

SYLVIA PLATH'S WOUNDED PSYCHE EXPRESSED IN HER ARIEL**¹Thungyani Ovung, ²Dr. Royichan Antony V**¹Research Scholar, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya (India)²Supervisor, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya (India)**Abstract**

“Life presents a continuous chain of struggle for existence survival” (524), cites S.K. Mangal from Darwin’s statement. The psyche, often known as the human mind, spirit, or mind, plays a significant role in determining our behavioral characteristics. For individuals who hold the belief that people are flawed, it is important to recognize that this state of brokenness does not occur spontaneously. However, it commences by delving into the past, namely focusing on our familial connections. When the mind is impacted, cognitive abilities become difficult, and individuals will undergo personality alterations. Surveys conducted in advanced industrialized countries suggest that there is no certain life stage that brings significantly more happiness or complete fulfillment compared to persons who have attained remarkable accomplishments.

Sylvia Plath's writing is full of frightening mental worlds. Contenders and critics opine that the writings of Sylvia Plath are “paranoid distortions of reality” (Latson N. pag.) from childhood till death. There is no text provided. If Plath had lived longer, there was an increased risk for them to acquire a manic psychosis. Plath's poems and literary works extensively explore her personal experiences, with a special focus on her renowned work, *Ariel* (1965). Plath's second collection of poems, a substantial body of work, remained unpublished at the time of her death and was subsequently issued by Faber and Faber two years later. The poems in the book, composed during the last weeks of her existence, epitomize Plath's highest achievement in literature and serve as a manifestation of her increasing recognition of psychological turmoil as a woman torn between the realms of life and death. This study tries to examine Sylvia Plath's damaged mental state as portrayed in her work, *Ariel*.

Keywords: wounded psyche, mental capacities, manic psychosis, psychic crises, confessional style, psychological damage, emotional and mental challenges, psychological manipulation, negative self-perception, sense of affinity, mental illness.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis in parenthetical citations to Plath’s works. The method followed for the same is based on the Handbook for MLA Format 9th Edition.

Profiles: "Plath Profiles volume 9." Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies 9 (2017).

Introduction

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well (Plath14. 43-45)

Sylvia Plath is a highly varied and esteemed poet from the United States in the 20th century. She is a poet who follows the Modern American confessional style, which involves carefully examining the psychological damage caused by common familial and cultural conventions. Andersen provides commentary on Plath's portrayal of the natural world., “she was a strange child, quiet and thoughtful” (135), The artist had a range of emotional and mental challenges, including sadness, desperation, desertion, dejection, dementia, schizophrenia, and mental pain, which is evident in her artistic creations. Plath is a tireless author who expresses her fearful emotions, life experiences, and relationships with her father, mother, husband, children, and society via poetry in a lively and enthusiastic manner. Beg avers hence, “A psychological probe into her personality, poetry, and bouts of insanity leading to her untimely tragic death results in recognizing her artistic excellence” (42).

Sigmund Freud made a noteworthy addition to the understanding of behavior and mental functioning with his theory of personality, commonly referred to as 'psychoanalysis', which emerged as a key advancement in the early 20th century. This contribution redirected attention from "illness" to "wellness" and from "evil" to "goodness". It is often discussed with compassion and care, mostly based on humanitarian principles, but it is occasionally misconstrued.

Plath's parents, Otto and Aurelia, led a life of seclusion and emptiness in their Boston apartment, despite being well-educated and wealthy. Otto Plath existed. “a dominant patriarchal presence in the household” (O’Reilly 355). O’Reilly continues, “He had stubbornly refused to seek medical advice for his declining health ... There is some evidence to suggest that Plath considered her father’s carelessness about his health as tantamount to suicide, and therefore as blameworthy” (366). Otto Plath is described as “an ogre” (de Nervaux 62) who clandestinely idolized Hitler. Mother Aurelia Plath is a staunch follower of societal conventions and regulations. Despite her exceptional cognitive ability and intellectual acumen, she was unable to meet societal expectations. Their extraordinarily brilliant daughter also inherited this feeling of solitude, Plath. “a gifted and precocious poet who began to publish in her teens, the awareness of a divided self-came early” (Wang 77,78). “There never was a good biography of a good novelist,” (129) laments Fitzgerald, a symbol of the American “Jazz Age”, in his Notebooks. The transformation is even more radical when Plath writes about her parents. Father and mother alike are submitted to a striking process of fictionalization. According to the Freudian approach, Plath’s father, “an intellectual tyrant” (Latson N. pag.) is to point the finger at for Plath’s mourning unto death, and her mother, “a metallic New England schoolmarm” (Latson N. pag.) is also to hold liable to far extent in the conviction of Plath. She is described as “a walking vampire” and “a murderess”. She abhors:

“My mother killed the only man who’d love me steady through life: came in one morning with tears of nobility in her eyes and told me he was gone for good. I hate her for that.”; “She is a murderess of maleness.”; “She’s a killer. Watch out. She’s deadly as a cobra under that shiny green-gold hood.” The mother as she appears in the poem

is not a real person but an imaginary creature, a vampire or a snake, Clytemnestra or Gertrud (de Nervaux 62, 63).

Plath experiences profound abandonment issues and attention deficit syndrome as a result of early childhood wounds, which have resulted in trauma., “‘Power’ is the main attribute of her poetry, be it the power of hate or love, despair or longing” (Majumdar 7). Plath, residing independently in Devon as a divorced individual, in a foreign land, and feeling betrayed by her disloyal spouse, composes the majority of the poems that will be featured in Ariel while being cognizant of the psychological manipulation present in her poetry:

Her promising marriage breaks up in the summer of 1962, and at the beginning of the new year, Plath found herself with two small children, living in a London flat during one of the coldest winters in recent British history. There she began poems, writing furiously until February 1963, when she took her own life. Fuelled by anger toward her husband and her father, she speaks in these poems as one whose feelings are more than her own (Cronin 15).

The collection of 43 Ariel poems delves into Plath's rocky marriage to Ted Hughes, as well as her unresolved issues with her parents and her own negative self-perception. The poems are written in a scattered yet logical fashion. Residing in Devon in solitude following her divorce, distanced from her place of origin, and harboring a sense of betrayal from her unsophisticated spouse, she composes the majority of the poems that will be featured in Ariel. This poem represents a notable divergence from her earlier Colossus poems and purports to offer understanding and a solution to the problems raised in The Colossus. “Plath is aware of the psychological manipulation within her writing” (Cronin 179). Ariel and Other Poems are purportedly influenced by the eponymous horse that Plath rides. Ted Hughes writes about the volume:

Ariel depicts a woman riding her horse in the countryside, at the very break of dawn... The poem begins with complete immobility in the darkness... There is then a change - the intangible blue of hills and distances come into being. The rider is "God's lioness;" she experiences the sensation of becoming one with her horse in a powerful entangling of knees and heels. The ploughed field on which she rides soon splits and vanishes behind her, ...she "cannot catch" (Plath vi).

The very first poem in Ariel's volume is, "Morning Song". The text intriguingly begins with the term "love," a word that she is notably hesitant to employ even when referring to her cherished two children: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch." (Plath 1.1).

Plath also lacks a sense of affinity with her own mother, who exhibited apathy and callousness towards her daughter's anguish, as observed by Susan E. Schwartz in her article “Sylvia Plath Appearing in Therapy” divulges, “her poetry reveals a disturbing netherworld of psychological oppression and need for release from its mutilations (75). Hence, the poem entitled "Medusa". The picture and story function as a vehicle for her to articulate her profound animosity towards her mother. These letters, penned by a daughter who exhibits

obedience and dutifulness akin to her mother, expose a dearth of affection. This rage is intensified:

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful.
Touching and sucking.
I didn't call you (Lines 16-21).

The poem "Elm" further delves into the persistent motifs of profound anguish and weeping, as conveyed by the line "I am inhabited by a cry" (Line 33). The poem elicits immediate visual representations of a traditional tree, functioning as a metaphor of the natural world. The tree symbolizes vitality, while ironically serving as a clear representation of the challenges posed by mental illness. The poetry commences:

I know the bottom,
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it
I have been there (1. 2-5).

We notice her natural tendency to avoid the planned division in her most recognizable manifestations of intelligence:

A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no by standing: I must shriek.
I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.
Clouds pass and disperse.

Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievable? (Lines 21-36).

Only a select few who are privileged may truly understand her deep desire for a dedicated and reciprocal relationship, even in the face of persistent grief: "Nightly flapping out/ Looking, with it hooks, for something to love" (3), The experience is exceptionally intense, to the extent that individuals with heightened sensitivity might view it as profoundly frightening on an existential level.

The Elm tree symbolizes her profoundly distressed psychological state. The poem is filled with vivid sensory perceptions that create an extraordinary visual image. "the voice of the sea, the sound of the rain, the scarlet sunset, the violent storm, the ominous moon, the dispersing clouds, etc., surreptitiously change into deep inter-fluxes of emotional experiences" (Majumdar 143). The poem "Elm" delves further into the persistent motifs of profound anguish and weeping, as exemplified by the verse "I am inhabited by a cry" (Line 33). The poem elicits immediate visual representations of a traditional tree, functioning as a metaphor for the natural world. The tree symbolizes the interconnectedness of life, while ironically also serving as a clear representation of the challenges posed by mental illness. Plath describes nature imageries as "shadowy," "cloudy," "pale," and "gone off." The depiction of the Creator's retribution is sombre and obscured by darkness, reflecting the

profound anguish of her inner suffering. Many individuals fail to meet their essential duty of showing love towards one another and the entire interconnected natural world:

Love is a shadow.
 How you lie and cry after it
 Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse ... //
 Clouds pass and disperse.
 Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievable?
 Is it for such I agitate my heart? //
 I am incapable of more knowledge (Plath 3. 7-9. 34- 37)

In the poem "The Applicant," Plath delves into her encounters with anxiety and emotional volatility. The poem bears a resemblance to an interview, mirroring the painstaking techniques employed by psychologists when they first engage with a patient. The central theme of the text is the protagonist's quest for a spouse, which reflects Plath's acknowledgment of the significant support that individuals dealing with mental illness or trauma must actively seek. This applies not only to the female protagonist but also to her male counterpart, referred to as the Applicant.

A wife is a cherished companion in a man's life, symbolizing the unity of two individuals (Mathew 19:4-6), rather than being treated as a mere thing gained by a formal request, like an "Application". The man's demeanour starkly contradicts the authentic and invaluable emotional connection depicted in the poem's first stanza. In this stanza, Plath lists the difficulties one faces when making personal decisions in order to find a suitable partner:

First, are you our sort of person?
 Do you wear
 A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
 A brace or a hook,
 Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
 Stitches to show something's missing? (1.2. 1-6).

The Applicant's hand is completely lacking in things, thus requiring his wife to support him:

Empty? Empty. Here is a hand //
 To fill it and willing
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches
 And do whatever you tell it.
 Will you marry it? (Lines 10-14).

The poem "Gulliver" is praiseworthy for its title, which is derived from "Gulliver's Travels" by Swift, a revered 18th-century literary masterpiece. From her viewpoint, Gulliver's eyes perceive the world with the acuity of an eagle's sight. However, their experience is limited to encountering nothingness, which symbolizes the protagonist's profound inner emptiness resulting from her father's absence:

This toe and that toe, a relic
 Step off!
 Step off seven leagues, like those distances //

That revolve in Crivelli, untouchable.

Let this eye be an eagle,

The shadow of this lip, is an abyss (7.8. 21-26).

The early feelings of emotional pain and want for affection gradually evolved into profound psychological instability, agitation, and intense madness.

Another highly popular poem among Plath's works is "Lady Lazarus". Within the text, the author expresses her thoughts "using the perspective of a dramatic monologue" (Rosenblatt 142). The poem references the profound and distressing experience of subjecting oneself to the scrutiny of the public, as well as the author's sincere intention to commit suicide and their unwavering will for a retaliatory comeback. The poem begins with enigmatic and powerful imagery, such as a "Nazi lampshade," "fine Jew linen," and "the full set of teeth" (Plath 14). Her text, fueled by anguish and suffering, evokes a profound sense of urgency that both shocks and bewilders readers:

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade (Profiles 173).

The poem's central character is Lazarus, a prominent biblical figure, portrayed as a "quasi-mythological" entity. According to the holy Bible, Christ brings Lazarus back to life after his death. Plath employs this scriptural account as a symbol of her downfall caused by intense suffering. In the poem "Lady Lazarus," the female protagonist achieves victory, although at the cost of her own self-destruction and the oppressive society she inhabits. The poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" both depict the imminent emotional breakdown of the speaker. And so, "Lady Lazarus" ends with a threat from the persona:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer,

Beware

Beware. //

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air (Plath 27. 28. 79-84).

Rosenblatt rightly observes, "The poem jumps with hallucinatory rapidity from mind to world, from life to death, and back again" (144).

While other of Plath's poems emphasize the body as an object, most readers and critics agree that "Cut" demonstrates a schizoid detachment from the body:

What a thrill-

My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of hinge.

Of skin,

A flap like a hat,

Dead white.

Then that red plush (Plath. 1. 1-8)

According to Ignacimuthu, "... ambition has been responsible for the fashioning of many giants in the world in all spheres of activity. Healthy ambition is free from selfishness, vanity, and pride... Not all are gifted with healthy ambition... it spurs us to struggle with a purpose" (23). Even as death kept beckoning Plath in "Stings", life kept thriving her but mercilessly to fulfill the demands of life: Death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen (17. 51-52). Thus, even when everything else fails, she must persevere.

In conclusion, individuals frequently encounter difficulties in managing terrible events, whether they involve family, marriage, or society, despite their honest efforts to fulfill the demands efficiently. The prevalence of wounded psyche is not limited to Sylvia Plath alone, but it is very frequent in today's world, reflecting the widespread nature of life itself. On the other hand, it can also be highly prevalent to the extent that it results in unpleasant psychological maladjustment and suffering, such as over-anxious disorder (OAD).

Sylvia expresses her inner turmoil via her writing, imbuing her pen with the spirit of her deeply wounded psyche. Throughout her youth, she endured a series of distressing experiences, which ultimately led to her untimely suicide at the age of 32. Sylvia Plath's life and works also contain the repercussions of psychological trauma. Plath's Ariel provides readers with a deep insight into the author's innermost thoughts and emotions, enabling them to obtain a comprehensive grasp of her wounded psychological and metaphysical identities. "Even those who do suffer from depression and or suicidal tendencies do not truly have the desire to die, but rather the desire to end their feelings of hurt and deterioration" (Smith, et al., 169). Later on, in "Paralytic" the poetess certainly shows up "all is well" type of disposition in dismay: I smile, a buddha, all/ Wants, desire/ Falling from me like rings (Plath 7.8. 33-35). This assertion applies to both Sylvia Plath and anyone who is experiencing psychological disorientation. The presence of the fault is indisputable, providing a chance for repentance. Nevertheless, the sole means of attaining atonement is by undergoing the cathartic ordeal of the wounded soul, which entails a distressing and profound journey of self-exploration that the brilliant writer Plath never accomplished.

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