

Portrayal of Gender Roles in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Tanu Gupta¹, Anju Bala Sharma²

Department of Mathematics and Humanities, M. M. University, Mullana,
INDIA.

¹tanugupta76@yahoo.com, ²anjubala.sharma20@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is one of the most powerful confessional poets. She wrote in a time when women were still dominated by men. Within the patriarchal society women had to play set roles, they were to remain in the kitchen and were never to speak an unwanted opinion. Hence, Plath and the woman she portrays in her poems felt suffocated within these domestic prisons and were desperate to create a role for themselves outside the dominating misogynist role.

Gender roles are portrayed in most of the poems of Sylvia Plath. Plath's extensive assessment of gender-roles is based on her father's death and her divorce from Ted Hughes. Bawer has correctly acclaimed that "Plath was the mouthpiece of a movement embodying an independent woman oppressed by man in her whole life" (Quoted in Wagner Martin 20). Gender roles in her writing focus not her position as single mother, forced into a domestic setting to care for her children alone. The suffocation that Plath experienced can easily be rooted the historical context of women's right at that time.

Keywords: Gender roles, domesticity, male domination, male - female relationship

INTRODUCTION

It is clear from the poetry of Sylvia Plath that she has not liked the concept of womanhood as a mere source of enjoyment and reproduction. A woman is much more than that; she is rather a living entity, an individual whole. In another poem *The Eye-mote*, she indirectly proposes, through her own ease, what she would like a woman to be:

What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife,
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis;
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Horse fluent in the wind,
A place, a time gone out of mind. ("The Eye-mote" 25-30)

The miserable lot of womankind is also ventilated in such poems as *Strumpet Song* (which brings to the corruption of the 'self') and *Spinster* (which highlights a rough, tough prospect for an old unmarried woman).

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argued that man is able to mystify woman. This mystification and stereotyping is instrumental in creating patriarchy. A woman has been socialized since birth to feel and act in ways that automatically have excluded her from participating in the culture's most valued activities. Perhaps Beauvoir's most famous statement in the book is that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267).

This important insight suggests that it is not biology or nature which makes us women. Man is viewed as 'One', while woman as the 'Other' to man: as all the things which man is not.

Plath's poem *Daddy* expresses her feeling of oppression from her childhood and conjures the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society. The conflict of this poem is male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and be free from male domination. Within the family unit, the father had to be strong and controlling. In *Daddy* the speaker projects the image of a fascist to her father. The fascist image is the intimate symbol of controlling dictating power. Plath may not only be talking story of her father but of the patriarchal society in which she lives:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. ("Daddy" 48-50)

Plath's poem *Daddy* expresses her feeling of oppression from her childhood and conjures the struggle many women face in a male-dominated society. The conflict of this poem is male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and be free from male domination. Powerful imagery overwhelms the readers forcing them to imaging the oppression that the last two stanzas of the poem particularly represent a dismal picture of life for women who find themselves under a dominating male figure.

The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now. ("Daddy" 71-75)

The passage seems to demonstrate that the speaker has kept under a man's thumb all her life. Plath describes her husband and the ability of male power to strip a woman of her sense of self, as Plath was married to her husband for seven years during which he had an affair with another woman Assia Wevill. He had drained her by drinking her blood, or figuratively sucking the life out of her.

In *The Snowman on the Moor*, Plath uses a story of fantasy as an allegory for an abusive relationship in which the male dominated the female. The poem follows a woman who leaves her husband's house after an argument, defying her seemingly disaffected husband. While in the woods, the women are haunted by a strange 'snowman' that possessed:

spike-studded belt
Ladies' sheaved skulls:
Mournfully the dry tongues clacked their guilt. ("The Snowman on the Moor" 37-39).

The image of moon which Plath uses in the poem *Edge* is a traditional image of female passivity. Traditionally moon is compared with the image of woman and the sun with the man. The moon is reliant on the sun as the moon gets the light from the sun. In the same way women are said to be reliant on men. Plath also uses the image of moon again in poem *The Moon and the Yew Tree*:

The Yew tree points up. It has a gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. ("The Moon and the Yew Tree" 15-17)

Here, the moon is her mother and the yew trees symbolize death. The image of moon is surrounded by the images of death such as the yew tree which is traditionally found in the

grave yards. This image of death suggests that it is the only way for women to escape of a male domination. The function of males in Plath's poetry is one of the activity and domination. All men seem to be in opposition against her.

Feminist anger is also embedded in her poetry. Her objection and the rejection of patriarchal traditions and restricting roles for women are registered in one poem after another. She shows an uncommon affection for her children. She regards women as the guardians and protectors of new life while men are found to be guilty of destruction. Thus, each line of her verse is lacerated with the awareness of pain, anguish and suffering which is an inevitable part of woman's life.

Plath's images and diction give a picture of suffering in relation to female roles and domestic experience in her late poetry and in several poems of her first book of poetry, *The Colossus* (1960). Many of the poems in this volume were written after her marriage and during her first pregnancy. Poem *The Colossus* deal with male - female relationship or motherhood. *Moonrise* uses remarkably ominous imagery and allusions to Christ's death in relation to pregnancy:

Berries redden. A body of whiteness
Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone
Though the body walk out in clean line.
I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones
Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.
Death whitens in the egg and out of it. ("Moonrise" 13-18)

The poem concludes with a concentration to Luana, the goddess of childbirth, whom Plath transforms into a woman in the moon. Traditionally the moon, connected with the female cycle of menstruation, represents the negation of pregnancy. And the child of the labour Plath describes is an 'ancient father', 'white-bearded weary', a figure resembling 'Father Time' or perhaps 'Father Death', rather than a child. Thus, the birth of that experience includes its antithesis.

Plath sees a bride as a woman upon whom a certain kind of privacy is forced, a woman in *Purdah*. The bride sees herself become a personal possession to be enjoyed by her owner at his will.

I am his
Even in his
Absence. ("Purdah" 29-31)

Sylvia Plath describes the marriage system where man and woman are not treated equal. Woman is considered inferior to man and has to follow some conditions to get married. She expresses the same in her poetry. Millett states, "The term 'Politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Man is superior, God like: female is inert, passive, "doomed to immanence by man" (Millett 23). In the poem *The Applicant*, the marriage system is explained in terms of conditions where all the conditions are applied only on 'it' i.e. the wife. 'It' has to obey her husband and do whatever he tells to 'it'.

Here is a hand
To full it, and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it. ("The Applicant" 10-13)

In the same poem man is defined by the black suit he puts on, but the definition of woman shows her more alienated and dehumanized. While the man is a junk heap of miscellaneous parts given an exact shape by a suit of clothes, the woman is a windup toy, a puppet of that black suit. Even, she does not exist unless the black suit needs and wills her to. He (the husband) offers a black suit to 'it' (wife).

Black and stiffs, but not a bad fit.

Will you marry it?

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Believe me, they'll bury you in it. ("The Applicant" 21-25)

The phrase 'Power Politics' used by Kate Millett, operates in a subtle manner in the institution of marriage, reducing the states of a woman to a mere utility item, an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification. The wife is nothing but an instrument for the husband's use, an object to care for him, console him, do his every bidding. She has no will of her own. She inhabits the world where man is superior. Woman is reduced to a function; she exists as robot for man's use, as suit of clothes, no more. She dissolves back into nothingness after it. In *The Applicant*, again the woman is described as paper:

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,

In fifty, gold. ("The Applicant" 30-32).

Through this poem Plath describes the stereotypes expected of a woman and expresses the anguish, humiliation and pain associated to being a woman in the 1960's. She is expected of a woman playing roles like stitching, sewing and cooking and be an emotional support too at the time of need. Commenting on the status of woman, Juliet Mitchell observes: "Production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children are the key structures of woman's situation" (Mitchell 100).

The bride will have to obey her groom. Whatever he lacks, she will supply. She will support him in the same way as the cast supports the body. This woman is a domestic blob. She is a kind of Gracie Allen Puppet: "It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk" ("The Applicant" 36-37). Repetition of the word 'talk' shows her annoyance with this system. Plath continued to explore the subject of woman with child as well as that of woman with man.

Women are imposed, hurt, made into puppets, hollow or blank with no identities or no wills. Plath's ambivalence toward men, marriage, and motherhood in her last poems, and the guilt she surely felt help to explain the degree to which her poems are associated with suffering. They reflect not only her perception of external reality, but they project her inner reality as well.

In poem *Lesbos*, she writes of her depression at the black existence of the average housewife. The poem starts with simple statement: "Viciousness in the Kitchen". The whole poem has an air 'windowless', implying that to this dirty loud kitchen is the beginning and end of this woman's world, she is restricted. The child is described as a 'puppet', probably implying that this young girl will grow up to be a 'puppet' operating at the whims of others, just like her mother.

In *The Applicant*, the woman is kept in a closet and sold like an item of clothing. The woman, which throughout is described as 'it', thus depersonalising her, is advertised to the buyer as a

thing. It is also described to the buyer as being his 'last resort'. There are other images of woman as being helpless and merely looked upon as 'object'. In *Purdah* women are described as 'fade', and in *Childless Woman* as 'ivory'. In *Face Lift*, the speaker is anesthetized, another form of helplessness. In *Gigolo*, the woman claims to be a mere 'pocket watch' and in *An Appearance*, the woman's body opens and shuts like a 'Swiss watch'. These women hold no personal qualities at all, they have become mere objects.

CONCLUSION

Generally in many of her poems, she feels that her role as a woman is inflicted on her by society as general she does indeed seem to see it as a conspiracy, and the only means to escape from it is unconsciousness or death. The doctors and the enemy both referred to as Herr, which is German word for 'Mister'. In *Lady Lazarus*, the woman is made to feel like an object, and kept passive: "So, so. Herr Doktor/ So, Herr Enemy" (65-66).

The seizure of the woman by the man highlights that like many relationships, the male had successfully asserted his dominance. The snowman is everything that Plath resented and feared. The poem has a tone of quite resignation; it's a poem of frustration that inevitably ends with the woman giving up her search for independence. The abusive relationship alluded to in this poem ended with Plath having to raise her children as a single mother. Plath's personal experiences complicated her inner distress. The snowman carries the heads of independent women, symbolizing male domination over women who dare to speak out against gender roles. Acting on largest scale, *The Snowman on the Moor* ends with

The Woman humbled then, and crying,
The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk
And mild obeying. (49-51)

Juliet Mitchell said that oppression of woman is rooted in the ideological realism, which includes the production, reproduction of children, sexuality and socialization. These four functions are primarily or first carried out by the family. Hence the family plays a key role in the oppression of woman. These four elements of material life interact with one another, so that woman cannot be emancipated unless revolutionary changes occur in all of them. The roots of woman's oppression will not automatically wither away under socialism.

In the poem *Edge*, Plath explains one of the fundamental problems with women — they are expected to simultaneously act as sex objects and domesticated mothers. Still, *Edge* is morose, even by Plath standards; it implies that the only way for a woman to achieve perfection by societal standards is through death. She writes that a woman has achieved perfection when she is dead, and also suggests that this is the only thing that a woman can truly obtain.

The woman is perfected
her dead
body wears a smile of accomplishment. ("Edge" 1-3)

The woman in this poem is dead, having given all she had to her children. It examines motherhood and femininity in a new perspective. The woman's body is compared to that of a pitcher of milk, slowing being depleted by her children. For Plath, motherhood is the ultimate culmination of gender oppression.

Sylvia Plath shows a sense of alienation and a struggle for identity in most of her poetical expression that reveals the poet's search for identity lost somewhere in the middle of

tradition, culture, language, sex and gender. Her poems show her relentless search for a true self, in spite of her socio-culture ambience. The feminine sensibility which appears her poetry is a natural outcome of her experience as a woman. Like a sensitive artist, she tries to communicate her suffering as a matter of human experience in her poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am heartily thankful to my supervisor Dr. Tanu Gupta whose encouragement, guidance and support from the initial to the final level enabled me to develop an understanding of the subject. I also offer my regards and blessings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of this research paper.

Above all, I express our gratitude to God, the almighty, who aided me with his strength, gave me wisdom and patience to complete this paper. Moreover, I thank to my husband, my daughter and other family members for their help and supports.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, S. (2003). *Sylvia Plath*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.
- [2] Alexander, P. (1999). *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo.
- [3] De Beauvoir, S. (2010). *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage.
- [4] Butscher, E. (1977). *Method and Madness*. New York: Dodd and Co.11.
- [5] Freud, Sigmund. (1985). *On Narcissism*. Rivkin and Ryan. 151-153, 376.
- [6] Kukil, K. V. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Anchor Books.
- [7] Plath, S. (1998). *Plath Poems: Selected by Diane Wood Middlebrook*. New York: Alfred Knoff.
- [8] Gill, J. (2006). *The Colossus and Crossing the Water: The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (pp. 90-106). New York: Cambridge UP.
- [9] Gill, J. (1982). *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: The Dial Press. 92.
- [10] Plath, A. S. (1975). *Sylvia Plath: Letters Home — Correspondence 1950-1963*. London: Faber& Faber.
- [11] Plath, S., & Hughes, T. (2008). *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- [12] Mitchell, J. (1996). *Women: The Longest Revolution*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [13] Wagner-Martin, L. (1999). *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. London: Macmillan.

Authors Profile



Researcher Anju Bala Sharma is attached with Department of Mathematics and Humanities, M. M. University, Mullana, India. She has conducted research under the supervision of Dr. Tanu Gupta.

Postal Address: W/o Sh. Kapil Dev Vill. Dhalyani, P.O. Bhapral, Teh. Ghumarwin, Distt. Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh, Pin-174027, India.