Research Paper English literature

Pathetic Plight of a Woman as Revealed in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Anju Bala Sharma Research Scholar, Dept. of Mathematics and Humanities, Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana

Dr. Tanu Gupta Associate Professor, Dept. of Mathematics and Humanities, Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is one of the most powerful American poets of the post World War II period. Viewed as a therapeutic response to her divided personae as an artist, daughter, mother and wife, her poetry reveals the psychological torment associated with feelings of alienation, inadequacy and rejection. Further, the neglect of women's rights and the inequality of opportunities for male and female grew in her irritated self. Betrayal by her loved husband exaggerated her psychological disorders. Her poetry also reveals the frustration and tension which a woman faces because of the patriarchal structure and the discrepancy between the way she wants to behave and the way she is made to behave. She thought that nobody being able to satisfy her needs and considers death as one and only solution.

KEYWORDS Ambivalence, Frustration and Pathetic Plight.

PAPER:

Sylvia Plath's poetry is a presentation of emotion, excessive self-absorption, inaccessible personal allusions, and nihilistic obsession with death. Viewed as a therapeutic response to her divided personae as an artist, daughter, mother and wife, her poetry reveals the psychological torment associated with feelings of alienation, inadequacy and rejection. Her first volume of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, displays an intervening obsession with estrangement, motherhood and destruction in contemporary society. Much of her anger is directed against her father, Otto Plath, whom she cites both as a muse and target of scorn. She confers historical and mythical allusions and references to Nazis and the Holocaust to offer depth and closeness to her psychic distress. In a highly pathetic tone, Sylvia says in *The Colossus*:

O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress,
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered.

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line. ("The Colossus" 17-21)

In the poem *Daddy* the speaker compares her father and her husband to vampires saying how they betrayed her and drank her blood-sacking her dry of life. She tells her father to give up and be done, to 'lie back' (75) and further in line 80, she says 'Daddy, daddy you bastard'.

The Vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year
Seven years, if you want to know. ("Daddy" 72-74)

Plath's poems *Daddy*, *The Snowman on the Moor*, and *Edge*, bring to light her frustration with gender-role at the time by exposing her relationships with men and her treatment. Thomas McClanahan, a professor at the Idaho State University Department of Humanities, characterises Plath's poetry as aggressive, saying: Plath is a brutal poet — she taps a source of power that renovates her poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood and innocence. *Daddy* acts as partial story for her volatile opinion of men, tracing her reasoning back to the death of her search to find a replacement. It traces the roots of Plath's relationship with the first man of her life — her father and relates the shock of her father's death with her romantic relationship in later life.

The use of Holocaust imagery in *Daddy* promotes the idea of an oppressor and an oppressed. Her father was overbearing and possessed. This would forever disturb Plath, who would begin in her search for a "brute heart of a brute like you" (50) for her whole life. The references to Nazis and Jews in her poetry are actually metaphors. Like Jews in Holocaust, she is a victim or oppressed and the doctors, her father and other figures are her oppressors like the Nazis. It is evident; much of Sylvia Plath's work dealt with the imprisonment that she felt as a woman. This is specific in *Daddy* where she links her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew.

I thought every German was you.
. . . . .
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. ("Daddy" 29-35)

Plath's poetic collection *The Colossus and Other Poems* tries to mask the storms brewing within the poet. This shows her sense of failure, frustration of ennui, boredom, loneliness, hopelessness and cheerlessness. In the poem *Sow*, the persona of a woman is simply reduced to reproductive function, and the poet writes;

For thrifty children, nor dolt pig ripe for heckling,
About to be
Glorified for prime flesh and golden cracking. ("Sow" 13-15)

According to social feminists, the powerlessness of women in society is rooted in four basic structures: those of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialisation of children. Family is an institution which reinforces women's oppressive condition. Commenting on the status of woman, Juliet Mitchell observes: "Production, reproduction, sexuality and socialisation of children are the key structures of woman's situation" (Mitchell, 1974, p. 100). In the poem *The Bee Meeting*, she expressed what frustration she is really talking about: "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" ("The Bee Meeting" 6) She is facing the very fact that nobody being able to satisfy her needs and desires for unconditional love and considers death as one and only solution. Her poetry reveals pain and suffering, however, she sometimes portrays mental and physical pain as retribution for doing and her poetry so frequently contains images that associate physical and mental

suffering. The woman speaks and tries to revolt. Her resentment, her revolt builds:

I shall unloose—
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart—
The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes. ("Purdah" 52-57)

Furthermore there are examples of poems where the speaker feels unable to move, illustrating the restrictions which Plath felt that society's convention placed upon her. *In Plaster*, she (inner woman) feels trapped by her out casing (the front she has to present to fit in the society's rules). The poem begins: "I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and the old the yellow one" ("In Plaster" 1-2). The 'old yellow one' is her real self, the white the fake. She describes how at first she hated the white and fake front but ultimately saw that it had advantages, began to accept falsity and the falseness became a way of life and she almost forgot what her real self was. She writes:

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp —
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit. ("In Plaster" 43-45)

Here the harshness of Sylvia Plath's hatred for the roles restricted on her as a woman can clearly be seen. In poem *Paralytic*, she describes herself as entirely immobile, tended to and even kept alive by outside forces, as a dead egg. The poet appears to have no influence on the outside world in the hope that it will not wish to influence her.

The Claw
Of the magnolia,
Drunk on its own scents,
Ask nothing of life. ("Paralytic" 37-40)

In *All the Dead Dears*, she identifies herself with the dead woman in the museum:

How they grip us through thin and thick,
These barnacle dead!
This Lady here's no kin
Of mine, yet kin she is: . . . ("All the Dead Dears" 13-16)

In this poem she once again restates her belief that a model has been set for her, a role she must fit into, although this time she suggests that the role has been set by her predecessors in the contemporary society. The fact that the glass is 'mercury-backed' highlights again that she sees herself and the dead woman as one and the same:

From the mercury-backed glass
Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother
Reach hag hands to haul me in. ("All the Dead Dears" 19-21)

The poem *For a Fatherless Son* is very piercing when considered in the light of her own circumstances. Her husband's affair with other lady frustrated her more. Now she has the responsibility to bring up her children alone.

You will be aware of an absence, presently,
Growing beside you, like a tree,
A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree —
Balding, gelded by lightning — an illusion,

And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention. ("For a Fatherless Son" 1-5)

Winter Trees also presents a moving picture of a woman of sorrows, — the woman who loves, corresponds, and yearns for relationship, but is ultimately desolated at not being reciprocated. In this poem, love is given a different dimension. It is not the love of a woman for a man so much as the love of a sensitive human being for the helpless and the aggrieved. She sets up a kind of identity with the 'rabbit' because it falls unwillingly into the trap of the catcher:

How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.
And we, too, had a relationship—
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,

The constriction killing me also. ("The Rabbit Catcher" 24-30)

According to Sigmund Freud, "Sylvia Plath was a paranoid who suffer from a fixation in narcissism" (Freud, 1977, p. 376). Such narcissist patient always looks for a surrogate if by chance they lose their dear and near one. In case of Plath, she lost her father at a very early age and all the male persons whoever she encountered in her life were the surrogate. She badly searches for the qualities of her father in all men she met with. But everyone on this earth is exclusive and failed to fulfill her expectation which frustrated her throughout her life. Such kind of failure again and again pushed her towards suicide. Her over love for her father leads to an over expectation and estimation of her father, failure to which developed hatred towards her father. Such tremendous love-hatred, an ambivalent feature, is the theme of most of her poems. Her obsession for her father compelled her to commit suicide with a hope of reuniting with him. These conflicting love-hate feelings became the part of her literary and personal identity she could never escape.

Sylvia was also frustrated with the choice she would have to make which was either to fulfill her desire of becoming a "free-spirited poet", or falling into the wife or mother roles society was imposing on her. Further, the neglect of women's rights and the inequality of opportunities for male and female grew in her irritated self. The poetry of Sylvia Plath reveals the frustration and tension which a woman faces because of the patriarchal structure and the discrepancy between the way she wants to behave and the way she is made to behave. She expresses her harmony with other women.

REFERENCES

Freud, Sigmund (1977). The Interpretation of Dreams. London: Tavistock. | Mitchell, Juliet (1974). Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Great Britain: Hazellt Watson and | Vinay Ltd. | Plath, Sylvia (2006). The Colossus and Crossing the Water: The Cambridge Companion to | Sylvia Plath. Ed. Jo Gill. New York: Cambridge UP. 90-106. | Plath, Aurelia Schober (1975). Ed. Sylvia Plath: Letters Home — Correspondence 1950- | 1963. London: Faber& Faber. | Plath, Sylvia and Hughes Ted (2008). The Collected Poems. New York: Harper Perennial | Modern Classics. |