

The Depiction of Women in English and Kurdish Poetry: Gender and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT: This study looks at how women are symbolically represented in modern British, American, and Kurdish poetry. It focuses on how images of the body, nature, and home are used to create and challenge gender identities. Using feminist literary criticism and semiotic analysis, the study looks at how male and female poets use symbolic language to reflect, reinforce, or oppose patriarchal ideas. The chosen poets – W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Robert Browning, Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy, and Audre Lorde from English-language literature, and Abdulla Pashew, Sherko Bekas, Choman Hardi, and Kajal Ahmad from Kurdish literature each have a different but related view of what it means to be a woman. The major point of this study is that symbolic images of the female body, home life, and nature are important spaces where stories about women are either kept alive or changed. British and American poets commonly use psychological, mythological, and physiological imagery to question established gender roles. Kurdish poets, on the other hand, often connect feminine symbols to land, maternity, and survival because of their experiences with nationalism, conflict, and resistance. This comparison shows that both poetry traditions employ symbols to question and navigate entrenched gender roles, even though they use different languages and contexts. This study adds to the larger conversations about gender and representation by showing how modern poetry can be a site for both cultural continuity and feminist resistance by finding patterns in recurring symbols and their implied meanings in different cultures.

Keywords: Gender, symbolism, modern poetry, English poetry, Kurdish poetry, feminist literary criticism.

1. Introduction

In semiotic analysis, symbols function as signifiers that convey layered cultural and gendered meanings. Poetry has always been a strong way to express complicated feelings, social realities, and cultural beliefs (Lawes, 2019). The portrayal of women has always been a major focus of both poetry and criticism, along with many other issues. Poets from different languages and cultures have used symbols to shape, criticize, or support gender roles. In British, American, and Kurdish poetry, women are often shown through symbols that have deeper cultural implications related to femininity, authority, and resistance (Ghaderi, 2021). This study does not just look at poetry written by women; it also looks at poetry written by men. This is because different gendered views and power structures impact how women are represented in poetry. Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy, and Audre Lorde are some of the most important poets of modern English-language poetry. They question patriarchal ideas and place women's experiences at the front and in the center. At the same time, male poets like W. B. Yeats and Robert Browning have shaped how femininity is seen, frequently reflecting the problems in society at the moment. Kurdish poets like Sherko Bekas, Abdulla Pashew, Kajal Ahmad, and Choman Hardi write about women in unique ways that reflect the social and political issues they face, such as statelessness, nationalism, and gender discrimination. This

involves viewing the female form as a place of both personal pain and group resistance (Yousef et al.,2024; Gholami,2021).

This study looks at how some modern poets from the English and Kurdish poetry traditions use symbolic images of the body, nature, and home to talk about and understand the lives of women. These three symbols are the main things that this research will look at when it analyzes the chosen poetry. The article uses feminist literary criticism and semiotic interpretation to find patterns in how gender is constituted throughout cultures and looks at how poetry may both support and fight against patriarchal standards. We chose these poets to compare based on three main criteria: (1) how they dealt with themes of gender and power, (2) how they used symbolic language, and (3) how important they were in the context of modern poetry from the 20th and 21st centuries. The poets chosen indeed originate from different cultures and times in history, yet they are nevertheless similar in how they use symbols to showcase femininity. Their poems show both themes that are coming together, including nationalism, identity, motherhood, and resistance, and themes that are going in different directions because of the social climate. For example, Plath's use of the moon to show how far away a mother is in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" can be read next to Bekas's images of land and rivers to show how Kurdish women are oppressed but strong. Symbolism has long been an important part of poetry because it lets poets express complex ideas and avoid being limited to literal meaning. It gives them a way to talk about complicated experiences, especially those that have to do with gender, using myth, metaphor, and images from nature. Symbolic language typically supports traditional gender roles, but it can also break them down by giving people other stories to tell that go against the grain (Ghaderi, 2016). Duffy's "The World's Wife," for instance, uses the female voice to reclaim mythological and historical stories, which directly goes against traditional male writing. In the same way, Kajal Ahmad's poetry shows the militant female body as a way to fight back against patriarchal Kurdish society.

In order to understand how poetry criticizes and redefines femininity, we need to look at how women are symbolically shown through the body as a space of trauma and change, the landscape as a metaphor for rootedness and resistance, and the home as a place of both confinement and freedom. In both English and Kurdish cultures, this kind of symbolism is not just literary; it's also political, showing that there is ongoing discussion on gender, identity, and the survival of culture (Ahmad, 2007; Bekas, 2018).

2. The Role of Cultural Context within Portrayals of Gender

Gynocriticism is the study of women's writing, with an emphasis on female authorship, common themes, and different literary traditions. It is a type of feminist literary criticism that looks at how poetry portrays women by asking how texts either support or challenge patriarchal ideas. This critical approach looks at how literary structures, motifs, and language can build or break down gender hierarchies. It is based on larger feminist movements. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and other foundational theorists posit that women have always been seen as "the Other" because of how men see the world. Elaine Showalter's idea of "gynocriticism" (1979) stresses how important it is to look at women's writing on its terms, paying attention to their bodies, experiences, and language. These frameworks are especially helpful in poetry, since symbolic images are a big part of how people build their gender identities. Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" (1975) is an important idea. It was first created in film theory, but it has also been useful in literature studies since it shows how women are often seen as objects from a male point of view. In traditional English poetry, women have been glorified, sexualized, or suppressed, and they have been used as muses instead of subjects. Poets like Carol Ann Duffy go against this tradition by giving women a voice and looking at myth and history from a feminist point of view. In the same way, Sylvia Plath's writing shows how the female body is a place of both pain and rebellion. For example, in *Lady Lazarus*, bodily anguish becomes a metaphor for taking back control (Plath, 1965; Showalter, 1979).

Gender performativity is the concept that gender is constructed through repeated social performances rather than being innate. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) makes things even more complicated by arguing that gender is not something you are born with, but something you learn via repeated social and linguistic activities. This approach can be used to look at the poetic personas in English and Kurdish poems, where femininity is acted out, fought against, or reimagined through symbols. For instance, Duffy's *Medusa* fights against her monster stereotype by showing emotional depth and betrayal. Kajal Ahmad's lyrical speaker, on the other hand, changes traditional Kurdish female roles by expressing desire, rage, and agency—things that change the "script" of Kurdish femininity. Gendered nationalism makes it even harder to represent women in Kurdish poetry. As researchers like Nira Yuval-Davis (1997)

and Zehra Arat (2015) have pointed out, women are typically seen in nationalist rhetoric as biological reproducers of the nation or as symbolic bearers of cultural identity. Male poets like Sherko Bekas often use women as symbols of the homeland—people who are sad and strong. These images can be inspiring, but they also run the risk of making women into static icons. Feminist criticism questions these kinds of uses of female iconography by asking, "Whose voice is being heard, and whose is being spoken for?" This is especially important when looking at Ahmad and Choman Hardi, who fight against symbolic reduction by focusing on real women's experiences of conflict, displacement, and bodily autonomy (Ahmad, 2007; Bekas, 2018).

Feminist literary criticism, then, gives us a way to look at texts in a new way by showing us the power dynamics that are hidden in symbolic representations. Feminist theory is still quite useful for looking at how modern English and Kurdish poetry reflect and often challenge the gender norms in their own communities. This is seen from the criticism of objectification, the return of women's voices, and the breaking down of old gender norms. Feminist critique shows how voice, form, and symbolism may either support or challenge established power structures when used in poetry (Butler, 1990). In this work, I use feminist literary criticism and semiotic analysis to look at poetry by both men and women. The study will look at how images of the female body, landscape, and home are utilized to build, support, or fight against gender ideas in each culture (Butler, 1990).

3. Symbolic Depictions of the Female Body in Modern English Poetry

Modern English-language poetry uses symbols to show the female body as a site of power, trauma, and resistance. Contemporary poets break against traditional gender stereotypes by using somatic and mystical imagery in their critiques instead of portraying women as passive muses or housewives. This section explores how modern poetry uses the female body not just as a place of symbolic meaning, but also as a way for women to take back their power, fight against male control, and rewrite the stories that are told about them. The symbolism of corporeal oppression and rebirth is a big part of this change, as shown in Plath's *Lady Lazarus*. The poem uses the story of Lazarus from the Bible to show how the speaker's cycle of death and resurrection is a metaphor for getting back power after being hurt by a man. The speaker's recurring resurrections, which turn anguish into resistance, are alluded to in lines like "I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it." The picture "my right foot / A paperweight" makes me think of how society objectifies and limits women, making them into immobile figures. But by the last lines—"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air"—the speaker becomes a phoenix-like figure, which means not only survival but also the reclaiming of violent power, which goes against her role as a victim (Plath, 1965).

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* also shows this same tension between objectification and resistance. The Duke's controlling speech, "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together," shows how men use their power to silence women's freedom. The Duchess is now just a painting on the wall, with no voice, personality, or power. Through dramatic irony, Browning criticizes Victorian masculinity's tendency to be possessive and violent. In the same way, the speaker in *Porphyria's Lover* kills Porphyria to freeze a moment of obedient love, which again shows how ridiculous patriarchal power is. The masculine gaze makes the female body a symbol of desire, purity, or ownership in this poetry (Browning, 1842).

On the other hand, Carol Ann Duffy takes back feminine legendary figures to show and turn these power dynamics on their heads. Her poem "Medusa," from *The World's Wife*, presents the story of the myth from the point of view of the "monster" herself, not the masculine hero. The change in her body, like "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy / grew in my mind, / which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes," shows how she was hurt emotionally—jealousy, betrayal, and loneliness. But this change also gives you power. "Wasn't I beautiful?" she asks. The poem asks how society assesses women's looks, anger, and getting older when it says, "Look at me now." Duffy's *Little Red Cap* continues this subversion by turning the innocent girl into a self-empowered seeker of artistic freedom. The story ends with a symbolic act: "I went in search of a living bird a white dove which flew straight from my hands to his gaping mouth," which shows her poetic and sexual power (Duffy, 1999).

Audre Lorde adds an intersectional view to symbolic representations of women by including race, sexuality, and colonialism. Lorde writes in *A Woman Speaks*, "I am a woman and not white," which shows how oppression works on many levels. Her phrase "My magic is unwritten, but when the sea turns back, it will leave my shape behind" compares history to a tide, with the woman speaking out against being erased. The sea here stands for both trauma and new life. Lorde's voice, especially in *Coal*, makes Black

womanhood visible: "Take my word for a jewel in the open light." The symbolic tension between darkness and visibility shows a reclaiming of identity on terms that aren't set by white or masculine standards (Lorde, 1997; Foundation, 2020). These poets indicate that the way the female body is represented in modern English poetry is no longer just for show or to look pretty. The feminine figure becomes a powerful, dynamic force for change, voice, and power, whether she is shown as ash, marble, snakes, or coal. This change in symbolism goes against older patriarchal ideas and shows how the feminist and intersectional movements are changing the literary world (Foundation, 2020).

4. From National Symbols to Personal Voices – Evolving Female Agency in Modern Kurdish Poetry

The depiction of women changed significantly in modern Kurdish poetry. Kurdish women used to be static symbols of national identity, but now they are expressive voices of personal and political power. This section delves into how modern Kurdish poetry uses symbolic images to do more than only show the shared history of the Kurdish people. It also questions patriarchal power structures and places women at the center of change. In the past, men commonly used women as symbols of home and sorrow in their poems. But in more contemporary works by women, these images are used to talk about living experiences, pain, and resistance. This change is part of a larger literary and intellectual endeavor to see women not merely as characters in national discourse, but as self-determined voices with their power. The link between women and the soil is one of the most common symbols in Kurdish poetry. Sherko Bekas and Abdulla Pashew employ natural scenery like mountains, rivers, and birds to show how strong and painful an oppressed nation is. Sherko Bekas is one of the most prominent modern Kurdish poets. He often uses broken and bizarre images to show how Kurdish women feel and how they have been treated throughout history. The following poem shows this clearly by using symbolic language to show how personal memory and social struggle are connected (Bekas, 2018; Pashew, 2025):

"Her şahiyek ez li xwe dikim
Destên wê jî ne
Pir kurt an pir dirêj,
Pir berbelav an pir teng
li ser min" (Bekas, 2018)

I carve each branch for myself,
Her hands, too –
Too short or too long,
Too scattered or too tight –
Rest upon me.

The woman in this poem is more than just a person; she is a powerful force that is deeply ingrained in the poet's mind and memory. The poet's burden includes her "hands," which might be seen as caring or holding back. This kind of symbolism shows how women in traditional Kurdish poetry often carry the emotional and historical weight of a whole people, yet have no voice in it.

Abdulla Pashew also uses the bird as a symbol of both freedom and oppression. He writes in his poetry "If You Wish" (Pashew, 2025):

"Çûkê azad bike / Ev hêlîn li ser zimanê min e!"
Free the bird – this nest rests on my tongue! (Pashew, 2025)

The picture of the bird here is both poetic and political. It is both the poet's voice and the voice of Kurdish women who have been silenced by cultural norms and political persecution for a long time. The bird is lovely and can fly, yet it still needs the speaker's help. In this way, Pashew's symbols, even when they are sympathetic, nonetheless put power outside of the feminine form. Kurdish women poets today, like Kajal Ahmad and Choman Hardi, on the other hand, don't use externalized symbols and instead write from the perspective of women. Their poems question the way women are seen as objects and abstracted by putting physiological, emotional, and intellectual independence at the center of the poems. They go from showing women in a symbolic way to women writing poetry (Ahmad, 2007; Hardi, 2007).

Kajal Ahmad's writing directly challenges cultural and poetic standards that are dominated by men. Her speaker is both hurt and rebellious (Ahmad, 2007):

"Ez ew jinm ku agir di destê xwe de girt,
Tarîyê di nêvê min de tê agie dan,
Bi peyvên xwe derz dikim weke Mezopotamya,
Di bêdengiyê de radest dike zaravê baranê" (Ahmad, 2007)

*I am the woman who holds fire in her hands,
Darkness weaves through my womb,
With words I stitch together Mesopotamia,
And surrender to the whisper of rain in silence.*

This poem takes back the old "land-as-woman" metaphor by showing it from a very female point of view. The speaker isn't just a passive representation of the land; they are an active force that molds, defines, and gives it meaning. Her womb stands for more than just being able to have children; it also stands for struggle, darkness, and creative force. Ahmad uses common gendered images like fire, rain, and stillness to show how complicated life is for Kurdish women. These women are shown to be strong since they show both anger and calmness. The speaker's voice has a political urgency and a lyrical intensity.

Choman Hardi's poems go even further in their resistance by dealing directly with violence, grief, and being forced to move. Hardi's poetry questions the idea that pain is beautiful by drawing on her own experiences as a refugee and a witness to political crimes. In the poem (Hardi, 2007):

"Ew hîsariya xwe di bêdeng de tîne,
Li ser rûyê xwe diqewimeke çêkî,
Gûrên wê wekî rivêrên tîkildar bûn,
Lê dengê wê, her çi qelew bû, diçe herî dawî" (Hardi, 2007)
*She carries her sadness in silence,
A bullet wound drawn across her face,*

Her graves became entangled rivers,

But her voice, no matter how heavy, disappears at the end.

Hardi does not use a metaphor to hide violence. The bullet wound is real, and the burial is not merely a metaphor for sorrow; it is a monument of lived death and departure. The "disappearing voice" criticizes how Kurdish women are silenced in both cultural and artistic traditions. But, strangely, the poetry itself becomes the act of voice, breaking stillness through its shape. Modern Kurdish feminist poetry is all about moving from metaphor to embodiment, from a passive figure to an active narrator. The meanings of symbols like the bird, the river, and the mountain change, but they stay the same. They are no longer just emblems of idealized femininity or pain; they are now tools for agency, witness, and self-definition. This change in literature is a sign of a bigger social and political awakening. As Kurdish women take up place in public life, academics, and activism, their voices in poetry get stronger. This is a challenge to both patriarchal standards and nationalist ideologies that have used female representation to build a sense of community. Ahmad's and Hardi's poetry is a strong place for both cultural resistance and gendered critique when you look at it through the perspective of feminist literary theory, especially Cixous's (1975) idea of "writing the body" and Butler's (1990) idea of "gender performativity." Their art not only goes against traditional ideas of women, but it also takes back poetry as a way for feminists to express themselves and change things.

Ultimately, the change in how women are portrayed in Kurdish poetry is more than just a change in imagery; it is a change in power. Poets like Ahmad and Hardi do not only depict women in symbolic roles; they rewrite them, giving us not only criticism but also new versions of them. For them, poetry is not just a way to express their culture; it is also a weapon for feminist survival and opposition.

5. The Influence of Cultural, Political, and Historical Factors on the Depiction of Gender in Poetry

In semiotic analysis, symbols function as signifiers that convey layered cultural and gendered meanings. The way women are shown in poetry is always connected to the existing political, historical, and cultural conditions, serving as a context for women's depiction. Symbolism, which can be seen in the body, the landscape, or a tale, is always changing. It is a semiotic system that is shaped by societal norms that give images certain meanings. This section tackles how the same symbolic motifs, such as the female form, the natural world, and mythological archetypes, represent quite different inclinations in English and Kurdish poetry due to the political histories and gender ideas of each tradition. This analysis uses several poems to show how the symbolic representation of gender is affected by the context in which they are read (Lawes, 2019).

Feminist movements, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism have all changed how English poetry depicts the female body. The body is a semiotic battleground that shows both symbolic oppression and resilience. Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath shows the feminine body being cut up, dehumanized, and brought back to life over and over again. The line "My right foot / A paperweight" uses a familiar object to show how society controls people by making them heavy, still, and quiet. In semiotic terms, the body means giving up, but the speaker eventually takes it back in a violent, phoenix-like way: "I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." This change in connotation is essentially political; it reflects the historical background of second-wave feminism, when women fought back against being objectified by men by taking back their bodies. Similarly, Carol Ann Duffy's use of myth resonates with how feminists have reinterpreted historical archetypes. In Medusa, the speaker's transformation into a monster, "turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes," is a metaphor for rage and betrayal. Medusa's semiotic role changes; she goes from being a villain to a complex character shaped by emotional pain. Duffy's work shows how the UK has tried to take back women's stories since the development of literary and political feminism. These representations are the outcome of a major change in the history of writing, when women started to write about their own symbolic identities instead of males (Plath, 1965; Duffy, 1999).

Kurdish poetry's symbolic framework is not shaped by liberal feminism, but rather by a long history of statelessness, nationalism, and war. In the past, this has meant that women could only play symbolic roles, as land, mother, martyr, or national voice. In Sherko Bekas's poetry, women are often described as landscapes or burdens. For example, in "Her hands... rest upon me," the female shape represents a broken presence that stands for both closeness and cultural anguish. These symbols are more about society as a whole than about individuals. They represent a culture that nationalizes the female form, making her body a place where memories are stored (Bekas, 2018).

In semiotic analysis, symbols function as signifiers that convey layered cultural and gendered meanings. When you look at it in context, Abdulla Pashew's use of the bird as a symbol takes on a new meaning. The bird in "Free the bird this nest rests on my tongue" is both a beautiful metaphor for communication and a sign of being denied freedom. Kurdish women, like the poet's writings, are beautiful but trapped, wanted but silent. When looked at from a semiotic point of view, this symbolism becomes deeper: in Western literature, the bird often stands for freedom, but in Kurdish poetry, it becomes a metaphor of beauty that is trapped, always longing but never truly free. This shows both discrimination against women and the suppression of Kurdish identity (Pashew, 2025; Lawes, 2019).

Modern female poets like Kajal Ahmad and Choman Hardi disrupt this symbolic order by changing the way we think about the female body as both important and a maker of importance. Ahmad's lyrics, "I am the woman who holds fire in her hands," go against the idea that fire is a masculine and destructive metaphor. In this case, fire stands for a woman's creative rage and political need. Her speaker weaves in Mesopotamia, claiming to be the symbolic author of the area rather than just representing it (Ahmad, 2007; Hardi, 2007).

Choman Hardi's use of the term "A bullet wound drawn across her face" to show cruelty takes away any lyrical distance. The wound is real, not just a metaphor, and its presence in the poem challenges any reader or culture that tries to reduce women to national or motherly roles. This bright picture aligns with what feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler state about semiotic disruption, where the sign (in this case, the woman's body) becomes a place of instability that avoids permanent meaning (Butler, 1990; Hardi, 2007).

In semiotic analysis, symbols function as signifiers that convey layered cultural and gendered meanings. These changes are closely connected to the historical settings of each tradition. As women in the West have made progress in the law, politics, and society, so has English poetry. Kurdish poetry has grown in a place

where politics makes it hard for people to survive as a nation and as a gender. Women have often been used as symbols to support nationalist stories, but modern poetry challenges this idea by showing how limiting these kinds of roles can be. Semiotic studies tells us how poetry uses symbols that are repeated to give its work more meaning. Because meanings change over time, in different cultures, and because of politics, symbols like the body, landscape, and myth have diverse meanings in different literary traditions. To further appreciate how symbolic language reflects or breaks gender norms, it is helpful to look at how different poets use these themes in their own cultural settings. In Plath's writing, the feminine body is a site where mental resistance happens. Ahmad's feminine figure is both holy and unsteady, which is a contradiction. Duffy's poetry gives the landscape metaphorical meaning, while Hardi's poetry fills it with blood and memories. These different uses show how symbolic forms can either support or challenge traditional ideas about gender (Lawes, 2019).

In the end, poetry is a space where societal standards are both reflected and questioned. There has been a shift in both English and Kurdish poetry from using symbols to hold things in place to using symbols to undermine them. This is part of a larger change in how gender is represented. In both English and Kurdish literature, women are not seen as inert objects or static symbols. Instead, they are seen as active subjects who share their own experiences and help make meaning.

6. Conclusion

This study used feminist literary criticism and semiotic analysis to compare how women are symbolically represented in modern English and Kurdish poetry. The main question of this study was how poets from these two very different literary traditions use symbolism, especially through images of the body, nature, home life, and mythology, to write about women in ways that either reflect, challenge, or change cultural gender norms. This study has revealed that, even though male and female poets use comparable symbolic language, the cultural meanings and gendered connotations of these symbols are very different since they are used in different historical, political, and social situations.

Feminist ideas and changes in society and culture have had an effect on how women are shown in modern English poetry. W. B. Yeats and Robert Browning were some of the key male poets who wrote about women. They did it through romantic idealism or patriarchal critique, often showing inner struggle, societal tension, or artistic inspiration. Sylvia Plath and Carol Ann Duffy were two female poets who changed the literary world by making the feminine body and voice strong, independent, and rebellious. These poets change well-known symbols like Medusa, Lazarus, and the moon into powerful emblems of women's power, trauma, and renewal. This challenges long-held ideas about gender and literary conventions.

Kurdish poetry, which is closely connected to political struggle and cultural resistance, often uses women as symbols of national identity and strength. Male poets like Sherko Bekas and Abdulla Pashew use images of nature, calm, and pain to show how the Kurdish people are suffering together. They often use female characters to represent the country. This nationalistic framing could muffle women's real-life experiences by turning them into symbols of collective memory. Kajal Ahmad and Choman Hardi are modern female poets who take a different approach to this story. They write from a female perspective that focuses on women's experiences, pain, and strength. Their poetry attacks patriarchal restrictions and shows how gender, displacement, and conflict all work together to oppress people. This shows how important it is for individuals to have a say in collective stories.

This study concludes that symbolic representation in English and Kurdish poetry is not just an artistic feature but also a politically important tool to support or challenge common values. From the points of view of feminist theory and semiotics, poetry is a lively site where identities may be built, challenged, and rethought. English poetry often follows the development of feminist discourse and gender theory. Kurdish poetry, on the other hand, shows how nationalism, cultural preservation, and the female voice are all connected. Together, they show how literature can question traditional norms and create new gender narratives that go beyond restricting cultural and political boundaries.

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