The Unheard: British Women’s Poetry

For generations women’s voices have been silenced and buried to the tides of time. The dominant voices of the times have taken those voices and not given the space to express themselves and exist to their fullest potential. Even today, with all the advancements and progress women have made to correcting this unequal balance of power has been met with strong opposition and active resistance to these types of movements. Along the way, as women have gained more power, they have found a strong desire to find their history, a history that has been lost to them through the centuries. One of the first places women have looked for their history is one of the few mediums that women had access to through the decades, and this is literature, more specifically, poetry. While I, like Fleur Adcock, take strong credence to the words, “If I have a theory of the tradition informing [women’s] poetry is that there is no particular tradition: there have been poets, and there have been individuals, and a few of them have influenced a few other”¹ these words are less simple than they seem. While a strict “tradition” of poetry may not be found poetry, like all works produced in a culture do not form in a vacuum, they reflect the society around them as well as the experiences of the individual within that society. Women’s poetry then, reflects each author's individual experience within the culture they live in, in this case, the culture of Britain and Ireland. Each one of these women speak to

¹ Fleur Adcock- 587- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British Irish Poetry
their truth about what they have experienced and lived, while being influenced by other writers and poets. Simply by writing about these truths and examining them do these women reveal the true legacy of women’s writing during this time frame and that is a legacy of resistance and challenge. A resistance to the male dominated society that has silenced women for so long. My examining a few of those authors from along those lines I will examine exactly how they resist the society as well as explain how this tradition of resistance can be used to define women’s contemporary poetry.

First we will look at the at the works of Fleur Adcock, the poet who most influences the stance of a non-existence of tradition in all poetry. Even Fleur Adcock’s poems can be treated a subversive towards the culture. Her poem Against Coupling challenges the notion of relationships as a whole. When taken from a feminist perspective this poem can be viewed as a push against the cultural expectation of women to engage in romantic relationships as the highest form of aspiration for women, to belong to man. The poem itself feels very personal as the speaker starts of stating, “I write in praise of the solitary act”2 expressing not only a respect of people who exist outside of relationships but for those who act alone throughout life. This proclamation, praising the acts of solitude goes against the norm that society tells us, that we must look for someone to love in order to be complete, as if we are not a complete person unless we find someone to spend our life with. Fleur’s poem though does not in its entirely condemn these interacts that so many hold is an almost holy light. Instead she simply is pushing her readers to take those solitary moments and learn to enjoy them, to “embrace it without encumbrance”3 and learn to enjoy your own solitude and in a way embrace your full authentic

2 Fleur Adcock- 587 Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
3 Fleur Adock- 588 Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
self without the need for validation from other. This is something that all people can learn from but especially women who are told more often than not to place their worth with the validation of others.

Another Adcock poem, *The Ex-Queen Among the Astronomers* challenges the social status quo as well, painting the picture graceful ex queen and then painting her with such strong sexual imagery like “she sucks at earlobe, penis, tongue.” This kind of imagery, while not totally taboo during 1979 when the poem was written, to use that language to describe a queen can be seen as highly subversive as it goes against the general rhetoric that surrounds the royal family or royalty in general.

Moving on to Liz Lochhead, whose work is often framed as feminist, expresses the difficulties of womanhood among the “images, languages, and rituals of Scottish culture,” as well as her rewriting of folk stories for “contesting and rewriting patriarchal values.” In her poem *Mirror’s Song*, which is dedicated to Sally Porter, Lochhead describes a woman who gives birth to herself, smashing as she does. Not only does this poem subvert the delicate sensibilities that often times are associated with womanhood but she also frames childbirth, a taboo subject in of itself in many cases, as something both natural as well as powerful and destructive. This juxtaposes the gentle imagery of giving life and also gives agency to a woman’s experience with childbirth. Childbirth is often times framed in a way that romanticises the event but many of these accounts are presented by men who do not actually experience childbirth. By reframing childbirth as something that is violent with lots of smashing, a different picture is painted and this the regularly accepted pictures of birth are changed. When you dig deeper into the idea of a

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4 Fleur Adcock-589- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry  
5 Keith Tuma-736- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
woman giving birth to herself it is easy to see how this can be viewed as a message of independence from society. By giving birth to oneself you are removing the aspects of the culture that shape you and asserting your existence for only yourself. Lochhead exemplifies this in all the imagery that has to do with smashing. In the poem the subject is describes as smashing daughters, mothers, shred wedding dresses, snapping spike-heel icicles, all the imagery associated femininity in society and the act of destroying those ideas. By showing how violent birth can be, an then using it to describe the birth of oneself, it can also be used to show how difficult it is in society during that time to define who you are without others. In this way Lochhead wants the audience to rethink the ideas of how people, especially women, define themselves. Lochhead then resists the traditional definition of womanhood, where what a woman is is defined by outside forces and instead writes in a way that gives that agency back to women.

Medbh McGuckian takes a more personal approach then Lochhead, using the poetry she writes to “make sense of her own felt experience under the weight of received accounts of nation and, or as, woman.” While she is making sense of these experiences she is also claiming an agency that for many women, is denied on a regular basis. Many feminist scholars take the position that simply talking, or in this case, writing about your perceived truths and experiences is a subversive act that defies the traditional narrative of women. By using your voice to speak and to share your truths, you change the narrative and in many ways this exemplifies women’s writing around this time. Women during the twentieth century were just coming into the academic light, finally given the space to explore their traditions and history for what it is, instead of the male centered and dominated history they had been told up until this point. While

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6 Keith Tuma- 784- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
this exploration was beginning a new process came into light, the process of creating what was not already there. Women during this time, like McGuckian, turned to creating a tradition that many like Adcock do not believe exists. In the poem *Slips* McGuckian asserts that her identity and indeed, her history are not only of women but also of the nation. “My childhood is preserved as the nation's history”\(^7\) using imagery of her mother, and grandmother, talking about those experiences and how that makes up the history of the world just as much as many major events that you learn about in school. In a sense, McGuckian takes the idea of history and forms it around her life, asserting that her history is just as valid and real as those histories you learn in school. As with the authors this too is an assertion of identity as well as an assertion of history. In this way McGuckian carries with the theme of resistance by asserting a history that was largely forgotten and pushed to the backside. Her poetry asserts her history as just valid as the official histories of the world.

The final poet I focus on is Carol Ann Duffy, who is known for her works that explore the perspectives of many taboo groups of people in the world such as rapists, sex workers, and other groups of people both marginalized and and evil. Giving a voice to the people that society would rather not have one, but asserting that their truths, however dark and twisted, are something to be explored through poetry such as in *Standing Female Nude* and *Psychopath*. As Tuma states in his summary of Duffy, “explores the ways women have often been represented by men in art”\(^8\) as she attempts to recreate the male gaze with her poem *Standing Female Nude* by using the voice she comes up with of the sex worker doing the art. What strikes the viewers about this particular piece is how the woman thinks of herself, instead of the man we see how the

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\(^7\) Medbh McGuckian- 786- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry

\(^8\) Keith Tuma- 850- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
woman, the subject of his painting, views him as well. She is a person with needs and desires outside of being a piece of art to be consumed or as the speaker says, “The bourgeoisie will coo at such an image of a river-whore. They call it art.” The speaker does not see herself in this way and by seeing how she sees herself, neither does the audience. Simply by shifting the speaker we now find the “River-whore” humanized sex worker, a group of people who are never given a voice. While this voice is not coming from an actual sex worker the attempt to empathize and humanize them changes the perception of how sex workers are commonly viewed while still maintaining the normal narrative of treating women like objects. We are given her feelings on the matter, as well as her concerns, making us think that while yes, she is indeed someone who can be bought and sold, she does this to fill her own needs. The subject and speaker of this particular poem is challenges our perception of sex workers and the poem itself challenges our romantic notion of art, much of which’s subjects were prostitutes that were soon made into more than prostitutes when they were viewed as at This poem points at the hypocrisy of history, challenging the line that people draw between art and criminal activity. Challenging these lines comes into play with the rest of the authors we have looked at here as well.

Overall the tradition of women’s poets during the twentieth century is difficult to define at best and nonexistent at worst. What brings these women together is their desire to tell their story as authentically as they can. With their works they constantly push the boundaries of society in order to expand those boundaries to include more of their truth and authentic selves. As we move forward and look to the past for inspirations, those inspirations are very particular. These women did not look at every woman for guidance or inspiration when they wrote, instead

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9 Carol Ann Duffy- 851- Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry
they picked and chose what spoke to them the most and developed and grew from there. They resisted the ties of society and that resistance is how we define them today. With enough resistance and time, hopefully we can overcome the inequalities of this world. In the meantime, women will continue to write about them, continue to push the boundaries, and continue to move forward until they are as equal and free to be who and what they are as the rest of the world is around them.