

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2018.2.6.27>

Negotiating with Self: A Critical Study of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Dr. Mirza Sibtain Beg

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Shia P. G. College,

Lucknow, U. P., India

Abstract

Like coruscating comet, Sylvia Plath is an iridescent star illuminating the firmament of American English Poetry. She is highly venerated and viewed as a cult figure in modern American poetry. The entire corpus of her poetry is emblematic of her personal pain, her personality, and regressive recantation with the outward forces and outer world's menace. Her poetry is the eternal destination where the chariot of her creativity and life yearns to reach to. Her 'Self' in different guises turns mordant metaphor in her poetic pursuit; her Self becomes leit motif in her entire journey of poetic excellence. She observes the outer world with keen observant eye and sees life from the serene spectacle of death. The dynamics of the perspectives of her poetry enthusiastically explores variegated conflicts and complexities of life her negotiation with her selves unabashedly. Towards the fag-end of her brilliant poetic career, her philosophy of life soaked in all vigour, verve and vim converges into the cool confluence of her divided selves. Surprisingly, she perspicaciously peels of the different layers circumscribed around her with psychic honesty and flawless artistic excellence, and opens heart to her readers nonchalantly. Hurts, hate and haze doesn't petrify her, instead vivifies her fortitude to supersede seething solitude.

Keywords- *Pain, Passion, Self, Hurt, Hate, Patriarch*

Introduction

Pulsating passion for poetry and throbbing thirst and thrust for life led Sylvia Plath delve deep into her own self. Not in commensuration with short sojourn in this physical world, her poetic oeuvre is propitiously prolific. She has attained the cult stature in the elite echelons of American English poetry by the dint of her four scintillating collections: *The Colossus and other Poems* (1960), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971) and *Ariel* (1963). Her whole gamut is the pathetic proposition of her selves. In her first poetic collection, *Colossus*, we witness manifestation of herself, her second

volume *Crossing the water* recollects her inquisitive tendency another self, her third volume showcases her endeavour to dramatize the manifestation of herself, her last but most popular venture *Ariel* catapults her at the pinnacle of perfection for dramatizing of her true self perceptibly. Her early poetry is the eclectic expression of her engagement with the outer world, and later poetry adduces the conflicts underlying her inner world. In the beginning of her illustrious career, she seems groping gorging in and around herself, and her own experiences of life to find an outlet for her pent up feelings and gurgling emotions. Suzanne Juhasz is out rightly on spot when she avers:

It is understandable that a person who sees division, separation in her very self, who is morbidly conscious of surfaces and interiors and of the gap between the two, will aware of corresponding states in the external world (93).

In *Colossus and other Poems*, she penetrates and pierces playfully into the abyss of her selves. She is adept at depicting the variegated hamartia and its hues present in human beings, herself and nature, tenaciously touches the very chords of the hearts of her readers avidly. ‘Self’ and its incorporation in her poetic venture has become an idiom. She consciously and conscientiously paints her various morbid moods and selves in her poetry in an ebullient way. Louis Simpson succinctly remarks harking on her penchant to project self in her poetry: “Psychoanalysing oneself and looking for associations were common in intellectual circles in the fifties; this appeared in poetry as the creation of metaphors, the more remarkable the better (117).” She enthuses enchantment to her selves to reflect and refract in her poetry in the maze of vacuous narcissistic and nebulous contours. Mark the following lines of the poem “Beast”:

Mud-Sump, happy sty-face

I’ve married a cupboard of rubbish.

I bed in a fish puddle.

Down here the sky is always falling (*Collected Poems* 134).

“The Colossus” is the title poem of her first volume published in her life time, she gives an aperture to her emotions to connect her readers through charting painful and pathetic expressions. She expresses the wish of every child to have the cool cocoon of paternal security and assurance: it is the desire of moth of the star that desperately drives to the improbable revival of dead father to life. The Colossus image externalizes her adoration and appreciation of the masculinity and might of his father. She doesn’t want to capitulate and turn complacent but dynamic and move on. The poem shows her acquiring the central stage and longing to be absolved of the stasis she is stuck in:

Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour

The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.

My hours are married to shadow.

No longer di I listen for the scrape of keel

On the blank stones of the landing (*Collected Poems* 130).

The poem "Spinster" is immersed in her own longings and experiences. The poem unravels her distorted self, shows the buoyant feelings of a spinster. She seems more mature not to be lured to the advances of her lover. The persona of the poem is tilted tangentially towards nature, extensively ecstatic and wary of her emotions. She ultimately absolves herself of titillation of nature and man. She highlights the predicament of insecure girl, and reveals her tumultuous and tormented self. Mark the following lines of the poem:

And round her house she set

Such a barricade of barb and cheek

Against mutinous weather

As no mere insurgent man could hope to break

With curse, fist, threat

Or love, either (*Collected Poems* 50).

The poem "Aftermath" promulgates her gloomy self, it shows the intensity of poignantly painful life. She explicates her personal experiences unabashedly. The poems, "Two Views of Cavader Room", and "Suicide off Egg Rock" are reflective of her injured and sullied self. She doesn't want to be impinged upon by the gnawing hostilities and horror of the outer world. The poem "Two Views of Cavader Room" presents two discreet views: the first view describes the visit of a girl to the operation theatre and her repulsive reaction; and other view is alluded to Brughel's painting. In the poem, she finds her melancholic self surrendering to serene and somnambulistic strength of love. "Suicide of the Egg Rock" shows man's successful suicide attempt. The poem springs forth ordeal and languishing between life and death. She doesn't appear all devastated by the excruciating agony of life, instead she dives deep into the avalanche of her gurgling emotions in order to attain the acme of survival.

The volume *Crossing the Water* (1971) is cyclorama of her pain, plight and predicament, explores vagaries of her inner self. The poem shows her roller coaster surge and her chariot of artistic endeavour galloping. The poetic collection is prim presentation of her life experiences and discerns and dissipates her inner psyche. The poem underpins her tormented and torn family life, and her meteoric rise in her literary career too. Caroline King Bernard gives apt appraisal of the poems of the volume: "a kind of stepping- stone quality or sense of floundering of being neither on one shore nor the other. Both in the form and in substance, these poems are mainly interesting only because they represent an important stage in Sylvia Plath's poetic development" (57).

“Wuthering Heights” is very florid piece verse highly reflective of her sense of loneliness and alienation. The poem depicts the beautiful landscapes and panoramic beauty of nature and showcases the vituperative side of nature. She looks upon sky with sanguine and serene eyes. The poem also apprises us with her sympathetic attitude towards animals. She thinks that sheep are luckier than her to exert leverage for it’s worth. She seems awfully affront seeing the pall of gloom all around. Her melancholic self is discern in the poem mordantly. It also propounds her ambivalent thought towards nature in general and life in particular. The poem also portends her death wish inalterably. The following lines bear the testimony:

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
Among all horizontals.
The grass is bearing its head distractedly
It is too delicate
For a life in such company;
Darkness terrifies it.
Now, in valleys narrow
And black as purses, the house lights
Gleam like small change (*Collected Poems* 168).

The very florid poem “Pheasant” brings maintains her buoyant self and heroics of a pheasant. The poem shows her appalling apathy towards masculinity, and she vehemently vivifies her husband not to kill the bird. She lashes out at the fury of male power and domination in the world. The poem is an outcry against male hegemony and put forth her tortured self. Another poem of this lurid collection is “Widow” a chiaroscuro of her painful feelings, sense of aloofness and loss of inheritance. The poem throws light on her torn self and her estranged relationship with her husband Ted Hedges and absolute avowal from it. All the wounds and wallowing in the pain thereof is allayed to some an extent by the healing touch supplanted by her poetic artistry. See the lines of the poem “Widow” validate the point:

That is the fear she has-the fear
His soul may beat and be beating at her dull sense
Like blue Mary’s angel, dovelike against a pane
Blinded to all but the gray, spiritless room
It looks in on. And must go on lookin in on (*Collected Poems* 164).

In “Love Letter”, Plath foregrounds her new transformed self in an ebullient way. The poem is subtle piece of verse tangentially titillates her readers with her true self, “Facelift” is another charming poem illuminating the outpourings of herself stoutly. “The Stones” is the ground breaking

poem resurrecting her as an ardent and avid craftsman. Mark the following lines of the poem “The Stones”:

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.

The vase, reconstructed, houses

The elusive rose (*Collected Poems* 137).

Akin in vision, verve, and vigour to *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and *Crossing the Water* (1971), the poems of third volume *Winter Trees* (1971) carry forward hurts, hatred towards male domination, divided self, reclusion and repulsion for life and death. The poem “Three Women, A Poem for Three Voices” pinpoints her blood smearing agonies and anguish, and presents her three selves and their interconnected conflicts. The first woman in the poem is fully content with her lot and being the mother of a son, the second woman loses her child through miscarriage, and third one is reluctant to abandon her unwanted child. Plath’s views on pregnancy and motherhood are rancid and rancorous. The poem shows her obdurate ordeal and personal angst. Mark the following lines of the poem:

There is no miracle more cruel than this.

I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.

I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.

Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations.

The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.

I am the centre of atrocity.

What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering? (*Collected Poems* 180).

The poem “Lesbos” overflows in avalanche of malevolence, it reports repugnant outburst of hatred towards immediate neighbour who butt in on the entry of her daughter’s pet in house. The poem shows her wounded self: squirming and seething with anger to avenge neighbour and square score with the outside world. The poem flaunts readers flinching and flustering to catch the rhythm and tone of the poem. The poem was composed during her estranged relationship with her husband Ted Huges, and illustrates her the corrosion of her jaunty and jubilant self. The poem is a bright blend of private and public, and externalises the haze of her hurts inflicted by the outside world. A. R. Jones rightly rues that, “the relationship between the inner and outer worlds is fractured, the outer world holding up a mirror in which the inner world can see the distorted self (22).”

Plumbing the vividness of her agonies, anguish aplomb which are the bedrock of the poem, the poet draws an analogy between trees and woman. The poem unravels her ossified outrage against the atrocities meted out to women by the patriarchal world, she considers trees having more stability than women. In the poem “Childless Woman”, she shows phoenix as a symbol of rebirth and revival.

The poem is woven around the theme regression, repression and release. Mark the following lines of the poem “Childless Woman”:

The womb

Rattles it pod, the moon

Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go (*Collected Poems* 259).

“The Rabbit Catcher” is one of the finest poems of this collection, overwhelmingly oozes out her sorrows and loveless state. The poem is shrouded in uncertainty, helplessness and hopelessness punctuated with painful precision. She envisions bushes supplanting tumult and torment to her torn self. The poem launches a tirade against subjection and suppression of woman by man in a revolutionary way. She identifies herself with rabid rabbit who is entrapped by a heartless rabbit catcher. The fierce ferocity of wind, the sea and gorse mirrors her gloom and doom. Mark E. Leib aptly adduces his appraisal of poems of the collection, *Winter Trees*: “Plath is as usual in full control of her craft as she handles her familiar themes, the encroachment of death, the search for escape for mental torment and pitiless cruelty of the world (45).”

Ariel (1965) immerses us in limpid pool of dejection and despair, perspicuously projects her personal and public acquaintances. Her transformational journey is tenacious tale of the search of her true self. The phenomenal rise and redemption in the poems of the collection catapults her prodigious genius into imperceptible depths. She demonstrates the exploration and evolution of herself with her unflinching and unwavering tone. The poems in the collection are overflowed with the cascading emotional ejections. Freida Huges is quite apt to add: “(Plath) wasted nothing of what she felt, and when in control of those tumultuous feelings she was able to focus and direct her incredible poetic energy to great effect (xix-xx). The lurid poems “Elm”, “The Man and the Yew Tree”, “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, “The Applicant”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Poppies in October”, “Ariel”, “A Birthday Present”, “Daddy”, “Fever 103⁰”, etc. are drowned in the whirlpool of herself and all poems are resultant reflection thereof.

However, “Elm” is a very lurid piece of verse of the collection dabbled in melancholy, hurts and haze, and throbbing passion. The poem dissipates her unbridled and unchecked revelation of herself. The tree in the poem symbolises her tormented self, self- exploration in the maze of mental peace and hurricane is a panacea for her redemption. She faces all the knowing tendrils and tremors of real world bravely and brazenly. She perceives perspicaciously rush of emotional response to sea, sea-sand, rain, morbid and mauling moon, scarlet sunset, callous clouds etc, she uses symbols like sea, tree, moon, flower and sunset project her variegated selves. The poem is highly symbolic of her pall of gloom and masochistic endeavour. See the following lines:

I am terrified by this dark thing

That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.
Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievable?
Is it for such I agitate my heart? (*Collected Poems*193).

The representation of herself in different guises becomes the leit motif in her *Ariel* poems. The very first poem of this collection “Morning Song” pinpoints her desire to be loved and cared for. The poem shows the ecstasy of a precocious child who seems absolutely unaware of the tormented tornado she has to plunge into later in her life. “Balloons” is a luminous poem that shows the same buoyancy of a child and her viewing this transitory world, she regards love as the bedrock of healthy and its absence leaves life dark and a dungeon place. She laments the life of modern women short of love, and advocates sanguine family welfare and care. She cogently considers childhood cocooned in bliss and buoyancy that can redeem her world. See the lines of the poem “Balloons” that corroborate the point:

The heart like wishes or free
Peacocks blessing
Old ground with a feather
Beaten in starry metals. (*Collected Poems* 272).

Apart from childhood, another theme

The Bee poems “The Arrival of Bee Box”, “The Swarm”, “The Bee-Meeting” etc. explicates the propagation and pace of the chariot of her creativity and her obsession with death. She propounds that the children are a glimmer of hope for futuristic bliss, similarly bees blow a trumpet of blissful future and brazen past. The poem shows her train of eternal exploration of true self. She confronts claustrophobically with her tortured self, but her struggle is superseded by the redemption of her ‘self’. “Ariel” is the title poem and shows her experiences of riding on the horseback at dawn whose name is Ariel. The Poem signifies her death wish irrevocably. “Tulips” is also very ground breaking poem that is woven around her experiences of sickness and hospital life. The poem recollects her experiences of being a patient at a hospital recuperating and recovering from an appendectomy and receiving bunch of tulip flowers from a well-wisher. She feels flavour of fresh tulip flowers amid acrid ambience of hospital, and impinging on her private self. The red tulips enthuse her to come over the flaring frustrations and failures.

Over and above, the poems “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy”, and “Fever 103⁰ “proclaims public blending with private.” Lady Lazarus” woven around the myth inscribed in Holy Bible, according to which Christ resurrected his ally Lazarus from the dead. The poem presents fine fusion of her

personal pains aspirations. The poem exhibits another myth of Phoenix which gets raised from its ashes after five centuries. The poem "Daddy" is her most popular poem that entails her dilemma and distress she was subjected in her life to. The memories of her dead father, Otto Plath, who died immaturely incessantly hounds and haunts her. She begins to see her father as a Nazi, a torturer and herself tortured as Jews. The poem shows her tortured self, the hapless poetess never comes out his shadow throughout her whole life. The relationship between father and daughter has been painted like between Nazi and Jews. The poem is the exposition of an interplay of love and hate. Her last poem, "Words" elucidates her fortitude and firm resolve arising out of her tormented and bold cuddling anguish soul. She concludes that she can come on the pinnacle of perfection by embracing death. She selects awe-inspiring virtuosity and triumph of fate over human desires.

In conclusion, we may say that deep down the vortex of her emotional incantation, we see beacon brightens. Her entire poetic gamut is the spectacle of her glowing self, an ardent account of her negotiation with self. She is stirred and spurred by the phantoms of her gory and golden past; she is profoundly petrified by the stark realities of the present. She externalises and internalises her experiences, effulgent emotions, excruciating pain, and ekes out a lurid life festooned by both centripetal and centrifugal forces stoutly. Her poetry hovers around themes namely: relations, nature and death. She creates locus with these themes, inextricably linking, and juxtaposing them to the life force-her self- and interrelating them.

References

- Bernard, Caroline King. *Sylvia Plath*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1978. p. 57.
- Hughes, Freida. Foreword, *Ariel: The Restored Edition by Sylvia Plath*, Harper and Row, New York, 2004.
- Jones, A. R. "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton." *The Critical Enquiry*. 7, 1965. p. 22.
- Juhasz, Suzanne *Naked Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition*, Octagon, 1976. p. 93.
- Leib, Mark E. *Into the Maelstrom*. Harvard Advocate, Winter, 1973.p. 45.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1981.
- Simpson, Loius. "Black Blended with Yellow" *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*, Macmillan, London, 1987. p. 117.