In the preceding chapters, concepts and ideas that are found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath having either or both of the two contrary or similar values as enunciated in her poetry have been discussed. Ambivalence is defined as the simultaneous presence of conflicting feelings and tendencies with respect to a person or an object in psychoanalysis. The simultaneous arousal of contradictory feelings on certain perceptions of Sylvia Plath makes her poetry ambivalent. Thus, the coexistence of opposing attitudes or feelings, such as love and hatred, appears to be the driving motif of her poetry.

Sigmund Freud had recognized the complexity of the human being when he formulated his theories of the fundamental motivating forces of man: “the
constructive life urges and the destructive death urges” which he called “Eros” and “Thanatos”. Freud further divides the life urges into the ego drives and the sex drives (Page 179). However, Freud’s dualism in his psychoanalytical theories shows even he is not free from conflicting experiences. Thus, the pressures on the individual are both of an external as well as an internal nature. When these feelings of seemingly contradictory natures are presented in the form of art, the expression appears ambivalent. Sigmund Freud writes:

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality. Language has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation. It gives the name of ‘Spiel’ [play] to those forms of imaginative writing which require to be linked to tangible objects and which are capable of representation. It speaks of a ‘Lustspiel’ or ‘Trauerspiel’ [‘comedy’ or ‘tragedy’: literally, ‘pleasure play’ or ‘mourning play’] and describes those who carry out the representation as ‘Schauspieler’ [‘players’: literally ‘show-players’]. The unreality of the writer’s imaginative world, however, has very important consequences for the technique of his art; for many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of phantasy, and many excitements which,
in themselves, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer’s work” (Freud 148-149)

However, when the phantasy or the day-dreaming of ordinary people is compared to the imaginative experiences of the writer, the poetical creation of the daydream will be of no significance. In the creative process of imagination, a memory of an earlier experience, which, according to Freud, usually belongs to the childhood period, serves as an initiation of a wish and proceeds on the direction of finding fulfilment in the creative work.

So in order to understand the ambivalence in Sylvia Plath’s poetry it has become imperative to investigate the anxieties, agonies and trauma that she had faced in her earlier adolescent life and the various problems of the failure of relationships with her husband in her married life. Although Plath had a pleasant period of infancy and childhood experiences before her father’s death, her memories always appeared to have been filled with her pathetic experiences in the later period of life. Moreover, Sylvia Plath was a very sensitive writer and as such, all her tragic experiences and desires mingled with the sweet and pleasant memories childhood hopes and aspirations find their expressions in her poems. Therefore, the ambivalence that we find in her poetry may be considered as a reflection of her personality. In a sense, her life and works cannot be separated.
Thus, the thesis tries to explore comprehensively the life and works of Sylvia Plath focusing on the aspect of ambivalence in her poetry.

The first chapter is an introduction of the life and works of Sylvia Plath. It also discusses some of the concepts of ambivalence in order to highlight the important aspects of the thesis. Ambivalence is defined as the simultaneous presence of conflicting feelings and tendencies with respect to a person or an object by *Gale Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2005). The concept of ambivalence is important to Sylvia Plath’s life. This feeling is generated by certain important events that happened in the poet’s life, like the early death of her father, and the unhealthy relationship that she had with her mother whom she strove to please with her achievements. Plath also had problems with her femininity; she was ambivalent towards being a woman and her desire to become a writer. The most important impulse that guided Sylvia throughout her life was her ambition to succeed as a writer. This compulsion to become a writer and “the Poetess of America” (*UJ* 360) was the driving force in her life. But, she was aware of the conflicting nature of the choice of her vocation.

About ambivalence, Plath expresses in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, where the protagonist, Esther Greenwood says to her friend, Buddy Willard:

> If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be
flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (Plath 89-90)

Sylvia dwelt upon the question whether she could combine marriage and her writing successfully and would often ask Adrienne Rich, another poet, wife and mother about the possibility of combining motherhood and writing.

Social and cultural ideologies about being a woman in 1950s America also increased her ambivalence. The push and pull in the poet between her need for self-identification and the demands of society and culture to conform to the norm of femininity, as well as her desire to experience everything that life has to offer her further enhanced her feelings of conflict. The impact of these feelings and attitudes on the poet are reflected in the poems. The ambivalent feelings and attitudes of the poet are expressed in the poems.

The second chapter of the thesis is a study of the social and literary background and influences where the impact of social and cultural ideologies and the influence of major writers on Sylvia Plath are analysed. Studying Plath’s poems with reference to the historical context shows that she shared most of the ideology that was prevalent at the time among American women. The prevailing ideology was explicitly spelt out by Governor Adlai Stevenson, who gave the address on the Graduation Day of the class of 1955. Nancy Hunter Steiner, Sylvia’s roommate from 1954 to 1955 (Steiner 9), remembers the speech as
sexist, and says that it has been given in order to persuade educated, intelligent women to stay home leaving the public sphere to men. (Steiner 56-57)

Anne Stevenson understands the Governor’s address as the valuation of educated girls on the nuptial market, their education and training to be used to elevate their husbands with precisely the kind of perfect service that Sylvia’s mother had provided for Otto Plath, her father, after their marriage in 1932 (Stevenson 24). But Sylvia does not want to submit her life to her husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by his experiences. Instead she wanted to have a legitimate field of her own, apart from her husband’s, which he must respect. (UJ 98-99).

Since Sylvia had already decided to combine marriage and writing she has accepted ambivalence to be a part of her life.

Sylvia’s poems cannot be dismissed as only autobiographical, subjective, and self-centred. They show an awareness of the social and political climate of the time. Her life illustrated that she tried to conform to the norm of the invented American woman, wife, mother and nurturer of the home, while being very much conscious that she was a brilliant, intelligent woman, “educated, emancipated woman” who is critical, particular, and aristocratic in her tastes (UJ 100). Sylvia’s ambivalence lay in her attempt to combine the two.
Sylvia was profoundly affected by the conflicting ideologies of domesticity and achievement. The ambivalent feelings towards self, marriage, and close relations are a natural outcome of this dichotomy.

American society at the time had a double standard. This double standard of the society resulted in Sylvia Plath’s envy and hatred of men.

During the immediate postwar period in the USA women were encouraged by the economic and personal opportunities that the war had given them. They anticipated a more independent future, free from the pressures of the home, though a combination of internal and external factors led to a period of anxious, defensive retrenchment. Gill says;

[this] retreat to the family and the home clearly has particular implications for women, both as poets and in their everyday experience as American citizens. (Gill 24-25)

The fearful and contradictory nature of American culture of the 1950s influenced her poetry and at the same time aroused anxiety in Sylvia’s own life.

Janet Malcolm, who was a contemporary of Sylvia, observed in her book *The Silent Woman*, Sylvia Plath was able to confront the fearful postwar American life. She did this in her poems like “Daddy”, in “Fever 103°”, she
writes about the deadly effects of “Radiation”, “Hiroshima”. The title of one of her poems is “Thalidomide”, which was a drug produced in the 1950s to help people to relax but later discovered that it caused babies to be born with deformed limbs.

Plath was also influenced by the experimentations, and radical self-analysis of the early twentieth century. She was influenced by T.S. Eliot and other important writers of the modernist movement, including Ezra Pound, Joyce and Woolf while she was studying in her school and college. She read Auden, Lawrence, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas and Williams, and Yeats whom she admired. She admitted that she was influenced by Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Auden, William Blake and Shakespeare (Gill 16). But she did not ignore the influence and inspiration of women writers who were also important to Plath as competitors. Plath admired Woolf and Lawrence; she felt that their influence would help her to produce a great work. (UJ 337)

Plath was very much influenced by the writings of the confessional poets Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Theodore Roethke. Lowell’s Life Studies published in 1959 made a great impact on Plath and provided her a breakthrough in her poetry. In an interview, Sylvia expressed her excitement at Lowell’s expression of taboo subjects in his poems
Thus, the exploration of the personal, painful and taboo areas of experience by Lowell, Sexton and Theodore Roethke influenced her and showed her the development she should take in her own writing.

The third chapter is devoted to the investigation of the theory of ambivalence with reference to Sylvia’s poetry. An analysis of the ambivalence in the poems with relation to father-figure, mother-figure, self and in being a woman and a writer is taken up in chronological order.

Ambivalence is an inherent part of human experience. Studies about the concept of ambivalence are of interest not only in psychoanalysis and literature but in present day societal as well as professional relationships. Freud has said that ambivalence is expected, even necessary, for everyone to experience. The term ambivalence was first used in the diagnosis of schizophrenia.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, ambivalence is the coexistence of conflicting motives and attitudes. J. D. Page describes the nature of ambivalence in the following way:

Love and hate, as viewed by psychoanalysts, are not necessarily mutually antagonistic. Often the two are inseparably fused. In courtship there is often some quarrelling, and loved persons are often hurt. Conflicting coexisting motives and attitudes of this nature are
frequently encountered in psychoanalysis and are included under the heading of *ambivalence*. (Page 180)

The two emotions, love and hate, are not alternatives, but they exist together. The nature of ambivalence thus gives rise to a complicated, dual and conflicting feeling. This complicated feeling can be encountered in close or intimate relationships.

About ambivalence in close relationships, Bengtson et al say:

> Ambivalence is an apt term to describe the contradictions we experience in our intimate social relationships. We can feel it: the paradox between closeness and distance, the push and pull between intimacy and setting boundaries. Ambivalence is a phenomenological reality, a universal human experience, a reflection of the dilemmas we face in close relationships. (Bengston et al 568)

Raulin and Brenner understand that for Freud ambivalence is a normal and expected constituent of any relationship. Freud’s use of the word in this way was a change from the concept of ambivalence described by Bleuler as a symptom of schizophrenia. Both Bleuler and Freud had also observed the presence of ambivalence in normal and healthy people as well as in those diagnosed with schizophrenia (Matthew H. Bowker).
Sylvia Plath exposes the ambivalent position of women in patriarchal, and modern Western society in her poems. The poems also disclose the undercurrent of hatred, rage, desire of escape through death and rebirth, to be free from the shackles of social and cultural bonds. These negative feelings are inseparably fused with the feelings of complicity with the prevalent cultural ideology of being a wife and mother, nurturer of home and children. Her late poems show a rejection of convention and superficiality of the prevailing ideologies of the middle part of the twentieth century.

In her famous poem “Daddy”, written in October 1962, Sylvia’s conflicting feelings towards father-figures are portrayed. The speaker’s love of her father as well as her hatred of him because of his untimely death is expressed ambivalently in the poem. Her father is cruel because he died, but adored and loved at the same time, as the daughter in the poem says: “Every woman adores a fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you” (CP 223). In her Journals, Plath writes about her own father “He was an ogre. But I miss him” (UJ 431).

Another poem which deals with the mother-daughter conflict is “The Disquieting Muses”. The daughter’s accusation is that her mother left her unprepared to face reality and she is haunted by these disturbing “muses” or “godmothers”. Her reproach is that it is her mother who is the cause of the
presence of these “disquieting muses/godmothers” in her life. These poems are a new and startling way of expressing feelings about close relationships and show a rejection of the norm and a refusal to comply with it.

The fourth chapter presents the analysis of the poems written during 1956 and 1961 with reference to Plath’s ambivalence. The early poem “Two Sisters of Persephone” (1956) deals with the theme of rejection of love and its consequence. The poems “The Disquieting Muses” (1957) show ambivalent feelings towards mother-figures while “Full Fathom Five” (1958), “Electra on Azalea Path” (1959), “The Colossus” (1959), express Plath’s conflicting feelings and attitudes to her father’s death and to father-figures which are dealt with in the later poems.

She wrote poems on the subject of barrenness and pregnancy in “Barren Woman” and “Heavy Women”, just within five days of each other in February 1961. The hospital poems “In Plaster” and “Tulips” (1961) deal with the conflict in the self between self-effacement and selfhood, the feeling of opposition between conformity and non-compliance to the conventional norms of femininity. An analysis of these poems shows Plath’s conflicting feelings towards femininity, to her father’s death, and, to her relationship with her mother.
The fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis Plath’s late poems. “A Birthday Present” written on September 30, 1962 gives a vista of the poet’s life as seen when she turned thirty. The 1962 group of poems related in theme are “Stings”, “The Applicant”, “Ariel”, and “Purdah”. They deal with transformation of the woman, a criticism of the patriarchal culture for its treatment of woman as objects or machines without feelings or wants or ambitions, transcendence of the self through hell to paradise, and the enigmatical nature of woman hidden by the veil. The two poems “Daddy” and “Medusa” written on October 12 and 16, 1962, respectively show development from the early poems written to the father and mother-figures. The study of the poems “Lady Lazarus”, “Childless Woman”, “The Munich Mannequins” and “Child” conclude the analysis of the poems. In the poem “Cut”, a poem written in 1962, Plath writes about a domestic experience:

What a thrill---
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge. (CP 235)

This incident is an ordinary experience of many women in their domestic chores. While trying to slice an onion, Plath writes the feeling of excitement when she cut her thumb. The thrill of violence and the sight of the dripping blood evoke both emotions of fear and awe. As the poems shows her great interest in
observing the flapping skin, blood, and the wound itself. The theme of the poem reflects the ambivalence with pain and pleasure along with her disenchantment to the injury itself signifying the realities of life. Her disgust and curiosity about life and death brings a complicated feeling of intrigue and excitement of euphoria. Such type of ambivalence permeates most of her work.

The last chapter is the concluding chapter and gives a summary of the whole thesis and shows the significant aspect of Plath’s achievement. It contains remarks, observations and the findings of the research work. The chapter shows that the analysis of the poems supports the argument about Plath’s ambivalence.

The poems that have been taken up for analysis with respect to Plath’s ambivalence show that her expression of ambivalent feelings and attitudes in her poems is a criticism of life, because it is an inherent part of human life. She also critiques the male ideology with respect to women. The ideology prescribes women to remain passive and be dependent to the husband and home. Her ambivalent attitude is a conscious “method of confronting and potentially working through her gender role anxieties” (Simons 26). The acknowledgment and expression of ambivalence have positive effects according to social scientists as they assume that it is a precursor to change in the lives of the individual as well as in the social structure.
Although many critics call Sylvia Plath a confessional poet because of her excessive indulgence in self and her frank and shameless expressions of her personal details she is not exposing her mind and self as a conventional confession. In her poetry we find some profound universal connotations. She writes:

‘Well then, if we agree, it is not odd
that one man’s devil is another’s god
or that the solar spectrum is
a multitude of shaded grays; suspense
on the quicksands of ambivalence
is our life’s whole nemesis.’ (CP 329)

The poem conveys her idea that one cannot escape from the presence of conflicts and contradictions in one’s life. Man has to accept ambivalence and be able to keep a balanced perspective of the presence of contradictions in life. She succeeds in making adjustments in her personal experiences and the realities of life. The horrible images of the devastation of war, social injustice and the subversion of women in a patriarchal society and the limitations of the artist in a traditional society are all reflected in her poems. Thus, we may safely conclude that Sylvia Plath is not always a personal poet. Regarding her impersonal attitude Jim Hunter writes:
An achieved poem becomes other people’s: they can walk round it like a sculpture, there is no umbilical cord connecting it to the poet’s life-blood, it has its own independent life. These poems are ours now. (Hunter 110)

Some critics would like to describe Sylvia Plath as a feminist because of her portrayal of the female body in her works and discussing the multiplicity of the feminist roles. However, she cannot be considered as a feminist in the true sense of the term. She writes against the male authority often represented by her father and her husband. But she also writes against the mother-figure with the same amount of anger and hatred. In fact, her violent attack appears to be against herself and everybody thus creating ambivalence.

Sylvia Plath explored different kinds of themes like alienation, death, loneliness and hypocrisy in her poetry which are the main characteristics of modernism. If we examine her poems from this perspective we can see Plath’s poetry leading towards post-modernism with emphasis on fragmentation and playfulness. Describing Sylvia Plath as just a confessional, feminist, modernist or post-modernist would be insufficient as she used a wider canvas beyond all these traditional concepts. Sylvia Plath has also used myths widely in her poems. Domestic affairs and the role of women in the family life is also another
important aspect of her poetry. Further research can be done in any of these areas. Moreover, the technique, style and the craftsmanship of her poetry are also important topics for further investigations. In fine, it would be pertinent to say that the theme and structure of Sylvia Plath’s poetry resonates with ambivalence.
WORKS CITED


