabilized but remains in a constant process of negotiating her own boundaries.

3. Analysis

The following is an analysis of selected poems from the collection (*Fever 103°*, *Mary's song*, *The Applicant* and *Daddy*) in order to show how different registers of the abject – the maternal body, decay and death, religious motifs and historically coded otherness – participate in the constitution of female subjectivity. Although these registers are considered separately for the sake of analytical clarity, they overlap in the texts and form a complex network of meanings. The analysis starts from the assumption that the subject in these texts is not stabilized through the rejection of the abject, but precisely through its taking over and performative staging, whereby the boundaries between self and otherness remain permanently unstable.

3.1. The abject body and the disintegration of the female self

The female body in the collection *Ariel* appears as a privileged site of abjection, that is, as a space in which the instability of the boundary between self and otherness is revealed. In line with Kristeva's understanding of the abject, the abject is neither an object nor a stable otherness, but rather that which opposes the subject and simultaneously destabilizes it: „The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning (...), what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses“ (Kristeva, 1982: 1–2). The body in Plath's poetry is therefore not a complete and stable form, but a place of decomposition, excretion and transformation. It is not abject because it would be „impure“ in itself, but because the symbolic order stabilizes it as a problematic boundary of subjectivity precisely through the distinction between pure/impure, acceptable/ unacceptable. Such an understanding of the body also coincides with broader feminist approaches that understand the body as an unstable and permeable category, rather than as a closed biological whole (Grosz, 1994). In this sense, the female body in *Ariel* functions not only as a theme, but also as a medium through which the crisis of the female self is articulated. Kristeva sums this up in one of her fundamental definitions of the abhorrent: „It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite“ (Kristeva, 1982: 4).

Such a crisis is particularly visible where the body ceases to be a boundary separating the inside from the outside, and instead appears as a porous, exposed, and unstable surface. In *Fever 103°*, this instability is shaped through fever, smoke, smell, and heat: the subject exudes from his own body „the low smokes“ that „roll / From me like Isadora's scarves“, while „The indelible smell / Of a snuffed candle“ and the repetition of „the sin, the sin“ (Plath, 1966: 53) merge the physical and the moral, the sensory and the symbolic. It is in this overlap that Kristeva's abject operates: that which emerges from the body and in doing so destroys its wholeness. The body is no longer a closed form, but a place where the boundary between inside and outside is erased. In this sense, Kristeva's claim that aversion to food is „perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection“ (Kristeva, 1982: 2–3) is particularly significant, where the act of expulsion simultaneously becomes an act of subjective establishment: „I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself.

(...) During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amidst the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva, 1982: 3). That is why the initial question „Pure? What does it mean?“ does not only open up the motif of purity, but also problematizes the very possibility of thinking of the body outside the symbolic regimes that designate it as pure or impure (Plath, 1966: 53).

At the same time, Plath does not depict a subject who frees himself from the abject, but a subject who passes through the abject. The figure of „pure acetylene / Virgin“ is particularly important because it combines virginity, purity, flammability and danger in the same image. Purity is thus not a state of untouched innocence, but the result of a self-destructive transformation. The same ambivalence is present in the motifs of cherubs, roses and „pink things“, which evoke a feminized and religiously coded space of elevation, but at the same time mark it with artificiality and theatricality. The subject does not enter transcendence outside the body, but through the burning, smoking and disintegrating body. That's why the final lines – „My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats – / To Paradise“ (ibid.: 55) – do not indicate pure liberation, but a paradoxical scene in which elevation is achieved only through disintegration. „Old whore petticoats“ inscribe promiscuity, weariness and social rejection into the body; it is a matter that has already been marked as a barrier.

If *Fever 103°* shows the abject body as a place of self-destructive transfiguration, *The Applicant* shows it as a place of complete objectification and fragmentation. There, the body is no longer feverish and ecstatic, but disassembled into a series of functional, replaceable parts: „A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch“ (ibid.: 4). Such breakdown does not only show physical damage, but also destroys the very idea of the body as a bearer of identity. The line „Stitches to show something's missing?“ (ibid.) is particularly significant because the stitches indicate that the body was already opened, already damaged and remade. In Kristeva's sense, this is precisely the place of abjection: the moment when the inside of the body is exposed and when the border no longer seems unquestionable.

Behind such instability lies what Kristeva describes as primary abjection, or the early process of separation from the maternal body. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that the abject arises from a violent and insecure separation from the mother: „The abject confronts us (...) with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling“ (Kristeva, 1982: 13). In this light, the female body in Plath's poetry can be read not only as an object of social regulation, but also as a place where the deeper, primary insecurity of subjective boundaries is revealed.

The depiction of women as „living dolls“ also moves in the same direction. They are simultaneously alive and mechanical, human and objectified, which produces precisely the unease that arises when established categories are destabilized. The repetition of „It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk“ (Plath, 1966: 5) describes not only the socially desirable female functionality, but also the complete reduction of women to use value. Dehumanization reaches its peak in the repetition of „Will you marry it, marry it, marry it“ (ibid.), where the pronoun „it“ abolishes the possibility of the female subject as a speaking and acting self. Women are not the subject of a relationship, but an object offered as a solution, a substitute or a patch.

It is important here that *The Applicant* does not establish a stable male subject in contrast to the devalued woman. From the beginning, the man is also marked by lack, prostheses, and vulnerability, which is why the relationship between the characters is not based on complementarity, but on mutual damage and alienation. Marriage thus appears not as a place of integration, but as an institution that offers a technical solution to an ontological and physical lack: „You have a hole, it’s a poultice. / You have an eye, it’s an image“ (ibid.: 5). Instead of wholeness, a substitute is offered; instead of a subject, a functional union.

In both poems, the female body functions as the place where abjection is most intensely manifested, but in different forms. In *Fever 103°* it is a space of fever, burning and self-destructive striving for purity, while in *The Applicant* it is reduced to a fragment, a prosthesis and a doll. In the first case, the subject disintegrates in an attempt to overcome its own corporeality; in the second, it is already reduced to an object of social functionality. In both cases, the disintegration of the body is not just a motivic layer, but a key mechanism through which the female self is shaped and destabilized in *Ariel*. In this sense, Kristeva’s claim that abjection is „a precondition of narcissism“ and that it makes it „permanently brittle“ (Kristeva, 1982: 13–14) is particularly important, because this is precisely what sums up the way in which Plath’s subject survives: not as a stable and self-consistent whole, but as a permanently fragile form of identity.

3.2. Death, the corpse and the performative self-destruction of the subject

The fragmentation of subjectivity in *Ariel* is inseparable from the disintegration of the corporeal, whereby the disintegration does not appear as a consequence, but as a condition of the formation of the subject. Abject elements such as the decomposition of the body, pain and death point to the fact that in the poetics of the collection, the process of constitution of identity – es-

pecially female – is necessarily self-destructive. The subject is not established in spite of dissolution, but precisely through it. In this context, death occupies a central place, and its ultimate materialization, the corpse, represents what Kristeva defines as an extreme form of the abject: „The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irredeemably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death“ (ibid.: 3).

The corpse does not cause abjection because it signifies death in itself, but because it exposes a body devoid of identity, reduced to its own materiality. As Kristeva emphasizes, „the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, [...] is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life“ (ibid.: 4). Facing such a body is simultaneously facing one’s own limits: with the possibility of completely erasing the difference between self and object, because the subject is „at the border of my condition as a living being“ (ibid.: 3). This is precisely why the introduction of the motif of death in *Ariel* does not mark the end of subjectivity, but its final point of articulation. In the song of the same name, *Ariel*, this process is not shown as a linear dying, but as an intense dynamic of decay and transformation. The body breaks down into fragments – „Thighs, hair; / Flakes from my heels“, „Dead hands, dead stringencies“ (Plath, 1966: 26) – thereby losing the status of a complete form and passing into a series of dispersed parts. Such fragmentation corresponds to Kristeva’s understanding of the abject as that which destroys the boundary of the body and exposes its interior, whereby bodily remains and decay become a sign of „danger to identity“ in which „the ego is threatened by the non-ego“ (Kristeva, 1982: 62).

The motif of „unpeeling“ is particularly important: „White / Godiva, I unpeel“ (Plath, 1966: 26), which suggests the gradual removal of layers of identity. This act signifies not only liberation, but also the radical exposure of the body to itself, almost as a process of stripping to the point where identity can no longer be maintained. „Dead hands, dead stringencies“ signify not only physical disintegration, but also the disintegration of social and symbolic structures that previously defined the subject.

At the same time, the poem also contains a strong connection between death and rebirth, but not as a linear transition from one state to another, but as a destabilization of the very boundary between them. The motif of the furrow („The furrow / Splits and passes“) and the movement of the body („Pivot of heels and knees“) refer to the scene of birth (ibid.: 26), which in Kristeva’s framework marks one of the key points of abjection because it erases the distinction between the inner and the outer, life and death. Here, birth does not function as the beginning of a new identity, but as a state in which identity can no longer be clearly demarcated. Thus, the process of disintegration in *Ariel*

cannot be reduced to destruction: it simultaneously implies the possibility of transformation, but a transformation that remains tied to the experience of the abject. The culmination of that process comes at the moment when the subject defines himself as a movement: „I / Am the arrow“, „The dew that flies / Suicidal“ (ibid.: 27). The subject is no longer a stable body, but a movement directed towards its own annihilation. However, this cancellation is not passive, but performative: it is an act in which the subject actively participates in its own dissolution. This is precisely where the specificity of Plath’s poetics becomes apparent: death is not the end, but a boundary through which the subject is formed as an unstable, fragmented instance.

In this sense, the corpse as the ultimate form of the abject remains implicitly present as the horizon towards which the body moves – as a state in which identity can no longer be maintained. The subject in *Ariel* does not stabilize after the encounter with the abject, but remains permanently marked by its action.

3.3. Historically and politically abject

In the collection *Ariel* abject appears not only in the register of bodies and death, but also in the space of historical and political trauma. At the same time, Plath introduces images of the Second World War and the Holocaust as a means of shaping subjectivity, whereby the lyrical subject reaches for the appropriation of Jewish identity in order to articulate its own position of vulnerability, oppression and marginality. Such a strategy can be interpreted within the framework of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, according to which societies are constituted through the production of what they mark as abhorrent, as the „other“ that threatens their identity. In this sense, Kristeva’s claim that anti-Semitism is „a kind of parareligious formation; it is the sociological thrill, flush with history, that believers and nonbelievers alike seek in order to experience abjection“ is particularly important (Kristeva, 1982: 180). Anti-Semitism thus appears not only as political or ideological hatred, but as a way of collective staging and organizing the abject.

Kristeva interprets anti-Semitism precisely as a form of social abjection: the Jew is constructed as a figure that embodies what the symbolic order tries to exclude in order to maintain its own coherence. In this sense, the abject is not outside society, but its constitutive edge. Kristeva explicitly emphasizes that „anti-Semitic fantasy relegates that object to the place of the abject“ (ibid.). In *Daddy*, Plath assumes exactly this position of the „other“, whereby the subject identifies himself with the persecuted body: „I think I may well be a Jew“ (Plath, 1966: 50). This identification does not arise from historical

belonging, but from the need to articulate one's own experience through the already existing discourse of extreme marginalization. However, this is where the ethical dimension of the song opens up. The appropriation of Jewish identity functions as a powerful poetic strategy, but at the same time it implies taking on a historical trauma that is not experientially one's own. Thus, Plath's poetics moves on the border between the articulation of personal suffering and the problematic identification with collective suffering. In analytical terms, it is important to maintain this ambivalence: the poem cannot be reduced to either an autobiographical statement or a historical representation, but rather operates precisely in the tension between these two registers.

This tension can be further explained by Kristeva's thesis that the figure of the Jew in anti-Semitic discourse takes on the function of a focal point of contradiction: „That object, the Jew, gives thought a focus where all contradictions are explained and satisfied“ (Kristeva, 1982: 178). This is precisely why the subject in *Daddy* can reach for Jewish identity as a sign of absolute threat, but also as a place where experiences of violence, subordination, and exclusion are symbolically condensed. In this sense, the poem does not appropriate history simply to amplify an intimate statement, but rather shows how personal trauma is articulated through already historically coded figures of otherness.

This tension is further intensified through the figure of the Father, who in the poem takes on the characteristics of totalitarian power. A hyperbolized series of signs such as „Panzer-man“, „Luftwaffe“, „Aryan eye“ and „swastika“ (Plath, 1966: 50) creates an almost visual spectacle of domination, in which historical signs are transformed into intensely charged symbols of absolute power. The Father becomes a figure who embodies the symbolic order as a repressive instance, thus transforming the private relationship into a political allegory. In this transition, it is particularly clear how the boundary between the intimate and the historical is erased: the figure of the Father is no longer just an individual authority, but becomes a place of condensation of collective power structures. Private trauma is thus not expressed outside of history, but is articulated through already existing political and ideological codes. In this sense, the Nazi iconography in the poem does not function as a historical illustration, but as a language through which the subject tries to name his own oppression. This further confirms that the subject is not constituted autonomously, but within the discourse that precedes and determines him.

In this context, Kristeva's remark that the anti-Semitic phantasm takes the form of „rage against the Symbolic“ is particularly important, culminating in the figure of what is imagined as the basis of Law and authority (Kristeva, 1982: 178). In *Daddy*, this is precisely why the Nazi Father appears not only

as a personal tyrant, but as the embodiment of an order that excludes, humiliates and classifies.

One of the key motifs of the poem is the inability to speak: „I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw“ (Plath, 1966: 49). This blockage of language is further radicalized by the image of a „barb wire snare“ (ibid.), which associates speech with violence and imprisonment. The repetition of „Ich, ich, ich, ich“, emphatic and almost mechanical, signals the disintegration of linguistic control and entry into a zone that eludes a stable symbolic order. In Kristeva’s sense, it is the moment when the subject faces the limits of language as the bearer of identity: speech no longer stabilizes the subject, but exposes it as fragmented and powerless. It is important to emphasize that this disintegration is not just a stylistic effect, but a symptom of the inability of the subject to establish his own speaking position. Language, which should enable the articulation of identity, here turns into a place of stagnation and coercion: the repetition of a foreign language („Ich“) does not signify mastery of speech, but its blockage. The subject thus does not speak from his native language, but from the language of the Other, which simultaneously shapes and disables him. In this sense, the disintegration of language in *Daddy* shows that the subject cannot be constituted outside of a relationship to the authority that controls the symbolic order.

The climax of the song comes in the act of murder: „Daddy, I have had to kill you“ (ibid.). That act should not be read as literal, but as a performative break with the Father figure as the bearer of symbolic power. Killing the Father here functions as an attempt to get out of the structure that defines the subject as subordinate and „other“. However, this coming out is not a simple act of liberation. In the finale, the figure of the Father becomes a „vampire“, a being that exists on the border between life and death, thus re-establishing the logic of the abject: what was rejected does not disappear, but returns in a changed form, as a persistently present figure that continues to haunt the subject. In this sense, Kristeva’s formulation of the Jew as a figure that condenses „waste and object of desire, of corpse and life, fecality and pleasure“ and becomes „an Object of fear and fascination. Abjection itself“ is also significant (Kristeva, 1982: 185–186). Although this description refers to the anti-Semitic phantasm, it is theoretically useful for *Daddy* as well because it shows how the political abject works precisely through ambivalence: it simultaneously evokes horror and attraction, rejection and identification.

It is precisely in this tension between identification and distance that the specific ambivalence of the political abject manifests itself. The subject simultaneously reaches for the figure of the persecuted body and cannot be fully legitimized by it. Such a position does not allow for a stable resolution: it

reveals that the experience of marginality cannot be expressed without relying on already existing historical models, but also that such reliance necessarily remains problematic. In this way, *Daddy* does not offer a unique interpretative position, but rather maintains the tension between personal expression and collective trauma. Therefore, the political abject in the poem does not appear only as a thematic layer, but as a structural principle that determines the way in which the subject speaks, identifies, and attempts to establish its own boundaries.

3.4. Religious motifs, motherhood, and food taboos

Sylvia Plath's poetry often engages with biblical texts, introducing motifs from the Old and New Testaments and the Christian tradition to articulate experiences of suffering, death, and existential crisis. In this sense, Plath's religious motifs are often interpreted as part of a broader symbolic and mythological structure that reshapes traditional religious patterns (Kroll, 1976). However, in *Ariel*, these motifs are not reproduced in their original form, but are reshaped, making religious discourse a means of questioning individual and collective trauma. The title of the collection itself suggests such an intertextual strategy: *Ariel*, „God's Lioness“, invokes the biblical register, but in Plath's poetics she loses her stable meaning and becomes a site of fragmentation and transformation of the subject. Such a reading coincides with Kristeva's insight that biblical impurity is already subject to the symbolic order: „Biblical impurity is thus always already a *logicizing* of what departs from the symbolic“ (Kristeva, 1982: 91). Religious motifs in Plath therefore function not as a guarantee of transcendence, but as a language of separation, prohibition, and boundary.

In the poem *Ariel*, religious motifs intertwine with abject images of the body in decay, blurring the line between transcendence and materiality. The motif of the furrow („The furrow / Splits and passes“) and the movement of the body („Pivot of heels and knees“) (Plath, 1966: 26) establish the scene of childbirth, which in Kristeva's framework represents one of the fundamental places of abjection because it destroys the border between inner and outer, life and death. The subject does not rise outside the body, but through its decomposition: „White / Godiva, I unpeel – / Dead hands, dead stringencies“ (ibid.). The act of „unwrapping“ signifies simultaneous release and loss of identity, whereby transcendence is realized only through the experience of one's own materiality. It is precisely in this combination of elevation and dissolution that the logic of the abject manifests itself: the subject is constituted on the border of its own disintegration. In this sense, Kristeva's claim that the biblical order rests on „a strategy of identity“ (Kristeva, 1982: 92) is important, that is, on a

system of differences that stabilizes the boundaries between the pure and the impure, the human and the divine, the permitted and the forbidden. In Plath's poem, this system is no longer maintained: religious signs remain present, but no longer guarantee order, but accompany the disintegration of the subject.

This tension between the religious and the physical is further radicalized in *Mary's Song*. There, the iconography of the Virgin Mary is linked to scenes of violence and historical trauma. The figure of Mary, traditionally a symbol of purity and motherhood, appears as a witness to suffering, thereby destabilizing her idealized position in the patriarchal order. In this sense, she approaches the iconography of the *Mater Dolorosa*, in which motherhood is no longer a source of comfort and purity, but of constant suffering and loss. The opening verses already introduce the connection between religion and the gap: „The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat“ (Plath, 1966: 45). The image of the lamb, which in Christian symbolism signifies the sacrifice of Christ, is here reduced to the materiality of flesh cracking in fat. The symbolic value of the sacrifice is thus collapsed into bodily reality. In Kristeva's sense, it is precisely such scenes that produce the gap because they expose what should remain subject to a system of separation. Kristeva shows that „the biblical text insists on maintaining the distance between man and God by means of a dietary differentiation“ (Kristeva, 1982: 95) and that food participates in „an initial division between man and God“ (ibid.). In *Mary's song*, this differentiation collapses: what should be a symbol of sacrifice and holiness returns as fat, meat, and expendable flesh.

The further development of the painting – „The fat / Sacrifices its opacity“ (Plath, 1966: 45) – further emphasizes the revelation of the interior. Fat, as the rest of the body, loses its „opacity“, thus erasing the boundary between the inner and the outer. In Kristeva's framework, such a violation of boundaries represents the basis of abjection because the subject confronts his own physicality as something foreign and disturbing. Kristeva particularly emphasizes that blood in the biblical code becomes „a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together“ (Kristeva, 1982: 96). Although blood is not explicitly named in the foreground in Plath's poem, the entire scene is permeated with precisely this semantic density: sacrifice, body, motherhood, violence and death are gathered in a single religious-food register.

The culmination of this process appears in the motif of devouring: „O golden child the world will kill and eat“ (Plath, 1966: 45). Here the religious figure of the child becomes the object of consumption, thus violating the taboo of cannibalism. Food ceases to be a means of sustaining life and becomes a

figure of violence against the body. According to Kristeva, aversion to food is one of the fundamental forms of abjection, because the act of eating implies crossing the boundary between the body and the world. In this image, this boundary is radically annulled: the body is not only consumed, but also destroyed, thus appearing abject in its most intense form. It is therefore no coincidence that Kristeva connects food prohibitions with a deeper process of separation: „Would the dispositions place-body and the more elaborate one speech-logic of differences be an attempt to keep a being who speaks to his God separated from the fecund mother?“ (Kristeva, 1982: 100). In this light, devouring the „golden child“ in Mary’s Song not only means violating the food taboo, but also the collapse of the symbolic distance that separates the subject from the mother and from the very source of life.

Kristeva shows that religious systems try to regulate such transitions through the distinction between the pure and the impure, especially in the area of food and the body. In Maria’s song, these laws are systematically violated: the victim does not stabilize the order, but destabilizes it, and the act of devouring exposes the violence that is at its base. Thus, the religious framework no longer functions as a protection against the abject, but as a space for its radicalization. In this sense, Kristeva’s claim that terms of impurity and defilement, which were previously tied to food, are then attributed to mothers and women in the biblical text is particularly important: „The terms, impurity and defilement, that Leviticus heretofore had tied to food (...) are now attributed to the mother and to women in general“ (Kristeva, 1982: 99). This shows that the food taboo and the maternal body do not form two separate registers, but belong to the same logic of demarcation.

A similar logic is present in the poem *Fever 103°*, where abjection towards food appears through the subject’s rejection of consumption: „Lemon water, chicken / Water, water make me retch“ (Plath, 1966: 54). Food, which should sustain the body, here causes nausea, confirming Kristeva’s thesis that the aversion to food stems from the threat it poses to the boundaries of the body. Refusing food therefore does not only signify a physical reaction, but also an attempt to establish control over one’s own identity, which is perceived as threatened. Since Kristeva situates food prohibitions within a broader order of separation from the maternal, nausea in *Fever 103°* can also be read as a symptom of resistance to any form of incorporation that erases the boundary between self and other. In all these texts, the maternal body occupies an ambivalent position. As a maternal figure, Mary symbolizes the source of life and religious purity, but at the same time, due to her connection with the body, blood, and birth, she becomes a privileged site of abjection. Kristeva formulates this particularly clearly when she says that „the taboo of the mother seems

to be its originating mytheme“ (Kristeva, 1982: 105–106). In other words, behind the entire system of biblical prohibitions lies a deeper demand for separation from the maternal. In this sense, Kristeva concludes even more precisely: „Biblical abjection thus translates (...) the taboo of the mother“ (ibid.: 106) In Plath’s poetry, this ambivalence is manifested through the constant intertwining of motherhood, food, and violence, showing that the subject can only be constituted through confronting what threatens it.

Religious motifs in *Ariel* therefore do not establish a stable system of meaning, but reveal its crisis. The violation of taboos, the destabilization of the mother figure, and the transformation of food into a sign of violence indicate that the symbolic order fails to fully contain the abject. On the contrary, it constantly returns, shapes the subject on the border between purity and decay, between transcendence and corporeality. This is precisely why Plath’s religious discourse is not a place of reconciliation, but a place where feeding, sacrifice, motherhood and violence are intertwined.

In this context, the analysis of abjection in Plath’s poetry necessarily raises the question of the very status of the subject that appears in these texts. Similar questions about the instability and relational character of identity are also raised in contemporary feminist criticism, which emphasizes that the subject in her poetry cannot be reduced to a stable and self-sufficient instance (Rose, 1992). If, according to Julia Kristeva, the subject is constituted on the border of its own disintegration, its stability and autonomy are called into question. It is precisely here that the approach of feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero, in the book *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), proves relevant, as it does not define the subject as a closed and self-sufficient whole, but as a narrative and relational being. Starting from the distinction between the question of what someone is and the question of who someone is, Cavarero emphasizes that the uniqueness of the subject cannot be exhausted by conceptual definitions. Namely, „‘who’ someone is remains inexpressible within the language of philosophy; but does not, as a result, remain utterly ineffable. Rather, ‘who’ someone is can be ‘known’ (...) through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist“ (Cavarero, 2000: 7). Furthermore, „Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words“ (ibid.: 8). Such a conception implies that identity is not a given and closed whole in advance, but a process that is formed through relationships with others. The

subject is exposed to the other from the very beginning, because, as Cavarero points out, „the ‘narrable self’ (...) is a self (...) exposed from birth within the interactive scene of the world“, and its existence is inseparable from the perspective of the other: „each of us is narratable by the other; that is, we are dependent upon the other for the narration of our own life-story, which begins from birth“ (ibid.: 12–14). Identity is therefore not established as self-possession, but rather emerges as a relational effect, always mediated by the gaze and speech of the other.

This relational dimension is further deepened by the assertion that the subject cannot tell its own beginning: „The narratable self cannot tell the story of his or her own genesis (...) but rather desires this story (...) from the mouth of another“ (ibid.: 30). Moreover, „the desire for this narration (...) implies that each of us entrusts his or her ‘unity’ and identity to another’s tale“ (ibid.: 32). The unity of the subject is thus shown not as an ontological fact, but as an always unfinished and mediated construction.

Within the context of such a theoretical framework, Plath’s lyrical subject can be more precisely defined. In *Ariel*, where the body is fragmented and the subject undergoes a process of „unwrapping“, the disintegration of the corporeal does not signify the loss of a stable identity, but rather reveals that this identity was never fully rounded. In *Daddy*, the speech blockade and the disintegration of language indicate the inability of the subject to establish his or her own voice outside of the relationship to the other that defines him or her. In *Mary’s Song*, where motherhood is transformed into a scene of violence and devouring, the maternal body appears as a site of simultaneous production of life and threat to identity, while in the *Fever 103°* the aversion to food signals an attempt to establish the boundaries of a body that is experienced as threatened and unstable. Precisely because subjectivity in these poems is shaped through corporeality, the maternal, the aversion to food, and historically coded vulnerability, it is a specifically female subject, not a general model of the lyrical self.

In this sense, the abject in Plath’s poetics does not merely mark a moment of crisis, but becomes the site where the fundamental structure of subjectivity is revealed. What appears as disintegration in Kristeva’s framework can be understood in Cavarero as an indication that the subject has never been a closed and self-sufficient whole. Plath’s female subject does not lose its unity, but rather shows itself as always already relational, exposed and fragmented – shaped through the body, speech and relationship with others. Abjection therefore does not merely produce the disintegration of the subject, but makes it visible in its constitutive instability.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of selected poems from the *Ariel* collection showed that the abject functioned not only as a motivic layer of Plath's poetics, but as a fundamental mechanism of shaping female subjectivity. Starting from Kristeva's theory of abjection, the paper pointed out that the subject in these texts is not established by stabilizing the boundaries between self and otherness, but rather by their violation. The body, death, religious discourse and historical violence do not appear as separate thematic registers, but as interwoven dimensions in which the subject is constituted through the experience of disintegration.

In the analysis of the abject body, it was shown that the female body in *Ariel* functions as a place where the fragility of identity is most intensely exposed. Whether it is a feverish, self-destructive transfiguration or a complete fragmentation and objectification, the body does not serve to stabilize the self, but to destabilize it. In this sense, Plath's poetics confirms Kristeva's thesis that the abject is not something that is simply rejected, but something that permanently haunts the boundaries of the subject.

Further analysis of death and the corpse further radicalized that perspective. In *Ariel*, death does not appear as the end of subjectivity, but as its final point of articulation, while the corpse, as an extreme form of the abject, exposes a body devoid of identity and thus calls into question the very possibility of a stable self. The subject is not formed in spite of this threat, but precisely through it, remaining permanently marked by the experience of its own materiality.

By introducing the historical and political abject, especially through the motifs of the Holocaust in the song *Daddy*, it was shown that the process of constitution of subjectivity does not take place outside of history, but in its centre. Identification with the persecuted body functions as a strategy of articulating one's own marginality, but at the same time it also opens up ethical questions about the limits of such identification. This further confirms that the abject is not only an individual psychological phenomenon, but also a socially and culturally produced category.

Ultimately, the analysis of religious motifs, motherhood and food taboos indicated that the symbolic order fails to fully regulate the abject. On the contrary, it is precisely in the area of religious norms – through the difference between the pure and the impure, through the figure of the mother and through the regulation of the body and food – that the abject appears most intensively. The figure of the mother's body proves to be crucial: as a source of life, but also as a threat to the disintegration of the boundaries of identity, it embodies the ambivalence that stands at the foundation of Kristeva's concept of abjection.

In this sense, the results of the analysis can be additionally explained in the context of the relational conception of subjectivity as explained by Adriana Cavarero. If the subject, as Kristeva shows, arises on the border of its own disintegration, then in Cavarero's framework this instability is not shown as a deficiency, but as a condition of its relational constitution: the subject is not a closed and self-sufficient entity, but a being whose identity is formed through the relationship with others and through the narrative mediation of its own life.

In conclusion, it must be stated that in *Ariel* Plath shapes a subject that cannot be stabilized within the symbolic order, but remains permanently situated on its margins. The object in this poetics is not an obstacle to identity, but its constitutive condition. It is through the constant movement between dissolution and establishment, between body and language, between attraction and gap, that Plath articulates a specific form of female subjectivity that eludes fixed definitions and remains open, fragmented, and relationally constituted.

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**ABJEKCIJA I OBLIKOVANJE ŽENSKOG SUBJEKTIVITETA U
PJESNIČKOJ ZBIRCI *ARIEL* SYLVIJE PLATH**

Rad analizira funkciju abjektivacije u pjesničkoj zbirci *Ariel* Sylvije Plath, s posebnim naglaskom na njezinu ulogu u oblikovanju ženskoga subjektiviteta. Polazeći od teorije abjektivacije Julije Kristeve te uzimajući u obzir relacijsku koncepciju subjektiviteta Adriane Cavarero, rad ispituje kako se u odabranim pjesmama uspostavljaju granice između jastva i drugosti, čistoga i nečistoga, života i smrti. Analiza pokazuje da abjektivacija u *Arieli* nema samo motivsku funkciju, nego djeluje kao strukturni mehanizam proizvodnje i destabilizacije ženskoga subjekta. U tom se okviru razmatraju četiri međusobno povezana registra abjektinoga: materinsko i žensko tijelo, smrt i raspad tjelesnoga, religijski motivi te povijesno kodirana drugost. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje načinima na koje Plath abjektne slike tijela, hrane, nasilja i svetoga preoblikuje u poetski prostor otpora patrijarhalnim simboličkim strukturama. Zaključno se pokazuje da se ženski subjekt u *Arieli* ne oblikuje jednostavnim odbacivanjem abjektinoga, nego upravo njegovim preuzimanjem, performativnim uprizorenjem i istodobnim razaranjem granica identiteta.

Ključne riječi: *Sylvia Plath, Ariel, abjektivacija, ženski subjektivitet, tijelo*