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Self-exposure in Elizabeth Bishop's "Pink Dog"

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Abstract

This article examines self-exposure in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Pink Dog" through a feminist lens. The feminist approach examines literary works through the lens of gender in an attempt to subvert the established societal norms and long-standing values on the plea that they promote inequality between the two genders of society. Through this approach, the marginalized voices, as is the case with the female gender, are empowered. The ultimate goal of feminist theories is to subvert the traditional gender roles and to rebuild society on healthy terms, ensuring gender equality as well as social justice. Applying this method to Bishop's "Pink Dog" will show how Bishop challenges the traditional roles assigned to both women and men under the patriarchal system.

Keywords: feminism, gender roles, patriarchal, Elizabeth Bishop, Pink Dog

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. She is considered one of the great American poets. Jarrell describes her as an "unassuming, pleasant, charming poet of restraint, calm, and proportion" (1946, pp. 498-99). She taught poetry at Harvard University and New York University and was also a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1949-1950. She won many prizes: the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award for her first volume *North and South* in 1946, the Pulitzer Prize for her poem collection *North and South – A Cold Spring* in 1956, the National Book Award for *Questions of Travel* in 1965, the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Geography III* and two Guggenheim fellowships as well as the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976.

Bishop visited and lived in many cities and countries. She spent a long time in Brazil, where she got involved in lesbian relationships with two women. She spent fifteen years with the Brazilian socialite and architect Lota de Macedo Soares. With Lota, she started to enjoy life and to feel very secure. She once called the years she spent with Rita the most productive years in her life. "Her 'home' in Brazil with her lover Lota . . . was perhaps the closest Bishop ever got to a sense of real belonging" (Fan, 2005, p. 47).

Later on, Bishop's relationship with Lota became very stressful. Having found a new lover, Bishop decided to head back to the United States. Suffering from depression, Lota followed her and committed suicide in 1967 when Bishop did not reciprocate her love. Bishop met Alice Methfessel in 1971, and they lived together as lesbians until Bishop's death in 1979. Bishop's

experience "of a lesbian identity," Rich argues, enabled her "to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them" (1986, p. 127). This experience also enabled her to masterfully express "intimate, low-voiced, and delicate things" (Rosenbaum, 2005, p. 86).

2. Setting

"Pink Dog" was published in 1979, but the poem was probably written in 1963 or 1964 in Brazil. The setting is in Rio de Janeiro during the Carnival festival. The tone is sardonic, ironic, bitter, and defiant all at once. The speaker is anguished but refuses to be a victim or to be classified as a social misfit. In terms of form, the poem is written in rhymed tercets. The elaborate poetic form and the rather superficial social theme that Bishop uses in "Pink Dog" function as double masks.

3. Double masks

With these masks on, Bishop expresses her personal anguish, which was caused by her sexual propensity. Her feeling of being sexually insulted and socially alienated urges her to use the triple rhymed tercets to convince society at large that being lesbian/different does not subvert the dominant regime of heterosexual men and women; a lesbian can be in harmony with them. This is apparent in the strict AAA rhyme scheme, which is followed throughout the poem. The lines of the first stanza, for example, end with "blue," "hue," and "avenue" (Bishop, 1991, p. 190). In this regard, Dickie explains that "Bishop's penchant for triple rhymed tercets indicates an interest not just in the difficulty of the rhyme scheme but in the triangles it calls up, as in 'Pink Dog,' which has a subtext of sexual fury underneath its political commentary (1994, p. 2).

The poem starts with a detailed description of the weather during the summer in Brazil. People are spending a nice time on the beach:

> The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.
> Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.
> Naked, you trot across the avenue. (Bishop,1991, p. 190)

Cloth is available in different colors and is enough to make umbrellas that can cover and "clothe" the whole beach. The many umbrellas make the sand of the beach invisible and signify the presence of a large number of people. It is a very hot season; the sun is "burning" and the sky is "blue," and there are no clouds. The addressee is unknown, but it may be understood from the "[u]mbrellas," "the beach," and "[n]aked" that it is a woman who is being described. Surprisingly, the reader realizes that the addressee is a dog. Mitrano argues:

> Unlike her mentor, Marianne Moore, Bishop does not use animal allegory to suggest the possibility of a gentler world; rather she uses it to point to a self-censoring process, to intimate guarded, even muzzled, speech about the possibility of positing a female subjectivity against the grain of the page. . . . Bishop's female dog . . . is not simply a dog but a signifier that keeps the poem (and us) oscillating between two semantic clusters; 'woman' and 'dog'. (1995, p. 35)

Aware of the surroundings, the stark "naked" dog "trot[s]" across the street while determined to show her nakedness to the people around. With nothing to cover up her body, she challenges people. The insistence of "Pink Dog" on the dog's nakedness with the ugliness that it might have is strongly suggestive of the dog's/woman's rage that is both physical and sexual. It also

reflects her deep-rooted insistence on challenging the "social conventions" and on refusing "invisibility" (Cucinella, 2002, p.75).

Bishop describes the dog in the following stanza "with a remarkable eye for detail" (Elkins, 1983, p. 43). She is bare and free from hair. She is also self-confident; she does not fear the burning sun or the passersby:

> Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!
> Naked and pink, without a single hair …
> Startled, the passersby draw back and stare. (Bishop, 1991, p.190)

The interjection, "[o]h," shows how amazed the speaker is when she sees the naked dog. The adverb "[n]ever" indicates that this is the first time in her life that she has seen such a creature in stark nakedness. Bishop heightens the dog's nakedness by using "bare" and "naked," and emphasizes it with the prepositional phrase "without a single hair." The color "pink" is used to "suggest difference, unease and alarm, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality and the temptations and risks of self-exposure" (Gill, 2020, p. 147). Again, the emphasis on nakedness raises the dog to the level of a human being, and most certainly to that of a woman, as her body is "without a single hair." This strengthens the link between the female speaker in the poem and the dog. It seems that the dog is a woman in disguise. As Lombardi points out, Bishop "project[s] her most intense feelings into a variety of poetic protagonists to escape stifling categorization and conventional definitions of identity" (1992, p. 153).

On seeing the naked dog, the passersby are not only horrified but are also attracted to her. They "stare" because they do not expect a dog to be stark naked. Yet, the society does not allow or acknowledge her because she is naked, and her skin is pink; the color is associated with scabies. They keep staring at and retreating from her in horror. They are afraid of getting infected. It is not rabies or scabies that the poet cares for. Actually, she uses both terms to refer to something else. These diseases highlight a physical problem as sexual affairs are associated with the body.

The speaker's suffering as well as the dog is is unbearable. The "pink dog and speaker appear as two rival aspects of the self – one that would parade its nakedness, whatever the consequences, and one that would cover and protect, since it cannot or does not wish to expel, the body" (Costello, 1991, p. 88). Both the woman and the dog can be regarded as one entity in two different shapes. The seemingly warring aspects of this lesbian woman show the severe impact of societal conservatism on her. She internally suffers and panics as society alienates her:

> Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.
> You are not mad; you have a case of scabies
> But look intelligent. Where are your babies? (Bishop, 1991, p. 190)

The physical symptoms, which are mistaken for "scabies" and "rabies," horrify the passersby and, by implication, the society at large. Rabies and scabies keep the dog alienated and socially despised. This socially rejected "eyesore" of a dog, obviously suffering from infectious diseases, is the focal point that Bishop highlights. The physical oddity is the cause of the dog's alienation. The diseased body of the dog metonymically reflects the speaker's disease of lesbianism, and will cause her to be alienated, too. She has no place in this patriarchal society.

4. Significance of the pronoun "they"

Bishop uses the third-person plural pronoun "they" to keep herself at a distance from society, and to argue that it does not care about her or about the dog, which represents her; it is indifferent and biased against the scabious dog as it is against the lesbian woman. The fear that makes society tremble is so high that it endeavors to eradicate the potential threat caused by the woman. The adverb "[m]ortally" indicates that the society considers it a matter of life or death to combat the physically diseased dog and the sexually different woman to protect its own assumed stability, which is endangered by their presence.

The speaker is convinced that she would not be considered infectiously mad if she works on her physical problem. This is further clarified by the rhetorical question "[w]here are your babies?" According to the inherited and bequeathed dogmas of the misogynist society, a woman is expected to be a mother, the right source for getting "babies." She should not be attracted to the same sex, as in doing this, she violates the rules established by society. Her lesbianism would not offer society any new generations. The epidemic should be contained by ostracizing lesbians. The society does not regard her sexual inclination as personal freedom, but as a deviation from the long-standing norms.

The word "babies," which closes the previous tercet, is suggestive as it implies the presence of a woman as the subject of the poem. It reinforces the notion that the woman identifies with the dog. A woman, not a dog, can "look intelligent":

> (A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.)
> In what slum have you hidden them, poor bitch,
> While you go begging, living by your wits? (Bishop, 1991, p. 190)

The reference to the "hanging teats" is a reminder that the dog is female. The reference is also to the lower part of the body with the adjacent private organs. Here, the speaker is hinting at lesbianism, the sexual inclination that causes the woman to suffer. The poet places the first line of the stanza above in parentheses to highlight the assigned role of a mother expected and accepted by the biased society of a woman. To be socially acknowledged, she should be like Sylvia Plath's woman in her poem "The Applicant," who is sarcastically described as a machine whose job in society is to "bring teacups and roll away headaches / And do whatever you tell it" (Plath, 1992, p. 293).

Ironically speaking, the poet is using the derogatory word that society uses, "bitch." This is how a woman with a different inclination is branded. "[P]oor," the modifier that precedes the word "bitch," pinpoints the poet's sympathy for the naked dog in a misogynist society that does not offer her enough leeway to practice her sexual orientation without fear or shame. She does not have to stoop or use her skills and wits to beg for respect and for personal freedom from her society. If she does not use her "wits," she will lose her status and jeopardize her position in society as a woman worthy of dignity and respect.

5. Bonds with other social groups

Bishop creates bonds with the other alienated groups in society. She uses the alienation and the injustice that the poor suffer from to show how unfair and biased society is. She associates her cause with a general one to win victory for hers:

> Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,
> to solve this, how they deal with beggars?
> They take and throw them in tidal rivers.
> Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites
> Go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights
> out in the suburbs, where there are no lights. (Bishop, 1991, p. 190)

Her bitter advice to the dog is emphasized with the rhetorical question, "Didn't you know?" The tense used in the question is the past simple tense, which is indicative of past actions inherited by one generation after another. The bias of society and animosity against deviant and defiant members are widespread. Also, the way society deals with those who have a different sexual orientation shows how conservative and restrictive it is. "They," referring to the guardians of the established social conventions, throw eccentric members into "tidal rivers" to get rid of them forever. They "bob" up and down on the strong waves of these rivers and are left there to sink and die. No help is offered to them, just because they are marginalized.

Bishop makes her cause broad enough to include all the marginal, despised, and helpless in a prejudiced society. The sexual deviants, along with "idiots," "paralytics," and "parasites," face tough conditions and severe alienation. They are not allowed any rights and are restricted to living in the dirtiest places. "Sewage" is where society keeps them stuck. The sweeping darkness, as there are "no lights," pinpoints the endeavor of the society to ignore and eradicate these defiant members.

6. A prejudiced society

The society goes far in its animosity against the dog/woman. It allows her little room for any respect or sympathy:

> If they do all this to anyone who begs,
> drugged, drunk, or sober with or without legs,
> what would they do to sick, four-leggèd dogs? (Bishop, 1991, p. 190)

Bishop uses the pronoun "they" and associates it with everything biased, horrible, and unfair. The treatment that the dog/woman receives at the hands of a merciless society is anticipated. If "they" chase "anyone who begs," it would chase the "four-legged" dog, a "bitch", and a source of infection to death or destruction. Similarly, a woman is not acceptable if she breaks the rules by openly exhibiting her sexual inclination. The rhetorical question "what... dogs?" that ends the stanza shows the mercilessness of the patriarchal society.

Deep inside, the poet knows that she is sexually different from the other dogma-worshipping members. Her case, as well as the dog's, is unique:

> In your condition you would not be able
> even to float, much less to dog-paddle
> Now look, the practical, the sensible
> solution is to wear a *fantasia*.
> Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-
> n eyesore. . . . (Bishop, 1991, pp. 190-191)

The bitter advice that Bishop unleashes to the naked and pink dog to "wear a fantasia" is caused by the unfair treatment meted out to her by a prejudiced society. She uses her own weapons of disguise to survive in a society that welcomes the false. In the meantime, she shows society its

ugly face and its ineffective standards. With the different sexual inclination that the dog/woman has, her chances for acceptance into this society are low, but they can be enhanced if the dog/woman searches for an immediate solution that can be both "practical" and "sensible." To be acknowledged, the dog—the woman implied—has to wear a masquerade and "hide itself in a carnival costume" (Dombrowski, 2011, p. 34).

At the Carnival festival in Brazil, "[n]aked" and "pink," the dog is easily recognizable as an alien creature. She represents an oddity which is both physical and sexual and which is obviously unwelcome among the people around. To mingle with devoted society members and to avoid being "an eyesore," she has to wear a mask to shield herself against their contempt. No one will discover her true identity behind her makeup. Her identity would also be unknown, as no one would expect her to be a "dog." They would think she is a normal woman because the animal in her—her lesbianism—will sink deep beneath the surface that her makeup secures.

It is the speaker's sense of eccentricity that makes her reluctantly advise the dog to wear a "costume' and "dress up". Like the dog, she is part and parcel of the struggle and, of course, cannot disentangle herself. Costello explains:

> The poet writes from the margin, on the divide between culture and nature. It is her empathy for the pink dog, her own sense of marginality, that provokes her terrible advice. In a culture which abhors the body's mutability, disguise is the only alternative to expulsion or annihilation. (1991, pp. 85-86)

It is socially inappropriate for anyone—the dog/woman included—to wear makeup or "mascara" during Ash Wednesday, as it is a religious event.

> But no one will ever see a
> dog in *mascara* this time of the year.
> Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.
> What sambas can you dance? What will you wear? (Bishop, 1991, p. 191)

Bishop uses "*mascara*" to further reinforce the idea that the addressee in "Pink Dog" is not only a dog, but also a woman. A woman can realize the time for festivals, "dance" sambas, and select what to wear. She tries to hide the ugliness that society sees in the naked dog by advising her to put on some "mascara" because society will not accept her as she is. It will accept and acknowledge her if she modifies herself to suit the norms and values it requires its members to respect. This reflects the wide gap between what is false and what is real in society. The standards it respects are false, and only the false would in her case be acceptable.

In other words, the dog has to hide her own ugliness to get accepted and acknowledged in society. She has to disguise herself in mascara. Ash Wednesday does not offer the naked dog/lesbian woman much freedom, but another alternative is secured: the Carnival festival. It is common in carnivals that all restrictions—dogmas, customs, and traditions—are suspended. So, it is a golden chance for the dog/woman to mitigate her anguish by enjoying full freedom and equality with the members of society while keeping her sexual inclination underneath the outer mask. Bakhtin points out that at the Carnival:

> The official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety [is replaced with] the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. (1989, pp. 129-130)

But in Bishop's "Pink Dog," the Carnival festival is not as free from rules as it is expected to

be. The presence of strangers has ruined it:

> They say that Carnival's degenerating
> --radios, Americans, or something,
> have ruined it completely. They're just talking. (Bishop, 1991, p. 191)

The rules that are supposed to be ignored in the festival are strictly observed, as the Carnival festival is not as free as it should be. There are strangers from other countries, the "Americans." Here, Bishop broadens the net to include herself as one of the outsiders. She also assures herself and the naked dog that the Carnival is not a good occasion on which she can exhibit her sexual preference as a lesbian. She will be considered a social misfit because the Carnival has been ruined. "The problem with carnival is that it is one of those hyperbolic concepts that can always go over into their opposites" (Pechey, 2007, p. 129).

The speaker ironically reinforces the idea that the Carnival is "always wonderful," but:

> A depilated dog would not look well.
> Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival! (Bishop, 1991, p. 190)

"[D]epilated" is a word that is suitable for describing a woman, not a dog. Bishop uses "depilated" to describe the dog to strengthen the reciprocal relationship between the dog and herself. Ironically, society would consider a woman who is lesbian as a pervert, as a dog suffering from scabies. Both are considered social misfits. The imperative "[d]ress up!" followed by the exclamation mark reflects the society's dominance as well as the speaker's anguish and defiance. Walker argues that "people still argue about whether the recommendation the speaker gives to the dog to 'dance at Carnival' is to any degree serious" (2005, p. 118). After all, the carnival is used as a cover where real faces and inclinations can be masked.

Dressing up is impossible for the lesbian woman as she regards it as an abandonment of her sexual inclination and as a kind of surrender to the will of a misogynist society. To dress up for her is to admit that she has something ugly that she should cover. The poet repeats the imperative "Dress up and dance at carnival!" This time, she couples it with "dance," which is the target result. "Dance" is suggestive of the full freedom and communal joy that the members of the society share. It also works as an allure for the naked and pink dog as well as the lesbian woman to abandon her sexual preference by masking her lesbian identity. Nonetheless, "the temporary cure or cover-up of Carnival" (Fortuny, 2003, p. 32) would not end, or even mitigate, her anguish.

In "Pink Dog," the dog and the woman are linked through their gender and through their disease, which both reside in the body. Here, as Dickie explains, we see "the hysteria of a woman who has been sexually insulted. She finds company in the diseased dog and makes that dog stand for her own sense of misuse" (1994, p. 13). The anguish and isolation the lesbian woman undergoes are the factors that hurt, suppress, and demolish her feeling of relatedness to society. Nonetheless, she gets very determined and very defiant as she purposefully faces society with her body completely uncovered.

7. A call for franker confessions

Bishop in "Pink Dog" offers no clear-cut answers or effective solutions to end the speaker's

dilemma, mitigate her anguish, and make her feel welcome in a patriarchal society as a member worthy of dignity and respect. The temporary solutions offered in the poem can be beneficial for a lesbian woman, ready to abandon or at least conceal her sexual inclination, and accept the values of society without questioning them. The poet calls for "franker confessions and more forceful politics" (Longenbach, 1997, p. 9). "Her last line 'Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!' suggests a stinging indictment" (Walker, 2005, p. 119) of a heterosexual society.

To conclude, the speaker is determined to expose herself and to be accepted as she is without any modifications or wearing any masks. She believes that her sensual inclination is not something ugly she has to hide. As Yorke puts it, "to be lesbian is to be a 'self-chosen woman', to be a woman who has said 'no' to the fathers" (1997, p. 79). More fuel is added to the conflict between the woman with her lesbianism on the one hand, and the society with its inherited values on the other. She is not willing to sacrifice her lesbianism, nor is society ready to acknowledge her as a legitimate member. Her revolt "against the oppressive designs of patriarchy" (Erkkila, 1992, p. 145) is the best transcendence she can achieve.

Through a feminist reading, the impact of lesbianism on the poet's life and her identification with the naked dog are investigated. In the poem, the dog is scabious, and its skin disease makes it abhorrent to society. Likewise, the female persona's lesbianism—regarded as a physical disease—causes her to be socially alienated and despised as she revolts against the established gender roles set by a patriarchal society. She undresses herself in the person of her protagonist—the dog—to subvert the inherited societal norms. Like her mentor Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, Bishop regards lesbianism as a part of her own identity as a free woman. The conclusion is that there is no immediate solution to the speaker's dilemma. Yet, her defiance of the imposed societal categorization, along with her insistence that society should accept her without reservations, is the beginning of the change in question.

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