



SYLVIA PLATH'S LATER POEMS: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL READING

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ABSTRACT

Art is not always a representation of the self. Poetry especially has been defined variously through the ages: Subjective and Objective, poems have coexisted with each other. The poems of Sylvia Plath are often associated with the depiction of her personal elements. Though she is hailed as the proud poet of the confessional mode, her final works are more social or historical than personal in content. For instance, her reactions to the Holocaust and the Second World War are well presented in her later poems. Thus she can be seen traversing beyond the boundaries of Confessional Literature. This paper attempts to study the social developments and situations of her contemporaneity impacting her poetic consciousness in the years closer to her death.

Keywords: *Confessional, Taboo Subjects, Social Mode, The Holocaust.*

Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry designates a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which deals with the facts intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet. It is a style that emerged in the United States in the 1950s. It was written in rebellion against the Impersonality theory of New Critics. Confessional poetry focuses on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche and personal drama. "It also includes previously taboo matters such as mental illness, sexuality and suicide..." (Wikipedia). The celebration of human body is a common element in confessional poetry. The personal experiences, trauma and other happenings in the poet's life are expressed without any sort of hesitation and inhibition. The boldness and frankness of the poets have often attracted severe criticism. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Emily Dickinson are some of

the legends of confessional poetry. Some of the confessional poets have broken the tradition. They have responded well to the materialistic and the social changes of the time too. For example, the poets in America have become dispirited over the pressures of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation and dissatisfied with increasing regimentation of American life.

The Holocaust

The term Holocaust is derived from the Greek word *holokauston* which means animal sacrifice. It underwent a lot of semantic changes down the centuries and Sir Thomas Browne employed it in his *Urn Burial* in 1658. He denoted it as a term related to great massacres. Since 1960s, the term has specifically been denoted the genocide of Jews by the Nazis.

During the Hitler's rule, Jews were forced to remain in ghettos and later were shipped to concentration camps. They were spotted through various means. Drugs were forced to the prisoners and their belongings were confiscated. Even the converted Jews were not spared. The Nazis indulged in a false propaganda claiming that Jews had a hidden agenda – to conquer the world, and the Nazis were out to preserve “the purity” of the Aryan blood. Rarely the world had witnessed such an attempt at wiping out a particular race, its identity and culture.

Plath and Social Issues

The Holocaust and the World War II had a deep influence on the writers of contemporary era. Though Plath's name was associated with Confessional Literature, yet her poems created in the wake of these historical events, marked her growing engagement with social themes. One could say that she was straddling in both the worlds, private and public simultaneously during this phase of her poetic career. Her poetic anthology *Ariel*, published posthumously, corroborates this claim.

Lady Lazarus

In “Lady Lazarus,” the speaker can be seen as a survivor of the Holocaust. Though the poem is about Plath's suicidal attempts and near death experiences, the reader can easily relate the poem to the Nazis and Jews: “I have done it again/ One year in every ten/ I manage it” (*Ariel*, 8). These lines refer to her depression and consequent action. What follows is a German image to denote Nazism and oppression: “A sort of walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as Nazi lampshade” (*Ariel*, 11). The phrase is a deliberate expression that indicates the brutal torture of Jews in the camps. Their skins were peeled off and used as lamp shades. The doctor is referred to as Herr Doctor, who tries to bring her back to life after her attempt of suicide. There are references too to the extermination camps where the Jews were slaughtered in great numbers.

Daddy

“Daddy,” addressed to the father Otto Plath, illustrates a figurative image of her father who passed away when she was eight years old. Her strange and unusual relationship with her father is described through various metaphors. There are allusions to the Holocaust as he is compared a Nazi and Swastika. The persona of the poem is a Jew and a victim at the same time. The father is portrayed as a giant and evil Nazi. He is a ‘panzer-man’ with ‘Luftwaffe’ brutality.

*An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew,
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. (Ariel, 49)*

Plath’s preoccupation with her Jewish ancestry reminds her of the ruthlessness of the Nazis. As a daughter, she had two strains in her blood, her father being a German and her mother part Jew. She imagines herself as a Jew and her father as the German oppressor. Her terror of her father is equated with the fear of Jews of the Nazis.

This poem was written by “a girl with an Electra Complex” (qtd. in Jon Rosenblatt) It can be seen as a poem about an individual entrapped between herself and the society. History’s horrible days are portrayed through patriarchal figures - father, Nazi, vampire and husband. These figures come to have social and political significant as one read through the poem. The speaker wants to break the patriarchal structure by killing her father who is aligned with her husband. The poem was written just after her husband Ted Hughes had left her.

Applicant

The poem “Applicant” (1962) presents the pen picture of man as just as a junk heap of miscellaneous parts given shape by a suit of clothes. Woman is depicted as a windup toy, a puppet of that black suit. This image of woman highlights her subordination to man in marriage. The applicant is marked as bride who is introduced to different ideas about the role she will play. It is an explicit portrait of marriage in her contemporary Western culture.

The poet speaks directly to the reader, addressed as ‘you’ throughout. The reader is also implicated. “People are described as crippled and as dismembered pieces of bodies. They are represented as just a collection of wheels and logs, smaller replicas of a smoothly functioning larger social machine” (Pamela J. Annas). The man in the poem is defined by the black suit he puts on. But the woman is referred as ‘it’ with no individuality: “to bring tea cups and roll away headaches/ And do whatever you tell it” (Ariel, 6). It is the picture of the male

dominated society. These poems are depiction of the social scenario of the mid-twentieth century. Even in a period of social turmoil of the Second World War and the Holocaust, there existed an extreme form of patriarchy.

Conclusion

The confessional poets of 1950s and 1960s pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers till date. But Sylvia Plath stands apart by transcending confessional elements to have a more significant universal appeal.

Art reflects the society and the artist draws his inspiration and material from the social and historical events of his age. In the case of Sylvia Plath, the socio-political catastrophes or scenario gets absorbed and personalized in her poems. Sylvia Plath observes, “Personal experience is important but... I believe poetry should be relevant to larger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on” (qtd in. bachelor and master).

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