

## STEVIE SMITH'İN ŞİİRLERİNDE YIKICI KADIN KİMLİĞİ

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, basmakalıp cinsiyet rollerinin pekiştirildiği evlilik kurumunda kadınların ataerkil ideolojiler tarafından köleleştirilmesini ele alan Stevie Smith'in (1902-1971) şiirlerindeki radikal kadın seslerinin incelenmesi üzerine odaklanmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Stevie Smith, ataerkil toplumlardaki erkek egemenliğini eleştirir ve bununla da kalmaz, aynı zamanda ezilmiş kadın profilinin ailede normalleştirilerek anneden kızlarına aktarılmasını sağlayan ataerkil ideolojinin kurulması ve sürdürülmesinde kadının gizli rolünü de geniş bir biçimde inceler. Bu sebeple, ataerkil ideolojinin katalizörü görevi üstlenen kadınlar da Smith'in sert eleştirilerinden nasibini almıştır. Bununla beraber, Stevie Smith, ataerkil toplumun egemen gücüne karşı başkaldıran kadın karakterlerine kendilerini en yüksek sesle ifade etme özgürlüğü de vermiştir.

**Anahtar Kelime:** Stevie Smith, Modern Şiir, Ataerkil, Başkaldıran Kadın Kimliği.

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## THE SUBVERSIVE FEMALE INDENTITY IN STEVIE SMITH'S POETRY

### ***Abstract***

This study focuses on analyzing the radical female voices in Stevie Smith's (1902-1971) poetry which is distinguished by its humorous, and at same time, extremely tragic approach to the enslavement of women within marriage that is an ideologically laden institution where the patriarchal domination of women is guaranteed through stereotypically constructed gender roles. In this regard, Stevie Smith does not simply criticize the hegemony of men in patriarchal societies, but also thoroughly interrogates the intangible roles of women in strengthening and maintaining the perpetuation of the patriarchal ideology which ensures that the subordinated position of women should be normalized within families and transmitted by mothers to their daughters. Thus, women who are the major galvanizers of the patriarchal ideology cannot circumvent Smith's harsh denunciation while resistant female characters, who tenaciously overturn the hegemonic power of the patriarchy, are given the loudest voice to express themselves.

**Keywords:** Stevie Smith, Modern English Poetry, Patriarchy, Subversive Female Identity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a female modernist who is configured as the “queen of contradictions” (Mallot 171), as well as an “enigma” that cannot be solved easily (Huk, 2005, p. 1), Stevie Smith (1901-1971) is a complicated poet and novelist who cannot be put into any distinct category and definition. Although her works may seem lightheartedly simple and uncomplicated at first reading, a closer look into Smith's poems can indisputably unearth their darker meanings along with their ironic and twisty tone. She is, indeed, a poet of strong feelings, writing particularly about “loneliness, conventionality and death” (Corcoran, 1993, p. 71). With her “striking originality, a complete separation from poetic fashion”, Smith challenges literary conventions by blending song, prose, and poetry, accompanying sketches and plurality of voices that emerge out of different dimensions of her society (Stevenson, 1992, p. 24). Apart from her unprecedentedly distinguished poetic technique, the dissentient personal profile of Smith also persistently becomes the prevailing source of attention. As Jessica Walsh asserts, Smith is an extraordinarily eccentric poet of “over sixty years old atonally singing her poetry while wearing clothing suggestive of a schoolgirl's uniform, complete with white stockings” (Walsh, 2004, p. 57). With her implementation of the plurality of voices, singing and performing her poems while wearing childish clothes on the stage, Stevie Smith proves herself to be a subversive poet, overthrowing the traditional dogmatic understanding of literature and indulges in “redefining poetry, both its generic limitations and its audience appeal” (Severin, 1997, p. 119). In compliant with her incorporation of a discursive approach to all forms of poetic conventions, Smith explores wide-ranging female experiences and

identities, nonconforming with the patriarchal assertions of gender roles. As Severin suggests, Stevie's poetry is an expression of "the tragedy of rebellious women who lash out at society's dictates, only to be crushed" (Severin, 1997, p. 125). Correspondingly, this study aims to investigate rebellious female voices in Stevie Smith's poetry which is unswervingly committed to give utterance to the socially and culturally marginalized women who profoundly disavow to be assimilated to the domineering masculine power.

The discrepancy between public and private identities and artificiality of social impositions which enforce individuals to wear masks to disguise their identities are frequently underscored in Smith's poetry that is not fanatically feminist, yet still, involves rebellious identities who do not easily succumb to the masculine authority. "By manipulating the traditions in a seemingly chaotic way", James Najarian writes, "Smith makes room for her own poetry" (Najarian, 2003, p. 472). In this regard, Smith's poems illustrate women's defiance of the androcentric constructions of feminine roles which are stereotypically designated to legitimize women's subordinated position in their social and private lives. As Anderson stresses, Smith's poetry represents "an uncompromising challenge to the hierarchy of literary forms, and to a dominant discourse which erases different kinds of speech" (Anderson, 2007, p. 174). Dowson & Entwhistle comment on the profoundly exceptional writing style of Stevie Smith and point out that:

Although any attempt to pin down a technical, cultural, or gendered specificity is unsatisfactory, taken as a whole her work exemplifies the diverse ways in which women poets before and after her negotiated with British literary traditions. Her multivocal dramatizations go further than her predecessors and anticipate the energetic dialogism which is widespread at the end of the century. Like all literary women, she is antisentimental but revalidates personal emotion as an artistic source. Autobiography and fantasy are one of the many oppositions which she conflates, often through the dramatic monologue. (Dowson & Entwhistle, 2005, p. 109)

Diverging from other radical paths of feminist poets who show an exuberated devotion to celebrate female resistance against male domination, Smith does not refrain from criticizing women in her poems and incessantly struggles to destroy rigidly constructed gender boundaries. Hence, neither men nor women can escape Smith's playful sarcasm and criticism.

“Freddy” is one of the outstanding poems in which Smith challenges traditionally accepted norms and conventions of the society. The conflict between the intimacy of woman and man relationship with the expectations of the society is brought into foreground in the poem. The poem reveals Stevie Smith’s disturbance with the judgmental gaze of society, burgeoning a moral encumbrance on the private life of individuals and forcing them to act in accordance with its pre-determined codes of behavior. The radical female voice of the poem expresses her disturbance with the pressure of the society and states that:

Nobody knows what I feel about Freddy  
 I cannot make anyone understand  
 I love him sub specie aeternitatis  
 I love him out of hand.  
 I don't love him so much in the restaurants that's a fact  
 To get him hobnob with my old pub chums needs too much tact  
 He don't love them and they don't love him  
 In the pub lub lights they say Freddy very dim.  
 But get him alone on the open saltings  
 Where the sea licks up to the fen  
 He is his and my own heart's best  
 World without end ahem. (Smith, 1983, p. 65)

Smith’s poem begins with the affirmation of the persona about her eternal love for Freddy. The concept of romantic love is brought under a close security with the poet’s use of Latin expression to describe unchanging, universal nature of her love for Freddy. “Sub specie aeternitatis” is a Latin phrase which means “in its essential or universal form or nature” and used by Smith to emphasize the eternity and immunity of her love for Freddy (“Sub specie aeternitatis”, def. 2022: 1). Nevertheless, immediately after confirming that she feels an eternal love for Freddy, in line five, the persona expresses how her love for Freddy changes according to the social milieu, they attend. Reminiscent of their different social backgrounds, the female persona states that she does not love Freddy so much in restaurants while Freddy does not love her friends in the pub. An idealized romantic image of love, constructed at the beginning of the poem is swiftly overthrown with the revelation of the fact that the persona

and Freddy have not much in common and have different lifestyles with no common friends. Restaurants and pubs are two significant places which give a hint about these two lovers' distinct social classes and opposing world views. Thus, both readers' and the society's expectations of a romantic love is shattered by the poet who has a dubious attitude to ideals, ideologies, and values of the society. Furthermore, Smith's refusal of the societal norms is more tenaciously understood in her insistence in the first line that no one can really understand her real feelings for Freddy and she does neither expect anyone to understand it. The persona thinks that it is not appropriate for people to involve in her personal relationship since they cannot have any idea about the essence of her relationship with Freddy. The persona adroitly questions the concealed, and at the same time, condemnatory authority of the society over the personal lives of individuals whose decisions and destinies are governed by the moral standards of the societies. The persona declares her determination not to be victim of the constraining rules of her own society which is directed at founding imperceptible control mechanism over everything that takes place in its own spatial order. The persona of the poem feels a strong public pressure on her life which is expressed in the poem as: "People who say we ought to get married ought to get smacked: / Why should we do it when we can't afford it and have ourselves whacked?" (Smith, p. 65). Marriage is an exceedingly important decision that brings fundamental changes in the life styles of human beings. Adopting a humorous tone in her rebellious attitude to the society, the persona unhesitatingly discredits the society's anticipations by saying that: "Thank you kind friends and relations thank you, / We do very well as we do" (Smith, p. 65). Smith's poem is an amusing story of a female resistance against the mandates of the society which is intended to administer an apparatus of control on its individuals.

"The Wedding Photograph" is another poem which employs interior monologues to reveal the inner thoughts of the female character who has an evil intention of getting rid of her husband. The poet's criticism is directly attributed to the patriarchal institution of marriage which provides men with a comfort of life without limiting his liberty while generating a psychological and physical entrapment for women whose spaces of movement is constrained within domestic environment. The female persona of the poem quite cleverly finds a way to evade the captivation of marriage by subverting it within inside. The institution of marriage which is regarded as one of the most devastating instruments of the patriarchal exploitation of women is manipulated to the benefit of persona. The same bitter derision of Smith can be

easily discerned in this poem, delineating a wedding ceremony in which newly wedded husband and wife are posing for their wedding photographs:

Goodbye Harry, I must have you by me for a time  
 But once in the jungle you must go off to a higher clime  
 The old lion on his slow toe  
 Will eat you up, that is the way you will go.  
 Oh how shall like to be alone on the jungle path  
 But you are all right now for the photograph  
 So smile Harry smile and I will smile too  
 Thinking what is going to happen to you,  
 It is the death wish lights my beautiful eyes  
 But people think you are lucky to go off with such a pretty prize. (Smith, 1983, p. 425)

The poem begins with the female speaker's saying goodbye to her husband as an insinuation of the idea that their marriage will not ascertain their unification but their separation. Smith draws a powerful image of a married life which is resembled into a jungle as a dangerous realm of wilderness, danger, and unpredictable complications in which women find themselves entangled. Contrary to expectations, the poem does not depict a woman who is victimized by marriage but a man who is victimized by a woman. The persona is a rebellious woman who is determined to exploit her marriage in order to undermine the marriage institution which is a patriarchal instrument of stabilizing the systematic domination of women. Through her interior monologue, the persona confesses her secret plan of killing her husband after getting married. She envisions her marriage as a big jungle in which an old lion will eat her husband so that she will regain her freedom. The poet ironically expresses that while Harry is smiling to give a best pose of himself for his photograph, the female persona smiles because she thinks that this will be the last smile of her husband. The persona's ludicrous attitude to her marriage obfuscates the poem's seriousness about the credibility of the wife's evil plan. However, the underlying reason of the persona's secret scheme of killing her husband is more succinctly exposed in the last stanza where the female speaker declares that: "Ah feeble me that only wishes alone to roam / Yet dared not without marrying leave home" (Smith, 425). The persona's choosing marriage as her only possible option to retain



her freedom to travel around the world draws attention to the fact that the patriarchal society's oppressive impositions leave no room for women to live a liberated life at their own discretion. Neither married not unmarried women can exercise their freedom without being exposed to the restraining norms of a biased society. Subsequently, the persona chooses to become a widow and bend the rules of society and turn them into her advantage. The poem vividly examines how women are hardly allowed to enact their free-will within restrictive spaces, the boundaries of which are pre-ordained by the regulations of the patriarchy.

In addition to “The Wedding Photograph” which portrays a defiant woman who appropriates marriage subversively to achieve her goal of gaining liberty, “The Queen and the Young Princess” is a poem in which Smith excavates the undercurrents of marriage institution. The poem reveals that women's captivation in marriage is a multidimensional problem which cannot be simply charged against men since women are equally responsible for endorsing the rules of the patriarchal society. The poem gives expression to the dialogues of a mother and her daughter who is not allowed to live her freedom by her own mother:

Mother, mother, let me go

There are so many things I wish to do.

My child, the time is not ripe

You are not ready for life.

But what is my life that is to come to be?

Much the same, child as it has been for me. (Smith, 1983, p. 313)

As the poem plainly exemplifies, mothers are the most important control mechanism on their daughters, implemented by the patriarchal system. An unrelenting passion of the young girl to discover the life around her and gain her freedom is restrained by her own mother who accepts marriage as the only possible destiny for all women. She assures her daughter that her future life will exactly be the same as her own life. The mother's complaisant submission to her fate is contrasted with the youthful agency and vitality of her daughter who will eventually yield into the impending fate of every woman that is to become a wife and a mother by relinquishing her dreams of changing her life. In the following lines of the poem, Smith invites her readers to look inside the institution of marriage which prosecutes inordinately heavy burdens on the shoulders of women:

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But Mother you often say you have a headache

Because of the crown you wear for duty's sake.

So it is, so it is, a headache I have

And that is what you must grow up to carry to the grave. (Smith, 1983, p. 313)

The mother queen never renounces to carry her crown over her head although it causes a headache for her. Within the broader context of the poem, the crown symbolically signifies marriage for women that passes from mothers to daughters. What is tragically underscored is that the mother willingly embraces her headache that is caused by the crown. The mother's emphasizing the necessity of undertaking headache without any complaint implies that all women should unquestioningly welcome the difficulties, hardships, and problems of marriage because it is their responsibility to pursue marriage. The mother even substantiates that her daughter, also, is obliged to carry her headache to the grave. The poem ends with a strong affirmation of the mother about the duties of women who should hold onto marriage and its anxieties: "Up, child, up, embrace the headache and the crown/ Marred pleasure's best, shadow makes the sun strong" (Smith 313). Smith, in this poem, plunges into the depths of the problems of women and unravels that women are the most important building blocks of the maintenance and the continuation of the patriarchal ideology which imposes marriage as the only possible form of existence for women. Smith's implicit accusation on women who are held accountable for women's oppression is more strongly felt in the last line where the mother insistently repeats that her daughter should embrace her headache and consider it as the pleasure of her life since shadow is necessary to make the sun strong. Anderson argues that Smith often "uses a range of voices in her poetry which mimic social attitudes and codes" (Anderson 178). Likewise, the mother's teaching and reminding her daughter about her subservient social status can be interpreted as Smith's mimicking the androcentric social codes purposefully to undermine its ideological grounds. In other words, there is an extremely harsh criticism directed by the poet at women who accept being at the shadow of men and assume that it is their major responsibility to make men stronger by remaining at the background. Smith strives hard to create awareness about the fact that women are the most significant ideological tools of the patriarchal system, the operation of which is maintained by women. Therefore, women are declared to be the greater culprits in establishing the normalization of the discriminative dynamics of marriage which ruthlessly employs heavy responsibilities on women and ascribe them the role of being a shadow of the men. Smith endeavors to open the minds of her readers to the fact that the prolongation of the patriarchal



domination of women cannot even be possible without women's willful participation by way of indoctrinating the minds of younger generations about the appropriateness of submissive women behavior. The tragic insinuation of women's entrapment in marriage is even conveyed through the title of the poem, "The Queen and the Young Princess" which implies that the same fate of being suppressed individuals is awaiting all women without the exclusion of queens and princesses. The married life is equally burdensome for every woman indistinctive of their different social classes.

Accordingly, "My Hat" is another poem which is based on a young girl who believes in the magic of a hat that has the power to change the stereotypically constructed gender identity that is imposed upon her. Similar to "The Queen and the Princess" in which the mother gives her crown to her daughter in order to provide the safeguarding of the patriarchal system as an indication of all mothers who play a central role in transforming the traditionally accepted gender roles from generation to generation, the mother in "My Hat" gives a hat to her daughter and affirms that it would help her find the right man in her life: "Mother said, if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap" (Smith 315). Once again, the poet's criticism is directed at mothers who are the primary factors in determining the future of their daughters. So, the mother gives a hat to her daughter with the aim of teaching her daughter about the only possible social role of womanhood in order that she should take the responsibility of marriage as a wife and a mother. Contrary to the mother's expectations, the hat lifts the young girl up into the sky: "What a moment that was as I rose up, I rose up like a flying swan / As *strong* as a swan too, why see how far my hat has flown me away" (Smith 315, emphasis added). The girl describes herself like a swan, flying in the sky. Yet, she is not a slender and fragile swan as the society expects of her, but she feels strong enough to do whatever she wants:

And all the time the swan wing in my hat waved beautifully

Ah, I thought, How this hat becomes me.

First the sea was dark but then it was pale blue

And still the wing beat and we flew and we flew

A night and a day and a night, and by the old right way

Between the sun and the moon we flew until morning day.

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It is always early morning here on this peculiar island  
 The green grass grows into the sea on the dipping land  
 Am I glad I am here ? Yes, well, I am,  
 It's nice to be rid of Father, Mother and the young man  
 There's just one thing causes me a twinge of pain,  
 If I take my hat off, shall I find myself home again?  
 So in this early morning land I always wear my hat  
 Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that. (Smith, 1983, p. 315)

Hats are usually the accessories of women and used as a sign of femininity. However, the hat, in Smith's poem, brings the girl's liberty by taking her into distant lands where she can be free of social domination and patriarchal inflictions. Rather than asserting the submissive gender role, the hat enables the girl to break free of gender roles. So, the hat becomes the symbol of feminine resistance against the patriarchal enforcements. The girl particularly underlines the fact that she feels quite happy of being away from her "Father, Mother, and the young man" who are the most domineering figures in her life (Smith 315). The words, father and mother, written in capital letters, specifically emphasizes the commanding roles of her parents in giving a direction into her life within the restraining borders of the society. This liberation from everything gives her such an extreme pleasure that she fears of returning back into her old life again when she takes off her hat. The girl, in the end, expresses her determination to never take off her hat again. Thus, it can be argued that the hat provides the female persona of the poem with an opportunity to deny the submissive gender role that is assigned to her. Instead of preparing herself to be desired object of a male gaze, she declares her own distinct identity by remaining a free individual with the help of this magical hat.

Smith's preoccupation with the problematic gender relations continues in "The River God" which associates river with death. The poem is narrated from the view point of the river who is respected and deified by human communities but secretly brings death for women. The poem draws an image of a river god who takes a sadistic pleasure of killing women who dare to trespass the borders. The poem begins with the speech of the river god who describes his physical appearance which is old and not very much attractive with his filthy and rough manners:

I may be smelly and I may be old,

Rough in my pebbles, reedy in my pools,  
But where my fish float by I bless their swimming  
And I like the people to bathe in me, especially women.  
But I can drown the fools

Who bathe too close to weir, contrary to rules. (Smith, 1983, p. 238)

The river god's emphasis on his particular love of women gives a hint of the idea that the river god represents men's authorial power over women who have no other choice in life rather than giving in the power of men or getting drowned. In opposition to the mythic overtone of the title which associates men with a mythological river god's absolute power, the poem, from its very first lines, deconstructs the perfect image of the river god who is physically described as smelly, filthy, and rough. Furthermore, the river god's punishing those women who go against the rules is reminiscent of the patriarchal domination of women who are strictly marginalized whenever they challenge the hegemonic supremacy of the masculine authority. The women who attempt to surpass the borders of their marital life the limits of which are determined by the rules of a patriarchal society become the main target of the society. The poem points to the helplessness of women who are symbolically killed and oppressed by men once they do not accept the submissive gender roles ascribed by the patriarchal society. The poem not only depicts a disgusting image of the river god as a man of filthiness, and coarseness but also proves him to be psychopath who intentionally suffocates women in order to take a complete possession of them.

So I brought her down here  
To be my beautiful dear.  
Oh will she stay with me will she stay  
This beautiful lady, or will she go away?  
She lies in my beautiful deep river bed with many a weed  
...  
Now. They say I am a foolish old smelly river  
But they do not know of my wide original bed

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Where the lady waits, with her golden sleepy head.

Is she wishes to go, I will not forgive her. (Smith, 1983, pp. 238-239)

The river god's obsession with the beautiful lady resonates with men's devastating relationship with women who are ensnared within the institution of marriage that is described like a prison from which there is no escape except death. The river god's aggressive and neurotic character is easily understood by his recounting of what he has done to the woman after killing her. He prepares a big marital bed at the bottom of the river and lays down the woman so that she will forever remain in possession of him. Smith provides a deep insight into how women are transformed into vulnerable victims of men who are reflected as psychologically distorted sociopaths, leaving no flexible site for women to exert their liberty. What Smith undergirds, further, is that women are totally disempowered by men who make life an unbearable torture and pain for women whose lives are as equally suffocating as getting drowned in a river. Therefore, Smith draws attention to the extremity of the patriarchal violence, the primary target of which are women who are compelled to yield into the male power. Women are confined to the submissive roles of being obedient wives while men are given the authority to rule over women. Unlike the previous poems which give voice to adamant voices of women who react against male supremacy and the patriarchal society, "River God" gives voice to a mentally unstable male character who kills every woman whom he falls in love with. No female voice is heard in this poem because they are both metaphorically and literally killed so as to become silenced objects of men. In this respect, the river in the poem is the evocation of a patriarchal society in which men are given an absolutely divine power of rule over women while it is an insecure and dangerous sphere for women to survive.

In opposition to "River God" in which the female voice is suppressed by the male figure, "Lady Rogue Singleton" is a revolutionary poem in which female persona goes against the enforcements of the patriarchal society. The never ending power struggle between man and woman is the major issue that is brought into foreground in "Lady 'Rogue' Singleton". In the poem, the female persona declares her own freedom by not surrendering to the man who tries to convince her into marrying him. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker is the man who proposes marriage to Lady Singleton:

Come, wed me, Lady Singleton,

And we will have a bay soon

And we will live in Edmonton

Where all the friendly people run. (Smith, 1983, p. 194)

The persona is a man who proposes marriage to Lady Rogue and portrays a picture of a perfect marriage and a happy life with a baby. The first part of the poem reflects a male point of view into the institution of marriage which is presented as an idealized state of being that can be desired by every reasonable women. However, in the second stanza of the poem the speaker changes into a woman who expresses her own perspective of a marriage which is entirely different from a male perspective:

O could never make you happy, darling,

Or give you the baby you want,

I would always very much rather, dear

Live in a tent. (Smith, 1983, p. 194)

Delineating a complicated problem of marriage life in an extremely plain language, Smith achieves to emulate the conflicting views of men and women who look into the marriage institution from two opposing angles. It is quite a revolutionary decision for a woman who prefers to live in a complete poverty in a tent instead of living in a house with a man. In this regard, the poem exclusively gives voice to a resistant female identity, claiming that women do not need the support of men in order to survive in the world. What the poet tries to emphasize is that it is better for women to prove their own existence as a single individual. The “rogue” in the title of the poem, bears a great significance in evoking Lady Rogue Singleton’s nonconformist personality which cannot be easily assimilated into the mainstream society. The persona’s defiant character is reinforced through the name of Rogue Singleton who revolts against patriarchy and prefers to remain single as a dissenter of social rules.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although she was writing during the period of modernism, Stevie Smith is an extremely controversial and ambivalent poet who cannot be fitted into a certain movement or period. Beneath the alleged naivety and childish utterances of Smith’s female speakers lie outstandingly self-conscious and intelligent women who do not fall victim to the manipulative power of the patriarchal ideology and its meta-narratives that are constructed upon the consented enslavement of women. Instead of willingly embracing marriage as their best

possible prospect of future, female speakers of Smith's poems are brave enough to contest patriarchal ideologies of male dominated society which undemocratically bestows an ultimate power of authority upon men while diminishing women into a subservient status, suppressing their voices, disregarding their needs, and turning them into passive objects of the male desire. Subsequently, marriage as a patriarchal institution is under a close scrutiny in Smith's poems, revealing the false masculine ideology which grants identity to women only in relation to their husbands as wives or mothers while women's distinctively unique identities are erased or neglected. For this reason, all the female characters in Smith's poems refuse to adopt submissive gender roles, inflicted by the patriarchy and persistently reinforce their resistant identities which do not conform to the rules of the society. Through her poems, Smith conveys an important social message by affirming that marriage is not the only fatal destiny for women since they have the power to change their future by reasserting their independent identities in isolation from men.



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