Chapter - IV

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATIONS

Critics have described Sylvia Plath as an extremist poet, a confessional poet, a pre-feministic poet, a romantic poet and so on. Some think that she was schizoid, carrier of death wish and some think she was a victim of male brutality. Whatever it was said about Sylvia Plath but it was certain that she was facing enormous amount of pressure and strain which were the main cause of her depression. She went through several steps of despair, grief, anger, quietness and longing. She used the mean of poetry to end her pains and pressures which were common for a woman living in the twentieth century. Plath was the woman who faced the problems boldly and raise voice against discrimination when other woman were silent. It is not matter of surprise that the poems of a complex and multifaceted writer like her are confessional and bring out those details of life which come from the deepest core of her isolated self.

Sylvia Plath expressed the horror and despair that lurk beneath the appearance of sanity in her 696 letter which she wrote to her family. Her poetry is filled with the socio-psychological situations like her personal sufferings and the tortures that she faced outside her family relations. She showed a resentment against male domination, hostilities toward the female condition are freely expressed in her poetry. Some feministic writers see her a writer who was abused and betrayed by men. In a male dominated society she tried hard to find her identity as a woman and as a writer. Sylvia Plath found herself caught in a conflict between her artistic and domestic desires. She tried her best to become a best wife and a mother and on the other hand she made every effort to become a good writer. She
successfully combined her social life with her professional life. She experienced a conflict between her family and her career. According to Annamma Joseph “Plath’s vision was probably of perfect fusion of the intellectually independent being with the socially conforming woman, towards the creation of a super achiever.”\(^2\) She reflected her personal situations in her poetry. In her journal she wrote:

“I have been and am battling depression. It is as my life were magically run by two electric currents, joyous positive and despairing negative- whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. I am now flooded with despair…as if I were something.”\(^3\)

The real significance of Sylvia Plath does not lie in her exposure of autobiographical material but in her dramatic approach to the representation of a violent and threatened self. As a major American poet she wrote in a period of literary transition, a period of post war prosperity and political passivity accompanied by resurgence of American individualism and success. She has expressed the personal and political experiences, the brutalities of war and the alienation of bureaucracy as metaphors between the world and self.

Plath’s poetry is confessional as she reveals her personal world through her poetry to the audience. She suffered a lot this could be seen through her writings. Her mental depression and failure of relation could be noticed in her poems. Her autobiographical projection in her writings is the main characteristic that is found in her poetry. Jon Rosenblatt points out that:
“In her confessions Plath employs numerous personae establishes objective settings within which the speaker of her poems dramatize themselves; and she consistently employs imagery in a realistic manner, rather than using the personal images or autobiographical references to reflect back upon herself. Plath uses personal allusions as the foundation for dramas of transformation and psychological process.”

Plath leads the reader into a world of heightened possibilities and fatal attractions. M.L. Rosenblatt said that Plath followed the autobiographical method of Life Studies. Plath was influenced by Lowell’s Life Studies. She wrote about Lowell’s Life Studies:

“I have been very excited by what I felt is the new breakthrough that came with Robert Lowell’s Life Studies. Robert Lowell’s poem about his experience in a mental hospital interest me very much.”

Plath found a mode of openness in Lowell’s Life Studies, both personal and poetic. She used personal as well as impersonal material in her poems. The personal material is based on the relationship with however family, friends and relatives. The personal images of fear, love and death are based on real life incidents. The impersonal elements that are reflected in her poetry are the elements of history, politics and society. Sylvia Plath portrays the
difficulties that are faced by a woman during a stay at mental asylum and her images descend to a much greater depth where identity forms and reforms itself.

Plath’s psychological and family history is similar to that of twentieth century confessional poets like Lowell, Sexton, and Berryman but there is certainly difference in the process of forming a personality through poetry. In 1950 the poets have shared the same cultural and psychological situations. They related their sufferings with their poetry. Plath also face psychological imbalance wrote within the trend of re-evaluation of aesthetic practice. Plath’s methods are different from her contemporaries. Plath had an ability to transform personality through her poetry.

Sylvia Plath certainly does not claim to be original in her writings. In an interview with Peter Orr she says:

“I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton who writes also about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems and yet they have a emotional and psychological depth, which I think is something quite new and exciting.”

Sylvia Plath was different from her contemporary writers, she stands as a multifaceted writer with a very original confessional mode of writing. Her works are not merely autobiographical but consists of experiences recorded into patterns that obtain an objective character through repetition, allusion and symbolic enactment. The political and social
elements could also be seen in Sylvia Plath’s poetry. Her first collection The Colossus (1960) focuses on herself and the real world. It consists of both imaginative and real elements. The poems in The Colossus describe a literal transformation into a non-human persona, as Northrop Frye puts it “a metamorphosis into an object in the world of nature which represents the falling silent of the world in its human or rational phase.” The second collection ‘Crossing The Water’ (1960-62) reflects the events of her life related to inner self. The poems in this collection deal with hospital experience, mental depression and recurrent reference of death. The other collections like Winter Trees and Ariel has the themes of deprivation, hostility, bareness, infertility and isolation. The collection ‘Winter Trees’ belong the poems that are recognizable and personal, moving from a private world to the limitless public one. Eileen M. Aird remarks about this collection:

“It is in this series of poems inspired by maternak feelings, that Sylvia Plath reveals the cruel opposites of the world in their starkest opposition, but they are not black poems.”

Most of the poems of Sylvia Plath are based on socio- Psychological issues like loneliness, death husband- wife relation and relation with friends and relatives. The issues of the society are also reelected in these poems. Alvarez describes Sylvia Plath’s poetry in the fallowing way:
“Poetry…is not made by efficiency-least of all Sylvia Plath’s poetry. Instead, her extraordinary general competence was, I think, made necessary by what made her to write: an underlying sense of violent unease. It took a great deal of efficiency to cope with that, to keep it in check. And when the efficiency finally failed her world collapsed.”

Plath’s art of writing is different she chooses her basic idea of writing poems from different sources such as man’s estrangement from nature, a threat and horror expressed through hostility, the father daughter relationship or an Electra complex, the theme of love, the theme of death, the sense of isolation, loneliness and deprivation accompanied by mental torture, suffering and loss of identity. The core of her poetry is based on autobiographical and personal elements, thus locating a meaningful relationship between self and the world. Plath’s description of landscape has been derived from her imagination and mingled with her fascination nature is “the poet’s deep feelings of man’s separation from nature and an equally deep experience of nature as inherently hostile to man.” She finds only “dream peopled village” in the opaque landscape:

All night gave her, in return

For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat

Of her heart was humped indifferent

Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set

On the black stone…
dairy herds

Knelt in the meadow mute as boulders.

(Hardcastle Cages, L.35-41)

Sylvia Plath in ‘Departure’ has shown how the fragile humankind is broken into a brutal end, which Mary Lyne Broe tells as ‘petrification threatened human existence’:

The leaden slag of the world

But always expose

The scraggy rock split shielding the town’s blue bay

Against which the brunt of outer sea

Beats, is brutal endlessly.

(Departure, L.11-15)

The poet is being threatened by the hostility of nature and remain more or less in obscurity.

As in Full Fathom Five:

All obscurity

Starts with danger

Your dangers are many, I

Cannot look much but you’re from suffers
Some strange injury
And seems to die.

(Full Fathom Five)

Plath is very much disturbed with nature that she refuses its entry. She feels a sort of rejection from the society and prefers to stay in an enclosure:

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check.

(Spinster, L. 28-29)

She fears to get lost and finds herself unable to connect with her surroundings.

I stood shut out once for all
Puzzling the passage of their
Absolutely alien….

(Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor)
Lastly Plath longs for death and wishes to escape from nature’s hostility. The world that is reflected in Plath’s poems is of blackness and coldness. She finds herself in an enclosure. In Plath’s poems like ‘Parliament Hill Fields’, ‘Poem for a Birthday’, Plath’s feelings are those of rejection by people, family, friends, herself and landscape. Same elements could be seen in ‘Three Women’. She feels loss of identity. An isolated self could be seen in her poetry. A loss of identity exists within her:

I am so vulnerable suddenly
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that are letting go
I leave my health behind I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like
Bandages: I go

(Three Woman)

Plath reveals the psychological experiences like hospital experience, failure of relations, hurt from the male dominant society, in her poetry. She projects her dark world through her poetry. Consequently she feels breaking apart from all:

I am breaking apart like the world
There is this blackness

This ram of blackness

I fold my hands on a mountain-

…I am used, I am dammed into use.

My eyes are squeezed by this blackness

I see nothing.

(Three Women)

The poems of Sylvia Plath reveal her personal experience, self-expression, identity crises and threat from nature violence and also reveal her longing to escape from the world to attain better life. Plath’s main cause of writing poems was her personal torture that she received from the world. She once wrote to her mother:

“I’ve discovered my deepest source of inspiration, Which is art: the art of primitives like Heri Rosseau, Gauguin, Paul Klee and de Chirico”¹¹

Her art made her to rise at such level. She put her emotions in poems, her personal situations, psychological imbalance are clearly shown to the reader like a plain glass.

Plath wrote her experiences in the context of time and place that shaped her mind specifically during mid 50’s and 60’s – a period after World War II and considered to be better and more successful by being wife and mother rather than adopting a career. She everywhere represents woman a victim, dumb blonde cardboard figures, old maids etc. In
poems like ‘Spinster’, ‘Two Sisters of Persephone’, and ‘Winter Trees’ she describes the fate of woman. Sylvia Plath didn’t like to be a classic feminist, as she wrote in her journal: “I am at odds. I dislike being a girl”, or being born a woman is a tragedy”. She admits to be an alienated person: “Yes, my consuming desires to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers… all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female, always in danger of assault and battery.” 12 She wishes to remove this indifference and to pertain her own identity: “I think I am going up /, I think I may rise.” The concept also continues in her other poems. In ‘Queen Bee’ she writes, “I have a self to recover, a queen” and sheds all other relations to itself. She often wrote to her mother: “I want. I think, to be omniscient…I think I would like to call myself ‘The girl who want to be God’…I am …I am powerful- but to what extent? I am.” 13

In Plath’s works there is expression of anger of rage for male society. The woman is presented as man’s prey, tortured beyond endurance, reduced like a lifeless puppet by his destructive expectations. Commenting on the disturbed condition Plath tells in ‘Applicant’ woman is a living doll, a dehumanized wife and an innocent female:

It can sew, it can cook,

\ It can talk, talk, and talk

(Applicant. L.33-34).
According to her man’s relationship with woman and nature is explosive, and a female is nothing but man’s idea to cleanse the body grossness. She feels deserted and loses her sexual identity:

Every woman’s a whore

I cannot communicate.

For Plath marriage is a sort of imprisonment it has the foundation of “lies and grief”. It is a prison in which all the dreams of a woman are shattered:

A ring of gold with the sun in it?

Lies, lies and a grief

…A disturbance in mirrors

The sea shattering its grey one

Love, love my season.

(The Couriers, L.5-9)

A woman doesn’t have an individuality like a man. Neither she is happy like a man, she is like a toy, a puppet in the hands of man who always plays with her emotions. She is treated as a commodity. Caroline King in his book “Sylvia Plath” says that it seems futile for her to cast herself as a low cast woman in a male – dominated society, she rebels against it, because “in her own marriage, she choose for herself
a role of domestic submissiveness while placing the success of her husband’s career above her own”.

Plath projects herself as “too pure for you or anyone/ your body/Hurts me” This conflict is unresolved and complex in lines:

…. I am a pure acetylene

Virgin

Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim.

Not you, nor him.

(Fever 103.L.46-50)

Plath conveyed her feelings about her tormented self and about her relation with male dominant society in a number of poems. In “Pursuit” there is intense portrayal of passion, a woman’s frantic terror, dark guilt and appalled self-awareness:

Entering the tower of my fears

I shut my doors on the dark guilt,

I bolt the door, each door I bolt…
Panther’s tread is on the stairs

Coming up and up the stairs

I hurl my heart to halt this place

To quench his thirst I squander blood.

(Pursuit. L.46-52)

The personae in these lines acts as a prey of Black Panther’s pursuit. In a terrified state she characterizes him as greedy and violent, majestic and graceful. This poem is dedicated to Ted Hughes. Her love for Ted is portrayed vividly in terms of mythological Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

….how but most glad

Could be this Adam’s woman

When all earth his words do summon

Leaps to land such man’s blood.

(Alternative Horizon)

Charles Newman comments that “no American poet of the era treated the theme of love with more cadour than Emily Dickenson; and Sylvia Plath carries the tradition to equal
heights at midcentury. What lifts their work above the commonplace is the totality of their affection and the fastidiousness with which they express them. Both cut through popular sociology by acknowledging the terrifying ambiguity of the female role, and then by universalizing their very feminism”.

Plath herself wanted to live within female inscription system but she was rebellious towards male society and hatred for men is rooted in her poems. As a victim she exists only to satisfy male hunger, and she presents her love as fierce predatory animal who is brutal and insatiable in his lust and he is witchy in his attitude. Her anger could be seen in “In Plaster”:

Cold glass, how you insert yourself
Between myself and myself
I scratch like a cat.

(In Plaster,)

If the characteristic of Plath’s confessional poetry is the frankness, and uprightness to deal with the most intimate personal feelings. Despair and frustration are the main elements of her poetry she continues to exemplify her personal depersonalization in poems like “Purdah”, “Lady Lazarus” and “Elm”

These are my hands
My knees

I may be skin and bone

Nevertheless I am the same identical woman.

(Lady Lazarus, L.31-34)

She always finds herself in solitudeness. Men are degraded to the level of “bastards” by Plath. Her devouring orality steadily becomes more threatening to her male opponents and she warns:

Beware

Beware

Out of ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

(Lady Lazarus. L.77-81)

Sylvia Plath uses more coherent verse in writing about herself and about her personal relationship with her father, mother, husband, child and grandmother, thus dealing with own living experiences and private psyche like fantasies, memories family history, childhood and also marriage and after life. A strange love- hate relationship is reflected in her poems. Caroline K. Banard comments:
“Her hatred of men seems rooted not so much in opinion as in her deeply diabolic, ambivalent relationship with her father; it seems frivolous to say that her struggle with the Colossus expresses merely a feminist’s sense of sexual injustice.”

Plath’s father Otto Plath died when Plath was ten, it was a big shock for he poetess from which she never recovered. She always remained attached with his memories. She could not come out from the loss of her father when she was a child:

….a black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two

I was ten when they buried you

(Daddy, L. 55-57).

Plath showed both elements that love and hatred towards her father. Sometimes she showed affection and sometimes she acquires a sense of hatred and an urge to kill him. Nancy Hunter Steiner reveals Plath’s motive when she confessed about her father that:

“He was an autocrat… I adored and despised him, and probably wished many times he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him.”

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She wanted to kill him but he died before she had to do so: ‘Daddy I’ve had kill you / you died before I had time’. This strange opinion about her father may be due to her sense of loneliness and isolation in her childhood, she was deprived of love of one parent from childhood. So, she thought so. She had to face a lot of odd ones which she must have not been if he had lived for a longer time. She chose poetry to defend such circumstances and escape from such situation. Poetry was the mean that she used to share her feelings. She becomes an Electra. In Sylvia Plath’s poems it is her love that kills her father. “Electra on Azalea” one of her poems is based on the love hate relationship of her father:

Oh pardon the one who knocks for, pardon at
Your gate, father- your hound bitch, daughter,
Friend,
It was my love that did both us to death.

(Electra on Azalea, L. 80-83)

Plath compares her personal experience to the sufferings of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. In poems like ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ there are German Nazi references, comparing her father’s role as Nazi and casting herself as Jew:

And you’re Aryan Eye, bright blue
Panzer man, panzer man, o you-

Not God but a Swastika…

(Daddy, L. 44-46)

In her next poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ she voices her sufferings and her sympathy for disturbing tensions against the Jews. She also reveals the brutality of pain and hysteria suffered in Nazi camps:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi Lampshade,
My right foot
A paper weight
My face a featureless fine
Jew Linen.

(Lady Lazarus. L.4-9)

Plath’s exploration of her personal world indicates that her poems are confessional in nature and they derive form and structure from her private revelations. Self is the nucleus of her poems, her poems are expressions of her own paradoxes—the one she finds within
herself and the others faced outside. Plath finds herself trapped within the social context that is historical and linear rather than natural and cyclical. She searched her identity between the two mirrors of the world and her own. She follows Wordsworth’s poetry.

Sylvia Plath tried to end her life in a series of suicidal attempts and her violent ecstasy into a death wish. Her poems are seen as “sweeping away of identity, a melting into a primal impulse”. Plath’s death poems are similar to that of Keats, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens and others. Plath’s poems reflect death and art in relation to one another:

Dying

I do it so it feels real.

Is an art like anything else

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell

She also asserts in lyric after lyric her several attempts to die poetically:

I have done it again

One year in every ten

I manage it.
A sort of walking miracle.

(Lady Lazarus, L.47-54)

In the death poems Plath shows her pain, self-exposure, suicidal attempts and self-destructiveness as an art to convey her inner violence and ecstasy. Talking about her ‘art of dying’ Alveraz observes:

“She is using her art to keep the disturbance, out of which she made her verse, at a distance. It is as though she had not yet come to grips with her subject as an artist.”

Sylvia Plath uses her personal situations as a weapon in her poetry. She uses American Cold War, history and social landscape to view herself in relation to them and finds difficulty in locating brutality. There she shows a brutal and dehumanizing relationship between an individual and society:

The peanut crunching crowed

Shoves In to see

Then unwrap my hands and foot

A big striptease

Gentleman ladies,
There are my hands

My knees

I may be skin or bone.

Nevertheless,

I am the same, identical woman.

(Lady Lazarus. L.16-25)

Through personal conceptions she creates beautiful images of her fate.

Peel off the napkin

O my enemy

Do I terrify?-

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath

Will vanish in a day.

(Lady Lazarus, L. 10-15)

It is wrong to view all poems of Plath in one dimension. Plath is considered as an aesthetic poet with psychological dimensions. Psychologically aesthetics of transformation has been
used as a means of reuniting the self and the world through Plath’s poetry. She intelligently fuses her ego with the outside world and reasonably tries to abandon her body through death, to free her soul and remaining in the state of living death. Plath’s psychological project is therefore both self-negating and self-expensive. She is not able to destroy her identical self but man œuvres over it again and again enlarging the scope to conquer the entire world.

Plath’s poetry is a work of personal process, in which she transforms her inner world into the world of reality through various images. She expresses antithetical attitude towards existence alternately speaking for life and against it. Plath’s poems on one hand are expressions of vitality and power and on the other hand they are self-negating and suicidal, thus employing a negative vitalism.

Plath’s poetry is confessional in nature and is based on her experience as a woman, working in the male dominant world who woman is treated merely a doll. The lack of community among woman writers in the 1950’s and 1960’s resulted in isolation for Plath within her own psyche. Due to such depression she pushes her poetry into the world of death, and the fear of death and destruction produces a shrillness in her life. At the end she finishes herself and her artistic world. Her career as a poet remained full of pain and suffering accompanied by violent ecstasy and the inability to control traumatic war like experiences.
REFERENCES


