

## Images of Queen Bee/Ant/Termite and Female “Selfhood”: Sylvia Plath, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison

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Queen bee and ant images are often used by contemporary women writers to depict women in various social situations and to define female “self” and “selfhood.” Among such writers are Sylvia Plath, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Plath has written five bee poems called the bee sequence about keeping bees and the queen bee. Alice Walker uses the termite queen image to describe the trauma of the protagonist in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Lastly, in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, ants are used as one of the many natural motifs that add color to the theme of the novel.

Although bees, ants, and termites are different insects, they share very similar biological characteristics. Bees and ants, together with wasps, are all closely related. Although termites are sometimes called “white ants” that evoke a resemblance to the ant family, they are now scientifically distinguished from ants. However, termites have a very similar social structure as bees and ants. What bees, ants, and termites all have in common is that they are highly social insects that live in organized colonies. Members of these colonies are divided mainly into three castes: the queen, a fertile female that has mated with a fertile male, and lays eggs; the drones, fertile males that mate with the queen; and the workers or soldiers, sterile (sometimes sub-fertile) females that do all the work besides reproduction in the colony.

What captures the imagination of writers is the unique ecological and biological mechanisms of these insects, in particular, of the queen. The queen is given great authority because the colony will perish without her, yet at the same time, she has very little control of her life and the colony. This equivocal characteristic of the queen is an effective image that can describe the complex identity of women in a patriarchal society. This paper will probe how the queen image is depicted in Sylvia Plath’s bee poems, Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. Moreover, by reading through and comparing each text, it attempts to expand the understanding of the respective text.

### I: The Bee Sequence by Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) was an American poet, novelist, and a short story writer.

Shortly before committing suicide, she completed a sequence of five poems about keeping bees, now referred to as the bee sequence, in less than a week in October 1962. Throughout her life, Plath had been obsessed with bees. Her obsession most likely started very early in her life due to her father being a professor of zoology and a very distinguished bee specialist. Plath herself kept bees when she moved to Devon, England, in 1961. As many critics have noted, these bee poems were written during the most pivotal moment in Plath's life. Various important changes took place in Plath's life in 1962. Earlier in January 1962, she had given birth to her second child. Her relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes, however, had not been going well, and after deciding to live separately for awhile with Ted, she moved back to London with her two children in September. It was also her most successful year as a writer when she completed her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, as well as many of her poems of high quality. In February 1963, however, she committed suicide by putting her head in a gas-filled oven.

The bee poems, which received much critical accolade, are included in Plath's second poetry collection called *Ariel* along with her other latter poems. The five poems are "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering."<sup>1</sup> Unlike her earlier poems that were written in a static, conventional style, her latter poems were on-going, open-ended, and unfinalized, allowing various interpretations. Critical praise toward her bee poems is definitely due to this change in her technical style. However, her tragic suicidal death that occurred soon before the second-wave of feminism most likely contributed to her literary success as well, for her life and her poetry embodied and expressed various frustrations experienced by women in a patriarchal society after WWII leading up to the early 60s. The shocking news of her suicide and her dramatic biographical history have naturally caused critics to interpret her bee poems in accord with her actual biographical events. In order to do this, many critics have referred to Plath's journals<sup>2</sup>, letters, and drafts. A biographical reading of Plath's poems, however, will inevitably narrow down and limit interpretations of her poetry, and thus events of her personal life will not be the focus of this paper.

In Plath's bee sequence, the bee motif is used to describe her complicated relationship with her father and her husband, Ted Hughes, but most prominently to make sense of her identity. As Broe observes, Plath "attempts to 'recover a self' by exploring the various operations of power within the apiary" (Broe 95). The ambiguous status of the queen bee indicates what Betty Friedan has termed "the problem that has no name," which many middle-class white women experienced in the 1950s. Ironically, *The Feminine Mystique* by Friedan was published in 1963, the very year Plath committed suicide. It is considered one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that ignited the second-wave

feminism movement in the United States. Plath's bee poems aptly expressed women's victimization, rage, and rebellion against the popular notion that women during this time could only find fulfillment in a domestic sphere through childbearing and homemaking. Just like the queen bee, women were made to believe they were in control of the household, when in reality, they were completely dependent on their husbands and children to give meaning to their life. The domestic sphere could not coexist with the social sphere, and so a women's career was considered unimportant at that time. As a mother and a writer, Plath struggled between these two incompatible spheres. Plath expresses her aching struggle in her poems, and the bee poems in particular, represent her search for an authentic and autonomous self. And through the portrayal of the queen bee, Plath "sought to give shape to her experience as a woman and a poet" (VanDyne 156).

Among the five bee poems, "Stings" most vividly expresses the persona's search for authentic identity.

### Stings

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.  
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,  
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,  
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.  
He and I

Have a thousand clean cells between us,  
Eight combs of yellow cups,  
And the hive itself a teacup,  
White with pink flowers on it,  
With excessive love I enameled it

Thinking "Sweetness, sweetness."  
Brood cells gray as the fossils of shells  
Terrify me, they seem so old.  
What am I buying, wormy mahogany?  
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,  
Her wings torn shawls, her long body

Rubbed of its plush—  
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.  
I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,  
Honey-drudgers.  
I am no drudge  
Though for years I have eaten dust  
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,  
Blue dew from dangerous skin.  
Will they hate me,  
These women who only scurry,  
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.  
I am in control.  
Here is my honey-machine,  
It will work without thinking,  
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

To scour the creaming crests  
As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.  
A third person is watching.  
He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.  
Now he is gone

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.  
Here is his slipper, here is another,  
And here the square of white linen  
He wore instead of a hat.  
He was sweet,

The sweat of his efforts a rain  
Tugging the world to fruit.

The bees found him out,  
 Molding onto his lips like lies,  
 Complicating his features.

They thought death was worth it, but I  
Have a self to recover, a queen.  
Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
Where has she been,  
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her—  
The mausoleum, the wax house.

(emphasis added)

The persona “I” who “stand(s) in a column” in the fourth stanza is the beekeeper. She searches for the queen in the comb but cannot find her. Instead, she envisions finding an old withered queen who has lost all her attraction and queenly authority. In the sixth stanza, the beekeeper distinguishes herself from the “honey-drudgers,” or the female workers, whose life consists of continuous labor and monotonous jobs of collecting flower pollen and nectar: “These women who only scurry, /Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?” The beekeeper herself has committed her life to menial jobs and has seen her talent being wasted, but she will no longer tolerate a life controlled by others. Instead, she, as a beekeeper, will be the one in control of her “honey-machine” to produce honey: “It is almost over. /I am in control. /Here is my honey-machine, /It will work without thinking, /Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin” (seventh stanza).

In the last two stanzas, the persona envisions herself as a queen who has retrieved her authority. This persona denies joining the other female bees who are ready to sacrifice their life in their attack of “a third person” that appears in the eighth stanza. This “third person” who “has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me” is most often referred to by critics as Ted Hughes because there had been an incident where he was actually attacked by the bees. Sometimes the person is referred to as Plath’s father. Whoever this person may be, this person is someone who is trying to confine the persona and other women to their roles within the colony for its sustenance. Unlike the other bees, this persona, howev-

er, is not ready to sacrifice herself to that given role.

The persona "I" would not waste her life on taking revenge, but strongly feels the need to retrieve her "self": "I have a self to recover." She finds the queen, but the queen she has found is not the withered old queen that she had imagined earlier in the poem. The "queen" she will recover has a "lion-red body" and "wings of glass." Her body is glowing and burning with energy. The red image appears in her other poems, such as "Lady Lazarus" ("Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air") and "Ariel" ("And I/Am the arrow,/The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red"). The red color invokes images of "fire," "death," and "flight." Moreover, the burning energy expresses her artistic talent she embodies within herself. This artistic energy, however, had been removed, together with the wings she used for her nuptial flight. The newly revived queen is able to fly once again with her wings of glass, leaving a red "scar" in the sky: "Now she is flying/More terrible than she ever was, red/Scar in the sky, red comet." This flight expresses her ambition to become a poet who would indelibly leave her name and her poems in the world. The newly queen will escape from the place where she was made to live in death: "The mausoleum, the wax house." The queen leaves behind this "mausoleum" in order to liberate herself. For the persona, recovery of the "self" cannot be attained within the colony. Escape from the colony thus indicates liberation, recovery of her authentic "self," and artistic pursuit.

## II : Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

The colony being a "mausoleum" for the queen is also illustrated in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). The novel recounts a traumatic experience of an African woman, Tashi, who went through the practice of female genital mutilation when she was young in order to be accepted by her tribe. She was told that the ritual is an expression of tribal pride and that no men would marry her if she did not go through it.

Female genital mutilation (FGM)<sup>3</sup> is the excision or tissue removal of any part of the female genitalia for religious, cultural or other non-medical reasons. It is still practiced mainly in African countries, and the countries where it is most practiced are Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Mali. FGM is also practiced in some parts of the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iran, and in other parts of the world due to migration of people. The practice causes detrimental psychological and physical effects on women, and in worst cases, can even lead to death. Despite such consequences, the practice continues even today for health and social reasons ungrounded by scientific data<sup>4</sup>.

In the novel, Tashi is haunted by two dreams—the image of "The Beast" and the "dark

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tower.” The image of “The Beast” or the giant cock was engraved onto Tashi’s unconscious after witnessing her sister Dura’s death caused by circumcision. The image of the “dark tower” is explained by Tashi to her husband, Adam as follows:

There is a tower, she says. I think it is a tower. It is tall, but I am inside. I don’t really ever know what it looks like from outside. It is cool at first, and as you descend lower and lower to where I’m kept, it becomes dank and cold, as well. It’s dark. There is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby’s fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark. I can not see them. And they’ve broken my wings! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh, and they’re forcing something in one end of me, and from the other they are busy pulling something out. I am long and fat and the color of tobacco spit. Gross! And I can not move! (Walker 26-7)

Tashi’s dream does not make sense to either her or Adam, and Adam is unable to explain Tashi’s nightmare to her psychiatrist when asked to explain it. Tashi does not know why this tower terrifies her either, and because she cannot pinpoint the cause or the meaning of this nightmare, she cannot escape from its captivation.

It is when Pierre, a cultural anthropologist, analyses her dream that everything becomes clear, both to Tashi and the readers.

You are the queen who loses her wings. It is you lying in the dark with millions of worker termites—who are busy, by the way, maintaining mushroom farms from which they feed you—buzzing about. You being stuffed with food at one end—a boring diet of mushrooms—and having your eggs, millions of them, constantly removed at the other. You who are fat, greasy, the color as you have said of tobacco spit, inert; only a tube through which generations of visionless offspring pass, their blindness perhaps made up for by their incessant if mindless activity, which never stops, day or night. You who endure all this, only at the end to die, and be devoured by those to whom you’ve given birth. (Walker 232-233)

The true form of the “dark tower” is revealed as a termite colony and she had been the queen termite inside it. This analysis of the “dark tower” by Pierre enables Tashi to remember the song about termites and termite queens the tribal elders had sung when she was a young girl. The song was about clipping the wings of the queen (women) so that she could inertly reproduce heirs for the sustenance of the colony (tribe). The song was a

secret code among the elder males of her tribe that was passed on from one generation to the next for the continuance of circumcision. It needed to be sung secretly behind women's backs so that women would not find out the real reason for the practice. The elders, however, did not stop singing when Tashi came inside their tent, considering her too little to understand the meaning behind the song. This song nonetheless remained somewhere in Tashi's unconscious, and surfaced later when she was older in the shape of the "dark tower."

When Tashi finds out the root of her nightmare, she is finally able to escape from her long-haunting trauma. The "dark tower" represented women's state of ignorance where they were destined "to suffer, to die, and not know why" (Walker 250). After her escape from such "animal-like ignorance and acceptance" (Walker 250), Tashi takes action against this cultural ritual by alerting young girls and women of its "disaster" (108). Her ultimate resistance takes shape in the murder of M'Lissa, the practitioner who circumcised her, in order to prevent M'Lissa from harming more girls. By resisting out of her own will and power, Tashi, for the first time, finds meaning in life, in living, in existing, which she had been deprived of by genital mutilation. She is no more a helpless, wingless queen of the termites, but someone who has retrieved her self-autonomy and dignity. For the first time, she is in complete control of herself: "I have the uncanny feeling that, just at the end of my life, I am beginning to reinhabit completely the body I long ago left" (Walker 110). Tashi has found that "RESISTENCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY" (Walker 281, author's emphasis).

### III : Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

Toni Morrison's portrayal of the system of the insect in *Tar Baby* differs from both Plath's bee poems and Walker's novel in that it is not treated only as a confinement to the queen. The narrator of the novel celebrates the power, vitality, and mysteriousness of nature of a fictitious island in the Caribbean called Isle des Chevaliers, the main setting of the story. Trees and lakes as well as insects such as butterflies and ants have as much say in the story as do the human characters.

The story evolves around three couples: a young black drifter, Son (William Green), and a beautiful black model, Jadine Childs; a retired owner of a candy business from Philadelphia, Valerian Street, and his beautiful white wife, Margaret; and Sydney and Ondine Childs who work for Valerian as a butler and cook. Natural forces are set against civilization throughout the novel. The opening of the novel, for instance, describes how the white people have destroyed the ecological system of this island by building their vacation

homes and cottages. Moreover, characters are divided to represent respective forces. Son, for instance, is a character who represents a natural force and is contrasted with Jadine who represents civilization. It is Son who brings the soldier ants onto Valerian's property with his trails of chocolate crumbs. When Marie-Therese, the blind keeper of black tradition and its "ancient properties" who now works as a washerwoman for Valerian, notices the soldier ants, a "great rush of butterflies," and Son's beast-like smell, she instinctively knows that he is "in agreement with her" (Morrison 89), meaning, he is on nature's side along with her people. She thus assumes him to be one of the descendents of the blind horsemen, riders brought to the Island from Africa as slaves, and who are believed to still exist somewhere in the mountains.

Soldier ants play an important role at the end of the novel. When Jadine goes back to the island, she realizes how the ecological system that had been destroyed by humans is now forcing its way back to life. Earth and trees are everywhere, popping out of bricks and cement of the vacation homes. The soldier ants have eaten through the loudspeaker wires of Valerian's stereo system and are about to eat up the house as well. Soldier ants are seen from Jadine's plane window that has just taken off from the island bound for Paris.

The hills below crouched on all fours under the weight of the rain forest where liana grew and soldier ants marched in formation. Straight ahead they marched, shamelessly single-minded, for soldier ants have no time for dreaming. Almost all of them are women and there is so much to do—the work is literally endless. So many to be born and fed, then found and buried. There is no time for dreaming. (Morrison 250)

From this description, it seems that female ants will be depicted as victims as in the previous two texts, but the narrator, on the contrary, continues to explain the queen's reproductive ability in fascination.

The queen is described to have total control over her life and the colony. It is the queen "who surmises, by some four-million-year-old magic she is heiress to" (Morrison 250) in order to produce the male "from the private womb where they were placed when she had her one, first and last copulation" (Morrison 250). The narrator is impressed by the fascinating mating of the queen ant that takes place in flight called the nuptial flight. On a sunny day, a queen flies out from the colony to the drone congregation area to mate with as many drones as possible until she is fully mated. After the male "emptie(s) his sperm into his lady-love," the queen "keeps (them) in a special place to use at her own discretion when there is need for another dark and singing cloud of ant folk mating in the air" (Morrison 250). Then, when the queen is ready, she sheds the wings she no longer needs

and starts "to build her kingdom" (Morrison 251).

Unlike Plath's bee poems that omit any sexual implication, or Walker's novel that focuses on the sex enforced on women, the narrator in *Tar Baby* celebrates and explores it as a once-in-a-lifetime, unforgettable experience. Even after generations of reproduction, the queen may still remember her "marriage flight":

The scent of it (wind of a summer storm) will invade her palace and she will recall the rush of wind on her belly—the stretch of fresh wings, the blinding anticipation and herself, there, airborne, suspended, open, trusting, frightened, determined, vulnerable—girlish even, for an entire second and then another and another. (Morrison 251)

After all the years of "(b)earing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying" (Morrison 251), the queen ant here still wonders whether her gentleman-love's "death was sudden. Or did he languish? And if so, if there was a bit of time left, did he think how mean the world was, or did he fill that space of time thinking of her?" (Morrison 251). In Plath's "Stings," the persona imagines a queen who has lost all her gloss and attraction that she once had. The queen termite in Tashi's dream is even more grotesque. But the narrator in *Tar Baby* imagines a queen who is still sexually active, for although female soldier ants "have much to do" and thus "(d)o not have time for dreaming," "(s)till it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (Morrison 251).

The narrator here is ambiguous. This parable may be what the narrator of the whole text who had always been sympathetic to nature is recounting, but it may also be Jadine's inner thoughts. If it is what Jadine is thinking, her comment of the female ants not having any time to dream expresses her denial to pursue her life in a black community where an individual is defined in relation to others, and her will to pursue a life in a capitalistic society instead. While already having made the choice of leaving, she still knows that it will be very difficult to forget Son and the relationship they had. If this parable is what the narrator of the whole text recounts, it can be interpreted that the female ants have willingly accepted their destiny. As Pereira notes, unlike the queen who leaves her community in order to attain her "self" in Plath's "Stings," the queen ant in *Tar Baby* rejects abandoning her community and "returns to the community to bear her eggs, the next generations of the hive" (Pereira).

Either way, the female ants in this parable represent African women who have inherited African traditional values. Ambiguity of the narrator presents two different views toward the life of the female ants—as confinement and fascination. It also introduces two different values of "selfhood"—Western-derived ontology of the solipsistic "self" and African-

derived ontology of the “self.”

Jadine’s actual flight indicates that she has decided to leave her community, her African heritage and “selfhood.” Jadine’s denial of African “selfhood” is clear also from the conversation she has with her aunt, Ondine, just before going to the airport. Ondine tells Jadine that

A girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women. (Morrison 242)

Ondine tells Jadine that a person does not need a natural mother in order to become a daughter and that “(a) daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (Morrison 242). Ondine believes “selfhood” can only be attained by becoming part of the community, and in order to do that, one needs to accept his/her cultural heritage and understand its “true and ancient properties.” For Ondine, “There ain’t but one kind” (Morrison 243) of woman because one does not become a woman until she defines herself in relation to other members of the community.

Jadine, however, believes there are two kinds of women, as is clear from her comment, “I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (Morrison 243). Jadine believes she will not be able to recover her “self” unless she leaves Son, Eloë, “the woman in yellow,” and “the night women.” For her, holding on to her African heritage is incompatible with her life goal, and thus her “selfhood.”

As Pereira explains, comparison between *Tar Baby*’s ant parable and Sylvia Plath’s bee poems “reveals limitations in the white female vision of a self” and “broadens the discourse to include an African American perspective on female selfhood and truth” (Pereira). Jadine’s dichotomous ontology that results in such understanding of the solipsistic individual self derives from Western discourse and ideology. Such dichotomous ontology of the self does not exist in African American society, for African American women have always been both “ship and harbor,” to put in Morrison’s own words. African American women have always participated in social and domestic spheres.

This ontological difference between Western and African selfhood can be further observed in the depiction of the relationship between the queen and the workers. As mentioned earlier, the persona “I” in Plath’s bee poems clearly distinguishes herself from the other female workers. The persona regards the worker bees as “they,” the “honey-drudgers,” and that she is no such thing. The distinction between the queen ant and

worker ants in *Tar Baby*, however, is interestingly left unclear. Generally, from a scientific perspective, the queen and the workers are put into different castes despite both being female. Eusocial bees, ants, and wasps are thus divided into three categories: the queen, the drones, and the workers. This categorization is strange when one compares it to mammals that make no distinction between the fertile and the sterile female.

In *Tar Baby*, the fertile queen and the sterile female workers are not categorized into different castes. Scientifically, the taxonomy "soldier ants" denotes female workers or females that specialize in foraging, and does not include the queen. The narrator, however, describes the queen as part of the "soldier ants" among other female ants. The queen does not have any special authority over the other female workers, but considers herself only as part of the whole system of the colony. The job allotted to her is to reproduce, and together with other female workers, she supports and sustains the colony. Whereas the persona of Plath's bee poems struggles to search for a solipsistic identity that sticks out from the other female members, the queen ant in *Tar Baby* works together with others in order to accomplish jobs destined for females.

The queen ant in Morrison's *Tar Baby* is not a victimized queen. Unlike Plath's queen bee or Walker's queen termite, she is a queen who defines her "selfhood" without having to give up her sexuality or children or without having sexuality and children forced upon her.

## Conclusion

The image of the queen has been used to define female identity under various social circumstances. By comparing and contrasting how each author has used and adapted the queen motif, it enables us to understand the respective author's specific definition of female "self" and "selfhood." The difference between the bee, termite, and ant may appear of no importance at first, but reading through and comparing each text elucidate its importance. Although they share a similar ecological system, they also have distinct features that are reflected in the depiction of the female identity in each text.

There are, for instance, several important features unique to termites that need mentioning, which explain why Walker chose this particular insect instead of more common ones like bees or ants. The first characteristic is that there is also a "king." Unlike bees and ants, male termites do not die after mating but continue to exist in the colony to mate with the queen, which describes more adequately the social situation Tashi is in. Another important feature is that there is more than one egg-laying queen in a colony. This is also more relevant since Tashi is not the only one who has suffered from this social practice. The last distinct feature of termites is that the queen's movement is more confined than

bees and ants due to the distended abdomen that increases the queen's body length to several times more than before mating. Thus, she inevitably loses control of her body, needing all assistance from her attendant workers. Her abdomen is distended to the point of grotesquery and she is far from the elegant image of the queen described in Plath's poems. The physical limitation of the termite queen vividly illustrates the physical deformity that FGM causes women.

What is unique about the queen ant in *Tar Baby*, on the other hand, is that it can live for up to thirty years, whereas the life span of the queen bee is between two to seven years. The lifespan of other female ants is one to three years, which means that the queen ant lives through ten to thirty generations. Like "the woman in yellow" and "the night women" in the novel, the queen symbolically becomes an inheritor and transmitter of cultural heritage. Ant colonies live long too, which more adequately represent the African American community that attaches great importance to history. Another difference compared to bees is that ants are literally "grounded." Although both the queen bee and ant shed their wings once they have mated, other female bees can fly freely in search of flower pollen and nectar, whereas female ants do not have wings at all. Thus the female ants in *Tar Baby* do not abandon their community but stay for its sustenance. This "rootedness" of the female ants emphasizes the African-denoted ontology of female "selfhood" and community.

Lastly, the distinct feature of the queen bee that differs from the queen ants or termites emphasizes the image of a solipsistic "self." Against general belief, some ant nests may consist of more than one queen, which never happens in bee colonies. When the old queen fails due to old age or illness, the workers develop one or more new queens by feeding them royal jelly. When there are many emerging queens, they immediately try to kill one another. When the new queen is ready, the workers will then kill the reigning queen by clustering around her until she suffocates to death. It is only when one queen survives in the colony that she flies out to begin her new colony. The queen bee's pursuit for the one and only identity, even by killing her mates, aptly illustrates Plath's definition of the solipsistic female "self."

Comparison of the three texts reveals various interpretations of female "selfhood" and helps expand our understanding of each text. Some critics, however, explain that comparison also reveals authors' ideological limitations. For instance, Pereira points out how *Tar Baby's* "signifying" of Plath's bee poems "uncover an Africanist presence in Plath's bee poems, a presence unnoticed by Plath critics" (Pereira). It is more than natural, however, that our ways of understanding the world evolves through time, and thus criticizing the lack of Plath's racial sensibility is somewhat fruitless. Rather, it would be more productive to compare, understand, and accept various social ideologies and discourses so that limita-

tions can be projected in our present and future understanding of the world.

### Notes

- 1 "The Swarm" was left out by Ted Hughes when he published *Ariel*, but it has been included in the restored edition, published nearly forty years after Plath's death according to Plath's original selection and order. Besides these five poems, Plath wrote a poem called "The Beekeeper's Daughter" earlier in her life, which is included in her first poetry collection called *The Colossus*.
- 2 Plath kept a journal since she was 11 years old until her death. However, Ted Hughes claims to have destroyed the final volume of her journal between the winter of 1962 leading up to her death, which must have contained details that would have helped interpret her poems from a biographical perspective.
- 3 Female genital mutilation is also called female genital cutting (FGC), but I have used FGM in order to emphasize my political stance against this social practice.
- 4 It is falsely believed that FGM maintains good health and cleanliness, preserves virginity, enhances fertility, prevents promiscuity, increases matrimonial opportunities, enhances beauty, improves male sexual performance and pleasure, and promotes social and political cohesion.

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