



IDEAS AND IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

DR. RICHA VERMA

Assistant Director
School of Languages
CSJM University, Kanpur
(UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The themes of Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry are clearly based on her experiences as a female working in a male dominated creative field, where woman's opus is considered non-seriously. The lack of community among women writers in the 1950's and early 1960's resulted in isolation for Plath within her own psyche, leading to her angst and animism. This experience of isolation, connects her to an ambivalence about self-image, image of the world and relationship between self and the world. In her own fury and depression, she pushes her poetry into the world of death, and the fear of death and destruction produces a shrillness in her life or a kind of self-negation.. a negation that spreads from her body to her entire cosmos. In the end she mourns herself as dead, continuing to play the parts of both the mourner and the mourned and of the consumer and the consumed. Her career as a poet can thus be described as of suffering and pain, accompanied by violent ecstasy and the inability to control traumatic war-like experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Stephen Spender wrote in his essay on "Warnings from the Grave" that "Poetry is balancing of unconscious and conscious forces in the mind of the poet, the source of the poetry being the unconscious, the control being provided by the conscious. If the poet thinks about his poetic ego, he visualises a point where consciousness and unconsciousness meet. The unconscious forces are below the threshold at which he becomes aware of himself as having an identity . . ." ¹ Sylvia Plath's poems come out of her consciousness immensely forceful self. She produces disconcerting, terrifying poems; and the power, the forceful decisiveness,

DR. RICHA VERMA

1P a g e



and the starkness of these poems are decided not by self-identifiable poetic expressions, but by a woman finding herself in a terribly difficult situation. She appears to be mired with the mental processes that are active underneath the surface of consciousness and yet affect the self in an intimate way.

Critics have described Sylvia Plath as an incisive confessional poet, a post-romantic extremist poet, a pre-feminist poet with strong tinge of suicidal poet and more. Others have observed her as a schizoid, a person with death-wish, while others find her as a victim of male brutality, desolated by German Nazi father, undermined by an ambitious mother and destroyed by a faithless husband. Whatever the critics may consider about Sylvia Plath's poems, it is certain that she was undergoing enormous amount of strain and pressure while leading a painful life, and perhaps these pressures and pains were the immediate cause of her depression. She went through several stages of anger, grief, despair, quietness and longing. Perhaps it was her desire to end the pains and pressures which were common for a woman living in the twentieth-century America. What was new about Plath was her approach to wrestle with the problems and the ways in which she portrayed contradictions and fragmented pieces of her personality in an era when other women writers were silent. It is not surprising that the poems of a complex and multifaceted writer like her are confessional and bring out those details of her life which come from the deepest core of her isolated self. In an interview with Peter Orr she said:

*"I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife.. I believe one should be able to control and manipulate experiences within informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important.."*²

Sylvia Plath's real strength lies in her dramatic approach to represent threatened and violent self. Her hybrid dark world of nostalgia and hatred, of self-transformation and negation very remarkably represented her sense of antagonistic feeling between herself and others. This relationship was rendered through a dramatic heightening of her own speaking voice. As a major American poet, she wrote in a period of literary transition from modernism to post-modernism, a period overexert in American life and art from the explicitly political, and a period of post-War prosperity and political passivity accompanied by the resurgence of American individualism and success ethics. She has demonstrated the personal and political experiences at the same time using the brutality of the War and the alienation of bureaucracy as metaphors for the relation between self and world.

Sylvia Plath's poetry is considered to be entirely 'confessional' where she explores her personal world, revealing the actual experiences directly to the audience. The term



‘confessionalism may also be used to refer to those other writers whose personal experiences are inseparable from the autobiographical self of the writer. For example, in Anne Sexton’s poetry the impulse of self-revelation is so much mingled with a meaningful self-sufficient aesthetic form that it is difficult to distinguish between the autobiographical projection with personal reflections. This is not the case with Plath’s work. Jon Rosenblatt points out that :

..In her confessions Plath employs numerous personae [and] establishes objective settings within which the speaker of her poems dramatize themselves; and she consistently employs imagery in a realistic manner, rather than using the personal images or autobiographical references to reflect back upon herself. Plath uses personal allusions as the foundation for dramas of transformation and psychological process.³

Plath takes the reader into a world of heightened possibilities and fatal attractions. In her poetry the central development is an initiation, a transformation of self from a state of symbolic death to that of rebirth, thus dramatising the warring forces of her universe.

M. L. Rosenthal, who first used the term ‘confession’ for Robert Lowell’s work, argued that Plath followed the autobiographical method of Life Studies. One may argue that Lowell’s work provided the initial impetus for Plath to project her true experiences of sickness and mental suffering. She wrote about Robert Lowell’s Life Studies:

I have been very excited by what I felt is the new breakthrough that came with Robert Lowell’s Life studies. . . Robert Lowell’s poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much.⁴

In Life Studies she found a mode of openness, both poetic and personal. Lowell’s revelations of suffering and depression in his poems like “Waking in the Blue” and “Home After Three Months Away”, where his life is exposed in and out of the mental hospital, has inevitably touched Plath closely. But, following Roethke’s example, she puts an emphasis on both personal as well as impersonal materials in her poems. The personal element in her work includes the characters which are based on her friends and relatives, the personal images of fear, love and death, and the autobiographical incidents. The same function is served by the impersonal elements of history, politics and society. In Robert Lowell’s works, there is no mention of history, politics and society; and unlike Sylvia Plath he speaks directly and realistically of his mother, father, wife, and friends. Plath’s poetry focuses on the difficulties faced by a woman during a stay at mental asylum and her images descend to a much greater depth where identity forms and reforms itself. Lowell’s images, on the contrary, stay on the surface.



The psychological and family histories of all the twentieth-century confessional poets such as Lowell, Berryman and Sexton are somewhat similar to that of Plath. Lowell's frequent visits to the mental hospital, Berryman's addiction to alcohol and Sexton's obsession with death do provide the framework for Plath's writings, but there is certainly difference in the process of forming a personality through poetry. Other contemporary American poets have shared the similar cultural and psychological situations of 1950's and dissatisfied with social and academic consensus have related their poems between suffering and individual self. Plath also being affected with the psychological imbalance wrote within the trend of re-evaluation of aesthetic practice, yet her methods are distinct and more comprehensive than her contemporaries. Plath's poetry is marked by the method she chose in transforming the personality through poetry, her commitment to the initiatory process, the use of image sequences, and a lyrical dramatic mode.⁵

Sylvia Plath certainly does not claim to be original in her writings. In an interview with Peter Orr, she says :

*"..I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also about her experiences as a mother; as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth, which I think is something quite new and exciting."*⁶

Despite Sylvia Plath's association with many of her contemporary American writers, she stands as a multifaceted writer with a very original, entirely confessional mode of writing. Her works are not merely autobiographical or self-revelatory like there many other personal poets, but consists of experiences recorded into patterns that morph into an objective character through repetition, allusion and symbolic forms.

To apply a broad framework for the study of Sylvia Plath's poems, the best way is to divide them into two groups, i.e. her early immature pomes, and the later more matured pomes. There is a notable difference between her earlier works, and the later ones not only with respect to subject matter and imagery, but also in form and pattern. Her mythologising images of self and world change from natural and supernatural in early poems to social and political in those of the later group. The first collection The Colossus (1960) focuses on the boundaries between herself and the hostile world and to test the limits of her action, both imaginative and real. The poems describe a literal transformation in a non-human persona, as Northrop Frye puts it "a metamorphosis into an object in the world of nature which represents the falling silent of the world in its human or rational phase".⁷ The second collection Crossing the Water (1960-62) considered as transitional or experimental collection, does not set out either the honesty of her early poems or the power of later ones, but only



reflects the events of her life related to inner self. Associated with the true experiences of hospital life, seriousness of her mental suffering, it is the recurrent reference of death which treads all along these poems. The sense of barrenness, hostility, deprivation, infertility and isolation is further continued in Plath's later collections Winter Trees and Ariel. Here she establishes a more profound relationship with self, continuing her fascination with death in the final succession. As the title suggests, Crossing the Water may thus be judged as a bridge between her early pomes of The Colossus and the later more original and daring later writings of Ariel.

The third volume of Sylvia Plath's poems published posthumously in 1971 by Ted Hughes, contains two sections. The first section 'Winter Trees' contains eighteen short poems written nine months before her death, and the second section, written exclusively for the BBC broadcast in 1960 is a long dramatic poem titled 'Three Women' and portrays three pregnant ladies and their sense of fear, isolation, bleakness of miscarriage and infertility. Pomes of 'Winter Trees' are recognisable domestic and personal, moving from 'a limited private world to the limitless public one'. Eileen M. Aird remarks about this collection:

*It is in this series of poems inspired by maternal feelings.. that Sylvia Plath reveals the cruel opposites of the world in their starkest opposition, but they are not black poems . . .*⁸

Most of Sylvia Plath's poems related to her vulnerable self, inner loneliness and death, were written between September 1962 and 11 February, 1963, the date of her death. These last poems were collected under the title Ariel and were posthumously published in 1965 by Faber & Faber. The bleak, grotesque, despairing and maimed human world of Ariel brings out her personal world of desolation and grief. Death is considered to be pure in these poems, which brings escape from the conflict. The pain and torture of living finally culminates in the art of dying, symbolising rebirth. Alvarez describes Sylvia Plath's poetry in the following terms:

*Poetry. . . is not made by efficiency__least of all Sylvia Plath's poetry. Instead, her extraordinary general competence was, I think, made necessary by what made her write: an underlying sense of violent unease. It took a great deal of efficiency to cope with that, to keep it in check. And when the efficiency finally failed her world collapsed.*⁹

The ability to write about death with control and objectivity, accruing from a certain reasoned and reasonable artistic creation, is one of the remarkable qualities of her later poetry.



Sylvia Plath's poems, illuminate in varying degrees her belief in art and in artist's and right to create a world of its own. She chooses her basic idea of writing poems from various angles, such as, man's estrangement from nature, which is perceived as inherently hostile towards its own kind and a threat and horror expressed through such hostility; the father and daughter relationship or an Electra Complex; the theme of love and feminine sensibility; the sense of isolation, loneliness and deprivation accompanied by mental torture, suffering and loss of identity; and lastly, the theme of death, surrounded by both fascination and fear. The ideas projected in her poems deal with self as a nucleus marked by an autobiographical and personal element, thus locating a meaningful relationship with the images of self and the world. Throughout her poems, self proclamaant, as a recurrent and powerful subject, gathers a number of her central themes such as her exploration of the boundary between self and outside world, her struggle to be reborn as a transformed being, her concern for truth and untruth, real and unreal, her interest in the process of creation and perception, her self-consciousness and above all, her ambivalence. Her feelings seem to have no control and in maniac depressive alterations between exultant happiness and raging despair, her mood swings were so abrupt and violent that ecstasy rubbed her shoulders with agony.¹⁰

Sylvia Plath's description of landscape seems to have been derived either from her knowledge or from her imagination, and mingled with her fascination for nature is "the poet's deep feelings of man's separation or estrangement from nature and an equally deep experience of nature as inherently hostile to man."¹¹ For her reality is characterised by a "no colour void" and nature by "blankness", both waiting to ensnare the solitary self, either through its threatening indifference or its actual hostility. The indifference is found everywhere: in "looming" sand pits, "ocherous" salt flats, "blue wastage" of Egg Rock, "dry papped" stones, even in the "blooming shingles" of 'Point Shirley'. The blunt impenetrability is more evident in the "mute stoniness" of 'Hardcastle Crags'. She finds only "dream peopled village" in the opaqued landscape:

*All night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
Of her heart was the humped indifferent
Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set.
On black stone, ..
.. dairy herds
knelt in the meadow mute as boulders.*

The poet is in danger of being threatened by the hostility of nature and seems sharply conscious of herself and remain more or less in obscurity, as in 'Full Fathom Five':

All obscurity

DR. RICHA VERMA

6 Page



Starts with danger:

Your dangers are many, I

Cannot look much but your form suffers

Some strange injury

And seems to die.

Plath finds herself one with nature notwithstanding her mood of instability and her repressing attitude to it. In the lines like “I’d come for / Free fish bait”, “I smelt / Mud stench, shell guts, gulls leaving”, and “I only brush away the flies”, the repetition of “I” reveals her aesthetic and moral proclivity and represents her identity crisis. In such landscape poems, the speaker is usually “I” and is occasionally accompanied by “you”, i.e. landscape, thus serving the function of the poet’s peculiar or distorted vision. She is so much threatened and lured by the spirit of nature that she refuses its entry. She feels rejected from the society and prefers to stay in an enclosure __ a person ringed with a barbed wire.

The world evoked by Sylvia Plath’s poems is that of coldness, laziness, blackness and stoniness. In ‘Two Campers in Cloud County’ she identifies herself with an impenetrable terrifying blackness and self enclosure. In other poems like ‘Parliament Hill Fields’, ‘Poem for a Birthday’, and ‘Surgeon at 2 a.m.’ her feelings are those of rejection by people, friends, family, landscape and herself. She confirms her importance in the lines: “I am a stone, a stick,” “I am so small / In comparison to these organs”, “I am the sun in my white coat / Grey faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers”, and so on. The alienation, solitariness and identity crisis further extend in Three Women where the feelings of self-sufficiency accompanied by pain, fear of deformed childbirth and loss of femininity combine to make hers a disturbed and depressed self. Her failure to stay on with the competing world is related in the lines where she describes her infertility and miscarriage and associates it with an inability to live naturally.

Sylvia Plath’s poetry is a work of personal process, in which the central development is an initiation, a transformation of self from a state of symbolic death to one of rebirth, dramatising the warring forces of her personal universe. She expresses antithetical attitude towards existence, alternately speaking for life and against it. Her poems on one side are expressions of power and vitality and on the other are suicidal and self negating, thus embodying a negative vitalism, brilliantly extolling and simultaneously denying harshly the claims of life. The death and rebirth pattern of initiation reflects her own sense of having been reborn after her suicide attempts and mental breakdown in 1953. She wishes to identify her soul after rejecting her body and also wants to live and die at the same moment; this violent contradictory relation with life and death depicts an extraordinary perplexity towards her own self.

REFERENCES

1. Stephen Spender, "Warnings from the Grave", in The Art of Sylvia Plath ed. Charles Newman, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970, p. 199.
2. Peter Orr, The Poet Speaks, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd.: 1966, pp. 169-70.
3. Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation, The University of North Carolina Press: North Carolina. 1947, pp. 16-17.
4. Peter Orr, in The Poet Speaks, pp. 167-68.
5. Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation, p.157
6. Orr, The Poet Speaks, pp. 167-68
7. Northrop Frye, Norton Lectures at Harvard University,. 4/17/75.
8. Eileen. M. Aird, Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Works, New york : Harper & Row Publishers, 1973 p. 68.
9. A. Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath" in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970, p. 58.
10. Ronald Hayman, The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath, London: Heinemann: 1991, p. 46.
11. Ingrid Melander, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: The Study of Themes, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972, p. 47.