
Gender-Semantic Functions of Poetic Metaphor in Sylvia Plath and Halima Xudoyberdiyeva: A Comparative Analysis

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Annotation *This article examines the gender-semantic functions of poetic metaphor in the works of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Halima Xudoyberdiyeva (1947-2018) through a comparative typological lens. Poetic metaphor in women's confessional and lyric poetry operates not merely as a rhetorical device but as a primary vehicle for encoding female subjectivity under conditions of social constraint. Drawing on cognitive metaphor theory as developed by Lakoff and Johnson, and feminist literary theory as articulated by Irigaray and Beauvoir, the article identifies and analyzes three convergent metaphorical systems in both poets' work: the female body as historical archive, animal imagery as a vehicle for encoded inner resistance, and natural metaphors of time and irreversible loss. The comparative analysis demonstrates that Plath and Xudoyberdiyeva independently deploy structurally homologous metaphorical strategies to address the same gender-semantic problem, despite working in culturally unrelated literary traditions and without any demonstrable mutual influence. These findings suggest that cross-cultural comparison of poetic metaphor is a productive methodological tool for understanding the structural conditions of female poetic voice.*

Keywords *Poetic metaphor, gender semantics, Sylvia Plath, Halima Xudoyberdiyeva, female subjectivity, comparative literature*

Sylvia Plath va Halima Xudoyberdiyeva she'riyatida poetik metaforaning gender-semantik funksiyalari: qiyosiy tahlil

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Annotatsiya *Mazkur maqolada Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) va Halima Xudoyberdiyeva (1947-2018) asarlarida poetik metaforaning gender-semantik funksiyalari qiyosiy-tipologik tahlil qilinadi. Ayollar konfessional va lirik she'riyatida poetik metafora nafaqat ritorik vosita, balki ijtimoiy cheklov sharoitida ayol subyektivligini kodlashning asosiy usuli sifatida namoyon bo'lib, bu holat mualliflar o'rtasida hech qanday bevosita aloqa bo'lmagan taqdirda ham o'zini ko'rsatadi. Lakoff va Johnson kognitiv metafora nazariyasi hamda Irigaray feministik adabiyotshunoslik nazariyasiga tayanib, maqolada uchta umumiy metaforik tizim tahlil qilinadi: tarix arxivi sifatida ayol tanasi metaforasi, ichki qarshilikni kodlovchi hayvon tasvirlari hamda vaqt va qaytarib bo'lmas yo'qotish haqidagi tabiiy metaforalar. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, Plath va Xudoyberdiyeva bir-biriga bog'liq bo'lmagan adabiy an'analar doirasida bir xil gender-semantik muammoni hal qilish uchun strukturaviy jihatdan o'xshash*

metaforik strategiyalardan mustaqil ravishda foydalanadi. Bu topilma qiyosiy adabiyotshunoslikning metodologik imkoniyatlarini kengaytiradi. Tadqiqot natijalari poetik metaforani madaniyatlararo qiyosiy o'rganish ayol poetik ovozi shakllanishiga ta'sir etuvchi chuqur strukturaviy omillarni anglashda samarali metodologik vosita ekanligini tasdiqlaydi.

Kalit so'zlar *Poetik metafora, gender semantikasi, Sylvia Plath, Halima Xudoyberdiyeva, ayol subyektivligi, qiyosiy adabiyotshunoslik*

**Гендерно-семантические
функции поэтической метафоры
в творчестве Сильвии Плат и
Халимы Худойбердиевой:
сравнительный анализ**

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Аннотация *В данной статье рассматриваются гендерно-семантические функции поэтической метафоры в творчестве Сильвии Плат (1932-1963) и Халимы Худойбердиевой (1947-2018) в сравнительно-типологическом аспекте. Поэтическая метафора в женской поэзии выступает не просто как риторическое средство, но и как основной инструмент кодирования женской субъективности в условиях социальных ограничений. На основе когнитивной теории метафоры (Лакофф и Джонсон) и феминистской литературной теории (Иригарэ, Бовуар) в статье анализируются три сходящихся метафорических системы: тело как архив истории, зооморфная образность как закодированное сопротивление и природные метафоры времени и невозвратимой утраты. Исследование демонстрирует, что С. Плат и Х. Худойбердиева независимо друг от друга выработали структурно аналогичные метафорические стратегии для решения одной и той же гендерно-семантической проблемы в несвязанных литературных традициях, что расширяет методологические возможности сравнительного литературоведения. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что кросс-культурное сравнительное исследование поэтической метафоры представляет собой продуктивный методологический инструмент для понимания структурных условий формирования женского поэтического голоса и особенностей художественного осмысления женской идентичности.*

Ключевые слова *Поэтическая метафора, гендерная семантика, Сильвия Плат, Халима Худойбердиева, женская субъективность, сравнительное литературоведение*

Introduction

Metaphor is not merely an ornamental feature of poetic language; it is a primary cognitive and semantic instrument through which poets construct, contest, and redefine experiential categories. In women's poetry, metaphor assumes an additional dimension: it becomes a vehicle for encoding female subjectivity in forms that negotiate, resist, or transcend the constraints imposed by the poet's social and cultural context. This article examines how metaphor operates as a gender-semantic device in the poetry of two women poets who worked in radically different cultural traditions: Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), the American confessional poet, and Halima Xudoyberdiyeva (1947-2018), the Uzbek national poet.

The comparative approach adopted here is typological rather than genetic: the two poets had no demonstrable contact and cannot have influenced each other. What makes the comparison productive is precisely the absence of such influence. When two poets working in unrelated traditions deploy structurally similar metaphorical strategies to address structurally similar problems, this convergence points toward something more general about how female poetic voice works under conditions of social constraint.

The significance of this comparison lies partly in what it challenges: the widespread assumption that Western confessional poetry represents a universal norm of female poetic self-expression against which non-Western women's poetry is measured and found deficient. Xudoyberdiyeva's poetry has received almost no sustained attention in international comparative literary scholarship, in part because its formal strategies do not conform to the confessional mode that scholarship has trained itself to recognize as markers of genuine female subjectivity. The present study argues that this absence reflects a methodological limitation rather than a

literary one, and that the tools of cognitive metaphor theory provide a culturally flexible framework for identifying the structural homologies that make cross-cultural comparison of women's poetry productive.

Theoretical framework

The analysis draws on two theoretical frameworks integrated for the purposes of cross-cultural comparative analysis. The first is cognitive metaphor theory as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a fundamental structure of human thought: conceptual metaphors organize how we understand abstract domains in terms of more concrete experiential ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Applied to literary analysis, this framework treats poetic metaphors not as isolated rhetorical figures but as instantiations of deeper conceptual structures that reveal how a speaker understands and organizes experience. The value of cognitive metaphor theory for cross-cultural comparison lies in its claim that metaphorical mappings are grounded in embodied experience: since human bodies and basic physical experiences are shared across cultures, certain metaphorical structures recur independently in different linguistic and literary traditions.

The second framework is feminist literary theory, particularly Luce Irigaray's analysis of how women writers deploy and subvert the metaphorical systems available within patriarchal discourse (Irigaray, 1985). Irigaray argues that the dominant metaphorical systems of Western culture are organized around masculine experience and tend to encode femininity as passivity, absence, or negation. Women poets who work within these systems face a double bind: they must use metaphors that are, at the structural level, not designed for their experience. The strategies they develop in response constitute what this article calls gender-semantic functions of

poetic metaphor. However, Irigaray's framework was developed within a specifically Western philosophical and literary context. When applied to Islamic-Turkic women's poetry, it requires modification: the symbolic resources available to poets within that tradition differ from those available within the Western phallogocentric discourse that Irigaray analyzes, and the strategies of resistance or encoding that those resources enable differ accordingly. This article therefore treats Irigaray's framework as a productive starting point rather than a universal template, supplementing it with attention to the specific symbolic economy of the Islamic-Turkic literary tradition.

Body as Historical archive

Plath's metaphorical system is organized, to a significant degree, around the female body as a primary conceptual domain. The body in her poetry is not merely a physical entity but a semantic surface upon which history, violence, and identity are inscribed and read. In "Lady Lazarus," the speaker's repeated dying and resurrection is rendered through the metaphor of theatrical performance, with the body carrying the traces of historical atrocity (Plath, 1965). The metaphorical mapping of personal suffering onto historical violence serves a gender-semantic function: it insists that the female speaker's private experience has public, historical weight.

In "Muqaddas ayol" ("The Sacred Woman"), Xudoyberdiyeva performs a structurally parallel operation. The poem's central metaphorical system renders the woman's body as a site of historical inscription: "Harir, xushbo'y badaningda toshlar izi bor" ("On your silken, fragrant body there are traces of stones," author's translation) (Xudoyberdiyeva, 1987). The conceptual structure FEMALE BODY IS HISTORICAL ARCHIVE operates identically in both traditions, even though the specific cultural content differs significantly.

The cultural significance of these body-metaphors becomes clearer when we attend to

what the conceptual mapping FEMALE BODY IS HISTORICAL ARCHIVE achieves in each tradition. In Plath's poem, the mapping insists on the public, political weight of female suffering: to read the body as archive is to demand that the personal be recognized as historical. In Xudoyberdiyeva's poem, the mapping achieves something related but differently oriented: it insists on the continuity between individual female experience and the accumulated history of what women have endured, positioning the speaker's dignity not as a personal achievement but as the inheritance of all those who bore similar marks before her. The same conceptual structure serves, in each case, a gender-semantic function specific to its cultural context.

Animal imagery: Encoding resistance

A second major metaphorical system centers on animal imagery, deployed to represent aspects of female experience that resist social containment. In Plath's "Ariel," the speaker merges with a horse in a dawn gallop that culminates in the declaration "I / Am the arrow" (Plath, 1965; 27): animal energy becomes the vehicle for the self's dissolution into pure forward motion, enacting simultaneously liberation and self-annihilation. The conceptual metaphor SELF IS ANIMAL gives the speaker access to a register of intensity and freedom that social identity forecloses. The animal metaphors in Plath tend toward violence, liberation, and explicit confrontation, serving the gender-semantic function of making female rage, energy, and desire for self-transcendence not merely expressible but spectacular.

Xudoyberdiyeva's central animal metaphor operates differently but serves a related function. The tiger in "Ayol o'tib borar" ("The Woman Walks By") is explicitly hidden: "Ich-ichida yo'lbars o'kirib, / Sirdan mayin jilmaygan ayol" ("A tiger roaring deep within, / A woman who smiles mildly on the surface," author's translation) (Xudoyberdiyeva, 2000). Where Plath's animal metaphors bring inner intensity to the surface, Xudoyberdiyeva's

preserve it within. This reflects a deeper cultural difference: Plath's tradition prizes visible disclosure, while Xudoyberdiyeva's Islamic-Turkic tradition values the virtue of hilm dignified composure that maintains inner strength without external display.

Natural metaphors of Time and Loss

A third convergence concerns the use of natural imagery to encode female experience of time and loss. In Plath's "Tulips," the hospital patient's drift toward dissolution is rendered through aquatic metaphor, in which the social self gradually recedes (Plath, 1965). The conceptual metaphor maps selfhood onto surface and depth, serving the gender-semantic function of making the desire for relief from social identity expressible.

Xudoyberdiyeva's "Oldimdan oqqan suv" ("Water Flowing in Front of Me") deploys water metaphor in a structurally related but emotionally opposite direction. Here water figures the irreversible passage of time and the loss of what was not sufficiently attended to: the speaker recognizes, too late, that her mother's presence was like water flowing past, essential and unnoticed, recognized only in its absence. The poem's emotional climax arrives in the anguished address "Onam, onam-a?!" ("Mother, oh my mother?!") (Xudoyberdiyeva, 2000). The conceptual metaphor TIME IS WATER encodes a characteristically female form of grief within the Islamic-Turkic tradition's ethical framework of filial piety: the hadith "paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers" gives maternal loss a weight that extends beyond personal grief into the domain of spiritual failure, and the water metaphor carries that weight without naming it. The gender-semantic function is to make audible a form of moral-emotional experience that the tradition identifies as specifically significant for women as daughters.

Discussion

The three metaphorical systems analyzed above share a common structural feature: they all function to make visible or expressible aspects of female experience that the dominant

social and cultural order tends to suppress, deny, or render illegible. In Plath's case, this suppression is challenged through transparency and exposure the confessional mode makes the private public, staging inner life as spectacle. In Xudoyberdiyeva's case, the challenge works differently: rather than exposing what is hidden, her metaphors encode it, making it audible to the careful reader while preserving the dignity that the Islamic-Turkic tradition locates in composure.

This difference in metaphorical strategy reflects a deeper difference in how the two traditions conceptualize the relationship between authenticity and display. For Plath's tradition, shaped by psychotherapeutic discourse and confessional aesthetics, authentic inner life must be externalized to be real. For Xudoyberdiyeva's tradition, shaped by Islamic ethical discourse and the virtue of hilm, authenticity consists precisely in the capacity to maintain inner intensity without submitting it to external validation. Both are culturally specific responses to the same structural problem: how does a female speaker assert the reality and significance of her inner life against a social order that tends to diminish or deny it?

A further dimension of this comparison concerns what each tradition's metaphorical systems make possible that the other's cannot. Plath's body-as-archive metaphors allow a form of explicit historical-political claim-making on behalf of female suffering that Xudoyberdiyeva's tradition does not readily accommodate: the mapping of personal pain onto the Holocaust is a gesture of assertion, demanding recognition of the female speaker's experience as public and historically weighted. Xudoyberdiyeva's tiger metaphor allows something that Plath's confessional transparency cannot: the construction of an interior life that maintains its dignity precisely because it is not submitted to public scrutiny, an inner reality that is more fully itself for remaining audible only to the careful reader. These are not equivalent achievements, but

they are achievements of comparable sophistication, and recognizing this is the first step toward a genuinely reciprocal cross-cultural feminist literary criticism.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of poetic metaphor in Plath and Xudoyberdiyeva reveals two independent instances of a shared structural phenomenon. Both poets deploy metaphorical systems organized around the female body, animal imagery, and natural processes to encode female subjectivity in ways that resist the constraints their respective social and cultural contexts impose. The specific metaphors differ significantly: body as Holocaust archive versus body as site of stone-traces; visible tiger versus hidden tiger; dissolution into water versus irreversible water of lost time but the underlying conceptual structures and gender-semantic functions are homologous.

This finding has implications for how we understand the relationship between poetic form and gender semantics across cultures. Metaphor is not a culturally neutral device that poets fill with culturally specific content; it is itself a culturally shaped instrument whose deployment reflects and negotiates the specific constraints that culture places on female expression. The cross-cultural comparison of metaphorical systems in women's poetry is therefore a productive methodological tool for identifying the structural conditions under which female poetic voice is constructed conditions that transcend cultural boundaries even when their specific manifestations do not. Xudoyberdiyeva's near-total absence from international comparative literary scholarship is not a reflection of her poetry's richness or significance; it is a consequence of the methodological frameworks that scholarship has brought to the study of women's poetry. By demonstrating that her metaphorical strategies are structurally homologous to those of one of the most studied women poets in the Western canon, this analysis opens a path for her work

to enter the international scholarly conversation on its own terms, rather than as an object of ethnographic curiosity or a deficient approximation of Western confessionalism.

Methodological implications

The findings of this study have broader implications for the methodology of cross-cultural comparative literary analysis. Standard approaches to the study of women's poetry have tended to treat the Western confessional tradition as a methodological default, measuring non-Western women's poetry against its norms and finding them deficient when those norms are not met. The analysis presented here suggests an alternative approach: rather than treating any single tradition's metaphorical strategies as a universal norm, we should ask what gender-semantic problem a given poet's metaphors are solving, and evaluate the adequacy of those metaphors within their own cultural and literary context.

Applied to the case of Xudoyberdiyeva, this approach reveals a poet who has developed sophisticated metaphorical solutions to the problem of encoding female subjectivity within the specific constraints of her tradition. The tiger that does not roar in public is not a failure to achieve Plathian transparency; it is a success in achieving Xudoyberdiyevian composure. The water that flows unnoticed until it is gone is not a failure to articulate maternal grief directly; it is a success in articulating that grief through the specific symbolic resources that the Islamic-Turkic tradition makes available. Understanding this requires not just knowledge of the poems but knowledge of the tradition within which they operate and this is why cross-cultural comparison, conducted with appropriate methodological care, is more productive than either purely internal analysis or comparison that takes one tradition's norms as universal.

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