

Sylvia Plath: Poetry of Accumulated Pains & Betrayed Relations

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ABSTRACT:

Key Words:

In recent Years, cultists have enshrined Sylvia Plath as a martyr while critics have denounced her as a shrew. Plath's devotees maintain that she was the victim of a sexist society, and her suicide was a response to the oppression of Women, and her poetry was choreography of female wounds. Circumstance of female, her responsibilities and her doom is same from the primitive time. Though time has changed but that time also worked against the lot of female world. In her pioneering study of the second sex, Simone de Beauvoir has rightly said:

*"The women of today are in a fairway to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundation."*¹

Apparently, Sylvia Plath played her social role so convincingly. She was an accomplished writer, wife and mother. She described herself as Triple Threat woman. Her friends described her as energetic, efficient and cheerful, but no one can't make nay guesses about her intense despair, anxiety and insecurity. It is her autobiographical novel which illuminates the sense of her isolation which she conveyed through her poetry. Her poetry and life with their different but complementary intensities were for the most part inseparable. This inseparation gave Sylvia Plath strength to face her demons. She dared to express her negative emotions and her choice was to be true to her experiences and to her art rather than to the traditional norms of feminine experiences.

She had to suffer a lot from her childhood due to death of her father. She was suffering from complex of insecurity. Her insecurity and lack of affection from part of her father, made her attracted towards Ted Hughes, who at that time was completely an unknown person, but today he is England's best known living poet. In 1195 when Sylvia won fulbright scholarship to Cambridge England.

She met a man Ted Hughes there. He was of 25 years then and was a different sort of man. Tall, blond, self confident, talented and intelligent, a Yorkshireman of working class parentage. He entered in Sylvia's life like a thunder and lighting. A friend who knew both Sylvia and Ted at Cambridge made an observation about them:

"They seemed to have found solid ground in each other. Ted's gusto took more constructive forms and Sylvia had found a man on the same scale as herself. Her vividness demanded largeness, intensity, anextreme, and Ted was not only physically large, but he had a corresponding largeness of being. He was unfettered, he was unfraid".²

Soon they got married. After marriage Sylvia found that sense of fulfillment and security in her self which she lacked earlier. She expressed her feeling for Ted in a letter to her mother:

"I can't for a minute think of him as someone, 'other' than the male counterpart of myself, always just that many steps ahead of me intellectually and creatively so that I feel very feminine and admiring".³

She perceived her marriage as a opportunity to create a microcosmic super world, a family of superior beings soaring high above the multitudes. She needed a strong guiding hand on her, to some higher purpose, some transcendent goal. She was enthusiastic about her "big, handsome bearish brute of a man", and "preached his virtues and the virtues of their creative life together breeders of art and an eventual race of

similarly gifted offspring"⁴ when Ted published his first volume of verses, she was very happy and she expressed her joy as:

*"I can rejoice, then, much more,
Knowing Ted is ahead of me".⁵*

She herself published several poems about Hughes at that time, among them a few are 'Ode to Ted' and 'Pursuit' the latter was filled with sexual imagery. Influence on creative life and works of Sylvia Plath was of none other than that of her bus band Ted. It was Ted who made her aware of those things which she had never noticed. After marriage they worked as a team, each being the others best critic and guide. Poetry of both have numerous references to their shared experiences. One of this sort of poem is 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. Life's sweet and bitter experiences worked as theme for her poems and it was her subsequent unhappiness with her husband that led to bitter poems written during the last nine months of her life. Her happy married life was ended with the discovery, that Ted was being unfaithful to her. This discovery shattered her as she was always faithful to him, but he was not. She fled to a neighbor, a good friend of her, and confided to her that,

*"Ted was in love with another
WomanShe wept and wept
and held onto my hands, saying,
'Help me!'"*

She further said that:

*Ted lies to me, he lies all the
time, he has become a little man"⁶*

Her purposeless life compelled her to cling to Ted as to a life raft, with him she was confident and able to find meaning in life, but that discovery followed their divorce. Ted went back but Sylvia stayed there. She wanted to fight with her odd circumstances with her two children. She was alone once again. Infidelity of her husband added a new bitter experience and that created a vacuum in her secured life. This vacuum further intensified her poetry and she wrote for Ted in one of her letters:

*"I made the most amusing, ironic and fatal step in trusting Ted, he was unlike other
vain and self indulgent men what I cannot forgive is dishonesty..... and no matter
what, or how hard, I would rather know the truth of which I today had such a clear and
devastating vision. I have a life to finish up here. What about life without trust the
sense that love is a lie and all joyous sacrifice is ugly duty. I am so tired. He is shameful
and shames me and my trust, which is no plea in a world of liars and cheats and broken
or vanity-ridden men".⁷*

Her efforts to find security in relation of Ted proved futile. She wanted to create a model of 'Daddy' in Ted but Ted appeared as a vampire, a killer who made her more grief stricken than ever. Now she had to look after her two children and had to face sufferings of life alone. This incidence least affected her writing, and she continued writing as her target was to write at least one poem in a day. It was the time when her autobiography 'The Bell jar' was published. State and sour climate of the heroine of the novel reflected external world of Sylvia. The Bell Jar used as a symbol of her internal chaos and despair produced by excessive external prohibitions. Her letters, works, poetry written during final weeks of her life reflected her true feminine nature and she expressed her grief as:

*"Mothers are devoured by their children. effaced; women are
subjugated by men, imprisoned, mutilated made into puppets or toys,
hollow or blank with no identities and no wills."⁸*

Her ambivalence toward men, marriage and motherhood and the guilt she felt, explained the degree to which her domestic poems were associated with sufferings. They were not exaggerations of pain but accumulation of it. Intensity of her pain depicted through her way of suicide. Experiences of her life made her aggressive, and poetry written during that time was also of this sort.

Her poem 'Lesbos' was written four months before her suicide. It was an aggressive poem and it seemed to be addressed to a silent female antagonist. This poem was based on some bitter experiences of her life with Ted and his extra marital affair with Assia Wevill. In this poem Sylvia told about that burden of desertion caused by her husband, and pain of those sufferings which she had to bear after divorce:

*"I am doped and thick from my last sleeping pill the smog of cooking, the smog of hell. Floats over heads, to venomous opposites, our bonses, our hair. I call you orphan, orphan. You are ill. The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you TB. once you were beautiful. "*⁹

Her poem 'The Application' published posthumously depicted the relationship of husband and wife as relationship of employer and employee. This poem concerned to the inbuilt expectations of husband from his wife. Applicant in this poem has no opportunities to speak for himself/herself at all. He/she is voiceless, silenced, without an opportunity to get in a world. Through this poem Sylvia gave us a nightmare world and made it clear that trauma and violence of the twentieth century affected men and women both:

*"The applicant evaluated the post war culture that urges men to be real men and women to be feminine women".*¹⁰

Sylvia depicted point of view of men towards women in this poem and she wrote:

*"But in twenty five years she 'll be silver, in fifty, gold, a living doll, every where you look. It can sew, it can cook, it can talk, talk, talk."*¹¹

Behind all those ideas, there was also a melancholic or sad note in this poem. Husbands perhaps do expect their wives to be angels in the drawing room, master-chefs in the kitchen and whores in the bedroom. Simultaneously, wives are expected, in the modern patriarchal culture, to cook, to sew and to drudge about the house, with the ability to 'talk' perhaps required but not necessary. This poem also symbolized a sick world, pretending to be healthy, but images of mutilation made everything clear in this poem. The world appeared as a hell to Sylvia where one could easily enter, but can not get any escape.

Her another poem 'Mirror' reflected her desperate effort to search the self, that self, that self which she had lost due to her marriage with Ted. Generally mirror used by human to identify himself/herself, and in this poem Plath used mirror to locate that new self and identity which would free from each and every bondage of male world. It was not only with Sylvia but each woman saw mirror to identify herself, and heroine in this poem does the same. Character relished her false and insulting truths of identity, in following lines as:

*"I see her back, and reflect it faithfully, she rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands. I am important to her. She comes and goes. Each morning it is her face that replaces darkness."*¹²

She an achieve freedom from male world by breaking false and suppressed images of herself. Sylvia Plath generally made woman as pivotal character in her poetry. It is women who make struggle against odds; against the authority of men, God, too is male and against man made institutions like marriage.

Her early uncollected poems and her powerful poetry in 'Ariel' had the woman as a central figure. Sufferings of women were raw material for her poems. But in some of her poems there were those types of women which had lots of energy and power. In 'lady lazarus' the speaker is a woman' for a long time she tolerated herself being who was as a treated like an exhibition piece as in following lines:

*"I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels real. I guess you could say I have a call. Come back in broad day To the same place, the same face, the same brutes."*¹³

But finally she decided to throw off all submissiveness and rose like a fury on her oppressors.

*"Her God, her Lucifer
Beware,
Beware,
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air"*¹⁴

Another poem 'Purdah' (Winter Trees) whose title is also symbolic. Purdah or veil is what hides the speakers' true self which was suppressed by male domination. In this poem the woman speaker was a doll like bride, jealously guarded by the groom, rose with domestic energy to kill her keeper and liberated herself. In the violent conclusion of the poem she casted off all submissiveness and assassinated the one who had oppressed her for long:

*"And at his next step
I shall unloose
I shall unloose
from the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart
The lioness,
The Shriek in the bath'
The cloak of holes."15*

In Sylvia Plath's poems male domination was personified as a huge colossus also. Her poems brought an idea that women remain dependent from primitive times. Her poem 'The snowman on the Moor' stressed the fact that the world which is full of unknown dangers forced women to depend on male weather it is her father, husband or her son. In this poem there are two male figures that confronted the female persona the arrogant husband and white giant. The white giant symbolized the dangers a woman had to face in life whereas the husband represented security and supports, even though he was haughty and proud. Through these images Sylvia, though with reluctance admitted the difficulty of living without the shadow of male figure.

Her another uncollected poem 'Complaint of the crazed Queen' portrayed man as strong, destructive, cruel and woman as the helpless victim. Though man is the hunter, oppressor and woman, the prey yet woman loves man for this brutality. This very idea is expressed in her poem 'Daddy' also in which she told:

*"Every woman adores a fascist. The boot in the face,
the brute Brute heart of a brute like you. "16*

She admired in being victimized, used or oppressed. However the evil that Sylvia Plath presented had not given the physical appearance of a giant in each poem. In 'Pursuit' panther is used as a symbol of mercilessness, but in this case too, victim was woman. Helplessness of woman reflected in this poem as:

*"I shut my doors
I bolt the door, each door. I bolt.....
The panther's tread is on the stairs,
coming up and up the stairs". 17*

These lines reflected that persona knew that escape is impossible and this hidden terror is depicted as:

*"There is panther stalks me down; One day I'
II have my death of him. He eats, and still his
need seeks food, compels a total sacrifice"18*

These lines reflect that panther wanted a total sacrifice and she must sacrifice her body and soul to appease him. But submissive personality of her persona rose at once to put an end to it. The liberated heroine of Plath symbolized by the 'lioness' and 'the queen bee' in her later poems. She understood that in order to defend herself against a fatal man, woman too must be awe-inspiring. This was the kind of liberated woman Sylvia Plath visualized, a woman who knew no restraints:

*"Now I break up in pieces that fly about like
clubs.
A wind of such violence
will tolerate no by standing : I must shriek. "19*

And since she assumed a terrible form to warn all men. The anger against men is best expressed in 'Daddy'.

*"If I' ve killed one man, I' ve killed two,
The vampire who said he was you".20*

Her changed image can be visualized in her mother poem. Dancing on the Grave of a son of a Bitch, it begins as:

*"God damn it,
at last I am going to dance on your grave,
old man,
You have stepped on my shadow once too
often, you have been unfaithful to me with
other women, women so cheap and insipid
it psyids me out to think I might ever be
put
In the same category with them:
I am going to dance on your grave because
you are
dead
dead
dead
under the earth with the rest of the shift".²¹*

Sylvia Plath's women protagonists and she herself was not only against the dominating male world, but also oppose the institutions established by men, for example, the institution of marriage. Her experiences compelled her to think that marriage and domestication made a woman unreal, it suppressed her true self. She spoke about the disillusionment of marriage in her poem "The Couriers" (Ariel)

*"A ring of gold with the sun in it?
lies, lies and a grief"²²*

The title of the poem is significant, as we expect couriers (messengers) probably of love and hope but the poem is totally about disappointments. She told about institution of marriage, that it bound a woman to a man and she is forced to be a slave, to cook and to sew for him just to become doll like bride. The Bell Jar, her autobiography reflected the same sense about marriage in which Esther felt that getting married is like being brainwashed and afterward you went about in some private, totalitarian state". This state of being brainwashed life is the result of following the humdrum routine of domestic life, day in and day out. Her own married life was failure because love and faith had died between the couple. All her experiences, her failure of relations compelled her to think like that. No doubt is too tough for everyone, but for a woman it is even more so and she must defend herself against all odds. Personality which appeared in some of her last poems was very different and Howe made remark about her after the study of her book 'Ariel'. Thus struggle in life is a part of man's lot, and Sylvia tried to project that idea through her works. Plath used words, images, rhyme, rhythm and figures of speech which presented her self. Most striking poems she wrote were quite different. They were written out of an extreme condition, a state of being in which the speaker for all practical purposes. Sylvia Plath herself had abandoned the sense of audience and cared nothing about-indeed was hardly aware of the presence of anyone but herself.

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