

RACIAL NOSTALGIA IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT:

Key Words:

“Fumy, Spirituous mists inhabit this place
separated from any house by row of headstones. I
simply cannot see where there is to get to:”

Above lines depict fundamental human problem, the fear of our inner emptiness, crisis of the identity, and a fear of the meaninglessness of our existence. Sylvia Plath was in many ways a deeply disturbed poet. She suffered a lot due to her alien presence in the West. She searched desperately to find her cultural roots but failed to do so. She felt something lacking and within her which she had to endure in patriarchal culture. She put her lack through these lines:

“I see myself as a Shadow neither man nor woman; I feel a lack.”

Her poet can never be understood without understanding her heritage and ancestry. German inheritance penetrated throughout her life. German identity of her father cast a shadow over her future wherever she went. This was a quite shameful of her, because she related her family history in the larger context to the contemporary history, culture and society. She did this by translating her private sufferings into sufferings of the Jew community tortured by Hitler. Jew were considered an alien race and harassed by the attitude of German specially Hitler who was a Nazi. For the Germans, war was of course the supreme occupation and cause of enjoyment. War between Germany and Italy was full of violence and the main sufferers of the violence were the Jews only. Germans considered:

“Man should be like the lion who would never tolerating an equal
partner in his den, and not like the meek cow, living in herds and
driven hither and thither.”

Though that bloodshed and violence caused great blow to the image of Nazis but that was not proper punishment for the sufferings caused to the Jews. Sylvia Plath had also created a similarity between the Nazi theme and the loss of her father. As the Nazi destroyed the entire culture of the Jews so her father discoloured her world. Death of her father made her helpless and the same helplessness she had to feel after seven years of her marriage, when her husband transformed into a Nazi and left her in more anger and vexation. Loss of her father and husband made her emotionally disturbed. She tried to sort out her emotional imbalance but she failed in doing so.

Past of Sylvia Plath chased her throughout the life and she recalled an incident when she had been selected as a guest editor of a magazine and Managing editor who was a Jew noted Sylvia's German background. She penetrated Sylvia's armour by pricking through her soul. This incidence made her depressed and her emotional state worsened. This increased further when she learnt that she had been rejected for summer fiction workshop at Harvard due to the German identity. She had to be sent to a local psychiatrist and there she suffered from traumatic shock treatments. In spite of curing these shock treatments made wrong effect upon her. After her first suicide attempt she was sent off to a private hospital where a female Jewish psychiatrist administrated more shock treatments and poured into girl's mind a dose of Freudian principle about incest and father daughter relationship etc.

She was fully aware and was haunted by the double identity and this double fascinated her throughout. Her existence as a German was a thing of shame for her. She carried a blood guilt that must be expiated. The circumstances in which she grew were sufficient to raise dark and disturbing clouds over her future. She was fighting with an enemy, but that enemy was never able to identify and that unseen foe had distorted her whole life. Edward Butcher wrote about Sylvia's fierce rage towards her father because he had died and abandoned her. Ted Hughes also wrote, “She grew up in the atmosphere of tense intellectual competition

and Germanic rigour.” and Alvarez wrote, “Her conception of herself, her husband and her marriage were all overblown in a quite German way.”

Her poem “Daddy” is the most famous poem and this poem penetrated her German inheritance and burden of those memories. In this poem she invoked the holocaust enlarge the personal predicament by imagining the girl as a victim to Nazi father.

Most of her poems are deeply attached to those memories of rootlessness and alienation. Absence of father had created a vacuum in her life and so her poetry was marked with same vacuum, nostalgia and homesickness. She started to think that death was the only way which could create the bond between her alien self and well defined personality.

Sylvia Plath was alienated from her environment. She felt victimized and fragmented from that culture in which she grew. Once she wrote in her diary about herself,

“I still do not know myself perhaps I never will. But I feel free..... unbound by responsibility..... I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married..... I want, I think, to be omniscient. I would like to call myself the girl who wanted to be God..... never, never, will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul..... My life is still just beginning. I am strong I long for the cause to devote my energies to.....”

A Cambridge acquaintance defines exploratory side of Sylvia’s psyche, “Sylvia felt that a drawing back in the face of any aspect of life was nothing less than horrible, a voluntary courting of deformity. It disgusted her, filled her with an angry contempt..... Sylvia was serious and truthful and highly evolved.... She explored everything that happened to her with precision and courage....”

But there was a persistent and agonizing hollowness at the core of Sylvia’s existence, an absence of the centre. “She seemed incomplete like fragments of mercury racing and quivering toward a center to settle in a self contained mass, ramification of her personality sought a focal point.” Her suicide resulted mainly from her inability to find that focal point. So her poetry is replete with purposelessness and optimistic fascination with the possibilities of death. She saw no end to the blackness of her world, one of her poem reflected the theme as:

“This is the light of mind, cold and planetary. The trees of the mind are black.....
And the message of the Yew tree is blackness- blackness and silence.”

She once told that everybody seemed rootless and I know only jews seem to be part of something, belonged to soething definite and rooted. Sylvia did belong to something but she was unaware of it. Though she tried to make few confused and guilt ridden guesses in several of her poems, but primarily it was the death which transformed her and then reborn as pure and true. Caroline King Bernard also felt, “earthly life was merely a prerequisite for death, often even a preparatory series of small deaths.” Her works did not come to us posthumously, they were written posthumously. This appears to be philosophical, but it proved to be an evidence of total racial and cultural desolation, achieved by cutting the western artist from her roots. Her search for identity, her inner contradictions and her conflicts made her life and mind so tragically instructive that she searched for a persona with which she can contemplate her dead father. So selecting the Jewish guise was almost automatic and it was stroke of unconscious genius, because jewish role offered her status of victim and sense of family. Though she was jewish in spirit but got alienated from her environment. She viewed reality through the telescope of an outsider which brought only sorrow for her.

She felt victim not merely to sense of desertion caused by her father’s death and infidelities of her husband, but the campaign of deception and distortion that had been waged fanatically for more than a century against the integral soul of west. The health of culture will unfailingly reflect itself in the art of culture as:

“When the driving force behind a cultural organism becomes twisted to serve alien purposes, when the magical power behind its natural unfolding is reshaped and used by those who have no comprehension of its inner meaning of necessities, than a kind of death ensues.”

In a study of suicide the writer Alfred Alvarez notes that “(O)ne of the most remarkable features of the art in this century has been the sudden sharp rise in the casualty rate among the artists.” It was certainly

predictable. Life void of the vital purpose or meaning that only cosmic consciousness of a high culture can impart.

Alvarez wrote of "..... this absurdity, this blend sense of being nothing more to life than life itself, as the foundation on which all modern art rests." And Sylvia Plath's "death in life" poetry can be understood in this context. She had not died natural death; she was murdered, choked to death on a mountain of alien filth. "Before the 20th century it is possible to discuss cases individually, since the gifted artist who killed them or were even seriously suicidal were rare exceptions." There were the awesome forces flowing through and around Sylvia Plath. Her German ancestry- which in another time and place could have saved her - made her doubly vulnerable. Sylvia was indeed sick. In her riveting and fascinating verse she made a few telling thrusts towards health, towards a true understanding of her condition, but they were insufficient. Living in a collapsing horror she "created rhythms more compelling and compulsive than anything contemporary poetry has known."

In the poem "Daddy", if it seems to be "sick" it was, Sylvia, as noted, was a sick girl. The critic Robert Phillips described her poems as full of blackness, one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written. A.R. Jones believes this and her other "Last poems" achieve a compulsive intensity no so much from their element of naked confession but from this assumption that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind. This response is quite visible in following poem:

"It stuck in a barb wire snare.
ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak
I thought every German was you. And the language obscene.
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."

This poem imparts a hypnotic and startling effect upon readers, and perhaps in the history of poetry. John Frederick wrote that device used by Sylvia carried an electric charge. That charge was due to frustration of her inability to find her roots and her agonizing sense of guilt for being German. In reality her father, Otto Plath was an anti-Nazi. His death left Sylvia on lonely way to walk through the hating world of anti German. In her fantasies she thought of her father was pure German, pure Aryan, and she prayed to recover him but failed because of lack of communication between the dead father and the girl. Critics assume that Plath by taking a Jewish persona, wished to cast herself as victim. But in the poem she had shown herself as a killer also. She had never said that she was a jew, but she always said, she might be the one. The whole poem gave the evidence that Sylvia had no idea about her identity and this disturbed her and led her to path of suicide. In death by suicide "Sylvia Plath suffered the fate of voicelessness. Alvarez rightly said that, "She gambled for the last time having worked out the odds, not much caring whether she won or lost. Her calculation went wrong and she lost." She miscalculated her circumstances and resultant she had to lose her life.

The child who had recited this poem was of course a grown woman, one who could understand the polarity and the natural spiritual relationship between the sexes. The problem with her was that she was never able to find a "fascist" who was a "pure or true", a man with enough mastery over life to be a giver and a taker, one who coupled to protect her from the consciousness of an existence. She created "a model" of Daddy in Ted Hughes. At the end of poem daddy and Ted become the same person. Ted Hughes, for Sylvia was another "Vampire", a taker. "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and her other late poems showed the fury directed against the males. In following lines:

"Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut."

Sylvia was bound to her own culture unknowingly. If she would not have had this problem of "Fascist" to contend with, much less would she to kill them with such inner torment she hated fascists because she loved them. Alvarez said about the poem, "Daddy is a love poem". And it is also a suicide note, one of many Sylvia

left in her poetry in her last six months. Sylvia Plath probably had no real choice- in an existential sense- but to commit suicide. Her deed was strangely logical and quite proper. The resignation and total nihilism of her final poems were chilling:

“The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying
We have come so far, it is over.”

It can only be devoutly hoped that in the future some of the more prideful and combative western artists will seize the dagger pointed at their own hearts and plunge it where it properly belongs into the vitals of the male violent and smirking thing that destroyed Sylvia Plath and will destroy the future of Sylvia Plath any many others until it is finally thrust into the graveyard of history.

The poet has used her psychological images and the sense of her own vulnerability resulted from isolation to society, and she viewed herself as victim of her own culture. Plath casted herself as member of the jewish race who was persecuted. The holocaust was the ultimate experience of human violence and Plath was perhaps the only poet who could internalize this condition of brutal dehumanization. The theme of guilt appeared in the poems added to the existential vision that they were tried to project. Plath felt responsible for her father’s death as he died at the time when her mind was psychologically most involved with her father. In Plath it grows into a lifelong search for a father figure and consequent feeling of guilt resulting from the fear of incest. Her search for vision was more basic in that she wanted to break out of the body and merge into the other. Plath was such a great artist as she consciously manipulated her inner state of turmoil into artistic whole, in the process recovering a certain degree of hold on reality. This frustration s quite visible in her poem Berk-Plage:

“This black boot has no mercy for anybody.
Why should it, it is the hearse
Of a dead foot.”

Though Sylvia Plath herself has said,

“I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informal and intelligent mind.”

Yet she put the speaker/herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization. Her characters portrayed how terror may grip the mind and render it rigid. Through her speaker’s projective fantasies, she projected her own understanding of hysterical control and the darker knowledge of imagination. She used the strategy to deal with these experiences by exaggerating to heighten the ordinary experiences. Plath stood outside to judge her characters, drawing caricatures not only of madness but of its counterpart and hysterical sanity. Later she began to let the characters speak for themselves in caricature, parody and hyperbole. When the mind that dealt with terror stiffness and rigidities, parody became natural means of expression. Her poem Elm depicted the reality as:

Love is shadow
How you lie and cry after it
Listen;
These are its hooves; it has gone off like horse.
All might I shall gallop this,
impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, four pillow like a turf,

Echoing, echoing.”

Her later poems were a strong response to oppressive modern society and her dual consciousness of self as both subject and object. The dialectical tension between self and world was for that location of meaning in Sylvia Plath’s poems. Her later poems characterized by a conflict between Stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, these were largely about what stood in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self was more often trapped within a closed cycle. She expressed herself in following lines:

“And the soul is a bride
In a still place, and the groom is red and forgetful,
He is featureless.

.....
For a minute the sky pours into the hole like
Plasma
There is no hope, it is given up.”

One moves- but only in a circle and continuously back to the same starting point. The self can change and transformed, only if the world in which it exist be transformed, only if the world in which it exist be transformed, as the possibilities of the self are intimately and inextricably bound up with the world. Sylvia Plath’s sense of entrapment, her sense, and her choices were limited and directly connected to the particular time and place in which she wrote her poetry. So her later poems described the American women in a “comfortable concentration Camp” – physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished. The recurring metaphors of fragmentation – the abstraction of the individual – in Plath’s late poetry were socially and historically based. They were images of “Nazi concentration camps of fire, bombs” cannons wars through the roof. Social history became the landscape of her works and she went back in time to encompass such significant historical events. In poem Berk Plage she depicted her pain as:

“The high, dead , toeless foot of this priest
Who plumbs the well of his book.”

Her feet trapped between nature and society, biology and intellect, her self definition and expectation of others, as between two mirrors. Her images of wars and concentration camps, of mass and individual violence, were only the end result of an underlying depersonalization, an abdication of people to their artifacts and an economic and social structure that equates people and objects. Sylvia Plath was doubly isolated both from a past tradition and a present community, she found it difficult to structure new present community, and she found it difficult to structure new alternatives for the future. No wonder her individual quest for rebirth failed as it led her continuously in a circle back to the same self in the same world. Finally what she bequeathed us in her poems is a brilliant narrative of the struggle to survive.

Almost to the very end Plath remained ambivalent, retained her dual identity and could not celebrate liberation or defiance. Those experiences left the author with no possibility of development other than violent wrenching in tone. Experiences of Holocaust made her uneasy. Howe discovers in Plath an uneasiness about the tone in lines.

“I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels rent. I
guess you could say I’ve a call. It’s easy enough to do in
a cell. It’s easy enough to do it and stay put. It’s the
theatrical.”

This uneasiness drove her towards sentimental violence. Miller told that the reason for Plath’s despair was not her sufferings alone but the impossibility of communicating her suffering to other person. Throughout her life this identity crisis followed her and her poem ‘Mary’s song’ suggested that “History is nightmare from which she was trying to awaken.” It indicated her pessimism that she found everywhere. The human heart became that Holocaust in which she had to walk. She explained her horror in these lines:

“It is a heart
The holocaust I walk in
O golden child the world will kill and eat.”

This rage and pity blended with a sense of passivity and helplessness was an essential, innate condition of her heart. Sylvia Plath’s family history especially her childhood coupled with those gloomy experiences and her literary training in romantic and modern literature gave her a pessimistic cast of mind and enabled her to cast human conditions in true sense. In that case, the black or bleak outlook was already inherent in the speaker of her poems and evocations of the universal infamy in the poem amounted only to marshalling of

historical “facts” to fit a specific outlook or interpretation of life. In this connection we have to turn Ted Hughes’s account of Plath’s work.

“They (Plath’s Poems) can be intensely artificial but they are always lit with her innate excitement..... one can see here, too how exclusively her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus.”

Plath selectively reproduced the official history and she fully succeeded in relating that “history” to “her story”. this blend made her a true poet and Mathew Arnold well said that:

“It is an advantage to mankind in general to live in a beautiful world; that no one doubt. But for the poet is it important? We mean all sorts of things I know, by Beauty. But the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.”

Howe, the humanist finds Sylvia Plath’s poetry was too personal, too subjective and fragmentary and one can hardly doubt that they are remarkable. They did bring an element of experience that advanced the thrust of literary modernism by every inch. In her poem she exaggerated the ordinary experience to intensify the mind’s manipulative skills. Her poems reflected not only the outer reality but projected her inner reality.

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