WORKS CITED


CONCLUSION

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AS from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin; I am I .... My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over” Sylvia Plath:: “Ocean 1212-W”

Sylvia wrote her first poem “I THOUGHT THAT I COULD NOT BE HURT” at the age of fourteen charged with tragic undertone. This poem was inspired by the accidental blurring of a pastel still-life completed just before by her. A Colleague of her English teacher, Mr. Crockett, remarked on reading this poem: “Incredible that one so young could have experienced anything so devastating.” Sylvia had a lyric gift beyond the ordinary. In a long poem written by her between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, she explained the purpose of her writing poems: “I write only because / There is a voice within me / That will not be still”.

Later, the same voice became her “blood jet” of poetry for which there was no stopping except by her suicidal death. The appeal of the tragic muse is audible in a poem “To Ariadne” which she wrote at the age of seventeen in the spring of 1949. She had a “terrible egotism”, too. She loved her flesh, her face, her limbs with overwhelming devotion and erected in her mind an image of herself ‘idealistic and beautiful’ and always wanted to be a perfectionist in everything she did.

All these biographical details are important for a study of Plath’s poetry. Her
own life and personal experiences provided her with the material which she made use of to create works of art. Her experiences of being the winner of a college's prize offered her the material out of which she produced a novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). But fiction writing was not her major preoccupation. She had been writing poems even as a small schoolgirl. In her poetry, she focused attention on her own mental states even in the diverse periods of depression. She also laid bare her experiences as a person drifting towards insanity. Critics have naturally been drawn to the confessional elements in her work, trying to connect the content of her work with her biography. It is, however, wrong to consider her a mere confessional poet who indulges in self-dramatizations and poetic voyeurism since both of these elements of confessional poetry are absent in Sylvia Plath.

What is of remarkable significance in her works—poetry, prose writings, journals and letters—is her gender consciousness. Quite typically, the concept of gender is to be placed in opposition to the concept of ‘Sex’. While female / male sex is a matter of biology, feminine/ masculine gender is a matter of culture. The concepts of gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behavior and action as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Critically and crucially, biology need not be assumed to determine gender. That is to say that what makes a person female or male is universal and grounded in laws of nature. The precise ways in which women express their femininity and men express their
masculinity characteristically vary from culture to culture. Thus conceived, qualities that are attributed stereotypically to women and men in contemporary western culture such as greater emotional expression in women and greater tendencies to violence and aggression in men are seen as gender. It entails that they could be changed. There are many examples of different expressions of gender in the literature of cultural anthropology in non-western societies, the work of Margaret Mead being exemplary in this respect. The reduction of gender to sex would be to see gender differences as themselves biologically determined and that may be understood as a key move in the ideological justification of patriarchy.

The term patriarchy, meaning literally the ‘rule of father’, has been adopted by the majority of feminist theorists to refer to the way in which societies are structured through male domination over, and oppression of, women. Patriarchy refers therefore to the ways in which material and symbolic resources are unequally distributed between men and women, through social institutions such as the family, sexuality, culture and languages. Feminists tend rather to argue that patriarchy is, at least, the cultural interpretation of those natural relationships such as the role of women and men in child-birth and nurturing found in all human societies. They therefore seek to recover a pre-patriarchal stage, expressed in an écriture feminine, through which women can articulate themselves to themselves outside the distortions of male language. The exploitation and domination of all
women is not alike, and women cannot therefore be theorized as a single, homogeneous group.

Sylvia became gender conscious for the first time when she was two-and-a-half years old. Expressing her feeling on the birth of a female baby, her brother Warren, she writes in her biographical “Ocean 1212-W” (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, 120) that she:

Hated babies. I who for two and a half years had been the center of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth…. As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin; I am I…. My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over.

And later, when still very young, she had read A short History of Women (Davies:1927) and underscored the following excerpts, one from the section of “Contents” and the other from the “Epilogue” of that book, that conform to her personal belief and attitude as a woman:

Life began without sex; animals simply divided in two and went their way. What advantage did the life-force gain by the evolution of sex? … Sex is the result of specialism in performing the labor of living …. Thus the possession of two sexes gives an animal or a plant a start in the race for evolution. Thus sex is seen to be three things, rejuvenation, division of labor, increased ability for variation.’ (p.ix)

… for once both sexes use their reason equally, and have no unequal penalty awaiting the exercise of their emotions, then women cannot fail
to dominate. Theirs is the stronger sex once nature and art cease their cruel combination against them, because it possesses a greater singleness of purpose and a greater fund of imagination, for those are the two properties which all men must forfeit under the institutions and necessities of our industrial civilizations….

…perhaps the world will be happier in the new regime. But all this is of only partial value as speculation on the future; for men and women are purely relative terms, and long before the tendencies of our times work to their logical conclusions, men and women, as we know them, will have ceased to exist; and human nature will have forgotten the ‘he and she.

Sylvia wrote more than 600 letters home to her mother out of which 400 letters published by her mother provide unique insight into her thinking and feeling regarding her gender consciousness. She was overly happy on having found her most suitable male counterpart, Ted Hughes in Cambridge who she said “is the only man” she “would rather be with than alone” (LH, p.264). She was glad of being a “woman” and said that she would be a “woman singer” and that her songs would be of “fertility of the earth” (Ibidem, 256) She could not think of Ted even for a minute as someone “other” and felt very feminine admiring and most glad of being herself that “Adam’s woman” (Ibidem, 238). She appreciated the “legend of Eve coming from Adam’s side” and said that “that’s where I belong” (Ibidem, 276) and by 1957 married him. However, she proved to be a mismatch for him as per her own confession of Ted’s vision being “photographic” and her
own ‘an impressionist blur (Ibidem, 267) She wrote to her mother that she had everything in life she had ever wanted “a wonderful husband, two adorable children---and her writing” (Ibidem, 458), but all of sudden ill-wind started stalking by the month of August 1962, and her marriage was seriously troubled because “Ted was seeing someone else (an Australian au pair), and Sylvia’s jealousy was very intense”. (Ibidem, 458) She had “too much at stake” and felt to be a “too rich person to live as a martyr” and wanted “a clean break” from her husband so as to “breathe and laugh and enjoy” herself again. (Ibidem, 460) The predicament of “a deserted wife knocked out by flu with two babies and a full-time job” had become so astounding that she felt “living apart from Ted” ---“being no longer in his shadow” – wonderful. (Ibidem, 479) The tragic predicament she felt to be in had been expressed long back by her in her juvenilia “I THOUGHT THAT I COULD NOT BE HURT”:

Then suddenly my world turned gray,
And darkness wiped aside my joy.
A dull and aching void was left
Where careless hands had reached out to destroy
My silver web of happiness.

Apart from her letters, her personal entries in to her journals published posthumously by her husband Ted Hughes and co-editor Frances McCullough have been deemed as her most important work next to her poems. They express the central need of her nature to be “articulate, to hammer out great surges of
experience Jammed, dammed, crammed in me over the last five year”.
(contemporary Literature, 521.3)

The bodies of women, the houses of women, were traps separating her from
the truth she wanted to reach. At eighteen she felt locked into the ‘warm, feminine
atmosphere of the house’ which closed her into a “thick, feathery smothering
embrace”. In her teens she saw life circumscribed by biology: she was angered by
nature’s determinism: the earth as life giver was female and women were “engines
of ecstasy” who must “mimic” the earth. She felt would die engulfed by her
mother. She her not been loved for herself, but for her achievements, and that her
mother had enacted her unfulfilled desires through her daughter who complied, so
afraid was she of abandonment after her father’s death when she was eight. The
geography of her days was divided between masculine and feminine. Like
Virginia Woolfe she did not have a secure sense of she was. And separating from
Ted Hughes she not only reenacted the feeling of her father’s abandonment, but
also the anger against her mother. She imagined her dead father Otto Plath a
buried colossus over which she crawled like a fly: her mother a devouring
Medusa; and her husband an enemy, her erstwhile “Jailer”, the “vampire” who
drank her blood for seven years. Adrienne Rich’s protest against the male0
“culture of manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core, has every stake
in opposing women actively laying claim to our own lives” was absolutely
genuine. Sylvia’s interior conflict between self-assertion and self-abnegation, had abnegation won a final victory, over her art as well as over her life. When free of her husband’s oppressive shadow in her last six months, she wrote out of the “hole” she was in, fighting for “air and freedom”, and produced ‘terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked’ her. (LH., 549-51)

Women who are poets have much trouble winning recognition than do men. Two centuries looming after the first American woman poet Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson could win recognition only after her death. And more so, Marianne Moore, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Hilda Doolittle, Sara Teasdale and Elinor Wylie are among some of the feminine songbirds whom the critical establishment---aloof, academic and male--- never took too seriously. Only Elizabeth Bishop happened to be Judged worthy of succeeding the longevious Marianne Moore. And as of Sylvia herself, the embattled heroine of the Women’s Liberation Movements, a powerful prophetess, she could give vent to her feminine emotion of anger to rise “out of the ash/ with my red hair/ And ... eat men like air”. With her pain came insight and a new self-awareness for women.

There has been a surge of psychological studies focusing at the exploration of relationship of female creativity to Sylvia’s insanity and suicide in her over-analyzed testimonial poems such as “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus” and “Lesbos”. The voice of her protest against gender inequality or discrimination eloquent in a
number of her poems such as “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Purdah”, “Jailer”, “Burning the Letters”, “Event”, “Death & Co”, and a score of her letters and surviving journals has languages been ignored thus far to the discomfiture of genuine Plath study. Mentionable here in this context are five of her more personally aggressive and “terrible lyrics” ---- “The Rabbit Catcher”, “Thalidomide”, “The Other”, “The Courage of Shutting-Up”, and “Purdah”--- that express directly and brutally her anger, bitterness, and despair over her husband’s desertion of her for another woman, an Australian au pair. Sylvia the passive sufferer of “I Am Vertical” or “Last Words” has become in the five terrible lyrics cited just before, Sylvia the avenger--- Medea as well as Dido.

The poet who wrote, from her uncollected juvenilia “To Ariadne” to the last poem of her final phase “Edge”, some three hundred poems ought to be considered the central poet of the 1960’s and not “an interesting minor poet” as W.H. Pritchard has called her. Her poem “A Birthday Present” begins with a woman making pastry and in “Mary’s Song” with a woman cooking the Sunday lamb but we find in both of them the protected, secure world of kitchen and house giving way to an inner world of violent and tragic dimensions whereas in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, the queen bee (Plath herself) “marries the winter of your (Ted’s) year” soaring up as a symbol of female survival triumphantly “more terrible than she ever was”. Plath’s tinsel poetic vision has created a series of
female images of almost magical power and autonomy such as of avenging Clytemnestra in “Purdah”, “the pure acetylene virgin” in “Fever 103°”, the vampire killer in “Daddy”, the ascendant Phoenix-cum-sarcophagus daemon who can/will eat “men like air” in “Lady Lazarus”, and majestic “God’s Lioness” in “Ariel” until she is perfected by and in death giving the “illusion of Greek necessity” in “Edge”.

Madness, loneliness, sexual identity, family relationship, and anger and hatred against gender inequality are some of the major themes Sylvia Plath has given treatment to in her poems. In “The Stones”, a dialogue between the dislocated girl who is Maenad and witch and the “mother of otherness”, she expresses for the first time the individual female experience biologically and experientially. Her poems are, right from the self and craft conscious poetry in The Colossus through the poetry of landscape in Crossing the Water and the poetry of Symbolic opposition between creativity and destruction in Winter Trees to the poetry of tragic necessity in Ariel, are like the “pickled fetuses” in her novel The Bell Jar “proper in shape and number and every part”.

It can be said that the gender inequality presented as symbolic net which Sylvia Plath casts on the world of perception has above all a personal value, and that we must consent to a partial identification with her if we are to enjoy and understand her poem. Her work stands on stylistic merits alone. And it is
remarkable that the devices she uses are almost as varied as the rigid thematic content. The ease of composition to which she has testified in connection with her last poems shows that the unconscious processing of her material was formal as well as thematic. The felicitous rhythmic and phonetic inventions, which perfectly render the finest intentions are innumerable. To mention only a few of them: among the dramatic and unexpected cuts which are such a striking feature of her poems, some are particularly evocative. In “Cut” they perfectly express the highly complex reaction of the speaker, a mixture of fear, breathless fascination and narcissistic tenderness for her own body, and a heightening of the intensity of perception conveyed by the clinically precise description in the opening lines. In “Ariel” the cuts convey the final ecstasy and volatilization and in “Fever 103⁰” admirably suggest the feeling of ascension and forgetfulness of all earthly involvements, an effect very similar to that of the beginning in Baudelaire’s “Elevation”. The impression of calm finality and despair is due to the rhythmic chiasmus in “Edge”, and that of egoistic narcissism in “Childless Woman”, to the repetition of the same word at the end of a line and the beginning of the next. The particularly knotty texture of the lines in poems like “Medusa” or “Berck-Plage” suggests a concentration of loathing.

Generally speaking, the cuts tend to induce a strong narrative tension, chiefly due to a counterpoint between grammatical and rhythmic structure, and
sometimes, when the rhythm becomes obsessively marked. In the last line of five-line stanza, there is a feeling of foreboding very similar to many piano accompaniments of romantic ballads such as that of Schubert’s as in, for instance, “The Arrival of the Bee box”.

Apart from the thematic value of gender inequality and sibilants discussed above, the same freedom is observed in the sounds as in the rhythm. We might just detect an embryonic thematic function in a few other, such as in the fullness and gaiety of the child’s world in ‘a creel of eels, all ripples’, the vagueness of oval animal souls or trawling your dark as owls do, the gaping chasm of death in the “flesh the grave cave ate”, or “your dark amputations crawl and appeal”, or the hollowness of deceit in:

Lies and smiles
And he, for this subversion,
Hurts me, he
With his armory of fakery.

The general tone is very rarely purely elegiac. Her effort to dominate experience and the fear of fighting a losing battle in most poems has been built on a feeling of duality and antagonism. Stylistically, this ambivalence results in a Laforgian juxtaposition of the sublime and the homely, of compassion and hatred.

It is noticeable that just as the first line often states boldly the subject and the dominant tone of the poem, the last line is often markedly prosaic and at variance with the prevailing rhythm. It is as if there was, at the end of each of these efforts to shape experience into patterns and thus dominate it, a loss of faith and a return
to a shapeless and hopeless existence, a loss of faith and a return to a shapeless and hopeless existence, a feeling of the uselessness of effort.

The fact that we are always intensely aware of an individual voice speaking to us, even from the midst of despair, is a testimony to the poet’s achievement. This must be remembered when we notice the colorist accent of many poems, and when we face what seems almost a masochistic infatuation with death, in “A Birthday Present”, “Elm or Lady Lazarus”, and rather repellent familiarity with its gruesome aspect. For this passivity is necessarily that of the poet, who must experience reality with the utmost intensity even if that has to be broken in the process with an attitude erected into a dogma by Rimbaud and the Surrealists; and as a French philosopher said, the masochist experiences himself not so much as the victim as the battlefield.

The poet must re-enact in his life the struggle between anarchy and order and it is, doubtless, a silent but profound awareness of this duty which accounts, in Sylvia Plath’s poems, for the essential ambiguity of the themes and the protean presence of death.

Sylvia’s splendid assets (her education, her brains, his creative energy and her looks) could suddenly seem worthless; Something kept “trashing” them. Was it her mistrust in men? Yet how men in her life deserved mistrust! Otto Plath had hurt her, God had hurt her, Ted Hughes had hurt her- it is the male’s way. How men would like to take everything from her- her gold fillings, her genius, her life! Yet there must be something good in them, something repairing, or would she feel so much pain, such an awful lack? Ambivalence. At worst, and often, her sensibility was “childish,” over vulnerable a chest pounding in terror, blood boiling blackly. When told of her father’s death she said, “I’ll never speak to God again!” She was ever thus to the extreme.
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