Chapter 5

Conclusion: Quest for survival

It is impossible that anyone could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than Sylvia Plath was.—Ted Hughes (Feinstein, Elane, Ted Hughes, The Life of Poet, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001. p.231)

We have serious ground for concern. Not merely for the woman but also for the peaceful existence of man. There certainly is a logical dichotomy between woman as an individual and as merely a 'thing' or an 'object'. The desire to negate the latter is essential, but the ways and means that women adopt towards this end have to be well planned. For their adversary is man in all his roles: father, brother, lover, husband and son. As Margaret Laurence has said:

I think we have to be careful here ... for instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be re-educated with the minimum of damages to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers. We can't live without them and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well. (Laurence, Margaret, A Place to Stand On; essay by and about Margaret Laurence, ed. George Woodcock. Newest Press, Edmonton, 1983. p.23)
The new woman, perhaps, needs to be careful in redefining her roles, without losing either her dignity or integrity. For it is evident from the study of both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park that men in general have not changed. Where Wanseo Park’s male characters are persistently indifferent, Sylvia Plath’s men take their role as a challenge in taming the conscious protagonists.

If this is the case, what would then be the kind of survival for women be it in the West or in Korea? What are the priorities of women and does the Western or Korean milieu help the women in this direction? Can women change their destiny without the help of man? And finally, do the women have any alternatives in choosing a particular way of life? All these questions, although partially answered by both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park, lead us to the problem of identifying the rationale behind the emergence of the New Woman. Both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park spell out what is ‘new’ in their protagonists. The ‘I’ speaker in Sylvia Plath’s poem, Gigolo, proclaims her new image:

I shall never grow old. New Oysters
Shriek in the sea and I
Glitter like fountainbleau (Gigolo in Winter Trees)

Similarly, Wanseo Park asserts that her protagonists are new and different: “I'm interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, the general current. (.An nam-hyun, Women’s literature in 1990’ in Korea Taehaksa p.108) According to
Sylvia Plath, society limits the choices of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. Wanseo Park’s emerging new woman is contemplative about her plight and hysteria, and has, in a traditional society, the nerve to question the indifference of man. She chooses to remonstrate and fight against the general, accepted norms and currents of Korean society. What is similar about these women of both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. They are in this sense constantly engaged in the dialectics of survival. It is essential for them to redefine the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence, to be new women even though they have faced a lot of difficulties and easily fallen into neurotic and hysteric situation in terms being a new woman. Without being neurotic and hysteric, they cannot transform themselves into new women. Because a new woman cannot adapt and survive in this male dominated society without being called ‘rebel’. They are in this sense constantly engaged in the dialectics of survival. It is essential for them to redefine the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence.

This leads us to the very concept of 'new woman'. The new woman that has been explored in my work reveals that she is not the 'ideal' or the 'best' woman. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of
the patriarchal society, and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs.

The study of the two writers brings out clearly the various characteristics of the psyche of the new woman. What stands out very lucidly is the sharp contrast between Sylvia Plath’s and Wanseo Park's woman. The contrast is evidently the result of the difference in the cultural ethos. However, their aim is identical. But their approach to the male domination, the steps and measures taken to transcend it are completely different.

In Sylvia Plath's fiction, beginning from Esther to Sylvia Plath herself, they undergo a drastic transformation. The mutation extends from being naive and ignorant about the male world's motive and outlook to awakening to the realization that it is time for them to be on guard, to be alert so as not to fall a prey to the victimization of man. Esther's explored her journey through powerlessness and inaptitude to aptitude and courage. She refuses to be the fallen angel. Esther in Bell Jar, is proud of her liberated and independent existence. But once she steps into society surrounding her she becomes aware of the standstill traditional male attitude. She realizes that woman has not progressed at all, and, also, that men are basically dangerous. She's afraid of men. It's rational and natural for her to be afraid of men because men are frightening. Women, she finds, be it in America or elsewhere are still physically mutilated, as Doreen in The Bell Jar is, just for the pleasure of man. Thus, Esther is totally disappointed and distraught and becomes
Easter in the Bell Jar and the protagonists in Sylvia Plath’s poetry are seen as crazy because the way they react to the male dominated society is completely out of the range of what is considered normal. But they finally decide to refuse to be victims, instead to be survivors with vision. Eileen Aird says of Sylvia Plath that:

Her originality lies in her insistence that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman’s world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which contains the tragic. She draws from this female world themes which are visionary and supernatural: although it is a world which is eventually destroyed by death, her work is far from depressing because of the artistry with which she delineates her vision. (Aird, Eileen. Sylvia Plath, London: Oliver&Boyd, 1973. p.14.)

Protagonists of Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park, both as women, are not afraid of to be neurotic new women. It is important here to see how this dramatic choice affects their lives. The consequences of these affairs are painful to both of them but they both realize that they have made right choices for their survival and rebirth.
Wanseo Park’s women are all reflective and a little bit passive about their condition compared to those of Sylvia Plath. Their protest is not for equality like Sylvia Plath’s protagonists but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals capable of intelligence and feeling. They do not look for freedom outside the house but within it, without painting their life in various artificial shades of sentiments.

Protagonists of Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park have explored ways to seek their identity and dignity under the set traditional modes even though there are also women who would rather bow down to tradition. They make us realize that the thing that makes women endangered in our society is not woman's inability which has consigned her to a particular kind of life, but the image of impotency and incapability which is thrust upon her.

The hysteria of Wanseo Park’s women is not a private one. What comes out clearly is that, the problem leading to their hysteria is a vast one. The enormity of the problem is reflected not merely in their inability to cope with their immediate environs or people around, but also in their struggling to be individual human beings whose voices can be heard in male dominated Korean society.

For Korean women, marriage is one of the traditional social norms that enables both husband and wife to act and react in a conventional way. Professor Min’s wife in *Thus Ended My days of Watching Over House* is a traditional wife in the sense of being self-sacrificing, obedient and tolerant to her husband’s
indifference and egoistic character. The only thing that she can choose was tolerance and sacrifice, but in the end she couldn’t tolerate injustice any more. She reacts to her husband’s total indifference and impassiveness by bursting out emotionally. But she has the maturity within her to digest surroundings, for she doesn’t want a major calamity in her domestic world. She wishes to be adventurous and fly high but she doesn’t have any wings to do that. She is just a fallen angel. As Virginia Woolf mentioned, she is a fallen ‘Angel in the House’. But she manages to survive through her own tactics whether it be madness or hysteria.

Wanso Park’s male protagonists are all indifferent and unconcerned about their wives’ sentiments and desires. Their apathy makes women feel frozen. The catastrophe in the domestic world of Wanso Park is the outcome of the personal indifference of men and women’s inability to cope with it. But Wanso Park’s women survive with dignity, and finally, they are neither timorous nor scared of men. Wanso Park’s fiction aims not at acceptance but existence with all its divergent connotations. They will try to make adjustments, as does professor Min’s wife at the end of the novel, and will not give up hope. She starts to look at herself and to come out of the cocoon of domesticity.

Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, tries to assert more aggressively through her works that what women want to achieve as independent beings, has not been achieved. She was so stressed by her surroundings that she wanted to fly away by
riding her imaginary horse, Ariel. Ann Sexton already recognized this in Sylvia Plath’s poem:

Those early Poems were all in cage (not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn’t found a voice of her own, wasn’t in truth, free to be herself...at the end, Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out. (Ann sexton, ‘The barfly ought to sing’ in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman, Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1970 p. 174)

Also Margaret Atwood said that “The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole thing.”(Atwood,Margaret ‘An Introduction to The Edible Woman Second Words, Anansi, Toronto, 1982. p.370)

If the goals have not been achieved perhaps the mistake lies within the goals. What exactly was the goal of the feminist movement? Is it liberty versus responsibility? Sexual freedom? Quest for self-identity? How far can women go with the unconstrained liberty away from the family life? How far can women go with unconventional bonding as Esther aspires for but finally discards? Sylvia Plath suggests all problems to be solved in feminist perspectives. Her protagonists learn through trial and error that imitating male attitude does not lead them towards a complete and dignified life. They want their own spaces where they are able to grow as women who have their own voices. They are forced to rethink and re-evaluate their decisions and choices. It is here that their self-examination is
significant. But the final step in all her novel and poetry is sort of personal exile, a solitary existence for survival. Sylvia herself and Sylvia’s protagonists are in more intense and madness situation than those of Wanseo Park due to the their more open society compare to the oriental. The contemplative protagonist is unable to accommodate herself within the prevalent social system. Constant questioning makes them neurotic and hysteric

It is in this context that one sees a marked contrast in the protagonists of Wanseo Park. What is more mellow and mature about Wanseo Park's women is their ability to adjust along with their capacity to retain their dignity. Wanseo Park does not see separation or exile as the solution to women’s problem. Even though her protagonists mostly lead a harrowing and depressing life and have no sense of contentment at all, they think that the rebellion is not to break the relationship. Instead, there is the momentary self-exile in the life of ‘I’, but she comes back. Wanseo Park says, "when she realizes what she has to do, she has to compromise". Compromise in this sense is very significant for Wanseo Park but certainly at the cost of survival. Wanseo Park aims not for severance or divorce but synthesis:

I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think basically and problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging... (Trans. Chun Kyung-ja. p.89)

Wanseo Park strives for a harmonious and individualistic existence within the family matrix. It is perhaps here that the Korean ethos helps Wanseo Park in
moulding her protagonists. The women in Wanseo Park’s novels understand that the characteristics in men and women are transpositional. They protest strongly but do not break away because they see no polarity between them. This comes from Confucian norms embedded in Korean society. Confucian norms are a part of the Korean culture and customs, even though contemporary women in Korea shy away from these norms and are reluctant to face the harsh reality. It is perhaps for this reason that despite repression of desires being overwhelmingly heavy and stressful, Korean women are hesitant to go beyond the social norms. In Wanseo Park’s fictional world, women are not severely scorned or abused, but they are in the center of patriarchal norms which are against woman’s emancipation and her indomitable courage in facing various odds in life is intimidated by surroundings. But at the same time the protagonists no longer want to be extolled for their self-effacing nature. What is predominant in Wanseo Park’s emerging woman is the desire to harmonize her roles as an individual.

The new woman portrayed by both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park is thus in the process of emergence. What is new is the essential awareness. Now women start to feel that it is time to define women as human beings. The protagonists of both Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park are thus identical in refusing to be victims giving in to the domination of patriarchal men. Survival for them means that they are not be dominated or subordinated, and that all individuals should be free to determine their own lives as equals. Only this can help them come out of their world of neurosis and hysteria for their survival.

But I want to replace the word ‘man’ with ‘woman’ in his remarks: “woman’s greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in her decision to be stronger than her condition.”