Sylvia Plath is variously regarded as a cult figure, a bitch goddess, an extremist poet issuing out "blood jets", a frenzied woman, a heroine of suicide. Her poetry has generally been looked upon as a casebook of her private sufferings, as a result of which Plath criticism has tended to be case-studies. Her work has, necessarily, given rise more to public fantasies rather than eliciting any sound critical assessment. This leaves room for a researcher to salvage her work from the wreckage of her extremely fascinating life which has received so great attention that critics seem to have been gripped by a compulsive urge to fuse her life with her art.

Sylvia Plath's poetry and fiction fundamentally explore her personal world. This has given rise to her largely being recognised as a "confessional" artist. To subscribe to this view is to accept that her life and art are inseparable, that an inalienable bond between her biography and literary output exists. On close reading of Plath's work there remains, however, no doubt of the fact that Sylvia Plath is not a "confessional" artist in the sense M.L. Rosenthal first labelled Robert Lowell as a "confessional poet." Rosenthal,

who first used the term to denote the poetry of Lowell, includes Plath in the same category. Rosenthal's argument is that in Lowell's *Life Studies*, Plath found a model of a new kind of poetry which dealt with the personal predicament of an artist's life, particularly his sufferings, which were hitherto regarded as a taboo to art. Edward Butscher also toes the line of Rosenthal's thinking and considers that in her late poetry Plath deliberately exposed her personal history in order to create an enduring legend.²

To accept this line of criticism is to acknowledge that Plath's poetry can never be understood without a constant reference to her biography. This is an unfortunate misconception. It is true that most of the Plath's poetry of the final period begins with an incident or experience of her personal world, but these poems immediately move away from the autobiographical situation to become artefacts existing by their own rights and in most cases yield meaning independent of biographical information. For example, "Ariel" is the result of her memory of a traumatic horse-ride, but the poem never describes the ride itself. Rather,

"Ariel" becomes a wonderful dramatisation of a woman's terrible journey that culminates in the triumphant experience of a rebirth. The bee poems have behind them Plath's own experiences with the apiary, but the poems can be understood without any knowledge of her personal experiences in beekeeping; the bee-poems are actually meditations of the modes and problems of human existence. They exist completely independent of her biographical experiences. A poem like "Death & Co." derives from her personal experience with visitors who offered her husband a lucrative opening in America, thereby virtually threatening to disrupt her married life. Plath deeply resented their presence and considered them messengers of death. But the poem "Death & Co." deals with two aspects of death, its terrible destructiveness and its appealing sensual attractiveness. The poem does not suffer an iota without this biographical information and exists as a self-sufficient artistic unit. Similar examples abound in her poetry.

Robert Phillips has suggested that "we are living in an age of autobiography" and that is why general truths about human nature no longer appeal. Rather the interest of the

reader is in the private experience of man. It is because of this, Phillips avers that the reader's interest in the poetry of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath continues to increase. This, I believe, is pseudo-criticism and to subscribe to such a view is to underestimate the achievement of Sylvia Plath.

Referring to the poems in Life Studies, Robert Lowell has himself said that inspite of a good "deal of tinkering with facts" in the poems, "there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry — the reader has to believe that he was getting the real Robert Lowell". This is a perfect statement of the aims and objectives of a "confessional" artist. Sylvia Plath, however, never gives us the "real" Sylvia, never presents that "standard of truth" which the poems in Lowell's Life Studies and Notebooks hold for the readers. The autobiographical-realistic mode of Lowell is supplanted by the personal-imagistic mode in Plath. Marjorie Perloff has aptly pointed out that Lowell's mode is realistic and his background historical.  

grandparents, his experiences of psychological disorders and treatment in mental hospital, his jail experiences as a pacifist during World War II, his marriage, his life with his uncle Devereux Winslow et al — all these figure quite realistically in his poetry and a reader can easily string together a biography from his poetry. But this is impossible in Plath's case, since Plath's mode has never been realistic and her background never historical. When Lowell writes of his grandparents he is concerned with his personal memory of those dear individuals; when Plath writes on her grandmother in "Point Shirley" she deals not with autobiographical reminiscences but meditates upon the fruitless attempts of man in struggling against the destructiveness of nature. When Plath writes of the father, we are not given an authentic portrait of Otto Plath and his personal world, as Lowell portrays the historical Commander Lowell, but the reader is presented with a father-figure, who is half-myth, half-God; part evil and part divine. When Plath writes of her children, the poems do not merely describe Frieda and Nick Hughes, but focus upon the child's world of unalloyed, idealised purity which stands in stark contrast with the terrors of the adult world which the mother lives in her psyche. To read Plath's poetry as confessional is to do severe injustice to the imaginative range and originality of the poet.
Another disturbing trend in Plath criticism is evident in A. Alvarez's theory that Plath's heroic self-excavations in her last poetry actually aggravated her psychological stress which resulted in her suicide. This view has been propounded by Alvarez in his much discussed *The Savage God*. A close reading of Plath's poetry, however, shows that her death is anything but the consequence of her "extremist" poetry. Obsession with suicide was actually ever-present in Plath's psyche. She had attempted suicide long back in 1953 and the root of such an obsession can easily be traced back to her shocking fatherless childhood experiences which finally resulted in her psychological breakdown. This is, however, the field of the biographer and the psycho-analyst and, I believe, should not cloud the critic's mind whose best reference is her poems which exist as distinct linguistic acts.

Feminist critics have also excavated Plath's poetry to establish their theory that Plath's suicide was a result of sexual politics in a male-dominated world. Among the most vigorous exponents of this attitude to Plath's

poetry are Harriet Rosenstein, Jeannine Dobbs and Constance Scheerer. These critics substantiate their views from certain poems like "Purdah", "The Applicant", "Lady Lazarus", "The Jailer" etc. in which Plath's rage against men is manifest. What is to be remembered is that Plath's rage is directed primarily against her father and her husband and this is generalised in these poems. But they are not typically feminist in their tone, because of the very simple reason that Plath had no ideological commitments to make nor was she taking any political stance against a case of male domination. That Plath was in reality not a victim of sexual politics, that she was not being discriminated against on the grounds of her sex, can easily be proved by the enormous recognition she had received during her lifetime. She has extraordinary success records, both in her academic and creative pursuits. By the time she died she had won a large reputation as a famous poet on both sides of the Atlantic. Her

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poetry was largely being published in America and England. The Colossus, her first book of poems, was published both in England and America and even her novel, The Bell Jar, was accepted for publication. May be she had to struggle to gain the recognition and success she had achieved in her life time, but which poet does not find the road to success a toiling one? It will never be worthwhile to consider Plath as a victim of male-conspiracy, as a martyr who sacrificed her life to male discrimination. These critics who focus attention upon poems like "Lady Lazarus" or "Purdah" fail to realise two things. First, that Plath's rage against men had no ideological bias behind it and, that, these few poems do not represent the acme of her literary achievement. Second, that Plath's rage against women is also evident in poems like "Lesbos", "Medusa", "Spinster" etc. If in just around five to six poems Plath has recorded the plight of the woman trapped in the falseness of domesticity, in nearly the same number of poems Plath has also voiced her disgust against women. The point is, that Plath's disgust and rage against the men and women in her poetry, should not be read as a generalised statement of truth; rather, these poems, issue out of her personal anguish for and animosity to certain individuals in her life.

It is a pity that Plath's fictional work, specially her novel, The Bell Jar, has till date not received adequate
critical attention. The novel has been rather underestimated as merely autobiographical. A close reading, however, suggests that the autobiographical concerns in the novel are the least significant ones, that Plath has dealt with much larger issues than the private in *The Bell Jar*. It is precisely to highlight these issues that I have dealt with the novel in a separate chapter. It must, anyway, be acknowledged that her short stories and minor fictional prose writings collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* and *Other Prose Writings* do not do justice to Plath's genius. Most of her stories deal with the raw materials of her life and generally fail to impress the reader as the work of a first-rate artist. I have, therefore, not shown any special concern in analysing her minor fiction other than making passing references to them wherever necessary.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to dissociate Plath's biography from her art and to throw light not upon the woman who suffers but the mind which creates. This is the major reason behind my not devoting any part of my thesis to an analysis of her *Letters Home*. Moreover, the letters mostly present a cheery, successful daughter constantly struggling, but struggling with positive passion and energy, on the road to success. The letters to her
mother give no adequate expression of her private sufferings and the breaking down of her personal world. Her letters present a masked persona, as if writing to her mother only those things which she would have liked her daughter to feel and do. It is interesting to note that one of the most disturbing and recurrent motifs in Plath's creative world is a deep abhorrence for her mother. The Letters Home is far removed from the world of her art, for they show a daughter deeply devoted to her "dearest mother". In short, the Letters Home do not throw any significant light upon her work.

What is really lacking in Plath criticism is a patient, detailed analysis of her poetry. Though renowned critics like David Holbrook, Marjorie Perloff, Jon Rosenblatt and others have written extensively on Plath, hardly anybody has read her poems as poems and, therefore, only those lines or sections of her poems have been discussed which help to testify to the critics' concerns. Accordingly, most of Plath's major poems have not been discussed in totality. I have, humbly, attempted to fill in these gaps. My purpose is to reveal the wide range of Plath's imagination that has mostly remained ignored.
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(SUMAN JANA)