CHAPTER - VI

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One may wonder why, in spite of being 'confessional'—i.e., personal, private or subjective—the poems of Sylvia Plath seem to have a universal applicability. She seems to belong not only to the sixties of the twentieth century but, in a curious way, to all generations. This is primarily so because the questions she raises are as old as civilization itself, centering upon man and his response to life in a world full of obstacles. Her poetry, thus, draws the attention of readers from all walks of life all over the world. Another reason for her appeal is the universality of her thought. In order to objectify the emotions she portrays in her poems, Sylvia Plath makes use of myths, legends and classical allusions that carry her poems beyond mere confession and make it possible for them to be considered from a detached perspective.

Having analyzed the major themes and motifs found in the work of Sylvia Plath, one may venture to surmise what her philosophy of life is. The world to her seems to be full of pain and suffering and the human lot far from enviable. Birth means being born into a world that negates more than it affirms. The world, feels Plath, is wrongly considered to be a place of enjoyment: it is, in fact, an
unpleasant experience-necessary but unpleasant - in the course of which man is bowed down by sorrows from all quarters. As a child he faces an unknown future that he will have to reckon with one day: as a mature adult he lives in anxiety about the choice he makes in life. He must make the right choice and this choice will shape the essence of his later life. So he is filled with a sense of responsibility and anxiety lest he should go wrong. Then, he has to face pain-physical and emotional. When he sees around himself suffering, disease, deformity and death, he is apprehensive that he too may become a victim. The trials he faces in life fill him with despair. He derives a little temporary consolation from his children but they, too, cannot dispel the sense of loneliness in his heart. He looks towards the heavens for help but all he sees is the cold inhospitality of the sun, the moon and the stars. May be death, he feels, will show him a way out of this meaninglessness.

Sylvia Plath believes that the birth of a child is the harbinger of death: a new generation has been born that will in time replace the older generation. The "difficult borning" (of "The Manor Garden") is the result of "two suicides" (of the parents). In fact, birth means being born in order to die, life itself being just a movement towards death. Not only does the child unknowingly bring
death to its parent, it brings anxiety and despair, too. They are perplexed when the child cries and stand around helplessly, as blank as well or as distant as the clouds, unable to pacify it (as in "Morning Song"). It demands attention, love and security which the parents are not always capable of providing, no matter how much they would like to.

"Your clear eye is the one most beautiful thing. I want to fill it with colour and ducks."

says a mother to her child in "Child" (Winter Trees) and is grieved because instead of facing joys in life, the child will have to face sorrow, a "dark / Ceiling without a star." In "Mary's Song", again, a mother is aware of the "holocaust" her child will have to live in and the tremendous sacrifice he will be called upon to make. In all her poems about children Sylvia Plath is acutely aware of the future loss and pain that are in store for the child.

According to Plath, sorrow in life comes from man's awareness of himself and his surroundings. One cannot escape the fact that there are people in the world
who are physically handicapped: children may be born deformed, with "Knuckles at shoulder-blades" or with sightless "white eyes": a man may lose his sight, like the blind pianist of "Little Fugue", or his limbs, like the mutilated soldiers of "Getting There", and depend on wheelchairs or crutches ("Berck-Plage"): a woman may face the agony of being childless or may suffer a miscarriage ("Three Women"). In milder cases, one may fall sick and be hospitalised (as in "Tulips"), be operated upon ("The Stones") or be put in plaster to heal ("in Plaster"). One may lose a dear one through death or desertion and mourn this loss the way the poet mourns for her dead father in several poems and for her "Mother, grandmother, great grandmother" who beckon her from the kingdom of the dead in "All the Dead Dears". In "For a Fatherless Son" she speaks of the sorrow that will be faced by a child who has been deserted by his father:

"You will be aware of an absence,
presently,
Growing beside you, like a tree.
A death tree, colour gone, an Australian gum tree-
Balding, gelded by lightning- an illusion.
And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention.
When man is face to face with sorrow and despair, he tries desperately hard to divert his attention to the brighter side of life: he looks for consolation first towards his children and then towards nature. At the sight of his children the love that surges through the heart of a parent temporarily—makes him forget his sorrow: he feels that the child is "the baby in the barn" and his smiles are "found money". But this false elation disappears when he realises that the child, too, would grow up and face problems of his own again. When a person is emotionally disturbed, children are no consolation. The woman in "Lesbos" who has "hate/Upto (her) neck. / Thick, thick, "does not see the child as the baby in the barn but as a "fat snail". Similarly, Esther in The Bell-Jar, another emotionally disturbed girl, says in the same vein. "Children made me sick." Thus children are no consolation to one with a deranged psyche. So man looks towards nature for reassurance. Again, he has to face disappointment: the wind pours by "like destiny" and seems to "funnel(his) heat away" ("Wuthering Heights") and the granite hills are enough to break him down to mere quartz grit"("Hardcastle Crags"). In vain, man tries to find sympathy and understanding in the world of animals which, however, remains beyond his grasp, eluding him forever. Finally, he thinks
of appealing to the heavens for help but he finds himself face to face with indifference once again: the sun keeps scorching the earth with its terrible heat (as in "Sleep in Mojave Desert") and destroys all forms of life: the moon, with its "O-gape", keeps looking on indifferently, being the cruel, unsympathetic "bony mother": the stars are cold and hard and remind man of the sense of isolation in his own heart.

One may well wonder what prompted Sylvia Plath to depict such a bleak world ridden with sorrow and pain. Her intention was not merely to be pessimistic: she felt that despair and anguish should be spurs to creative enterprise. In a world that seems meaningless man must create his own values and find a meaning in life.

Is there a God? - man wonders. Sylvia Plath ponders over the question and gropes for an answer. Her attitude towards God appears to be ambivalent. There are times when feels that God is inexorable, responsible for all the suffering in the world. On other occasions she is more inclined towards the idea of God as the Creator of the universe and man as a part of Him. In a spirit of defiance she has written "The Hanging Man,"
"Years" and "Mystic". She depicts a cruel God who is difficult—if not impossible to satisfy in "The Hanging Man":

"By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet."

Plath does not worship this god (not God to her here). In "Years" she decides to defy him:

"O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black.
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti."

She even doubts if He can help one who has faith in him. Thinking of mystics who claim to experience religious ecstasy through spiritual union with God, she questions the worth of their knowledge: "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" ("Mystic"). After a spiritual union which God one is brought back to mundane life amid the bustle of the city where the atmosphere is polluted by chimneys that keep belching smoke. The mystical experience provides no "remedy".

However, in her more serene moments, contemplating the meaning of life. Sylvia Plath comes to the conclusion
that man is a manifestation of his creator and ultimately becomes one with him. She comes to the conclusion that life does not end with death: the soul lives on and enters a new life. In "Totem" she compares the universe with the eye of a cobra through which the sky "eternally threads itself" in and out as life and death. In such a universe there is no finality. "There is no terminus, only suitcases/
/ Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit/ Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes." The soul, or "the same self" as she puts it, is immortal and just changes its "suitcase" or abode as it passes through death from one life to another. Thus Plath believes in the cycle or birth and death and also in the transmigration of souls. This belief convinces her that death is not end in itself but the beginning of a new life. Hence, in most of her poems death is followed by rebirth. This is how one would interpret a poem like "Getting There" (Ariel): the boxcars of the train symbolise the cycle of birth and death that one has to go through before union with the creator. As the poet says.

"The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredom, old faces
Step to you from the black car of Lethe.
Pure as a baby."
"The carriages rock, they are cradles", each cradle symbolising a new birth. In this respect, the train, like the hood of the cobra in "Totem", becomes symbolic of the universe, the Brahma, in which the cycle of life and death carries on eternally. And finally, one steps out of this cycle, transcending all sufferings, purged of all vices, all "old bandages, boredom, old faces"..."Pure as a baby". The old self is given a new life in a pure form. Similarly Lady Lazarus is born again and again like the phoenix. Thus, for Plath, death stands as an answer to the miseries of life: it is the gateway to a new, purer, happier life.

An important reason for the universal appeal of Sylvia Plath's work is her use of myths and symbols from all over the world. Traditionally, myths are ancient folk tales that explain certain features of a tribe or a class, bringing out the relationship between man and God. Ancient mythologies are generally about gods or human beings who, by virtue of their suffering, are elevated to the stature of gods. In the present age we have myths of a different sort: the themes are not woven around the physical exploits of a brave man:
rather, they are based on the emotional trials that a man suffers. However, the aim is the same—to highlight an aspect of a being that calls for appreciation and admiration. Speaking of primitive myths and their modern counterparts, C.Day-Lewis says:

"Primitive poets created myths to represent the mysterious workings of nature, or legends in which the deed of men were immortalised. Many modern poets have occupied themselves with another field the working of man's mind......Throughout the ages, poets have been fascinated by dreams and visions. Today, some of them are exploring the region of the unconscious, creating myths, not of man's battle with nature or other men, but of the hidden forces which, like sea-monsters, move and struggle beneath the surface of his mind."\(^2\)

The kinds of myths that Sylvia Plath uses have their sources in ancient Graeco-Roman mythology, popular folk tales and Bible. The myth and overshadows the rest is the Greek myth of Electra who schemed with her brother, Orestes, to avenge their father's death by
murdering their mother. The Electra-complex, a favourite with psychoanalysts, draws the attention of Sylvia Plath who devotes several poems to this myth. "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy," she admits in "Electra on Azalea Path". In "The Colossus", she, as Electra, works patiently like "an ant in mourning" under an "Orestian sky" to put together the fallen statue of her father. The poem "Daddy" is again "spoken by a girl with an Electra-complex". To counterbalance, there are references to the myth of Oedipus: "The Eye-mote" links the fate of the poet with that of Oedipus, exploring the similarity in their situations: "I dream that I am Oedipus." The myth of Narcissus is symbolised in "Among the Narciss"; the tragedy of Medea figures in "Aftermath": Persephone, the Greek vegetable goddess appears in "Two sisters of Persephone" and the vengeful Clytemnestra in "Purdah" as the lioness let loose. Figures of Greek and Roman mythology appeal quite frequently in Plath's poetry. As Eileen M. Aird says, they provide "concrete examples of pain against which personal experience of the poet can be projected." \(^3\)

The myth of the phoenix, the fabulous Arabian bird that burned itself every 500 years or so and rose rejuvenated from its ashes, is explored by Sylvia Plath.
in "Lady Lazarus" where the heroine has the terrible gift of being born again and again. This Lady Lazarus rises from the ashes whenever she is destroyed. Like a cat she has "nine times to die." The myth is modified: instead of a 500-year cycle, one life-span of Lady Lazarus lasts just a decade which is then "annihilated." The poem also contains an obvious allusion to the biblical character raised from the dead by Christ. Despite the reference to the poet's own suicide, the poem does not read like a case history: it is generalised through the phoenix myth and the biblical reference.

When Sylvia Plath names her horse "Ariel" she has in mind the Hebrew meaning of the word. In Hebrew "Ariel" means "lioness of God" and so Plath addresses the beast as "God's lioness". This name also has a biblical connotation: it is the name given by Isaiah to the city of David, a city which became the victim of God's wrath and was condemned to face tribulation but was promised deliverance in the apocalypose (Isa. 29:1-3.5-7). The name of Sylvia Plath's heroine in The Bell Jar, again has a biblical reference. In the eighth volume of the Sacred Writings of the Old Testament, Esther is the Jewish queen who saves the Jews from annihilation by the cruel Haman. Her sympathy for the Jewish people finds a
parallel in Esther Greenwood who feels the same kind of sympathy for the Rosenbergs who are electrocuted. Thus both, Esther Greenwood and Esther the Jewish queen, identify themselves with the weak and down-trodden.

Then, there is the legend of the old man of the sea, the old man of the Arabian Nights who, having been carried across the stream by Sinbad the sailor, refuses to get off his back. The allusion to this source is obliquely through the images of an old man crawling out of the sea, "complaining of the great cold" ("A Life"); the old man who, as the "draft father" goes down a pond with duck-feet winnowing his hair in "All the Dead Dears": and the old father who exiles his daughter from his watery kingdom in "Full Fathom Five". Associated with the sea, this old man is often identified with Poseidon as in "Lament": "He rode the flood in a pride of prongs." In fact, one may even associate him with the legendary Fisher King who became the victim of God's wrath and was made impotent—the myth employed by T.S. Eliot in The Wasteland.

A reference has already been made to Sylvia Plath's adaptation of Paul Radin's folk tales, the White Goddess myth of Robert Graves and the Dying God and Sacred Marriage myth explained by Fraser, all of which have been tackled in great detail by Judith Kroll in her Chapters in
a Mythology. By referring to these myths Sylvia Plath manages to achieve aesthetic distance and imparts to her work a universal quality. The private pain of the poet is rendered more comprehensible when compared with the suffering of Oedipus, Medea or even Sinbad (who has to carry a heavy burden whether he like it or not). Through these allusions there is a movement towards impersonality, towards the objectification of a subjective experience. Even the reference to the holocaust of the World War II and the harassment of innocent victims that Plath speaks of serves to portray her inner world, linking the external myth with the inner. For example, in "Daddy", as A.R. Jones says:

"The tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of the age.... The poem is more than a personal statement for by extending itself through historical images it defines the age as schizophrenic, torn between brutality and a love which in the end can only manifest itself, today, in images of violence." 4

J.F. Nims feels that Sylvia Plath's "timeless excellence" lies in" the sense of language and of metaphor
... "5 However, accepting this statement unquestioningly means just taking a partial view of the issue. The timelessness of Sylvia Plath's work lies in her themes: her subjects are those that have always fascinated man—anger and sorrow, love and hate, birth and death, life and afterlife, man and God—and which man has always tried to define in relation to his own existence. In dealing with themes that are perennial and not just confined to a particular era, Sylvia Plath has ensured that her poems survive even though they originate in her personal response to life. And then, she deals with human relationships which interest one and all: the relations between a mother and her child, husband and wife, father and daughter, among others, are explored by the poet. Doing so she lays bare the problems that human beings have always faced: love for a dear one is often accompanied by envy or resentment; sometimes excessive love teeters on hatred when it is not reciprocated: anxiety for the welfare of a dependent may turn into an exaggerated concern that may become stifling. Such are the issues that Sylvia Plath tackles and it is not difficult to see that they do not belong to the twentieth century alone: they are questions that have been faced ever since the making of man.

Regarding her own themes Sylvia Plath said:
"... For me the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving: making in all its forms, children, loaves of bread, paintings, building: and the conservation of life of all people in all places...

I do not think a "headline poetry" would interest more people... unless the up-to-the-minute poem grows out of something closer to the bone than a general, shifting philanthropy and is, indeed that unicorn—thing—a real poem, it is in danger of being screwed up as rapidly as the news sheet itself....

Surely, the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious or political propaganda. Certain poems and lines of poetry seem as solid and miraculous to me as church altars or the coronation of queens must seem to people who revere quite different images. I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescription of a doctor: if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime."
Instead of writing a "headline poetry" that would be valid only for the present, she preferred to write about "the issued of every time" which would always hold good and which would travel "far - among strangers, around the world, even." Had she focussed entirely on contemporary events, her poems too would have been cast aside like an old newspaper.

Joyce Carol Oates correctly sums up by saying that Sylvia Plath "speaks very clearly a language that we can understand. She is saying what men have been saying for many centuries, though they have not been so frank as she..." It is in this context that her poetry is to be read, understood and appreciated.
NOTES & REFERENCES


