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Searching for A Feminist Rights: A Postmodernist Analysis of Selected Poems by Sylvia Plath

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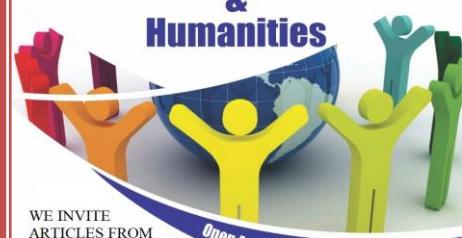
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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is one of those American poets who left their thumbprints on early postmodernist writings in America. Though, she lived a short life concluded by a horrible suicide, she produced a large body of poetry whose importance could have competed with later postmodernist poetry such as that written by Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelo and Harriet Mullen. The form and content of Plath's poetry demonstrated a new way of writing in comparison to the modernist poetry that preceded her time.

When postmodernism meant the ultimate end of previous metanarratives and philosophies of form and content of writing and when postmodernism advocated self-generation over self-understanding, Plath appeared as a newly generated poet with a feminist message. Her appeal for a feminist position found support in the rapidly developing public sphere, which America witnessed during 1960s, as well as in the artistic and literary postmodernist sphere that accompanied it.

To make an account for Sylvia Plath's achievement in this respect, the researcher divides the present paper into an introduction, three sections and a conclusion:

The introduction of the paper sets the background of Sylvia Plath's literary rise and significance in her posthumous literary American scene.

Section One discusses Plath's fight for a feminist role as it started early inside her family. The researcher selects a couple of poems to define the different sides of this internal struggle.

Section Two moves out to the larger social scene which Plath chooses to confirm her feminist demand on an external level. Here, she re-introduces the images of the 'bee' and the 'spider' to support her feminist stand.

Section Three sheds light upon the theme of suicide and how it allures Plath as a means to define her feminist self.

The Conclusion sums up the findings of the paper.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of the short life she lived, Sylvia Plath was a poet of more than two hundred poems besides a novel entitled *The Bell Jar* (1963). The first official appearance of Plath as a poet came through Ted Hughes' publication of her collected poems in 1981. Before that date, she appeared in *The New Poetry* edited by Alfred Alvarez in 1950s. the significance of choosing Sylvia Plath as a representative poet for Alvarez lied in the fact that *The New Poetry* was edited as a reaction to *The New Lines* which introduced those poets who cultivated a spirit for rejuvenating the traditions of Augustan formalism. In other words, *The New Lines* attempted to re-enliven the poetry of such high modernists as T.S Eliot, Robert Frost and others, while *The New Poetry* hailed the coming of a new trend, i.e., a Postmodernist trend advocated by Allen Ginsberg and other Beat poets of the 1950s America.

Alvarez, unlike the modernists who presumed to interfere into the contemporary scene in the hope of bringing order to it, urged the new poets to expose the declining scene of time without attempting to correct it (Peter Childs 1999, 132). It was the new postmodernist spirit with all its social detachment that encouraged the new poets to set their own

rules to contemporary scene without the pretension of devising an order to it. Presenting the un-presentable became the major theme among the postmodernists.

Another reason explaining Alvarez's enthusiasm for Plath's poetry was his belief that the influence of English poetry had practically receded and that the best way to bring it back to a level of new significance and recognition was to turn towards the experiences of the American poets. He announced that poetry written in English "might have come to something if it followed the lead of the Americans" (ibid, 133). Hence, Sylvia Plath was for Alvarez the paradigm of the new poets with new subjects and apparatus of writing poetry. Plath's focus on such subjects as male dominance, female vulnerability and a call for a feminist position in contemporary American social and cultural life suggested "a psychic desire to change cultural constructions of gender and to posit and critique an emergent female selfhood" (140).

Plath's poetry formed diverse critical views ranging from confessional and autobiographical poetry, poetry of an oppressed psyche to a poetry of self-creating myths based on an open confrontation with reality. Ted Hughes described Plath's poems as "chapters in a mythology" (P.R King 1979, 153). The

mythology of the self, of creating and accepting one's own mythical recognition of the self. Walter Blair defined that process of self-myth-making as a reaction to contemporary American scene where a woman's writing appeared as "haunted" by a masculine air of rejection and exclusion (Walter Blair 1974, 329). As American poets we requisite known for their extremely individualistic choice of poetic form and content, Plath also found her own individualistic poetic expression rooted in a firm feminist stand against male hegemony.

Her quest for a feminist identity had arisen from no one single reason but from multifaceted array of concerns and apprehensions. Her marriage break down, her gradually failing health, her two unsuccessful suicide attempts and her brooding feelings that life was a big eating game since she suffered a very specific personal dilemma related to her inability to define her filial relation to her Nazi father, a problem which imposed itself strongly on her definition of social and family commitment. Consequently, Plath's poetry, P.R. King comments:

a struggle with this scene of a lack of meaningful identity, the tension between an acute experience of the world and lack of a stable core of the self

with which to come to grips with that world (P.R. King, 155).

All quotations and references to the poems of Sylvia Plath are taken from Hughes, Ted (ed.,) *Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1981.

SECTION ONE: PLATH AND MALE-HEGEMONY.

Plath's resurrecting feminist self-sounded paranoiac and schizophrenic as she had to struggle against a socio-cultural scene that was adamantly masculine and mainstream in its voice of authorization. Having realized that "being born a woman is [her] tragedy (Dana Levin 2010, 3). She sets out warning "keep out of my barnyard,- I am becoming another", "Maenad" (1959). The "I" of these two lines refers to no definite self since there is also "another" identity at the other side of the speaker- Plath herself. This Lacanian play on identity emerges whenever Plath uses the "I" to refer to the other self which she tries to identify as *another, newly emergent of different* from her like in masculine America. Plath's account of identity meets Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic views of the human self: the individual, Lacan observes, has no self but an "other": "there are only others", Lacan

explains, "never a self; even the self is another to itself"(Jane Flax 1990, 18). The self exists or can be proved.

Hence, in her major poems directed to male figures, Plath succeeds in reproducing herself as different, daring and breaker of the set rules. In "Daddy" (1962), for example, she clearly defines her relation to her father whom she accuses of having victimized. As a pro-Hitlerian professor, Plath's father served to cater for her personal disgust against Nazi and Nazism. Hitler and her father represented for her the unjustifiable masculine pressure imposed on social and cultural life. The curses, the violent words and the disrespecting attributes she attacks her father with no mean that she hates him- though perhaps she does, but should mean to voice her new message clearly: that she is different from her mother as a woman; so, she resists male dominance in her family. For Plath, her father is an image of hate or a vampire like all other men who presumably suck out their wives' lives for their own interests. The "stake in your black heart" un clear-cut reference to this scene:

"There's a stake in your fat black
heart
And the village never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping
on you.

They always knew it was you.

*Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm
through".*

Stan Smith explained that Plath had meant "Daddy" to be spoken by an Electra-haunted female (Stan Smith 1982, 108). In the *Orestia*, Electra-Orestes' Sister becomes an accomplice in her mother's murder as she encourages Orestes to kill her and revenge her father's murder. Plath felt guilty that she had disregarded her father's exploitation and ultimate destruction of her Jewish mother. She, therefore, perseveres in this poem to underline that unbalanced relationship between male impregnability and female vulnerability in a male-determined society. As a poet with a feminist message, Plath openly expresses her misgivings towards the world of men in "Conversation Among the Ruin" (1956) too. She severely lectures a male paradigm ruined life she has suffered. The figures appears arrogant, unfeeling and keeps distanced from the social scene:

*"While you stand heroic in coat
and tie, I sit*

*Composed in Grecian toxic and
psyche-knot,*

*Rooted in your look, the play
turned tragic:*

With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,

What ceremony of words can patch the havoc"?

In "Lady Lazarus" (1962), Plath's feminist revolt escalates carrying the wish to "eat men like air" in the fight for women's rights:

"Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air".

The whole poem is made up of clear declarative syntax authorizing the second coming of "Lazarus" from an underground world. The theme of rebirth is very sharp and aiming towards a feminist undertaking of breaking free from what Margaret Walters calls "the tradition of imposed limitation" (Margaret Walters 2005, 115).

According to (Jane Flax 1990, 18) Plath registers a firmer feminist stand in "A Street Song" (1956), a poem which may immediately recall T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) as both poems arrive at a standstill when they turn into psyche tragedies for the protagonists. In Plath's poem, the female speaker assumes a Christ figure as being hunted down in the streets of America. Feeling of insecurity, defenselessness and betrayal reign high in the poem:

"Arming myself with the most reasonable items

To ward off, at all cost, suspicious Roused by thorned hands, feet, head

And the great wound

Squandering red

From the flayed side".

For Plath, "Christ is definitely a male figure who had assumed the feminist attributes of peace, non-retaliation and submission to mainstream nonchalance" (Jane Flax, 19). Nevertheless, the result was Christ's eternal message of the victory of blood and self-integrity over cruelty, chaos and physical violence. though he gave in passively to his unfeeling enemies, yet he survived through history in the memory of humanity. In identifying herself with Christ, Plath styles a stronger self and claims a larger map for women than what the masculine society assumes.

Thus, Plath's struggle for a differently molded self-stemmed from this highly complicated and interwoven psyche dilemma. The sense of a lost identity was so deep and irrevocable in Plath that she even compared it to the Original Sin as we listen to her confession in "Tale of a Tub" (1956):

"... we mask our past
in the green of Eden, pretend
future's shining fruit
can sprout from the naval of this
present waste".

The choice of Swiftian title is curious. In his story with the same title, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) satirizes and makes fun of the Augustan beliefs that order was ever restorable in a life designed and forwarded by human beings. His entrenched cynicism prevents him from cultivating any confidence in man. Plath perhaps quite aware of the novelist's struggle to say his message which essentially contradicted that of his time. Plath's world was similarly designed and preserved by men who advocated the idea that order was accessible through science and technology developed by men alone and by the dominance of mainstream thinking and philosophy. It is this doubtful look of both Swift and Plath that makes "Tale of Tub" a postmodernist poem with a rising feminist authority to question previous metanarratives and suggest new ones based on a feminist look.

SECTION TWO: THE BEE AND THE SPIDER: SIGNS OF FEMINIST POWER.

The "bee" and the "spider" have, of all Plath's other poetic contents, a highly

fascinating influence on her feminist views. These Nature's 'male haters' are so frequently mentioned in her collection of poems that a special attention needs to be directed to them. The 'bee' and the 'spider' as both images and symbols hold for Plath a unique feminist significance. She mentions the words "bee" and "bees" 17 times and tries to identify herself with this productive insect as it has the inborn ability to build up a male-free existence. Hence, she never hesitates to announce that

*"The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,
The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the
boors".* (Wintering, 1962)

"The bees, got rid of the men" is considered one of Plath's unlimited success towards proving the female prospective of establishing a "sound community ruled by regularity and discipline" (Jacqueline Rose 1992, 230).

Accordingly, there are opinions that have associated with the poet's attention in "bees to her father's scientific field in bees studies" (ibid, 231). Yet, such views indicate some significance when checked against the poet's explicitly feminist citation to them. P.R King feels this reference "when he attributes it to Plath's own search for an independent feminist

identity. The bees, as reality outside herself," King clarifies:

"are a mysterious source of both sweetness and danger. They are also herself in her task of recovering a sense of identity-creatures who are prepared to kill to protect their hives, in the same way as she has expressed her lost sense of meaning" (P.R King, 179).

However, "Plath's interest in bees substantiates her wish of retailing the male apparatus of subjugation practiced daily by her own family patriarchy and her contemporary society" (ibid, 180). Plath wishes to be the crown of her own day, rule and define her own identity and "draw the lines of others' destiny, I want, I think," Plath states, "to be omniscient ... I think I would like to call myself the girl who wanted to be God ..." (Dana Levin, 3).

Moreover, both the image of the bee and that of the spider pervade Plath's poetic debate. It is a "dreadful insect in comparison with the bees"(ibid, 4). Nevertheless, the spider stirs Plath's negative views against masculine presumption. The word "spider" and its derivations are repeated several times throughout her poetry," a fact which

assures her private interest in the excessive significance of the imagery"(ibid, 6), related with this insect. The spiders "symbolize for Plath the power of creating through destroying others to prescribe a different destiny for them. Spiders are all women in the same way bees are female insects, or widows" (Spider, 1956). The spider is, in this context, a strong representative of imminent "Death with its many sticks" (Totem, 1963).

The aggressive strength which "the spider employs on its targets" supplies useful material for Plath to adopt her activist attitude. This small boneless insect is reinstated by the poet as specified and crafty as it "squint[s] from the center field" (Totem 1963, 22). Through its inner strength, "the spider can silently and diligently change and reproduce other objects; hence female determination and aptitude in human societies as Plath seems to suggest (ibid, 23)". She even overstates the spider's power as it " spun the cosmic web " in which all should follow the new rules- the spider's.

Ever since, this hunter-spider spreads horror in its preys the moment they are trapped in any unwelcome struggle with it. "It demonstrates them its many arms" that are "multiplied" during scare besides hesitation "in the eyes of the flies" (Jane Flax,21):

*"Widow. The bitter spider sits
And sits in the center of her
loveless spokes.
Death is the dress she wears.
" (Spider, 1056)*

SECTION THREE: SELF- CONFIDENCE THROUGH SELF- DESTRUCTION.

Reference to suicide or being totally absent from reality is at the core of some of Plath's poems that can be classified as psychopathic. In "Poem for a Birthday: 1. Who" (1959), Plath describes to us how doctors used to "light [her] up like an electric blub" to get her out of her unconsciousness. Her sinking into such repetitive mental comas serves her absence from reality which denies her due meaning as a woman. When she is back to her consciousness, her feelings are like those of the magic in T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" (1927) where the new birth is burdened with a terrifying sense of alienation: "I am at home here among the dead heads". Going away from and back to the same bitter reality does not provide a sound solution for Plath's deep-rooted problem of *who she is*.

Her ultimate dilemma lies in the annihilation of the physical self itself or the "dying animal" in W. B. Yeats' description in "Sailing to Byzantium"

(1927) which seems to imprison her. Suicide becomes a "desire" for her "to control and punish [her] contested physical self" (Arielle Greenberg 2009, 10). In her thirty-one years life span, Plath tried suicide twice, a fact which she alludes to in "Lady Lazarus":

*"I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it-
And I am smiling woman.
I am only thirty
And like the cat I have nine times
to die".*

The same theme is also the center of "The Manor Garden" (1959) where the speaker is expressing a baby which ironically would inherit "Two suicides, the family wolves / Hours of blankness".

Through suicide, Plath means to re-create her decrepit self in a way similar to that which Arthur Miller devises for his 'suicidal' characters in *Death of a Salesman* (1974) and *All My Son* (1949) to carry them to the frontier of a spiritual birth. Besides, suicide becomes a 'streetcar' to get rid of the non-human world around. Most important for Plath is that suicide will define her lost self as it will immediately stop any further search for it in a world which has failed to recognize the feminist significance in its ideological

construction. She envisions that in life after death, she is purified of the old self which has tainted her character and "the soul [becomes] a bride/ In a still place ... " (Breck- Plage: 5, 1962).

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath appeared as a confessional writer for some critics such as Jacqueline Rose, David Trinidad and Kathleen Spivack. This view seems to have been formed by views related to her friendship with Anna Sexton and to Robert Lowell's lectures which she attended with Sexton early during the 1950s. It is True that some of those views are established on biographical material deduced from her own poems; yet that is not all the truth behind Plath's major goals and aspiration as a poet with a different contemporary message.

Plath philosophizes her biographical material to comment on the

injustices of her time rather than just passively to complain and brood over a personal dilemma. Her fight is not only against the male injustices practiced in her family, but also against the generally belittling masculine outlook of the time. As a woman poet, she manifests her discomfort towards the modernist poetry which inaugurated the last century. She confronts the modernist claim for objectivity, order and discipline with a parallel claim for the personal, individualistic and innate in the human experience. Through her unyielding belief that one has to be able to control and manipulate one's experiences, Plath establishes the ground for a particularly feminist position in the postmodernist scene which has shaped American artistic and literary life since the 1950s.

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