CHAPTER 4

Sylvia Plath’s Poetry

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 . . .” Sylvia Plath’s poems come out of her consciousness, which is immensely forceful, but below the threshold. She produces disconcerting, terrifying poems; and the power, the decisiveness, the positiveness and the starkness of these poems are decided not by an identifiable poetic personality, expressing herself, but by a woman finding herself in a difficult situation. She is concerned with processes that go underneath the surface of consciousness and yet affect the self in some more intimate and powerful ways.

Critics have described Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet, an extremist poet, a post-romantic poet, a pre-feminist poet, a suicidal poet and so on. Some see her as a schizoid, carrier of a death-wish, while others 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 mode to wrestle with the problems and the ways in which she gave voice to those contradictions and fragmented aspects of her personality at a time 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 significance, however, lies not in her exposure of autobiographical material but in her dramatic approach to the representation of a threatened and violent self. Her mixed violent world of nostalgia and hatred, of self-transformation and negation represents her sense of antagonism between herself and others. This antagonistic relationship is 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 overcome 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 applied the term 'confession' to Robert Lowell's work, has argued that Plath followed the autobiographical method of \textit{Life Studies}. Lowell's work did 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.¹

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."

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 obtain an objective character through repetition, allusion and symbolic enactment.
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 poems, and the later more matured poems. There is a notable difference between her earlier poems, and the later ones not only in respect of subject matter and imagery, but also 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". 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. Poems 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 . . .

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 ends 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.
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 proclaimant, as a recurrent and powerful subject, gathers a number of her central themes such as her exploration of the boundary between self and world, her struggle to be reborn into 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.

In 'Departure' the fragile humankind is broken into a brutal end, which Mary Lyne Broe defines as 'petrification threatened human existence':

The leaden slag of the world
But always expose
The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay,
Against which the burnt of outer sea
Beats, is brutal endlessly.

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
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:

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check.

She is afraid of being lost and deserted and unable to connect imaginatively with her surroundings. Plath’s “I” stands shut out:

... I/ Stood shut out once for all
Puzzling the passage of their
Absolutely alien...
Nature is hostile to her and grips her in its alien power. It is charged with a force which both maintains and extinguishes life. Finally, Plath craves for death and wishes to escape from nature's hostility.

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. A loss of identity prevails within her:

I am so vulnerable suddenly.
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me? I undo her fingers like
Bandages: I go.

The association of hospital, illness, suffering and torture is not an uncommon phenomenon, but it is a fairly insistent motif in her work.
where she describes the vulnerability and hostility of her surroundings. The ideas of destruction keep on running through her lines.

That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destruction,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed.

The flatness of her miscarriage is an indication of the malice and evil of the world, in which according to Plath, man has used his intellect to device means of torture and death. Her dark world is punctuated by the sense of blackness and isolation, projecting a growing depression at the core of her existence. Consequently she feels like breaking apart:

I am breaking apart like the world.
There is this Blackness,
This ram of blackness.
I fold my hands on a mountain—
... I am used. I am drummed into use.
My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
I see nothing.

The themes of Plath's experimental poems describing her personal experience, self-expression, identity crisis and threat from nature's violence reveal her yearning to escape from the world to attain a better life.

The early collection of Plath's poems is considered by several critics to be 'less matured poems' or 'those of beginners'. P. J. Annas is of the view that Sylvia Plath yearns for the Appolonian choice of rationality and order, which implies separation between the self and the world and control of the world by self while her poems express the Dyonsian desire
to transcend the boundaries of self and to merge with larger things. The persona sees the hostile world splitting into two warring principles of life and death, that limits her desires and controls the possibilities of existence in general. These poems consist of the balancing of contradictory realities and the conflicting attitudes towards life and death with a desired existence of the childhood and a suggested constancy of death and rebirth. As Jon Rosenblatt, suggests, we must read the final line of The Colossus as the simultaneous testimony to two contradictory emotional desires: to be reborn in a totally 'new' self and to attain the 'old' self with its hatred for itself and others. These poems are inspired by maternal feelings and are overtly personal, thus protruding the dark self of the poet. The language, pattern and form of these early poems is not adequately developed. Sylvia Plath herself describes the immaturity of her early collection:

For example, my first book, The Colossus — I can't read any of my poems aloud now. I did not write them to be read aloud. In fact, they quite privately bore me. Now these very recent ones — I've got to say them. I speak them to myself. Whatever lucidity they may have, comes from the fact that I say them aloud. 

The marked change in Sylvia Plath's poetry is obvious in her four volumes demonstrating her progress and struggles within her own poetic forms. Through 1950-59, she spent much of her energy assimilating the language and words of moderns, thus producing The Colossus. The same transitional quality was continued further in the second volume Crossing the Water written in 1960-61, where she moves hesitantly towards more
open forms, to develop a kind of new personal style. About these 'new poems' she said in an interview for the BBC:

These new poems of mine have one thing in common. They were all written at about four in the morning — that still blue, almost eternal hour before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles...\textsuperscript{15}

These poems were more matured and characterised by an innate intensity. What Ted Hughes calls as "the final phase", begins in April 1962 and stretches till her death in February 1963. "These poems are all out of batch from which the Ariel poems were more or less arbitrarily chosen and they were all composed in the last year of Sylvia Plath's life".\textsuperscript{16} Here the hesitant and too controlled gesture of The Colossus has disappeared and is replaced by a freer and surer poetry — attempting to relate and harmonise the internal experience with the perceived external events. The uneasy apprehensions of the early poetry have developed into a systematic laying bare of the terrible discrepancy between actuality and desire.\textsuperscript{17}

By and large Sylvia Plath's chief concern in writing poems was to relate her personal torture with that of the hostile world. Regarding her options, she once wrote to her mother in 1958:

"I've discovered my deepest source of inspiration, which is art: the art of primitives like Henri Rousseau, Gauguin, Paul Klee, and de Chirico."\textsuperscript{18}
Whether Plath really rose to the heights of primitives is debatable, but it is certain that her confessions were developmentally significant in several ways. For instance, it seems that she cannot maintain the intellectual defences in her transitional poems but it does give way to her future poems where she has acquired more predominant mode of fineness and power. She brings out her candid self-revelations and focuses on the frank literary versions of the emotional growth that she is experiencing: "a protean self image co-exists with the poet's continuous critique of her art and by enacting the growing mobility of her own consciousness... she evaluates the development of her poetry." Invigorated by a new imaginative power, she shows a strong tendency to diminish herself to the domesticated and the palpable and feels lost in the vast universe. She clamors: "Empty, I echo to the least football", I am "tiny and inert as a rice grain" and "I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of this light". Unlike her mother Aurelia Plath, who optimistically judged the natural fact of procreation or the feminine art of beautification, Sylvia Plath herself is censored not for her deviance but for conformity. She situates her pregnancy within sacrilegious communal myth of female fulfilment, yet her efforts to present her body in a form pleasing to her counterpart fail; the body is inherently obscene and its practices barbaric.

Sylvia Plath determinedly and fiercely wrote of the female experiences in the context of time and place that shaped her mind specifically during mid 50's and 60's — a period after World War II and a feminist United States. It was a time when American women were considered to be better and more successful by being wife and mother rather than adopting a career. Plath's life exemplifies the tension and stress of success ethics and the conflict faced by many women who had enough creative talent yet wished to fulfill the conventional role expected of them. In much of her poetry, women are portrayed as dumb blonde cardboard figures, derided as old maids or despised for becoming
housewives. Her conclusion, in poems like 'Spinster', 'Two Sisters of Presephone' and 'Winter Treachery', is that it is the fate of all women to be consumed by 'abortions', 'bitchery' or 'domestic drudges', all of which are culturally hostile to female creativity. In 'Two Sisters of Presephone', the two character represent a conflict between intellectualism and femininity within themselves. The first woman sits in deep resentment in a 'dark wainscotted room' with a sterile body:

As she calculates each sum
At this barren enterprise
Rat shrewd go her squint eyes
Root pale her meager frame.

The second woman lies 'lulled near a bed of poppies'. In "Spinster" also she continues her motif of barrenness in woman. Another feminist poem "Lesbos" describes a strong connection between the individual experience of oppression and a social pressure which produces it. Here she hysterically confesses the outcome of the unsuccessful married life; and the tensions of domesticity and the atmosphere of hate and resentment are vividly evoked in the onomatopoeic opening lines, "Viciousness in the kitchen / The potatoes hiss". The title "Lesbos" is taken from the name of an island which is creative and peaceful and where Sappho, the great poet of ancient world, lived with matriarchal culture. The striking contrast is shown between the title and theme, where the poet tries to indicate the devaluation of the femininity in women by the society. The despair and anger is projected towards man and society subjected to some form of dehumanisation and identity crisis.

Sylvia Plath, however, dislikes being a classic feminist. She writes in her journals: "I am at odds. I dislike being a girl", or "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy". Admits to be an alienated person: "Yes,
my consuming desires to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers... all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female, always in danger of assault and battery."  

21 She wishes to rise up of this indifference and to pertain her own identity: "I think I am going up / I think I may rise". The concept and the emergence as a degraded female also fiend place in some poems where she enters into a dialogue with self. As a Queen Bee she writes "I have a self to recover, a queen" and sheds all other relations to itself. In her letters to her mother she often wrote: "I want, I think, to be omniscient... I think I would like to call myself 'The Girl who wants to be God'... I am I — I am powerful — but to what extent? I am I." 

22 Her question "Do I exist?" refers to the fear of being alienated in the vast man-made world and the repetition of "I am, I am, I am" shows her urge to be present in it.

In Plath's works, there is an expression of rage against me. The woman is presented as man's prey, tormented beyond endurance, perceiving his impossible demands or reduced to a role of lifeless puppet by his destructive expectations. In 'Applicant the woman is a "living doll"', the role being offered is that of a dehumanised wife, an innocent female —

It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

For her, man's relationship with nature and women is exploitative, and a female is nothing but man's idea to cleanse the body grossness. She feels culminated and loses her sexual identity:

Every woman's a whore
I can't communicate.
Her relationship with man further extends in dealing with her oppressiveness and authoritarianism towards feminism. For her “marriage is a form of imprisonment”, it has the foundation of “lies and grief”.

A ring of gold with the sun in it?
Lies, lies and a grief.
... A disturbance in mirrors
The sea shattering its gray one —
Love, love, my season.

Her isolation becomes a source of personal triumph when the shattered reflections of the broken sea take place on the smooth mirror of the wedding ring, that once held the sun’s reflection in it and her love for nature. Unlike men, she does not have any individuality “Neither a woman, happy to be like a man” but as a winded-up toy, she is a mere puppet in the hands of the “black suit”. She not only considers herself as a “living doll” but also as “a commodity”, “a smiling woman”, “a whore” or “a big striptease”, limited to the boundaries of domestication. Caroline King Bernard, in his book Sylvia Plath, argues that it seems futile for her to cast herself as a low caste woman in a male-dominated society, rebelling against it because “in her own marriage, she chose for herself a role of domestic submissiveness, while placing the success of her husband’s career above her own.”

The theme of love-hate relationship—particularly in the framework of courtship and marriage— is treated in “Songs for Summer Day”, “Ode to Ted”, “Pursuit”, “The Queen’s Complaint” and “Bucolics”. Some poems portray overwhelmingly sexual, bestial, violent and destructive characters while others focus on emotional pain caused by an unhappy ending, and still others describe the conflict between intellectual and
sexual parts of marriage. "Fever 103" expresses the tension of her sexual desires and restraints:

Darling all night
I have been flickering, off on, off on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

She projects herself as "too pure for you or anyone/ Your body/ Hurts me". The conflict is unresolvable and complex in lines:

... I
Am a pure acetylene
Virgin.
Attended by roses,
By kisses, by cherubin.
Not you, nor him.

"Pursuit" is another intense portrayal of passion, conveying a woman's frantic terror, 'dark guilt' and appalled self-awareness:

Entering the tower of my fears,
I shut my door on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt . . .
Panther's tread is on the stairs
Coming up and up the stairs . . .
I hurl my heart to halt his pace
To quench his thirst I squander blood.

The persona acts as a prey of black panther's pursuit. Terrified and attracted, she characterises him as greedy and violent, majestic and
graceful. She writes about her poem “Pursuit” that she “wrote a full page poem about the dark forces of lust: “Pursuit”. It is not bad, it is dedicated to Ted Hughes”. The most direct poem related to her husband is “Ode to Ted”. Her admiration and love for her man is portrayed vividly in terms of mythological Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

... how but most glad
Could be this Adam's woman
When all earth his words do summon
Leaps to land such man's blood.

In her letter to Aurelia Plath, she admitted her character Adam to be Ted Hughes and Garden of Eden as Cambridge. She wrote to her mother: “I met the strongest man in the world... a huge hulking, healthy Adam”. “Cambridge is a lovely green Eden, and to have an English spring and the dearest, most brilliant, strong, tender man in the world is too much to keep alone”. In “Songs for a Summer’s Day”, she writes about her romantic walk with Ted and reveals that she entangled him in a web of love finally ending in a disaster:

... the artful spider spun
a web for my one man
 till at the days flawed closing
 no call would work his rising.

Charles Newman claims that “no American poet of the era treated the theme of love with more candour than Emily Dickinson; and Sylvia Plath carries the tradition to equal heights at mid century. What lifts their work above the commonplace is the totality of their affections and the fastidiousness with which they express them. Both cut through popular
sociology by acknowledging the terrifying ambiguity of the female role, and then by universalising their very feminism.\textsuperscript{17} He claims that Plath, unlike Emily Dickinson who perpetually rejected it, suffered from "the inability to accept love". Kamala Das, an Indian confessional poet, like some other American poets of the era such as Sara Teasdale, Anne Sexton and Edna St. Vincent Millay, willingly accepted the bitterness and journeyed to the darkest interiors of self extinction.

Sylvia Plath attempts to locate herself within the female inscription system, but to a greater degree her growing rebelliousness towards male authority and hatred towards men seem rooted in her poems. All the male figures are adversary- Nazi victimiser, 'Herr Doctor', 'Herr God', 'Herr Enemy', 'Herr Lucifer'. Man is described as 'beautiful but annihilating' and insecurity and infidelity overpowers the goodness and charm of marriage. She refers to the downfall of two lovers, Adam, and Eve in "Firesongs":

\begin{quote}
brave love, dream
not of staunching such strict flame, but come
lean to my wound; burn on, burn on.
\end{quote}

"The Glutton" and "Bucolics" refer to the fear, horror and bitterness of the sexual urges:

\begin{quote}
He'll not spare
Nor scant his want until
Sacked larder's gone bone-bare.
\end{quote}

As a female victim, she exists only to satisfy male hunger, and vividly presents her lover as a fierce predatory animal who is brutal and insatiable in his lust and witchy in his attitude. The strumpet- spinster
conflict is expressed in a schizoid manner where the bitterness of male body thrives to ruin her femininity in "In Plaster":

Cold glass, how you insert yourself
Between myself and myself
I scratch like a cat.

The frankness and uprighting in dealing with the most intimate and personal feelings is one of the chief characteristics of Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry. Such poems are incomparable to those of any other confessional poets of the era, who deal with negative vitalism and guilt but are hesitant to discuss sex publicly. Plath feels frustrated with the undesired urges of man and tries to hide herself from 'pain' and 'hurt' and tries to efface herself:

And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut paper shadow.
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the Tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself,
The vivid Tulips eat my oxygen.

Despair and frustration engendered on love in earlier poems is changed to resignation now and she continues to exemplify her personal depersonalisation in poems like “Purdah”, “Lady Lazarus” and “Elm”.

These are my hands
My knees
I may be skin and bone
Nevertheless I am the same identical woman.
She finds herself contented with solitudeness. "I" in her poems tries identify with her extreme experiences:

It is so beautiful to have no attachments
I am solitary as grass.

Man’s body is persistently described by Plath as stiff, mechanical, flat and two dimensional, and also as an instrument or a tool to work upon other creatures or on the outside world. Men are represented as 'jealous' in Three Women, and man’s body as "Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack", she writes:

It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They
Are jealous gods.

Men are degraded to the level of "bastards", "a man in black with Meinkamph look" or "a vampire". Her devouring orality steadily becomes more threatening to her male opponents and she warns:

Beware,
Beware,
Out of Ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Sylvia Plath concentrates on dealing with family alliance viewed through private treatings. She brings out a more coherent dramatic verse in writing about herself and about her personal relationship with grandmother, mother, father, husband and child, thus dealing with her
own living experiences and private psyche like fantasies, memories, family history, childhood and also with marriage and after life. Dealing with such apportionings, she finally hits on intensely built up relationship with her father. A strange love-hate relationship is spelt out in her poems. Caroline K. Barnard comments:

Her hatred of men seems rooted not so much in opinion as in her deeply diabolic, ambivalent relationship with her father; it seems frivolous to say that her struggle with the colossus expresses merely a feminist's sense of sexual injustice.¹⁸

Sylvia Plath's father, Otto Emile Plath, died when she was ten, leaving her with shocking memories. Her own dilemma could not overcome the loss of her father when she was still a child:

... a black man who
bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.

Sometimes she shows a deep affection for her father but at other times she acquires a sense of hatred and an urge to kill him. Nancy Hunter Steiner reveals Plath's motive when she confessed about her father that

He was an autocrat ... I adored and despised him, and probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him.²¹
Patricide is readily apparent in her poetry. 'She wished to kill him but he died before she had time to: 'Daddy I've had to, kill you / You died before I had time'. The daughter-speaker claims that she was responsible for his death or that she has murdered him 'I've killed one man, I've killed two' and 'Daddy, you can lie back now.' The ambivalence can be seen in some of her poems where love and affection is directed to him, and she refers to his dominant qualities and unmatchable traits of his character bringing him to the level of God. She describes him as 'Marble heavy, a bag full of God' and writes about his superlative quality in 'Lament':

He counted the guns of /& a brother
Laughed at the ambush of angel’s tongues,
And scorned the tick of the falling weather.

In "The Colossus", her father is portrayed as a gigantic, damaged statue, which she tries to mend together fruitlessly but the godlike gigantic figure remains always unattainable:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued and properly jointed.

This strange view in respect of her father may be due to her sense of loneliness and isolation in her childhood. She was spared the love of one parent right from the age of ten and felt desperately betrayed. She was left alone to deal with the bizarre circumstances surrounding her father's death which might have been avoided if he had lived. She then chose to write poetry as a fantasy escape and a defense against her loneliness.

Sylvia Plath's unnatural love for her father, who 'abandoned' her in death, caused a subsequent hatred for all men. Having been victimized and tormented she batters him with an equal and opposite aggression.
She becomes a modern Electra. Electra, as one may recall, took vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra, for murdering her father, Agamenmon, thereby robbing her own life of that love. In Plath’s poems it is her love that kills her father. Sylvia Plath associates her father’s death in water with that of Agamemnon who was killed in bath. “Electra on Azalea Plath”, one of her uncollected poems, deals with elaborately on the love-hate relationship with her father:

Oh pardon the one who knocks for, pardon at
Your gate, father — your hound bitch, daughter,
Friend,
It was my love that did us both to death.

In her most controversial poem “Daddy” Plath refers to the German-Jew relationship, where the hatred for her father originates because of his German descent. She further compares her personal experience to the sufferings of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. In poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy’, there are quite a few German Nazi references, indicating her father’s role as Nazi and casting herself as a Jew. An immediate example is where she “talks like a Jew” and presents her Godlike father as a dreadful Nazi with German features:

And your Aryan Eye, bright blue
Panzer man, panzer man, O you —
Not God but a Swastika . . .

In ‘Lady Lazarus’ she again voices her sufferings and her sympathy for disturbing tensions against the tortured Jews. She also reveals the brutality of pain and hysteria suffered in Nazi Camps:
A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Built as a Nazi Lampshade.
My right foot
A paper weight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew Linen.

The poem ‘Daddy’ is an explanation of fear and resentment Plath felt in describing a father-daughter relationship. He is now no longer a God but a staunch supporter of Nazis, a tormentor and torturer. The Colossal statue and God like figure is turned into a “ghastly statue”, “a brute” and “a black shoe”. Orr describes her poem “Daddy” as follows:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part a Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other. She has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it.

The mood of the poem is almost entirely conversational where the daughter directly addresses the memory of her father with integrating feeling. It describes the self pity, pain, suffering and sensationalism even though Sylvia Plath describes it as a “piece of light verse”. As A. Alvarez calls it, “it obviously isn’t . . . the racking personal confession”. It is a dark poem with no hope for the subject to regain it’s interest in and attitude for life. She hates everything that is German:
The tongue struck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire,
I thought every German was you
And the language obscene
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.

The speaker marries a man identical to him—"a man in black"—and bitterly remembers the relationship with 'Daddy' by relating her unsuccessful relationship with her husband:

And then I knew what to do
I made a model of you
A man in black with a Meinkamph look.

The persona kills her father imaginatively and attempts to purge not only the memory of her father but the 'Meinkamph' model of him — the vampire, before she is "finally through:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two
The vampire who said it was you.
And drank my blood for a year;
Seven years, if you want to know.

Killing imaginatively both the vampires, she is contented with his death—"Daddy, you can lie back now"—and magnifies the strain in the last line: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through".

The critics have variously interpreted the line "I am through". Robert Boyers, for example, suggests that this line "is an
acknowledgement of failure or a determinedly unrealistic wishfulfillment. Needless to say, as long as she lived, she could not be 'through'. The meaning of 'through' in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language is "having completed an action, process and relationship". This meaning thus goes with Boyers suggestion that Sylvia Plath could not be 'through' beyond all doubt, while she was still alive. Ingrid Melander, however, maintains that Plath had "finally liberated herself from the serious effects of her father's untimely death . . . and that she may have succeeded in the end". There is a strange kind of love-hate relationship depicted in the poem 'Daddy', where at one time Sylvia Plath wishes to be back with her father, by making several suicide attempts and by marrying a model of him, and at other times she abuses him and succeeds in killing him poetically. After murdering her father, she loses all her memories of him thus freeing herself from the humiliating persecution of love and violence. Her father's death, is thus a result, less of love than her need to defend herself from annihilation. The last line "I am through", therefore, suggests that she finally finds an escape from suffering and despairing grief, unrestraining herself to find relief and solace in the world of death.

Sylvia Plath's exploration of her personal world indicates that her poems are examples of confessional poetry and that they derive their form and structure from her private revelations. 'Self' being the nucleus of her writings, her poems are expressions of her own paradoxes - the ones she finds within herself and the others faced outside. She finds herself trapped within the social context that is historical and linear rather than natural and cyclical. She accepts her indefinite target in 'The Moon and The Yew Tree', that "I cannot simply see where there is to get to". Her 'self' is seen "caught between stasis and process, isolation and engagement, objectivity and subjectivity, speech and silence, and a search for a self in conflict, between the twin mirrors of the world and her own"
mind." Her attempt is to compose poems in close similarity to those of the early Romantics, which fit in the definition of poetry given by Wordsworth in as much as they are a product of strong "emotions recollected in tranquillity". Her poetry also proves Wordsworth's theory that all good poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions".

Sylvia Plath tried to end her traumatic experiences in a series of suicidal attempts and her violent ecstasy into a death-wish thus sanctifying her writings as a "final relief" or an "anti Ednic vision". Her poems are viewed as a "sweeping away of identity, a melting into a primal impulse". Her well constructed self elegies or death related poems like 'Lady Lazarus', 'Tulips', 'Ariel', 'Death and Company', 'Getting There' and 'Fever 103' overshadow those of all other modern poets for whom death is the mother of beauty. Similar to the death-poems of Keats, Dickinson, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens and others, Plath's poems interpret death and art in relation to one another:

Dying
Is an art, like anything else
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell,
I do it so it feels real.

She also asserts in lyric after lyric her several attempts to die poetically:

I have done it again
One year in every ten
I manage it —
A sort of walking miracle.
She talks about suicide attempts, by drowning herself in water and be one with her father:

At twenty, I tried to die,
And get back, back, back to you.

In these poems full of obsession with death, Plath suggests her pain, self-exposure, suicide attempts and self-destructiveness as an art to convey her inner violence and ecstasy. Talking about her 'art of dying', A. Alvarez observes:

She is using her art to keep the disturbance, out of which she made her verse, at a distance. It is as though she had not yet come to grips with her subject as an artist. 35

The dual consciousness of self, the perception of self as both subject and object, is one of the characteristics of most contemporary women writers. Sylvia Plath has this dialectical awareness of self as both subject and object in particular relation to society in which she lived. She uses history, American cold war and social landscape to view herself in relation to them and finds difficulty in locating readily. The individual thus seems trapped into a cycle of deaths and rebirths. 'Lady Lazarus', written in the last years of her 'life' defines a fundamental sense of doom and fatality. A brutal and dehumanising relationship between an individual and society is depicted:

The peanut crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap my hand and foot
A big striptease
Gentleman, Ladies,
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Through personal conceptions she creates a stark but beautiful image of her fate.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? —
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Similarly in 'Cut' she uses an image of paper and feels a complete entity into her cut finger:

O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill —
The thin
Papery feeling.

The conflict and frustration rendered in the mind of the poet reach their resolution, the life begins with rebirth. In her works there is a continual theme of "in the end is my beginning". In 'Lady Lazarus' the persona is 'a phoenix', who has got an immense gift of being reborn:
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair.

Eileen Aird writes of this poem that Plath "takes very personal, painful material and controls and forms it with the utmost rigor into a highly wrought poem... The hysteria is intense and affective." It would not be wrong to regard 'Lady Lazarus' as one of the most confessional poems of Plath ranking after 'Daddy'. It is built around the subject of achieving total purification through death. The same theme is recounted in other poems like 'Edge', 'Death & Company', 'Fever 103' and 'Stings'. From an anguished contemplation of suffering of a living being, she moves to a concentration on the pace of death. At this level, she achieved a perfect control over her emotions:

Blood jet is poetry
There is no stopping it.

In the last year of her life, she produced 'dark poems', the poems related to death, under the title Ariel the world of which is "bleak, despairing and grotesque, where maimed human beings call hopelessly to each other and are ignored".

As Alvarez says, in these poems there is "death from the start" and "in a way, most of her later poems are about just that; about the unleashing power, about tapping the roots of her own inner violence".

Some other well known poems, like 'The Munich Mannequins' and 'The Totems', bring out the same inner violence and her reactions to it. There is a vivid presentation of whiteness and coldness on earth, which represents death. The description of a naked bald mannequins
seen in a shop window in Munich, symbolises the perfection and sterility of death, blood encounters the perfection of death in the following lines:

The blood flood is the flood of love
The absolute sacrifice,
It means: no more idols but . . .
me and you.

'Totem' is even more intense in showing the relation between blood and death.

The world is blood hot and personal
Dawn says with its blood-flush.

Death is seen in these poems clearly as a horrific prospect and becomes all the more hideous in proportion to the consciousness of its victims. The human beings

. . . buzz like blue children
In nets of the infinite,
   Roped in at the end by the one
   Death with its many sticks.

The same horror of death is again the subject of 'Words', where the speaker reflects on her own death, decreed by "fixed stars" which govern a life—the power that represents and exults in stasis and passivity. In 'Ariel', too, we can find references to suicide. She casts herself as an arrow:
And I
Am the arrow
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

She again refers to her suicide attempt in 'Electra on Azalea Plath'. She ponders over her experiences of dying, "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide" and then rising out of it as

White
Godiva, I unpeel
Death hands, dead stringencies.

She tries to free herself from the shackles of life and rise out of her death into an inevitable destiny, which is pure and final. Purification through death is suggested in 'Getting There' also:

And I, stepping from the skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces
Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.

The ultimate object of these poems is to survive through self transformation, "but I / Have a self to recover, a queen". These poems are about rebirth or regeneration. At the end the speaker does arrive to the destination, which occurs through death. The ultimate fulfilment or a triumph over death is symbolised in the queen bee in 'Stings' where she is presented as
... now flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her —
The mausoleum, the wax house.

Ghastly death appears as the main subject of Sylvia Plath's later poems. Alverez feels as if "these poems were written posthumously". But Robert Scholes thinks that her "works do not come to us posthumously. They were written posthumously, between suicides". Her poems visualise death as life and life as prerequisite for death.

Sylvia Plath's poems may be considered as death-stricken, but her poetry sometimes does show her discomfiture with death. She regains a positive attitude towards death in 'Years':

Eternity bores me
I never wanted it.

A deep gravity of death is seen in another poem called 'The Birthday Present'.

Only let down the veil, veil, veil
If it were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

Death no longer endangers her, for she is the survivor and she has never been so 'pure'. In 'Tulips' her self is in passive state:
... flat ridiculous, a cut paper shadow
between the eyes of the sun and eyes of the tulips.

In the last poems of her life, namely ‘Fever 103’, ‘Edge’, ‘Contusion’, ‘Words’ and ‘Kindness’, she reaches beyond ‘purification’ to ‘perfection’:

The woman is perfected
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment.

The death-driven persona finds perfection in her own destruction — an accomplishment in reality. Death is pure for Plath because it brings escape from life and to conflicts symbolises rebirth, bringing relief from pain and torture. She does not fear death but fears from its after effects:

... the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
‘A Miracle!’
That knocks me out.

For Plath, the task is still not completed; the self does not survive, finally. Death in ‘Confusion’ is celebrated with no revulsion:

The heart shuts
The sea sides back
The mirrors are sheeted.
In a more controlled manner, she finally 'shuts her heart' and rises to be immortal. The life after death does not seem to her attractive and she prefers to lie back calmly in death. She says "I do not trust the spirits", and fears to return from the solace and peace of death:

I can't stop it
One day it won't come back.

It signals the end of her distress and promises a new existence, a goal desired and greatly feared. Caroline King Bernard comments on her death-drive as follows:

... it is annealing, transfiguring experience. From it woman may rise, shedding "dead hands, dead stringencies", to the ecstatic, totally pure union with the spirit ... In death, too, the baby is assured the same eventual triumph. And from death Phoenix may rise to live again.39

It would be incorrect to view all of Plath's pomes in the light of a single idea or a single poem, a 'death-driven poet' or a 'poet of suicides'. She may be considered as an aesthetic poet with psychological dimensions. Psychologically, the aesthetics of transformation and immediacy has been used as a means of reuniting the self and the world through Plath's poetry.40 She intelligently fuses the outside world with her ego and reasonably tries to abandon her body through death, to free her soul, battling against it and remaining in the state of living death. Her psychological project is therefore both self negating and self expansive. She cannot destroy her identical self, but manoeuvres over it again and again, enlarging the scope to conquer the entire world.
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 and die at the same moment; this violent contradictory relation with life and death depicts an extraordinary perplexity towards her own self.

The themes of Sylvia Plath’s confessional poetry are clearly based on her experiences as a woman creatively working in the male dominated 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 the 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, finally ending in a suicidal death-wish and eventually rising above it as an immortal.
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