

**TRANSCRIBING THE SELF - A RE-EXAMINATION
OF SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS
(ABSTRACT)**



ERICA MARY JYRWA

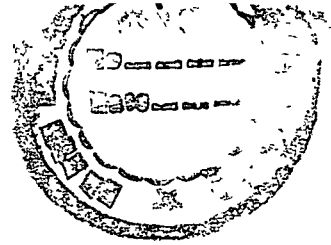
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INTRODUCTION

Linda Wagner-Martin prefaces her book on Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life by stating very clearly, “the story of Sylvia Plath has been told and retold. It has been given a chronological narrative, a geographical one, and a gendered one.”¹ Nevertheless, this study seeks to look at Sylvia Plath’s poetry as being reflective of a consciousness that was always alive to possibilities of change. Even though she suffered major setbacks in her life, they provided the impetus for her to write a new kind of poetry each time. Hence, on re-examining her poetry one discovers a variety of meanings that have significance to a reader even though one may be far removed from the world of Sylvia Plath.

Poetry provides Sylvia Plath with the necessary outlet to express her most private thoughts. In one of her letters she remarks, “my whole life will be a saying of poems”² attesting to her confessional style of expression. Her uncanny sense of honesty arouses the reader’s interest because of the way she deals with her emotions, without ever attempting to conceal them. It forms the backbone of her poetry almost as if she were keeping a strict vigil over herself, directing herself to face her various selves at the most private

moments, so that the act of transcription becomes both a physical act and a poetic statement, culminating in her suicide.

The interest in Sylvia Plath's poetry is heightened because of her "Keatsian tragic life that ended at 30"³ and her boldness to accept death as a victory, not as a surrender. She accepts suicide as if it were "a green promise hanging at the top of the highest branch of a tree."⁴ It is the final act of poetic translation and the ultimate "sacrificial"⁵ act undertaken in exchange for freedom, in order to further the cause of poetry.

Chapter-I: SYLVIA PLATH AND THE ELEMENT OF THE PERSONAL

Sylvia Plath's poems are closely related to her life and there is a strong sense of interdependence between the poet and her work. P. Rajani questions, "why is there a need of correlation between her life and work? Can't her poetry be understood and appreciated independently of biographical information?"⁶ He provides us immediately with a suitable answer which bespeaks the fact that Sylvia Plath's poems are one with her. He remarks, thus, "while most works of art have a life of their own, in the case of Plath, her work is inextricably associated with her."⁷ She uses her personal experiences as subject matter for her poems and intelligibly transcribes herself and her experiences into art. She focuses primarily upon

the loss of her father, her own suicide attempt in 1953 and the tragic breakup of her marriage. Even after going through experiences, which are otherwise bitter, she does not stop herself from putting them down into words. Candidness is an important quality to be found in her autobiographical poems. A re-examination of the personal elements will define how the poet strives to carve an identity as an individual in the midst of all the adversity she had to go through.

The journal entry of Sylvia Plath where she remarks, thus, “me, I never knew the love of ^a father, the love of a steady blood related man after the age of eight...”⁸ highlights her sense of loss felt by her at not being able to experience the love of her father. In ‘Daddy’ she accuses him of breaking her heart, “Bit my pretty red heart in two./I was ten when they buried you” (CP, pp.222-224). When she talks about her father, she is transformed into that little girl she had once been, reliving and re-experiencing the incidents of the past.

Sadness is not the only feeling the poet experiences. Anger, bitterness and frustration freely reign in the poet’s mind, thus, giving rise to alternating feelings of love and hatred for her father. This raises doubts in the reader’s mind, yet one understands that the poet is confused and frightened. When her father dies, it is as if the father’s death has deliberately

“exiled” (CP, pp.92-93) Sylvia Plath from him. It angers her and she mocks him, saying that he is a “fruit that’s death to taste: dark parings” (CP, p.118). When she loses her father she is utterly hurt and broken, her individuality suffers a setback. His death brings home the fact that her identity is affected for want of a father figure, stable and protective. In ‘Lament’ she yearns for the father who would have given her a better sense of herself. She expresses great admiration for her father who “scorned the tick of falling weather” (CP, pp.315-316) braving all odds that came his way. There is also a realisation in the poet that she has to move on with life and carve an identity of her own, one that is not influenced by her father, but one that is just as powerful and strong. She has to free herself from the past, from the painful truth that her father is no longer alive to inspire her. After her father’s death, she understands the importance of “self-preservation, her need to maintain herself in a fatherless state.”⁹

Ever since her father’s death Sylvia Plath begins to nurse an abnormal desire for death. The haunting memory of her dead father is responsible for this death wish.¹⁰ She says, “old man you surface seldom” (CP, pp.92-93) referring to the fact that his death is also the main cause of the pull towards him, and “the only way to allay the fears of his abrupt assaults on her peace would be to join him in the depths”¹¹ and she undoubtedly tries to join her

dead father. In 1953, she attempts suicide after being rejected by Harvard.

She remarks:

...
 At twenty I tried to die,
 And get back, back, back, to you.
 I thought even the bones would do.
 But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue. (CP, pp.222-224)

She tries to kill herself, thinking death can bring her release from all her fears of failure. When Sylvia Plath talks about her suicide attempt she does it in an outright manner like one who is unashamed of an act, which is otherwise considered an act of despair.

Sylvia Plath regards suicide as a vocation, which challenges her to sample it. Through suicide she aims to achieve something that she will not be able to gain during her lifetime. Suicide provides her with a means to assert a voice of her own, to capture the attention of the world around her and command a recognition that she would not have achieved if she was alive. In her essay 'On Sylvia Plath', Elizabeth Hardwick writes:

With Sylvia Plath suicide is a performance. "Lady Lazarus" describes it with a raging confident pride. There is no apology or fearfulness. Suicide is an assertion of power, of the strength – not the weakness – of the personality. She is no poor animal sneaking away, giving up; instead she is strong, threatening, dangerous.¹²

Death is an “art” (CP, pp.244-246) for Sylvia Plath because this is where she is able to translate herself as an artist who achieves the perfect aesthetic identity.

Sylvia Plath’s life becomes all the more poignant when her husband betrays her, and it repeats the loss that she experienced when her father died. As if she were an unlucky being whose relationship with men does not last, she bitterly expresses herself in her journal, “I hated men because they didn’t stay around and love me like a father”.¹³ When Ted Hughes leaves her for another woman, she is reduced to a helpless being, deprived of love and support. Everything dear to her is obliterated and deception is all that she gets in return making her an easy victim of ill health. She is unable to cope with the situation:

The fever trickles and stiffens my hair.
My ribs show what have I eaten?
Lies and smiles...
Hurts me, he
With his armor of fakery (CP, pp.226-227)

Love becomes valueless for the poet because she is badly hurt by a husband who does not seem to understand its worth. It is “either absent or unreal, deceptive or unimportant”.¹⁴ The tragic breakup of her marriage takes a toll on her, but it does not deter her creativity as a poet. Instead it had “the immediate effect of arousing her poetic energies ... Hughes’s departure fired

Plath's new drive toward self identity"¹⁵ and in 'Burning the Letters' she voices her independence from her husband's influence. She remarks that she is no longer a "dumb fish" or a puppet moving "between this wish and that wish" (CP, pp.204-205). The violence of her expression is also exhibited in one of her autobiographical poems, 'Words heard by accident, over the phone' where she angrily plucks off the cable of the telephone from the wall and flings the instrument when she overhears the intimate conversations between her husband and his lover. The words exchanged are referred to as "mud" (CP, p.202-203) suggesting the hypocrisy of the husband and the absence of loyalty in the relationship.

It can be rightly said that, "the raw material of Sylvia Plath's work can be found in the events of her own life".¹⁶ In her autobiographical poems, she is involved in an inward journey into the self, examining the events of her life which have played a major role in moulding her personality. This inward journey is not a sole end in itself. She in fact realises the importance of perseverance in the face of difficulty and to maintain the self without allowing it to be drowned by the problems of life. Even in moments of confusion, she refuses to withdraw; she is persistent in her effort to emerge as one possessing a complete self. Her creativity touches the highest point when she dies a death that allows her to be venerated as an artist and an

individual. The adulation she receives after her death is “as if Plath had not died at all”.¹⁷

Chapter-II: A RE-EXAMINATION OF SYLVIA PLATH’S IDEAL OF SELFHOOD

Sylvia Plath seeks to give birth to an aesthetic self. She is, however, torn between a longing to act spontaneously and between a life dictated by her elders. This impels her to cover up her true self with “a series of clever disguises”¹⁸ and a “mask”¹⁹ thus accounting for the contradictory nature of her poems. A re-examination of the poems that deal with Sylvia Plath’s attempt to strike a balance between her two selves, the “inner self”²⁰ and the “false self”²¹ offers an insight into the struggle the poet has to undergo before coming into being. Sylvia Plath’s poetry “springs from her own attempts to recognise herself and the ones found in the world she lived in...”²² This chapter seeks to probe the nature of the tension in Sylvia Plath’s poems, to delve into her mind and see how she attempts to resolve herself in her later poems, ultimately finding a solution in suicide which is the final act of translating herself as an artist.

Sylvia Plath is confronted and threatened by an artificial self which threatens to take control of her:

I am terrified by this dark thing;
 That sleeps in me;
 All day I feel it soft, feathery turning its malignity
 (CP, pp.192-193)

This is an image of the trapped identity of the poet. This same image is further mentioned in 'In Plaster' where the poet struggles to emerge as an independent self. The poem describes the poet's experience in a hospital ward while undergoing appendectomy. A patient in complete plaster lying in the neighbouring bed provides Sylvia Plath with an apt image of the struggle between the longing to establish an identity of her own, and the forces, which hold her back. The patient in complete plaster is in fact symbolic of the poet's artificial self, which she has to project to the world. Wanting to get rid of the artificial self, the real self engages in a battle for supremacy, "Now I see it must be one or the other of us" (CP, pp.158-160). Sylvia Plath is ready to get rid of that self which has handicapped her and resolutely remarks, "I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,/And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me" (CP, pp.158-160). 'In Plaster' speaks of the trapped identity of the poet because her ambitions are not her own, they are her mother's. To satisfy her mother's aspirations she had to push herself to the edge of perfection assuming it to be the ultimate path to success. A turmoil exists within her, to live according to the dictates of her mother, or to lead a life of spontaneity.

She tries to free herself from her mother's influence when she says, "Mother keep out of my barnyard, / I am becoming another" (CP, pp.131-137), commanding her mother to keep out of her territory because she is trying to conduct herself independently.

The question of accepting and rejecting herself is an element, which is present in Sylvia Plath's poems. The poems present a

... conflict of self and society within the poet, it deals with Sylvia Plath's sense of paralysis and discusses Plath's various attempts, metaphorically and within the poems, to narrate the possibilities for a transformed self reborn into a transformed world.²³

Besides being a poet Sylvia Plath is also a woman who is specially sensitive to the importance of her role as a mother, a wife and a lover. The ability to bear children is a definition of a woman's fertility. In 'Three Women', which is a dramatic poem, Sylvia Plath deals with childbirth and how it contributes towards self-definition.

The wife is proud of her ability to conceive and carry her child and she imagines nature too regarding her with interest:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient.
 Turning through my time, the suns and the stars
 Regarding me with attention
 The moon's concern is more personal
 She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
 Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so
 She is simply astonished at fertility. (CP, pp.176-187)

The wife occupies a pivotal role in the dramatic poem because the child she gives birth is a testimony of her identity. She enjoys a sense of completeness in contrast to the Secretary who, “equates her condition with death and masculinity”²⁴ for she says “I lose life after life .../I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses” (CP, pp.176-187). Again the wife gains an upper hand over the other persona who, “equates her child with danger for her freedom ...”.²⁵ The act of renouncing the child is also an act of deliberate denial. She has given up something that could have been a foundation for exerting her self and status. Motherhood, therefore, is glorified by Sylvia Plath; it is the finality of every woman and according to her, “the process of giving birth has reaffirmed her femaleness”.²⁶ This is true of Sylvia Plath for she gives birth to two children which is a fulfillment she achieves, and a means through which she transcribes herself as a woman and a mother.

In poems, which deal with the marginalised aspect of womanhood, she talks of the “spinster” the “widow” and the “strumpet” whose lives are without love and respect. The poems are a reflection of how she puts herself in their place and experiences a similar kind of frustration. In ‘Stings’ thus, she resolutely declares the reawakening and recovery of the dormant self, which is worthy of love and respect.

.... but I
 Have a self to recover, a queen.
 Is she dead, is she sleeping?
 Where has she been,
 With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (CP, pp.214-215)

The above lines summarise the poet's courage. She recovers the self she believes in, to raise it to the royal status of a "queen".

Sylvia Plath is not a feminist in the categorical sense of the term. But "Plath's range in her study of women is truly comprehensive and touches upon every aspect of feminine emotion".²⁷ Her poems about women only echo her desire to emerge as one who puts her sole trust upon her own capability. With a view to create a new image of the self, Sylvia Plath speaks about unloosening herself from the shackles of male influence. In 'Purdah' she wishes to free herself from the "Lord of Mirrors!" (CP, pp.242-244) who holds her captive behind the 'purdah', a symbol of "the system of male domination, and the poem is the process of the speaker's emergence from that system."²⁸ The phrase, "I shall unloose" (CP, pp.242-244) is her assertion that she is no longer willing to play the role of a submissive wife.

The self that Sylvia Plath depicts is never consistent. It alternates between fear and anger, doubt and confidence, hopelessness and strength.

Death is the ultimate end. It is a challenge that she accepts and the final path that she treads.

The woman is perfected –
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment, (CP, pp.272-273)

are lines taken from her poem 'Edge'. Edward Butscher calls it "an extended suicide note".²⁹ There is a clear evidence of Sylvia Plath's anticipation of her own death which will be achieved with perfection. Through suicide, she achieves the fullest means to express herself, and the readers are made aware of the impact of her poems through it.

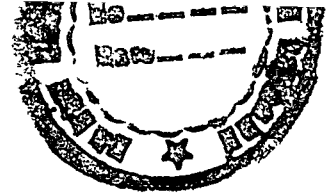
Chapter-III: Children as Fulfilling Images of Creativity in Sylvia Plath's Poems

Sylvia Plath's poems about children are comparatively few, and have been written only after the birth of her two children, about four years before her suicide. Her interest in the subject of children and her awareness of childbirth as a definition of her identity begins to surface only in the later part of her life. A re-examination of her poems about children would "lead to a better understanding of why she was able to produce such powerful poetry as a theme more likely to inspire sentimental verse and perhaps explain some of the fascination her work has as a forerunner of the contemporary female poet uniting self and poetry".³⁰ In the poems written

about her own children there is a commingling of the personal and the poetic which leads to a better appreciation of her attitude towards life itself. The uncanny element of the personal therefore reflects each rise and fall of her poetic temperament whilst portraying a new dimension of Sylvia Plath as a poet-mother. The manner in which she talks about the joys of motherhood is intense and vivid because she is able to experience the different phases of a woman's life first hand. Through the medium of poetry, she uses children as her subject to identify herself as a woman who is an embodiment of creativity. She is able to prove her fertility by giving birth to her children.

Sylvia Plath's poems about her own children are filled with a special kind of warmth and affection that can exist only between mother and child, thus creating a "symbiotic relationship".³¹ The overwhelming love that she has for her children is evident in one of her biographies where Edward Butscher quotes her comments about babies, " 'I want a lot – as many as possible. God! won't they be marvellous giants in the earth!' "³² In 'You're' she addresses her unborn daughter whom she is carrying:

O high-riser my little loaf ...
 Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
 A ^{creel} of eels, all ripples.
 Jumpy as a Mexican bean. (CP, p.141).



Such poems bring out her tender emotions, the tenderness is nowhere found in her other poems. They exist as an oasis in a body of poetry, which is otherwise replete with contradictory emotions. She lovingly addresses her child as the most perfect being and this is evident when she says, “Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing” (CP, p.265). And in ‘Balloons’ the relaxed mood stands out in contrast to the confused world of the adult.

The oneness between mother and child is also described in a sentimental way in ‘By Candlelights’ through the mother who nurses her child. Addressing her child as “small love” (CP, pp.236-237), she affirms the oneness that exists between them in the line, “This is the fluid in which we meet each other, ...” (CP, pp.236-237). These poems, however, are also tinged with anxiety and concern for her children’s future, and she also becomes aware of a sense of separateness that will exist once the children grow. Thus, “the baby becomes the threatened, vulnerable, weak self surrounded by dark outer forces ...”³³ The mother realises that the child “must eventually be his own independent self”³⁴ managing his own life and depending upon his own capabilities. The closeness between mother and child will be lessened once he grows up, and the mother is painfully aware of this truth when she says, “I’m no more your mother” (CP, pp.156-157).

Fear for her children's future, which hangs in the poet's mind, is, of course, a natural feeling. But at the same time, she wishes her children to grow up as strong individuals. Sylvia Plath is acutely aware of the shortcomings of her mother who had been overprotective, wanting to keep her children away from the hard realities of life. Moreover, in her poems, she voices her resentment at her mother's over ambitious attitude on her behalf. In 'Three Women', she subtly voices her refusal to dictate her son on how he should lead his life. She is determined to allow her children to grow up in a normal atmosphere without pestering them about the importance of being "exceptional" (CP, pp.176-187).

The satisfaction that Sylvia Plath achieves from the ability to bear children is immense. In spite of experiencing intolerable discomfort during childbirth, "My eyes are squeezed by this blackness/I see nothing" (CP, pp.176-187), yet she is filled with love for her newborn. She passes through a stage of unexplained emotions. One moment she suffers severe physical pain, the next moment she is drowned by a strong feeling of love. She lovingly observes, "What did my fingers do before they held him?/What did my heart do with its love?/I have never seen a thing so clear" (CP, pp.176-187).

Childbirth for Sylvia Plath, therefore, is a new phase of her life, which involves a recognition of herself as the creator of a new life which also defines her and enables her to partake of the joys of motherhood. Motherhood is a realisation which brings home the reality of selfless love that can be experienced and shared with one's own kin. The mother-child relationship is an embodiment of a superior kind of love because nothing is demanded in return. The pure innocence of her children is what Sylvia Plath longs for because their tender universe is not narrowed down by the obligation of adults. No matter how much she wants to go back to the world of a child, she is not able to do so.

She uses her children in her poems not only to bring out her poetical ability, but because she wants to express her pride at being a mother. She is a confessional poet who is unashamed to talk about her innermost feelings. The birth of her children, therefore, has motivated her to write new poetry; explore new horizons that have never been done before. Her children are an important means through which she transcribes herself as a complete woman with an identity of her own. Giving birth to her children is the final act of achieving an identity as a woman. Through her poems she translates the joy of being a mother as well as the anxieties that she experiences because of love and concern for the welfare of her children.

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath has been able to devise a legacy of her own characterised by her candidness and her willingness to take up the ultimate challenge of death through suicide. What bears re-examination in her poetry is how she charts out her progress in life through poetry in a very individualistic way. In her personal poetry she uses personal images that highlight her universal attempt to be in constant touch with the self as mother, daughter, wife and lover. Her poems, thus, are an expression of her “identity surging forth in all phases”³⁵ revealing her deep awareness of a sense of self, which ultimately climaxes with her suicide, the final stamp of her identity as an artist. Suicide “has allowed her to be appreciated and even venerated as a wonderfully sensitive soul who transcended life by death and art; ...”³⁶ It is not the end result of despair, it is rather an aesthetic mode which she resorts to in order to reach the ideal self. Although she does not live to talk about the immense fame that has come her way through suicide, yet she has been able to carve an identity of her own as a poet who has created her own personal myth.

NOTES

¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life. (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) xi.

² Aurelia Schober Plath ed. Letters Home. New York: (Harper and Row, 1975), p.244.

³ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life. (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) xi.

⁴ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath. (London: Viking, 1989) 33.

⁵ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide. (New York: Random House, 1972) 40.

⁶ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 2.

⁷ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 2.

⁸ Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough ed. The Journals of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Dial Press, 1982) 267.

⁹ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 28.

¹⁰ Refer to: Ted Hughes, Frances McCullough eds. The Journals of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Dial Press, 1982) 280. "Read Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* ... An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: ..." Within the framework of this study, Sylvia Plath's suicide has been looked upon as a justifiable act of creativity.

¹¹ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 109.

¹² Paul Alexander ed. Ariel Ascending. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 106.

¹³ Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough ed. The Journals of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Dial Press, 1982) 268.

¹⁴ Arthur Oberg, Modern American Lyric. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978) 158.

¹⁵ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 144.

- ¹⁶ Eileen M. Aird, Sylvia Plath. (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 51.
- ¹⁷ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath. (Viking Penguin, 1991) 334.
- ¹⁸ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 92.
- ¹⁹ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 152.
- ²⁰ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath. (London: Viking, 1989) 23.
- ²¹ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath. (London: Viking, 1989) 23.
- ²² Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 5.
- ²³ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 13.
- ²⁴ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 110.
- ²⁵ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 111.
- ²⁶ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 173.
- ²⁷ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 161.
- ²⁸ Leonardo Sanazaro, "The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, A Reconsideration", Centennial Review. Vol.XXVII, Issue No.I, (1983) 65.
- ²⁹ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 360.
- ³⁰ Lois Rosen, "Sylvia Plath's Poetry About Children: A New Perspective", Modern Poetry Studies, X (1980) 99.
- ³¹ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 134.
- ³² Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 193.

³³ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 34.

³⁴ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983) 228.

³⁵ Linda W. Wagner ed. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 1.

³⁶ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 86.

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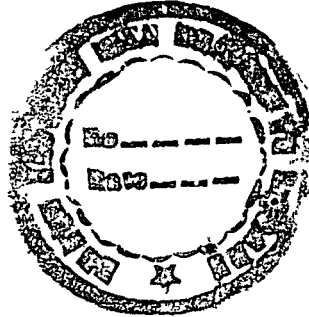
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BY

**ERICA MARY JYRWA
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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OF THE DEGREE OF
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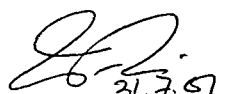
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This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

Erica Mary Jyrwa
(Candidate) 31.7.2001


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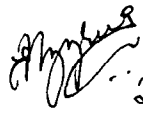
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INTRODUCTION

Linda Wagner-Martin prefaces her book, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life by stating very clearly, “the story of Sylvia Plath has been told and retold. It has been given a chronological narrative, a geographical one, and a gendered one.”¹ Nevertheless, this study seeks to look at Sylvia Plath’s poetry once again as being reflective of a consciousness that was always alive to possibilities of change. Even though she suffered major setbacks in her life, they provided the impetus for her to write a new kind of poetry each time. Hence, on re-examining her poetry one discovers a variety of meanings that have significance to a reader even though one may be far removed from the world of Sylvia Plath.

In another preface to her work, Sylvia Plath: A Biography, Linda Wagner-Martin writes about the scope and main themes of her poetry, thus:

She believed in her poetry, and she knew her craft thoroughly. In her poems, she wrote about the crucial issues of her life, but she made an expert art from these issues. She voiced anger as well as hope; she spoke of sorrow as well as joy. She wrote scathingly about people of whom she disapproved and about the husband who angered her. She wrote peacefully with a calm lyricism, about her children and their daily activities.²

Her poems are her mouthpiece for expressing her sensitivity to the things around her. Poetry provides Sylvia Plath with an outlet for her most private thoughts; it is the one conduit that is the mainstay of her attempt to

understand herself. As she remarks in one of her letters, “my whole life will be a saying of poems”,³ she attests to a manner of viewing herself in a way that finds expression solely in the confessional mode. Fiercely honest and direct, her poems portray her strengths, her weaknesses, her dreams and her attitudes towards life. Candidness, therefore, is one of the characteristic traits of Sylvia Plath. Her uncanny sense of honesty arouses the reader’s interest because of the way she deals with her emotions, happy or sad, without ever attempting to conceal them. It forms the backbone of her poetry almost as if she were keeping a strict vigil over herself, directing herself to face her various selves at the most private moments, so that the act of transcription becomes both a physical act and a poetical statement culminating in her suicide.

Robert Phillips remarks that “A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove”.⁴ This is definitely true of Sylvia Plath; she stands up for herself whilst writing her poems frankly without being bound by conservatism, or constraints of tradition, or an overshadowing male literary influence. Sylvia Plath is candid because she chooses not to conceal anything from herself or from the world. It is for this reason that she chooses not to hide herself behind a pseudonym. It is as if she urgently

wants the readers to identify her poetry with her; to accept the fact that her life and her poetry are interdependent; the one nourishing the other.

This dissertation does not concentrate on Sylvia Plath as a confessional writer, but the confessional mode that she adopts is integral to an understanding of her poetry. In the light of this remark it would be noticed that the poems dealing with the element of the personal is heavily laced with the confessional. The intensity of her autobiographical poems is heightened because they are a “brutally frank self-exposure”⁵ of her emotions; probing the most sensitive feelings resulting from various personal experiences. In order to capture the reader’s attention, she exploits the confessional mode “by creating an atmosphere of permission for the use of intense personal emotion and autobiographical subjects”.⁶ The reader is therefore made to understand how the poet’s personal experiences play a significant role in her poems where she attempts to create an identity that is hers alone. In her poems dealing with her personal life, she focuses primarily upon her father’s death, her suicide attempt in 1953, and the tragic breakup of her marriage. How she copes with these events and reasserts her self are elements that need to be re-examined.

Another important aspect of Sylvia Plath’s poems, which would be re-examined, is how she struggles with the question of selfhood. In her

poems she seeks for “an authentic and autonomous self”,⁷ one that is her own, free from the influences which might act as an obstacle in her path towards self-definition. The self is a definition of one’s personality, a silent reflection of the total character of a person. Her poetry provides her with a platform to voice herself as an individual possessing a unique self as a woman and an artist.

While seeking to fulfill herself aesthetically, Sylvia Plath continually confronts the alternatives before her. The various aspects of her self constantly challenge her to make the right choice and this struggle is evident in her poem, ‘In Plaster’ where she remarks about her artificial self, thus, “I hated her, she had no personality” (CP, pp.158-160). Clearly, Sylvia Plath privileges the spontaneous self over and above all the others. Her poems, however, are always locked in a struggle to make the right choice. This contributes to the kind of tension that gives voice to a poetry whereby, “she herself was the struggle of persons, she herself was drama”!⁸

After giving birth to her children, Sylvia Plath achieves a new sense of awareness of the worth and greatness of motherhood. Her children occupy an important place in her poems, bringing out her sense of maternity, giving her a new sense of direction, expanding her capability to love, both her husband to her children. Maternal love and motherhood is

something new for her, and she realises that they provide her with a stamp to her identity as a woman. With the birth of her children, there is a new thrust in her poetry as if their birth “unlocked her poetic powers”.⁹ Moved by love and concern, she voices these emotions in her poems, with a sense of pride and satisfaction. Her children were her stronghold when her marriage was falling apart, and “at a time when her personal life was under stress she turned to her children for solace”.¹⁰ The innocent world of the children, however, temporary, provides her with a sense of relief in contrast to her own disturbed world. Her overwhelming joy at motherhood is explicitly brought out in one of her letters: “I never dreamed it was possible to get such joy out of babies. I do think mine are special.”¹¹ Sylvia Plath, therefore assumes the role of a poet-mother. She uses children as her subjects, simply because of the fact that she cannot ignore her creativity as a woman and the joy and love that she experiences because of it. It could be said of Sylvia Plath that the act of transcription functions both at the biological and at the poetic level so that the simple joys of motherhood have been recorded in poems that literally overflow with the wonder of childbirth.

Contradictoriness is a significant vein in Sylvia Plath’s poetry. The swing of emotions between love and hatred, happiness and disappointment,

hopefulness and faithlessness, rejection and acceptance contribute to the final impact of her poems. Puzzling though these contradictions might seem to be, yet they form the stuff of her poetry. "On the aesthetic level", such poems "at their most intense and therefore absolute represent the fusion of these extremes".¹² They bring about a taut blend of opposing feelings; one that is not constant but rather dependent upon the mood of the poet. The poems, therefore, have to be understood in terms of Sylvia Plath's emotional vacillations.

Images that the poet uses are a perfect fit for her themes. They are often shocking, making her poetry "brutal, like the smash of a fist".¹³ In her famous poem 'Daddy' she portrays her father as a "German" (CP, pp.222-224), a Nazi whilst she is a Jew who is victimised by her father. The image of the holocaust is employed because she wants to highlight her own pain at the loss of her father. Her love for him is so intense that she views his death as a cruel act of abandoning her, leaving her fatherless. Sylvia Plath portrays herself as a Jew to "define herself, her sorrow, and not to involve our sympathies for the Jews of recent European history".¹⁴ The betrayal of her husband makes her life all the more poignant and miserable, and she talks of him as a "criminal" (CP, pp.226-227) who has greatly wronged her. In a lighter vein, she refers to her unborn child who moves inside her as a

“Jumpy Mexican bean” (CP, p.141) and like “pears” which “fatten like little buddhas” (CP, p.125). In a more sinister way, however, she talks of her suicide as a performing act, “the theatrical” (CP, pp.244-247) and “ ‘A Miracle!’ ” (CP, pp.244-247).

The metaphor of death in Sylvia Plath’s poems define her attitude towards it. She talks about death as an “art” (CP, pp.244-247); glorifying it; yearning for it in the poem ‘Getting There’ where she repeatedly says; “How far is it?” (CP, pp.247-249). The same longing for death to join her dead father is echoed in her poem ‘Daddy’ when she remarks, “At twenty I tried to die” (CP, pp.222-224), referring to her first suicide attempt in 1953. Thus, interest in Sylvia Plath’s work is heightened because of her “Keatsian tragic life that ended at 30”,¹⁵ and her daring to accept death not by waiting for it to come to her, but voluntarily daring to approach it through suicide.

- Suicide is an aesthetic affirmation of her identity; it is the final act of transcribing herself as an artist and an individual who believes that death is not a surrender but a victory over all the forces that did not allow her to be herself when she was alive. In suicide, Sylvia Plath willingly chooses to stand alone, free from the obligations of her family and society. It is her chosen path towards freedom. Anne Stevenson remarks, “the idea of suicide formed in her mind like the ultimate and irrevocable fig, a green

promise hanging at the top of the highest branch of a tree”.¹⁶ Suicide, therefore, is the ultimate act of “freedom”.¹⁷ What is most remarkable and at the same time frightening about Sylvia Plath is the fact that she speaks of suicide and death without any trace of fear in her poems. In his book, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide, A. Alvarez writes about her attitude towards suicide, speaking “with a wry detachment, and without any mention of the suffering or drama of the act.”¹⁸ Death for Sylvia Plath is not in any way an act of defeatism. It is rather an attestation of her identity as an individual who dared to step beyond and transcend death aesthetically without considering its darker aspects.

Being a woman-poet with an uncanny sense of honesty, Sylvia Plath enjoys the advantage of being able to express herself in a way that she wants to, different from the “woman poet in the middle of the twentieth century” who based her work on an “established tradition of poetry as a high art shaped primarily by male poets”.¹⁹ It is true that she might have been influenced by her husband, but it cannot be agreed that she depends totally upon him for inspiration. The best poems of her life were in fact written after her separation from him. She is a writer in her own right, and this is evident in one of her letters, “I am a writer ... I am a genius of a writer. I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; that will make my

name”.²⁰ Many poems present an incriminating picture of her husband as one who fills her with contempt and rage rather than love and respect. Although she is not a feminist in the categorical sense of the term, yet she airs her opinions convincingly wanting to shake herself free from the overshadowing personality of her husband. The phrase, “I shall unloose” (CP, pp.242-244) from her poem ‘Purdah’ is a declaration of her determination to emerge as an independent woman. At the same time, she voices her awareness of the different aspects of womanhood in her poems. She glorifies the role of woman as wife and mother, but also expresses her fear of the erosion of her womanhood. Poems like ‘Strumpet Song’, ‘Widow’ ‘Spinster’ and ‘The Applicant’ portray the irrevocability of this loss.

In order to achieve a better understanding of how Sylvia Plath transcribes herself, an attempt would be made to analyse her poems which embrace the varied strands of the personal, her concern for the question of selfhood and her sense of creative fulfillment as a mother. One important contribution towards Sylvia Plath’s success as a poet was her academic background. As a student in school and at Smith College which was one of the reputed women’s institutions in Boston, her work “as a writer and an intellectual had come to define her” earning the “respect of her friends and

the special treatment of the entire Smith faculty ...”.²¹ With an excellent academic background, along with a talent for writing, Sylvia Plath is not an amateur who flounders about in her poetry. She speaks with authority giving shape to her poetry through her candidness. Thus, a re-examination of her poems would convey to the reader a special kind of awareness about how she transcribes herself and how she makes use of her creative powers to carve an identity as a woman, a wife, a mother and an artist.

NOTES

¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life. (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) xi.

² Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 11.

³ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 244.

⁴ Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973) 8.

⁵ Emory Eliot, Martha Banta, Terence Martin, Marjorie Perloff and Daniel Shea, eds. Columbia Literary History of the United States. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 1087.

⁶ Emory Eliot, Martha Banta, Terence Martin, Marjorie Perloff and Daniel Shea, eds. Columbia Literary History of the United States. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 1089.

⁷ Linda W. Wagner, ed. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 156.

⁸ Gary Lane, ed. Sylvia Plath: New Views on Poetry. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1979) 9.

⁹ Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 111.

¹⁰ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 178.

¹¹ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 452.

¹² Linda W. Wagner, ed. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 147.

¹³ Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 100.

¹⁴ Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 29.

¹⁵ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life. (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) xi.

¹⁶ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath. (London: Viking, 1989) 33.

¹⁷ Linda W. Wagner, ed. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984) 71.

¹⁸ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide. (New York: Random House, 1972) 20.

¹⁹ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 7.

²⁰ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 468.

²¹ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath. (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 116.

CHAPTER-I

**SYLVIA PLATH AND THE ELEMENT OF
THE PERSONAL**

The autobiographical element in poetry is “a testing reality”.¹ It determines whether the poet is able to translate himself honestly or if he is overshadowed by the personal which keeps him from being true to his art. As a poet Sylvia Plath displays an honesty whereby she unreservedly expresses her most private emotions, even as she transcends them. Emotions swaying between love and hatred for her father, feelings of anger and bitterness for her husband who betrays her and references to her suicide attempts figure prominently in her poems. It can be said that, “the raw material of Sylvia Plath’s work can be found in the events of her own life.”² The poems are so closely related to her life that it is difficult to separate the “woman and the work”³ Sylvia Plath is one with her poetry. There is a strong bond of interdependence between the two. The poetry of Sylvia Plath “is a real voice in a real body in a real world”.⁴ The poems which deal with personal elements voice her innermost emotions, which are real and belong to her alone.

P. Rajani questions, “why is there a need for correlation between her life and work? Can’t her poetry be understood and appreciated

independently of biographical information?”⁵. He provides us immediately with a suitable answer which bespeaks the fact that Sylvia Plath’s poems are one with her. While “most works of art have a life of their own, in the case of Plath her work is inextricably associated with her life.”⁶ Based on this opinion offered by P. Rajani it is correct to say that Sylvia Plath uses her personal experiences as subject matter for her poems, and she intelligibly transcribes her self and her experiences into art. Poetry and personal experience merge into one. Even after going through experiences that are otherwise bitter, Sylvia Plath does not stop herself from putting down her thoughts into words. Thus, “there was, indeed, no stopping it. Her poetry acted as strange, powerful lens through which her ordinary life was filtered and refigured with extraordinary intensity”⁷.

Possessing an inherent talent for writing and self-expression coupled with a sensitive mind, Sylvia Plath exploits her creativity by transforming the personal into poetry. Candidness is one of the admirable qualities of her autobiographical poems, mirroring a clear picture of her feelings. A re-examination of these personal elements will define how the poet strives to carve an identity as an individual in the midst of all the adversity that she had to go through.

At the young age of fourteen, Sylvia Plath wrote “I Thought that I could not be hurt”. It is replete with “tragic undertones”.⁸ The poem is “inspired by the accidental blurring of a pastel”⁹ by her grandmother. The poem seems more than just an outburst of the poet’s disappointment at the spoiled pastel:

I thought that I could not be hurt;
I thought that I must surely be
impervious to suffering –
immune to mental pain
or agony.

My world was warm with April sun
My thoughts were spangled green and gold;
my soul filled up with joy, yet felt
the sharp, sweet pain that only joy
can hold...

Then, suddenly my world turned gray,
and darkness wiped aside my joy.
A dull and aching void was left
where careless hands had reached out to
destroy

My silver web of happiness.
The hands then stopped in wonderment,
for, loving me, they wept to see
the tattered ruins of my firma-
ment.¹⁰



When examined closely the poem echoes Sylvia Plath’s sense of loss – a loss not merely of the pastel, but of something more. The poem indirectly alludes to the death of her father at the young age of eight. In Letters Home, Aurelia Plath cites the comments of Wilbury Crockett on the poem,

“Incredible that one so young could have experienced anything so devastating.”¹¹ The poem clearly exhibits her sensitivity to loss and pain, and in fact defines her attitude towards death.

The journal entry of Sylvia Plath where she remarks, thus, “me, I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight...”¹² highlights the tremendous sense of loss felt by her at not being able to experience the love of her father. Sadness is not the only feeling the poet experiences. Anger, bitterness and rejection freely reign in the poet’s mind, and these emotions are expressed in her poem ‘Daddy’. She uses the pattern of a nursery rhyme in ‘Daddy’ to express her bitterness and portrays a cruel image of her father as a cruel “German”, a “black man” and a “brute” who breaks her heart forcing her to face one of the worst tragedies of her life, “Bit my pretty red heart in two, I was ten when they buried you” (CP, pp.222-224). Disenchanted and deeply hurt, the poet is forced to confront a painful reality. She angrily accepts his death because she realises that she cannot restore him. She says, “Daddy; I have had to kill you/You died before I had time –” (CP, pp.222-224). These lines speak of how the poet attempts to erase the painful memories of her father’s death. The word “kill” symbolically refers to the act of doing away with the feeling of sadness and it is as if she has to “kill” the painful feelings because she is

affected by them in such a way that they reduce her to a hurtful being. The poet did not get a proper chance to mourn, and when she is informed about the death of her father, Linda Wagner-Martin quotes her response “ ‘I’ll never speak to God again’.” Martin further remarks that:

the Plath children had no model for their mourning. Neither did they have any opportunity to mourn: Aurelia decided that Otto’s appearance in the casket was so forbidding that she did not let the children see him. They did not attend the funeral or the burial.¹³

Denied the proper mourning necessary for emotional health, the poet suppresses her emotions and accepts the bitter truth of her father’s death. This transforms her into an angry being full of hurt.

Viewing her father as a German Nazi, Sylvia Plath imagines herself to be a Jew greatly wronged by her father. This juxtaposition, though extreme in nature, portrays the bitter feelings she has been nursing for thirty years. His death leaves her confused and angry, and she compares her father to an “engine, an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew” (CP, pp.222-224) His death amounts to an act of cruelty which frightens her:

I have always been scared of you,
With you Luftwaffe; your gobbledygoo,
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue,
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you – (CP, pp.222-224)

The terrifying picture of Otto Plath as a Nazi is one of the main reasons, which keeps the daughter from expressing her feelings for him. Although Sylvia Plath misses her father terribly, yet it is anger and bitterness that overwhelms her, disallowing her to express her love for him. An absence of communication prevails which leave her handicapped for want of expression, "I could never talk to you./The tongue stuck in my jaw./... I could hardly speak" (CP, pp.222-224).

The image of the concentration camp forms an important element in 'Daddy' not because Sylvia Plath is drawn to history but because she wishes to depict herself as a wronged victim. Steven Gould Axelrod elucidates upon this image of the concentration camp when he remarks that without her father, her "existence struck her as marginal and doubtful, like that of a concentration camp victim; she felt herself menaced by effacement and erasure at every moment; ..." ¹⁴ 'Daddy' basically deals with the loss of the poet's father. It is also an echo of the poet's fear of the loss of the self. The father is a figure of stability from whom the poet can draw strength and inspiration. So when she loses her father, she is utterly hurt and broken; her individuality suffers a setback. It is but natural for her to feel the sense of loss of the self. The poem therefore tries "to explore the dynamics of her attitude toward individualism" ¹⁵. It portrays her as an individual who is

deeply hurt because her source of sustenance and inspiration is taken away from her. Moreover, the poet's self is confused because she is not able to resolve her feelings for her father. 'Daddy' becomes a complex poem since it presents the two extremities of anger and sadness mixed with fright. The last line of the poem climaxes in "Daddy, daddy, you bastard I'm through" (CP, pp.222-224). This line is truly an expression of frustration, where sadness is blunted by bitterness. She clearly dismisses it by saying that she is through with all the feelings of anger that has eaten her up. The term "bastard" highlights the intensity of Sylvia Plath's anger at her father who leaves her fatherless at a point when she needs him the most. Although she dismisses her aggrievement thinking that she is through with it, in reality she cannot erase it from her heart, and as a consequence an empty vacuum is created in her life.

In the poem, Sylvia Plath's attitude alternates between love and hatred for her father. This raises doubts in the reader's mind, yet one understands that the poet is confused and frightened. She is a psychological wreck reduced to a small petty being whose defenses have been weakened. 'Daddy' is an expression of sorrow overshadowed by anger. The poem is also a subtle expression of her longing to get rid of the feelings of sadness which torment her. Such feelings make her weak, and in order to erase them

in entomology however stands as a barrier between father and child without any possible bridge to connect the gap between them. The gap that is already present is heightened when the father dies of a disease that could have been prevented from getting worse.

In her poem 'Lament' Sylvia Plath squarely blames the bees for taking her father away, "the sting of bees took away my father" (CP, pp.315-316). The poet also voices her pride at her father's impressive personality. She paints a symbolic picture of her father who is full of strength, successfully trampling upon all hardships across his way. In 'Lament', Sylvia Plath "expresses great admiration for the dead father ... – the poem is more a description of the father's superlative qualities than an expression of the daughter's feeling of loss."¹⁹ Bad weather could never deter him, for he "scorned the tick of falling weather" (CP, pp.315-316). Even the "lightning" which "licked" (CP, pp.315-316) up everything in its path could not touch him with its "snaking fangs" (CP, pp.315-316), and like a "raging bather" (CP, pp.315-316) he faces the obstacles that stand in his way. These poetic metaphors attest to Otto Plath's indomitability. In the eyes of the daughter, her father is a definition of strength. But the irony lies in the haunting refrain, "the sting of bees took away my father". In spite of being a powerful male who is able to conquer the challenges of life, he falls

prey to the sting of bees and succumbs to death. On a symbolical level, his interest in bees is responsible for keeping him away from looking after his own health. As such, the bees are, therefore, the indirect cause of his death.

In 'Lament', the poet also yearns for the father who would have given her a better sense of herself. His death is a loss that affects her deeply, for she feels weak and lost in a world, which cannot offer her hope. Her love is so intense, that it hurts her tremendously when he dies. Love is aborted even before it is allowed to grow. At the same time, the father's death brings home to the poet the fact that her identity is affected for want of a stable father figure. She feels that she has lost an essential source of emotional sustenance and becomes aware that her identity is threatened because she has to depend on her own capabilities. At the same time it is also a realization that she needs to move on with life and forge an identity of her own, one that is not influenced by her father, but one that is just as powerful and strong.

When Sylvia Plath talks about her father in her poems, she transforms herself into that little girl that she had once been, reliving and re-experiencing the incidents of the past. As a young child, the poet could not understand her father's illness, why she and her brother were kept away

from him most of the time. Knowing clearly well that her father is seriously ill, but not knowing why, she says:

Your dangers are many. I
cannot look much but your form suffers
Some strange injury.
And seems to die: ... (CP, pp. 92-93)

The young girl is pained to see her father suffering from “some strange injury” which eats up his physical strength. At the same time it is this “injury” which creates a gap between father and child because she is kept away from him most of the time. This has been factually attested to by Aurelia Plath’s remarks in Letters Home:

I kept an “upstairs-downstairs” household when both Otto and the children were indoors, partly so their noisy play and squabbling would not upset him, but mostly so that he would not frighten them, for he now occasionally suffered intense cramping spasms in his leg muscles, which would cause him to moan in pain.²⁰

Otto Plath had always had an influential role in the Plath household, so it was but natural for his daughter to look up to him as a god who could ward off all evil. Unfortunately this godlike figure contrived by the poet when she was a young child suddenly weakens and is shattered when she sees her father suffer from severe physical agony. Her questions about his pain and ultimate death remain unanswered. “You defy questions” (CP,

pp.92-93) addresses the father who is like an enigma because she cannot find any answers relating to his disease and death:

You defy other godhood.
I walk dry on your kingdom's border
Exiled to no good. (CP, pp.92-93)

It is as if the poet is deliberately “exiled” from her father. This exile contributes to Sylvia Plath’s loss of confidence in herself because the godlike figure upon whom she places her trust is no longer present. It also proves to be detrimental. From then onwards she begins to nurse a desire for death in her heart, a desire to join her father in death, “At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you” (CP, pp.222-224). This ultimately leads to her own suicide. The haunting memory of her dead father is responsible for this death-wish. She says, “Old Man you surface seldom” (CP, p.92-93) referring to the fact that his death is also the main cause of the pull towards him, and “the only way to allay the fears of his abrupt assaults on her peace would be to join him in the depths”.²¹

In the poems about her father, Sylvia Plath is lost in feelings of uncertainty. At times she feels lost because of his absence, and there are times when she feels the need to shake off his influence over her. In ‘The Colossus’, she tries to retrieve her lost father by imagining herself to be fixing

her father's disoriented body with glue, but to no avail. Sylvia Plath "tries symbolically to reconstitute her father, the imago of a lost god".²²

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed ...
Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of her brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes. (CP, pp.129-130)

The poet is unable to rearrange her father's disjointed body. This increases the communication gap already seen in 'Daddy' and 'Full Fathom Five'. In 'The Colossus', the communication between father and daughter is further increased because the poet is unable to decipher the words of her father. His words are not clear for they are only empty sounds resonating in the poet's ears like a "mule-bray, pig grunt and bawdy cackles" (CP, p.129-130). It is like a "barnyard" where animals make loud sounds without understanding one another. Now that her father is dead, it is impossible for her to remove this distance. In spite of this her father is like a historical figure in her life, casting a strong influence upon her. The poem is based upon a situation where "the poet is exploring a very private, very personal experience, her relationship with her dead father, whom she both adores and hates because he died, because he is dead and still influences her ..."²³ Sylvia Plath is like an "ant" a small, helpless being trying to fathom the events in her life. For

many years she has been trying to figure out the death of her father, but she is “none the wiser” (CP, p.129-130).

As has been mentioned earlier, the death of her father creates a vacuum in the life of Sylvia Plath, snatching away a happy childhood in a split second:

the slime of all my yesterdays
rots in the hollow of my skull ... (CP, pp.301-302)
a future was lost yesterday
as easily and irretrievably
as a tennis ball at twilight.

Death becomes the sad reality that she has to accept. She has to put it at the back of her mind and move on. However, it keeps on disturbing her and reminds her of the tremendous loss. It also reminds her of the loss of a future possibility for happiness. Even though Sylvia Plath exaggeratedly considers herself to have been “God-fathered”, yet she voices her helplessness in the face of her father’s death, constantly reiterating that a part of her has died with him:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum ...
As if you had never existed, as if I came
God-fathered into the world from my mother’s belly.
(CP, pp.116-117)

The thought of being “God-fathered” does not provide her any relief. She knows fully well that her father is lying low in his grave which is a “poorhouse where the dead/crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower/Breaks the soil...” (CP, pp.116-117). His grave is a “poorhouse” because he lies there lifeless and inert with no life left in him. She puts forth a question, “How shall I age into that state of mind?” (CP, pp.116-117). In other words she is not sure whether she will be able to live with the loss. In her journal, she writes, “it hurts, Father, it hurts, oh, Father. I have never known; a father even, they took from me”.²⁴

Most of the autobiographical poems of Sylvia Plath deal with the loss of her father. They not only portray her sense of loss and sorrow, but they also bring out the struggle of the poet to forge an identity of her own in the absence of her father. She fully comprehends that she has to emerge on her own into the world without depending upon the father who has left her.

For Sylvia Plath, her father is not only a colossal figure with an imposing personality. He also possesses a negative side, which arouses the anger of the daughter. In her journal she writes, “he is an ogre. But I miss him”.²⁵ Otto Plath of course had disturbed the peace of the family with his illness and sudden death. In the poem ‘The Beekeeper’s Daughter’ she says, “My heart under your foot, sister of a stone,”(CP, p.118) reducing herself to

a dead entity overwhelmed by fear, sadness and bitterness. Her father's dominance when he was alive triggers off feelings of anger because it has reduced their home to "a well of scents too dense to breathe in" (CP, p.118). She addresses him as a "maestro of bees" moving "among the many breasted hives" (CP, p.118) trying to establish his supremacy over his family which is compared to a hive. Her father suitably occupies the position of the queen bee in a hive, usurping the place, which should have been her mother's. In his "hieratical frock coat" (CP, p.118) he exerts his power, and his position is that of "a queen-ship no mother can contest –" (CP, p.118). Sylvia Plath mocks her father when she says that he is "A fruit that's death to taste: dark parings" (CP, p.118), a being who is utterly helpless when death overtakes him.

Another autobiographical poem, which talks about personal loss, is 'Parliament Hill Fields' where the poet talks about the loss of her baby whom she miscarries early in 1961. She feels lonely and dejected. There is a strong feeling of isolation from a world, which does not understand what she is going through. An image of blankness and emptiness prevails, and this is suggestive in the words "bold", "faceless", and "pale":

On this bald hill the new year hones its edges
Faceless and pale as China
The second sky goes on minding its business

Your absence is inconspicuous,
Nobody can tell what I lack (CP, p.152-153)

Nobody understands the loss of the poet; no one can feel her pain. She is the lone bearer of her own loss. This has been explicitly brought out in the image of a group of little girls “in blue uniforms”, (CP, pp.152-153) walking together. One of them unknowingly “drops a barrette of pink plastic; but none of them seem to notice” (CP, p.152-153). In the same manner Sylvia Plath loses her child and none notices her loss. The “indifference of the natural and human world is an affront, but the woman seems incapable of rousing herself to anger”.²⁶ The poet regretfully addresses her child and says “Your cry fades like the cry of a gnat./I lose sight of you on your blind journey” (CP, pp.152-153). Consolation is a far cry for the poet, for she cannot share her grief with anyone. Her loss also erodes her identity as a mother for she feels that her creativity is endangered. But she is assured when she reminds herself of the older surviving daughter, “Your sister’s birthday picture start to glow” (CP, pp.152-153). The optimism in these lines speaks about the poet’s sense of hopefulness that she is not entirely childless.

Personal loss in the life of Sylvia Plath has a twofold effect upon her. Firstly, it obviously brings her pain and, therefore, maligns her sense of self.

College. Sylvia Plath enthusiastically describes her activities at Lookout Farm:

Day in, day out
I bent over the plants in my Leather-Knead
Dungarees, proud as a lady in a sea
Of prize roses, culling the fullest florets;
My world pyramided with laden baskets.
(CP, pp.89-90)

The self-confidence that the poet possesses is evident for she is optimistic that opportunities avenues will open up for her, offering her “laden baskets” of successful achievements and “prize roses” after she completes her education. True enough, she makes a name for herself as a student at Smith College receiving a host of accolades and commendations for her performances. She outstandingly enjoyed a “growing reputation as a prize-winning poet”.²⁷ One rejection, however, triggers a severe mental breakdown, pushing her to the edge of suicide. In 1953, Sylvia Plath had applied for a seat at the Harvard writing school. Rejection of the application was the last thing she expected, and when it happens she is utterly disappointed. Viewing herself as someone inadequate and incapable, she plunges into depression and cuts herself off from all those round her. The “rejection wounded her where she was most vulnerable, namely, in her self esteem...”²⁸ and “she felt useless and incapable of sustaining interest in

anything...”²⁹ A psychiatrist suggested that she should undergo an electro-therapy treatment to stabilise her condition. This treatment, however, aggravates her already debilitated condition and she becomes a nervous wreck, angry at herself and at the world round her. Her desire to excel in life is over-shadowed by this rejection. The consuming passion for an identity that is creative and successful is out of reach. With a view to put an end to defeat and disappointment she consumes sleeping pills and hides herself in the cellar. Fear of being mocked, she tries to kill herself, thinking death can bring her a release from all her fears of failure and rejection.

Sylvia Plath talks candidly about her suicide attempt in ‘A Birthday Present.’ The title of the poem is full of ironic implications. Though it speaks of a birthday present, yet it is something the poet is not interested in receiving. This is so because she is not alive by choice but “by accident” (CP, pp.206-208). It seems as if the poet longs for death to free her from some unseen chains that bind her and keep her from being what she wants to be. She had tried to die when she was twenty, to put an end to a life she thought to be a miserable failure. So there is no reason for her to celebrate her birthday, “I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year./After all I am alive only by accident” (CP, pp.206-208). The thought of death is a pre-occupation in the poet’s mind, which apparently suggests that she is in love

with death. Sylvia Plath is not obsessed with death in the same way as Keats was. Keats feared death would put a stop to his potential career as a poet, while she views death as a passage of release from worldly frets. It is like a passage from “psychological bondage to freedom”³⁰ and a means to achieving recognition as a unique identity. She nurses an abnormal admiration for death and says, “I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes” (CP, pp.206-208). Death is looked upon as something possessing the quality of serenity which is “pure and clean as the cry of a baby”(CP, pp.206-208) captivating her rather than arousing fear for it.

In ‘Daddy’ also Sylvia Plath also talks freely about her suicide attempt in 1953, which is not only the result of her frustration at being rejected from Harvard; it is also an act of desperation, a longing to join her dead father:

At twenty I tried to die,
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
(CP, pp.222-224)

Timely rescue revives her and proper medical care and psychiatric guidance contributes to her recovery. It is as if she is remade and repaired. Apparently, Sylvia Plath does not have enough confidence in her own

abilities. She yearns for an external support who can inspire her. And this support is none other than her father. Since he is dead, she feels that she is incomplete and helpless. This is responsible for drawing her to him, and she thinks that death can solve this feeling of inadequacy. It can be clearly understood that she depends upon her dead father to inspire her and to enable her to move on with life. She is of course redeemed from death, but suicide becomes a pre-occupation which she takes resort to whenever she feels dejected.

When Sylvia Plath separated from her husband in 1962, she is a broken human being. Once, while driving she went off the road, perhaps wanting to die. A. Alvarez writes about this incident, thus, "It had been no accident; she had gone off the road deliberately, seriously wanting to die."³¹ Luckily death did not come easily to her and she proudly declares:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it – ...
I do it so it feels like hell
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call (CP, pp.244-244)

Ironically, it is as if she is celebrating her suicide attempts every decade, willingly attempting to die and willingly experimenting with it to see if she would escape from death just as she had in her former attempts. Death and

suicide attempts become experimental sessions for the poet for she regards suicide as a vocation, which constantly challenges her to it.

Perennially locked in the struggle with her identity, through suicide she aims to achieve something that she will not be able to gain during her lifetime. Suicide provides her with a means to assert a voice of her own, to capture the attention of the world around her and command a recognition that has eluded her. In her essay 'On Sylvia Plath', Elizabeth Hardwick writes:

With Sylvia Plath suicide is a performance. "Lady Lazarus" describes it with a raging, confident pride. There is no apology or fearfulness. Suicide is an assertion of power, of the strength – not the weakness – of the personality. She is no poor animal sneaking away, giving up; instead she is strong, threatening, dangerous.³²

Apart from using suicide as a convenient mode to express her "power", "strength" and "personality", Sylvia Plath's suicide attempts have also become more or less sensational events for the public who she refers to as "the peanut munching crowd" (CP, pp.244-247). The public's attention is caught by her acts and they watch the progression of events with excitement. She becomes an object of entertaining pleasure for the crowd who watch her acts eagerly, "Them unwrap me hand and foot -/The big strip tease./Gentleman, ladies – ..." (CP, pp.244-247)

When Sylvia Plath attempted suicide in 1953, it became a publicised event, with newspapers broadcasting it to the whole world. The “story was given prominent space in the *Globe* under the headline of “Beautiful Smith Girl missing at Wellesly”.³³ Despite adverse publicity generated by this incident, Sylvia Plath did not concede that her suicide attempt was a marginalisation or a dwindling away of the self. She says, “Nevertheless, I am the same identical woman” (CP, pp.244-247) reasserting her self and voicing the need to be identified as a woman with an identity of her own. A re-examination of the poems dealing with death portrays Sylvia Plath as one who does not have any fear for it. Instead death is something, which has to be experienced with perfection.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well. (CP, pp.244-247)

The voice of the perfectionist is evident in the above lines. The poet raises the stature of death to “an art” which demands perfection. She also boasts of the fact that she is able to go through it as if she were performing any other ordinary duty. At the same time the verse cited above is a foreboding of her final suicide when death finally overtakes her. It can be rightly said that the lines are strongly evident of the fact that the poet is writing “a paean to suicide”.³⁴ Death is indeed “an art” for Sylvia Plath, because she is able to

translate herself as an artist who achieves perfection aesthetically. It exalts her position of an artist and accentuates her ability to transcribe herself through her poems and ultimately through the climactic moment of her death.

The loss of her father repeats itself all over again when her husband was disloyal to her. In a way the marriage of Sylvia Plath to Ted Hughes fills up the gap that had been created ever since her father died. The breakup of the marriage is another stage in life when she feels dejected. As if she were an unlucky being whose relationship with either her father and husband does not last, she bitterly expresses herself in her journal, "I hated men because they didn't stay around and love me like a father".³⁵ The fear of being abandoned hounds her and transforms her hurtful feelings into hatred. She becomes vulnerable and weak. At such a trying time, it is only one thing which maintains her stability, it is poetry which keeps her "live and sane during a time when the forces of daily existence were threatening to overwhelm her frail defenses".³⁶ It is only through poetry that Sylvia Plath could ventilate her feelings of hurt and anger. The poems written during this stage in her life presents her as a wounded individual. The tone of her poems is filled with rage, disgust and angry fierceness. At this point

of her life, Sylvia Plath emerges as one who is no longer inclined to hide her true feelings.

When Ted Hughes leaves her for another woman, Sylvia Plath is reduced to a helpless being, deprived of love, support and security. Her self-esteem is shattered and she has to fight a raging battle to maintain an appearance that everything is normal. It has been observed by one critic who thinks of “her brightness as a facade, as though she were able, in a rather schizoid way, to turn her back on her suffering for the sake of appearance, and pretend it didn’t exist”.³⁷ The struggle to portray a picture of normalcy is a difficult task because the artificial stance put up by her cracks under the strain. She becomes an easy victim of ill health; she loses weight and is unable to cope with the situation. Everything dear to her is obliterated and deception is all that she gets in return. She angrily remarks:

The fever trickles and stiffens my hair.
My ribs show. What have I eaten?
Lies and smiles ...
Hurts me, he
With his armor of fakery, (CP, pp.226-227)

The above lines are an extract from “the most vindictive of her late poems...”.³⁸ The self of the poet is trampled by the hurt she suffers because of the failure of her marriage. She dies a thousand deaths without being able to comprehend how and why she is trapped in the situation that she is in:

His high cold masks of amnesia.
How did I get here?
Indeterminate criminal,
I die with variety –
Hung, starved, burned, hooked. (CP, pp.226-227)

The remark, “how can a man deny what his family has meant to him”³⁹ by her biographer is directed against Ted Hughes who is referred to as a “criminal” responsible for the crime of hurting his wife and family. Ted Hughes is responsible for hurting the self-esteem of the poet; he reduces her to a woman without any worth. Their marriage is an unequal union of self-surrender on the part of the wife as is evident in ‘Pursuit’ rather than a union based on love and trust.

In the initial stages of Sylvia Plath’s romance with Ted Hughes, she dedicates ‘Pursuit’ to him. The poem is devoid of any romantic references. In fact it is replete with images of male virility, physical power and strength. He is a “panther” a “black marauder hauled by love” haunting her and “he prowls more lordly than the sun” (CP, pp.22-23). She is unable to flee from his pursuit. The poet’s act of surrendering herself to him is likened to a sacrifice of the self to the “fierce cat” (CP, pp.22-23). She observes that her submission “compels a total sacrifice” (CP, p.22-23). It seems as if she willingly succumbs herself to him, to his strength and power without regard for the consequences that might come about. The failure that follows this

exacts a penalty for the unconditional love that she has for her husband is not returned. No matter how much she clings to it, it disappears as if it had never existed:

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 irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart? (CP, pp.192-193)

Love vanishes like the clouds that pass away when blown by the wind. It cannot be recovered and this is the cause of her sadness, which overwhelms her offering her no hope. It seems that love is either “absent or unreal, deceptive or unimportant.”⁴⁰ Love becomes valueless for the poet because she is badly hurt by a husband who does not seem to understand its worth. The tragic breakup of her marriage takes a toll on her, but it does not, however, deter her creativity as a poet. Margaret Dickie Uroff observes:

The tremendous personal strain of the separation, the misery of what she imagined (or, rather, knew) to be an abandonment, the rage of jealousy and hatred that it inspired had the immediate effect of arousing her poetic energies ... Hughes’s departure fired Plath’s new drive toward self-identity.⁴¹

Her poetry rises to its peak during this phase of her life and the poems that she writes are replete with expressions of hate, vengeance and bitterness. She writes bitingly about the woman who stands as her rival competing for

the love of her husband. In her poem 'The Rival' she remarks, "You leave the same impression/Of something beautiful, but annihilating." (CP, pp.166-167). The threatening presence of her "rival" also threatens her sense of security as a wife who is bent upon holding on to her marriage.

Sylvia Plath's disgust and anger takes complete control of her in the later part of her life. The violence of her expressions are exhibited in two of her autobiographical poems 'Burning the Letters' and 'Words heard by accident, over the phone' which outrightly express her angry reactions at her husband's adulterous affairs. The outburst is openly described by the poet in her poems. 'Burning the Letters' is a frank narration of how anger and rage take control of her. Sylvia Plath collects all her husband's papers and books from his workroom and makes a bonfire out of them in the garden. She says, "I made a fire;" (CP, pp.204-205). She witnesses the papers being eaten up by the flames which is a sight "... more beautiful than my bodiless owl,/They console me –" (CP, pp.204-205). The poem symbolises the poet's final ritual of putting an end to a relationship, which has been infested with lies and deception. This act purges her bitter feelings and perhaps enhances a self-esteem, which has been terribly deflated. Though the anger seems uncontrolled yet it is also an attempt to resurrect her lost sense of identity, which occurs after she separates from her husband. It is an

angry but brave attempt to shed off chains of imprisonment; an act of liberation from being a silent victim who watches and endures everything without reacting in any way to her husband's infidelity. Sylvia Plath declares her independence, she says that she is no longer a "dumb fish" moving "between this wish and that wish" (CP, pp.204-205).

'Words heard by accident, over the phone' is an allusion to an incident when she plucks off the cable of her telephone from the wall and flings the instrument in anger when she overhears the intimate conversations of her husband and his lover. The words exchanged are referred to as "mud":

What are these words, these words?
They are plopping like mud.
O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?
They are pressing out of the many-holed earpiece, they are
looking for a listener
Is he here (CP, pp.202-203)

The word 'mud' suggests the hypocrisy of the husband and the absence of loyalty in the relationship. Filled with vengeance and bitterness, Sylvia Plath's act defines her as a wronged victim who lashes out in a way that has never been done before. She revolts against the husband who is an obstacle in her path towards creating an identity of her own. While being married, her identity is always defined by him, but after her separation she is

free from his shadow and she emerges as a woman, possessing an individuality belonging to her alone.

However, 'For a Fatherless Son' speaks of the repercussions that she fears for whenever she looks at her children she is reminded that they will grow up without a father; they also remind her that she is an abandoned wife. She addresses her children:

You will be aware of an absence, presently,
Growing beside you like a tree,
A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree –
Balding, gelded by lightning – an illusion,
(CP, pp.205-206)

The children will become aware of the absence of a father who would otherwise have been symbolic of a tree giving them shelter and love. However, because he has left them he is more like a dead tree that has been struck by "lightning", holding no place in their lives. The poem "also draws from imagery of destruction, trees that carry death rather than life, and the core image of the child's life, the absence of his father".⁴² At the same time Sylvia Plath feels consoled that her children are too young to ask any questions. She says, "But right now you are dumb/And I love your stupidity," (CP, pp.205-206). She observes that the ignorance of the children is "good" for her because she can dodge their questions and pretend as if

everything is alright. It is ironical that a few months later after she writes this poem, Sylvia Plath kills herself and leaves her children motherless.

Using her artistic ability, she makes use of her personal experiences and transforms them into poetry. Her candidness contributes to the impact that her poems have always had upon the reader. Her poems are often replete with expressions that reveal her emotions in a manner that is sometimes shocking and outrageous. She manipulates her personal experiences in such a way so as to produce poetry that amalgamates her life and her art. It is also noticeable that in her autobiographical poems, she is involved in an inward journey into the self, examining the events of her life, which have played a major role in moulding her personality. This inward journey is not a sole end in itself. She, in fact, realizes the importance of perseverance in the face of difficulties and to maintain the self without allowing it to be drowned by the problems of life. In the process of self-examination, she rediscovers her identity and realizes that it is poetry alone that can assist her in defining her identity. Even in moments of confusion, she refuses to withdraw; she is persistent in her effort to emerge as one possessing a complete self. Her loss does not deter her from taking part in day-to-day activities. Nor does she want to be considered a weakling who is incompetent in handling personal crisis. It is in poetry that she confesses her

feelings about the personal experiences that have affected her most. Her creativity touches the highest point when she dies a death that enhances her stature as an artist. The adulation she receives after her death is “as if Plath had not died at all”.⁴³

NOTES

¹ Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 27.

² Eileen M. Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 51.

³ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972).

⁴ Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 47.

⁵ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 2.

⁶ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 2.

⁷ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 26.

⁸ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 33.

⁹ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 33.

¹⁰ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 33.

¹¹ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 34.

¹² Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, eds. The Journal of Sylvia Plath (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 267.

¹³ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 28.

¹⁴ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 8.

¹⁵ Al Strangeways, "The Boot in the Face: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Contemporary Literature 3, XXXVII, University of Wisconsin, 1996, 373.

- ¹⁶ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 28.
- ¹⁷ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 41.
- ¹⁸ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 16.
- ¹⁹ Ingrid Melander, Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiskell, 1972) 30-31.
- ²⁰ Aurelia Schober Plath, ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 18.
- ²¹ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 109.
- ²² Gary Lane ed. Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979) 185.
- ²³ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 94.
- ²⁴ Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, eds. The Journal of Sylvia Plath (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 123.
- ²⁵ Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, eds. The Journal of Sylvia Plath (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 268.
- ²⁶ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983) 209.
- ²⁷ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1977) 10.
- ²⁸ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 110.
- ²⁹ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 111.
- ³⁰ Linda W. Wagner, ed. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 71.
- ³¹ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 31.

³² Paul Alexander, ed. Ariel Ascending (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 106.

³³ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 116.

³⁴ Charles Molesworth, The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979) 63.

³⁵ Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, eds. The Journal of Sylvia Plath (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 268.

³⁶ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1977) 28.

³⁷ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 40.

³⁸ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 219.

³⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 220.

⁴⁰ Arthur Oberg, Modern American Lyric: Lowell, Berryman, Creeley and Plath (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978) 158.

⁴¹ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (University of Illinois Press, 1979) 144.

⁴² Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) 99.

⁴³ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 334.

CHAPTER – II

A RE-EXAMINATION OF SYLVIA PLATH'S IDEAL OF SELFHOOD

Sylvia Plath seeks to give birth to an ideal self, and when she writes poems concerning the self, she is bent upon creating an image of strength and independence, for it is essential for Sylvia Plath to maintain her stability even in the face of disconcerting experience. Linda W. Martin remarks, “what Sylvia feared most was the loss of self. When mad, she explained, no person possess a self.”¹ This is a significant statement, which highlights the fear, that of mental disintegration which threatens to subjugate the self. While composing poems, which aim to create an ideal self, Sylvia Plath attempts to evolve an identity that is unique and unattached to the influences that might have a hold on her. In spite of this earnest desire to achieve possession of an ideal self, Sylvia Plath is confronted with situations, which pull her from one extreme to another. She is torn between her longing to act spontaneously; and between a life dictated by her elders. This impels Sylvia Plath to cover up her true self with “a series of clever disguises”² and a “mask”³. It is this same mask, which conceals her real emotions when she is confronted with difficult situations in her life. Anne Stevenson comments,

“indeed the bright, optimistic persona she so often displayed seemed a willed stance to disguise her inner self...”.⁴ That “inner self” is constantly inundated by problems and crisis. She wears a mask to hide her real self and desperately tries to project a picture of normalcy, thus accounting for the contradictory nature of her poems. A re-examination of the poems that deal with Sylvia Plath’s attempt to strike a balance between her two selves – the “inner self” and the “false self”⁵ offers an insight into the struggle that the poet has to undergo before coming into being. Sylvia Plath’s poetry “springs from her own attempts to recognize and reconcile her own paradoxes, the ones found inside herself and the ones she faced in the world she lived in”⁶ and she is deeply aware of the conflict within her. She understands the struggle between the question of being herself and being an individual dictated by others. This inherent contradiction is responsible for the presence of an uneasy tension.

The tension is especially visible in her earlier poems, which is the tension that bespeaks the kind of poet that Sylvia Plath is. She is a woman moved by the crucial issues of selfhood, swayed by the question of accepting and rejecting herself. Her concentration is basically focused upon how to overcome doubt and emerge as one with a unique identity of her own. The tension visible in the earlier poems gradually disappears in her

later poems after she is separated from her husband. Sylvia Plath has always looked up to Ted Hughes for inspiration, but after her separation from him, she has to depend solely upon her own abilities. She is compelled to trust herself since there is no other alternative. The break up of her marriage is a tragic event for Sylvia Plath, yet from the aesthetic point of view it is a time when she matures tremendously as a poet. The poems written during this stage of her life speaks of the poet as an angry young woman who no longer doubts herself. The reader's attention is drawn to Sylvia Plath not only as a woman poet of the sixties seeking to find voice through her poems but also as an outspoken individual. This chapter seeks to probe the nature of the tension in the poems of Sylvia Plath, to delve into the poet's mind and see how she transcends herself in her later poems, ultimately finding a solution in suicide, which is the final act of translating herself as an artist.

I am terrified by this dark thing,
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings its malignity.
(CP, pp.192-193)

Sylvia Plath is confronted and terrified by an artificial self, which threatens to take control of her real self. She is gripped by fear because it strongly dominates her. It forces her to wear a disguise and present a picture of perfection. The real self is suppressed and concealed behind a shell. She often mocks at herself and at her own inability to come out into the open

and be what she wants to be. A re-examination of the poems of Sylvia Plath speaks of this trapped identity, which tries to break free from that prison to emerge liberated with a mind of its own. Her desire to reawaken that dormant self is not easy. She frequently encounters bitter experiences of personal loss and rejection, contributing to her sense of dejection and frustration. This creates a feeling of mistrust towards the world around her and acts as an obstacle in her path towards self-definition.

.... I
Have a self to recover, a queen
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass.
(CP, pp.214-215)

The above lines, clearly suggest a reawakening of Sylvia Plath's awareness of her sense of self – the self that possesses the royal status of a “queen”. This self needs to be resurrected and placed in a status that is worthy of respect and acceptance. It is through literature and poetic expression that Sylvia Plath attempts to search her identity as a woman, a mother and a poet. Sylvia Plath's poems concerning selfhood are about the “quest, the search for the best of human and spiritual values, the adventurous achievement through which a person could find identity.”⁷ Sylvia Plath carves a legacy of her own, she creates an identity which is

independent from the influence of her mother, her husband and her benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty who is a constant source of support, “both financial *and* emotional”.⁸

‘Two Sisters of Peresphone’ is about dual identities and divided selves. Sylvia Plath intelligibly translates her own experience in the characters of the two girls in the poem:

Two girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other without.
Daylong a duet of shade and light
Plays between these. (CP, pp.31-32)

The last two lines of the above verse suggest an interplay or a struggle between the two selves to overshadow one another. The word “shade” stands for the artificial self that is not her own, and “light” stands for the self that the poet yearns to be. The presence of these two selves in the character of the poet results in a tension between them. There is one part of the poet which yearns to emerge freely from within but is not allowed to do so, she remains passive, and her life becomes a “barren enterprise” (CP, pp.31-32) for she wastes her time trying to figure out how to escape the cell that encloses her real self. Time consumes the best part of her because she is not able to make use of it in the way that she wants to. In contrast to the disturbed frame of mind of the first sister who isolates herself in “her dark

wainscoted room” (CP, pp.31-32), there is the second sister who aspires to be “like pollen on bright air” (CP, pp.31-32) to be free and live life according to her will. She “burns open the sun’s blade” (CP, pp.31-32) responding to nature around her. This is an indirect projection of Sylvia Plath who is spirited and spontaneous. The struggle between the two selves creates a tension, bringing out “the turbulent process that was taking place beneath her placid exterior”.⁹

The struggle that goes on within the “divided self”¹⁰ is evident in the poem ‘In Plaster’ which describes the poet’s experience in a hospital ward while undergoing appendectomy. A patient in complete plaster lying in a neighbouring bed provides Sylvia Plath with an apt image of the struggle between the longing to establish an identity of her own and the forces, which hold her back. The perfection of the patient in complete plaster frightens her:

She doesn’t need food, she is one of the red saints.
At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality –
She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was.
(CP, p.158)

The “real” self of the poet is imprisoned within, and the poem presents “the fierce resentment the inner Sylvia – the real one, the poet – felt in the presence of her artificial exterior.”¹¹ The patient in plaster is in fact

symbolic of the poet's 'artificial' self, which Sylvia Plath has to project to the world. Wanting to get rid of this "artificial" self, the "real" self engages in a battle for supremacy. However, it may be seen that the second self has provided silent support to the "real" self which is more or less dependent on it. Sylvia Plath suffers from a crisis of being: that of being her true self and that of putting on the self that is expected of her. More than often she has to allow herself to be controlled by her "artificial" self to please the world. This is no doubt a difficult task because it demands an adjustment that takes a heavy toll on the poet's individuality. This disguise however is a great help when circumstances in the poet's life put her in a situation where she would definitely like to hide her true feelings. In 'Tale of a Tub', Sylvia Plath talks about a "mask" that can hide bitter feelings and details of her life which she wants to remain unexposed, thus:

...
the fabrication of some cloth to cover
such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:
each day demands we create our whole world over,
disguising the constant horror in a coat
of many-colored fictions; we mask our past
in the green of eden, pretend future's shining fruit
can sprout from the navel of this present waste. (CP, pp.24-25)

After Sylvia Plath's separation from Ted Hughes, she tries desperately to pretend as if everything is going well:

For the children and for her art, Sylvia struggled to maintain appearances. She tended the children, cooked elaborate meals, helped harvest the apples, minded the beehives, shopped among the townspeople as if little had happened, seemingly cheerful as ever. The only signs of distress were her paleness and continued loss of weight, and the tenseness behind the bright smile.¹²

Disguise of course comes to her aid but not for long. In the end, the “artificial” stance cracks up under the strain.

‘In Plaster’ contradicts ‘Tale of a Tub’. The desire to get rid of the artificial self is strong in Sylvia Plath, but there is also a part of her, which is indebted to it:

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp –
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
So I was careful not to upset her in any way ...
... though I did it regretfully. (CP, pp.158-190)

The artificial self seems indispensable to the poet but it is not voluntary. She forces herself to do so. The presence of the two selves is “a kind of marriage”, like a union, but not a mutual one. The battle for supremacy between the two selves is especially evident in the line, “Now I see it must be one or the other of us.” (CP, pp.158-160) Sylvia Plath puts her foot down and is determined to establish an identity of her own, come what may. She is ready to get rid of that artificial self which has handicapped her and she resolutely remarks, “I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage

without her,/And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.”
(CP, pp.158-160)

Sylvia Plath “did indeed live her life “in plaster”, cementing her emotions or allowing them to be cemented by others, and then seeking to free herself from those casts, ... she felt suffocated and paralyzed, imprisoned and poisoned.”¹³ ‘In Plaster’ is about the imprisonment of her identity because her life is often dictated by her mother. Her ambitions are not her own, they are her mother’s. Her success and performance in school is equated with the ability to make her mother happy for “Aurelia Plath did indeed identify with Sylvia, unwittingly laying upon her daughter the heavy responsibility of keeping them both happy”.¹⁴ To satisfy her mother’s aspirations, Sylvia Plath had to push herself to the edge of perfection assuming it to be the ultimate path to success. Unconsciously, failure is then considered to be just the opposite of success rather than a stepping-stone or a learning experience that would motivate one towards it. This obsession with success in the Plath household contributed towards the ambitious attitude of Sylvia Plath who later could not handle rejection in her life.

A turmoil exists within Sylvia Plath, to live life according to the dictates of her mother or lead a life of spontaneity in accordance to her own will:

Sylvia had long been confusing two very different battles within herself. One was with an artificial Sylvia, modeled on her mother, driven by ambitions she believed Aurelia harbored for her and the ideals she thought Aurelia projected. This battle was occurring on a comparatively superficial level. Beneath it, so to speak, raged an altogether more serious war, where the “real” Sylvia – violent, subversive, moonstruck, terribly angry – fought for her existence against a nice, bright, gifted American girl ... Sylvia’s powerful buried self was deadly in its determination to emerge at any cost.¹⁵

Strongly agreeing with what Anne Stevenson says about Sylvia Plath’s “buried self” and her “determination to emerge at any cost”, it is a noticeable fact that she strives for this in her poems. In ‘Poem for a Birthday’ Sylvia Plath seems to shake free of the influence of her mother when she says, “Mother keep out of my barnyard,/I am becoming another” (CP, pp.131-136). She commands her mother to keep out of her territory because she is trying to conduct herself independently.

In the search for the ideal self, Sylvia Plath realises that her mother hampers her development. It also compels her to surrender her identity and live up to the expectations of her elders, never questioning them. Her main ambition is to please her mother who “vicariously enjoyed her daughter’s pleasures, sympathized with her “problems” ... and gloried in her accomplishments”.¹⁶ The extra parental care offered by her mother overwhelms her and she tries to break free from her. Although Aurelia Plath

had equipped her daughter with all the tools necessary for success, yet she did not do her part well when it came to encouraging her daughter to face life's uphill task. She tries her best to keep her children from the harsh realities of life fearing they might be affected by them. Sylvia Plath vents her anger at her mother for keeping her away from the cruel realities of life rather than training and encouraging her to handle them. The mother's world in 'The Disquieting Muses' is a world of make-belief whereas the frightening figures of the muses "with heads like darning-eggs" (CP, pp.74-75) are real:

Mother, who made to order stories.
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches, always, always
Got baked into ginger-bread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies.
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.
(CP, pp.74-75)

Aurelia Plath would always entertain her children with fictitious stories and keep trouble at bay by filling up their little heads that "witches" can be dispelled easily. The word "witches" perhaps refers to the dangers that lurk around their lives. In a real situation which occurred when Sylvia Plath was a child, Aurelia Plath tries to distract the attention of the children from a raging storm by making them sing and feeding them ovaltine and

cookies. But the muses seem to pull the attention of the poet from the world of make belief when the angry winds break the windowpanes:

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
'Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!'
But those ladies broke the panes.
(The Disquieting Muses, p.74-75).

The disquieting muses stand in contrast to the "comforting but illusory world her mother represents".¹⁷ Frightened by the truth that her daughter cannot handle hardships, Sylvia Plath's mother tries her best "... to cover up what lurked behind the ordinary. Sometimes she tries to exorcise it, to dispel fear; more than often she pretended it did not exist, and this last is what the speaker of the poem cannot forgive".¹⁸ The poem acts as a mouthpiece of the poet's reassertion of liberating herself from the "illusory world" of her mother. She faces the real world and buckles herself to meet challenges and learn from life's experiences. She says, "I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,/From muses unhired by you, dear mother" (CP, pp.74-75) It is a frank statement that Sylvia Plath will not lean for support on her mother's "illusory world", devoid of problems.

The question of accepting and rejecting herself as she is, is an element which is present in the poems of Sylvia Plath. The poems present a

... conflict of self and society within the poet; it deals with Sylvia Plath's sense of paralysis and discusses Plath's various attempts, metaphorically and within the poems, to narrate the possibilities for a transformed self reborn into a transformed world.¹⁹

A re-examination of Sylvia Plath's poems dealing with such conflicts will help the reader understand how the poet makes her own adjustments in a world of uncertainty, and how she rises up and voices her confidence in herself. In the first section of 'Poem for a Birthday', she says, "I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,/without dreams of any sort" (CP, pp.132-137). She does not seem to possess an identity and is reduced to "a stone" lacking individuality, incapable of hoping and dreaming, reduced to a state of abject stagnation. In the third section of the poem, Sylvia Plath presents another crisis of the self when she says, "Tell me my name" (CP, pp.131-137). It is evident that these are times in the poet's life when she does not know herself and suffers from feelings of inadequacy, which manifests itself in the form of mental disintegration. The vague question-like statement about who she is, is also an echo of the time when Sylvia Plath suffers from a nervous breakdown resulting in a suicide attempt. The temporary loss of memory and the ensuing shock treatments reduces her to an invalid. She enters a

trance-like world forgetting her self. When she says in the poem, “Now they light me up like an electric bulb/For weeks I can remember another at all” (CP, pp.131-137) speaks of the loss of identity. The poet is treated like a specimen who is being experimented by physicians. The loss of memory can be equated with the loss of her identity. In ‘Witch Burning’, which is the sixth section of the poem, Sylvia Plath talks of herself as occupying “the near image of myself, a doll’s body” (CP, pp.131-137). Although alive, yet she is helpless because she is not able to revive herself from a condition that has reduced her to an invalid. She further refers to herself as an imprisoned bird whose independence has been snatched, “They’ve blown my sparkler out./A black-sharded lady keeps me in a parrot cage.” (CP, pp.131-137)

‘Poem for a Birthday’ does not deal only with the loss of self. It refers to the anticipation of the birth of a new self. This poem was written when the poet was carrying her first child, and “... it is true that the poem is in part about this sense of imminent birth, of restless anticipation. But the birthday anticipated in the poem is also for herself...”.²⁰ The poem also speaks of her recovery from her suicide attempt, a symbol of the resurrection of the self. The poet returns to the normal world after a painful process of treatment in the sanatorium. In one of her letters to her mother, she says, “... I long to be out in the wide open spaces of the very messy, dangerous, real world which

I still love inspite of everything...”²¹ Sylvia Plath also expresses her realisation in the poem that “love” which is “the bone and sinew” of her life has “reconstructed” (CP, pp.131-137) her. She is ready to begin anew and give up all thoughts of uncertainty about her sense of self. She wants to leave behind all experiences, which have contributed, to the near-extinction of her identity. The last section of the poem, ‘The Stones’ speaks of a resurrection. The “city where men are mended” (CP, pp.131-137) is a culmination of the poem echoing the possibility of self-renewal even after experiencing circumstances, which have jeopardised the self. ‘Poem for a Birthday’ presents a journey-like picture of the self passing through different phases, going through innumerable crisis and finally reaching the destination where the self is “mended”. She optimistically says, “This is the after-hell. I see the light” (CP, pp.131-137) Sylvia Plath enters a new realm that stands in contrast to the world of “stones” of the first section of the poem and says “I shall be as good as new” (CP, pp.131-137). This is the final resolution of the poet, to reaffirm her identity despite having been under medical treatment in a sanatorium.

At times Sylvia Plath does not have any confidence in herself because the world around her does not offer her any hope. Harrowed by the question of defining herself in a world which does not give her an opportunity to do

so, she likens the world to “a place of force” (CP, p.193) tying her down and even choking her voice, thus preventing her from standing up as a strong being:

It was a place of force –
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil. (CP, p.192)

‘The Rabbit Catcher’ presents a bleak picture of the poet trying to fight all odds inspite of the overpowering pressures that aim to put her down. P. Rajani writes, “the poem points to the subjugation and exploitation of women in a male dominated society”.²² The world of the poet is perhaps dominated by her husband, thus disallowing her to express herself and this dominance can be subtly read in the lines quoted from the poem. The poem therefore is “partly a cry for help”²³, and this “cry” is directed to herself to rise up and fight in order to achieve self-expression. The threatening powers of nature act as symbols, which stand against the poet. ‘Finisterre’, written on the same lines sees nature threatening to hold her back from self-expression. Nature’s bleakness “cramped on nothing. Black/Admonitory cliffs, and the sea exploding/with no bottom, or anything on the side of it” (CP, p.169) offers the poet only a picture of gloom without any security for her to hang on to. “Images of blackness, fear and hopelessness”²⁴ are replete

in 'Finnisterre'. Sylvia Plath reiterates this feeling in the poem when she refers to her life as "gloomy, a dump of rocks" (CP, p.169) which is close to death. In the face of such despair, she carries on with life and faces the reality of the self being threatened. Regretfully, she remarks, "I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton./When they free me, I am beaded with tears" (CP, p.169). Her real self has not been allowed to surface. She is bound and confined by the rules and obligations of the world around her. She cannot speak for herself, and by the time she is allowed to do so, she is not able to speak out for she has been robbed of the power of self-expression. The life that the poet leads is "a life baptized in no life" (CP, p.163) because she is a living being who leads a life in the midst of lifelessness because her freedom to live according to her will is taken away.

Sylvia Plath's attempt to revive her dormant self is a theme, which dominates most of her poems. She draws upon her own personal experience in order to bring out her attempts to emerge as a being possessed of a complete self. 'Tulips' is a poem about the poet's experience in a hospital. The poet's husband brings her a bunch of tulips. But her response is unexpected, for she does not accept them lovingly. The poem "literally explores the persona's anger and guilt when her husband brings flowers into her peaceful, quiet, stark, white hospital room. The invasion of the red

breathing tulips into her intimate privacy seems more than the recovering woman can bear”.²⁵ Sylvia Plath voices her unwillingness to accept the flowers, “I didn’t want any flowers”; “The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me”; “Their redness talks to my wound”; “The vivid tulips eat my oxygen”, (CP, p.160-162) express the poet’s rejection of the flowers because they do not offer her any hope. In fact, they stand out as threats to the poet’s health and identity and invade the calmness she is experiencing in the hospital ward. Eileen Aird opines that the flowers disturb “the snowy whiteness and silence”,²⁶ which the poet is enjoying. The flowers remind the poet of the innumerable responsibilities she has to undertake after her recovery. At the moment she is experiencing a certain kind of serenity:

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody, I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses.
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.
(CP, pp.160-162)

Sylvia Plath readily surrenders her identity, giving up her name and everything that indicates her individuality. She is a “nobody” and her self is a “pebble” (CP, pp.160-162) possessing little importance. She “relishes the opportunity to relinquish all responsibility to become a ‘body’ with no personal identity”.²⁷ It is a moment in the poet’s life when she discovers a

certain sense of calmness because she is isolated from the experiences of daily life. She remarks:

How free it is, you have no idea how free –
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing. (CP, pp.160-162)

There is a sense of freedom from a life bound by duty and obligation. Even the photo-frame of her husband and child smiling threaten her and remind her of her onerous responsibilities as wife and mother.

When Sylvia Plath refers to having given up her “name”, (CP, pp.160-162) it is not the real self that she has surrendered. She has given up her artificial self, which has held her captive, her mask and disguise. For this reason she wants to taste the new horizons of freedom and lie in “peacefulness” (CP, pp.160-162) in the hospital room. But the presence of the tulips and their vivid “redness” (CP, pp.160-162) threaten the poet’s self. They endanger her as if they are some wild animals, which need to be caught before they further damage her self-esteem. She remarks, “The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals” (CP, pp.160-162). The tulips make Sylvia Plath aware that she has to leave the hospital and get back to the real world. In the real world, however, she will not be able to be her real self. Tied down by expectations of those who watch her, and by her sense of duty towards society and the world round her, she forces herself to suppress

her genuine aspirations. The tulips “not only force existence on the speaker but pain and self-awareness as well”.²⁸ ‘Tulips’ truly bring out the constant pull of the two extremes of the real self and the artificial self of Sylvia Plath which is also responsible for the tension in her other poems.

Besides being a poet, Sylvia Plath is also a woman who is specially sensitive to the importance of her role as mother, wife and lover. The ability to bear children is a definition of a woman’s fertility. It is an act, which provides a woman with a passport to achieve an identity of her own. Although a woman enjoys the position of being lover to a man, yet her role as lover is unfulfilled if she is unable to procreate. Barrenness is equated with emptiness and blankness. A woman who is unable to conceive and to give birth is likened to a “museum without statues” (CP, p.157). The fruitless womb of a woman can lead to the loss of self, and this is what the poet fears most. In ‘Barren Woman’, Sylvia Plath is perhaps indirectly applauding herself for being a lover to her husband and at the same time for being able to give birth to two children.

Childbirth is an important issue, which Sylvia Plath deals with in her famous dramatic poem, ‘Three Women’. The poem offers an insight into the poet’s attitude towards the experience of childbirth and how it contributes towards self-definition:

The work describes the experience of three women who are all pregnant ... The Wife moves from pregnancy through labour to motherhood; the Girl renounces the illegitimate daughter she has borne to return to her university life, while the Secretary's miscarriage results in a retreat into the routine of daily living as a compensation for the lack of maternal fulfilment.²⁹

As a dramatic poem, 'Three Women' presents an analysis and an understanding of the poet's sense of fulfilment as a wife because she is maternally creative. The wife goes through pregnancy; labour pains and childbirth, which is a culmination of her complete self as a fertile woman. The wife no doubt stands for Sylvia Plath whose wifely status permits her to enjoy respect in the society unlike the girl who illegitimately carries a child. The whole process of motherhood is satisfying, but in order to experience it she also has to undergo physical pain. This is equated with a journey through a "dark tunnel" (CP, p.176-187). She should have to "endure something akin to physical death to give birth to the child which will be a further proof of her identity."³⁰ The process of self-definition is not easy. Symbolically, the pain that accompanies childbirth stands for the pain and sacrifice the poet has to experience before achieving the chance to carve her identity. Pregnancy gives the wife a feeling of fullness and peace. There is a feeling of pride, and the wife imagines nature regarding her with interest:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and stars

Regarding me with attention
The moon's concern is more personal
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so
She is simply astonished at fertility. (CP, p.176-187)

This sense of complacency and pride gives way to pain. For childbirth is not an easy path to tread. Although it is a "miracle" concerned with the birth of a new being, yet it is also a compulsory passage of physical pain:

There is no miracle more cruel than this.
I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.
Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,
The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.
I am the center of an atrocity.
What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?
(CP,pp.176-187)

Childbirth is an experience, which seems to be a difficult imposition. It saps out one's strength and energy before the end-result is accomplished. This is also symbolic of Sylvia Plath's painful journey while moving towards the goal of achieving an ideal self. Since she is seeking to give birth to a new self, she has to undergo the pain that accompanies a new birth in order to be able to witness a "miracle". That "miracle" would definitely be the birth of the new self of the poet. The ability to procreate therefore is a final proof of one's identity. And this is true of Sylvia Plath too, because she is able to define her fertility as a woman in giving birth to two children, who are in

turn capable of procreating. Her “experience becomes emblematic of the normal experience of marriage, childbirth, and motherhood...”.³¹

The plight of the Secretary in ‘Three Women’ is a miserable one. She stands in sharp contrast to the wife, for she keeps losing her baby and “she equates her condition with death and masculinity”.³² She says, “I loose life after life. The dark earth drinks them./I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses” (CP, pp.176-187). The Secretary’s loss is also a loss of identity. It is likened to the death of the self and the deprivation of being a complete woman because the power of giving birth is against her reach. Miscarriage becomes a disease which stalks her, destroys her and disallows her from becoming a woman, “This is a disease I carry home, this is a death./Again, this is a death ...” (CP, pp.176-187).

Angry and disappointed at her own sterility, the Secretary forces herself to return to her normal routine. She retraces her steps to normalcy and attempts to reassert her lost identity:

... I recover
From the long fall, and find myself in bed,
Safe on the mattress, hands braced, as for a fall.
I find myself again. I am no shadow
Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife
The city waits and aches. The little grasses
Crack through stone, and they are green with life.
(CP, pp.176-187)

Through her, Sylvia Plath tries to project her own sense of perseverance in the face of loss and pain. The Secretary resolves neither to cry over her loss nor to live a life of regret. There is a sign of hope in the last two lines of the above verse, which speaks about the start of a new life even in the midst of hardship. This is symbolically interpreted in the two lines, which speak of green grass sprouting to life even amidst the hardness of stones. There is also a ray of hope in her husband's love. He will understand her in spite of her childlessness. He will be a source of strength, and she says hopefully, "I can love my husband, who will understand./Who will love me through the blur of my identity/As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue" (CP,pp.176-187).

Sylvia Plath also projects an image of hope through the character of the Secretary. Although she is not destined to bear children, yet the love of her husband can sustain her. This clearly defines Sylvia Plath's expectations of a husband from whom she expects will accept her as she is, without questioning her faults.

The young girl who gives up her illegitimate child is not ready to take up the responsibility of motherhood, and says, "I wasn't ready" (CP, pp.176-187). The child that she carries is a burden and she is ready to discard it. The young girl "equates her child with danger for her freedom, for her seriousness".³³ Now that she is carrying the child within her, she can see no other way out of her problem. It is too late for her to change the circumstance. She has to accept it, but with regret:

I wasn't ready.
I had no reverence.
I thought I could deny the consequence –
But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face
Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready.
(CP, pp.176-187)

The young girl is relieved after giving up her child. She is free from the responsibilities of motherhood and is unattached to her child who is a threat to her independence. "It is so beautiful to have no attachments!" (CP, pp.176-187) is an expression of the girl's relief as she rids herself off responsibility. This feeling of relief, however, gives way to an uneasy sense of peacefulness. She realises that she is missing something, and the fact is that she misses her own child whom she has given up, "I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?/Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?" (CP, pp.176-187). The act of renouncing the child is also an act of deliberate self-

renunciation. She is missing something that could have been a foundation for exerting her self and status. Through the young girl, Sylvia Plath echoes her fear of this loss of selfhood, which is linked to motherhood. The wife occupies a pivotal role in the dramatic poem because the child she gives birth to is a testimony to her identity. The child is the result of the respectable union of marriage. Although the wife has had to tread the painful path of childbirth, yet she achieves a sense of fullness and satisfaction because she completes the task of giving birth, which can be considered as the finality of every woman. The “process of giving birth has reaffirmed her femaleness”,³⁴ and this is true of Sylvia Plath who defines her “femaleness” by giving birth to two children. It is a fulfilment she achieves; it is a means through which she transcribes herself as a woman and a mother.

Poems which deal with a sense of the diminished self bring into focus the fears that she might be reduced to, a being without an identity. Such poems revolve round the death of her father and around those events that speak of the dark and ugly side of womanhood. The sudden death of Otto Plath is a loss that is irreparable. Depressive feelings continue to torment the poet, making her weak and vulnerable. It is as if one pillar of her life has crumpled. The aspiration to grow up and emulate him is thwarted for she

loses her future with him. Otto Plath's death is a "trauma which this little girl could not accept and from which she was not able to recover in a lifetime. It represented for her a rejection by the man she loved. He had abandoned her, never to return, taking with him a cherished portion of her life and experience".³⁵ She feels jilted and this one incident reduces her to a being whose self is hurt. The dead father "might just as well be a lover jilting his beloved".³⁶ The poem 'Jilted' brings out the feelings of the poet marred by pain, sorrow and bitterness. Even the beauty of nature cannot console her for it instead reminds her of the bitterness of life because of the absence of a father who would have otherwise have been a source of strength for her:

My thoughts are crabbed and sallow,
My tears like vinegar,
Or the bitter blinking yellow
Of an acetic star

Tonight the caustic wind, love,
Gossips late and soon,
And I wear the wry-faced pucker of
The sour lemon moon. (CP, p.304)

Sylvia Plath likens herself to a young fruit tree whose roots have been pulled away from the soil because of her father's death. In the poem,

she compares herself to “an early summer plum” which “droops upon its wizened stem” (CP, p.304).

Speaking about the disadvantages of woman hood in ‘Strumpet Song’ and ‘Spinster’, Sylvia Plath is also voicing her fear of the self being underestimated. Being a woman in a man’s world is not an easy position to occupy. So the self is always under a constant threat of being undermined. In poems which deal with the marginalised aspect of a woman Sylvia Plath analyses the condition of their varied experiences. In ‘Spinster’ she talks about the bleakness of a spinster’s life. She is “scrupulously austere” (CP, pp.49-50) with herself and is confined within borders of loneliness which cannot be mowed down:

And round her she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, fist, threat
Or love, either. (CP, pp.49-50)

The spinster seems to ward off all advances, which try to come close to her. She is “scared of her own emotions”³⁷ and “withdraws from the world of nature and man altogether”.³⁸ The situation of a spinster is an abnormal one for she imprisons her emotions inside her and does not express them openly. Her life as a woman is incomplete because she selfishly keeps her love to

herself without sharing it with anyone. Perhaps Sylvia Plath fears that she might be reduced to the position of a woman whose life revolves only around herself. Directly opposed to the figure of the spinster is the pathetic image of the harlot in 'Strumpet Song'. She gives herself to men who are willing to pay for her services. In doing so, she is also surrendering the self, and giving up her honour, for "... every man,/Red, pale or dark,/veers to her slouch" (CP, pp.33-34). The "lowered estate of the female is seen in "Strumpet Song", in which Plath positions the self as whore ...'³⁹ The eroded self is thus clearly exemplified in the character of the harlot.

'Strumpet Song' and 'Spinster' pose two opposing characteristics, that of strictness and austerity in the portrayal of the spinster, and laxity of moral character in the portrayal of the Strumpet. In 'Spinster', Sylvia Plath fears a total abnegation of the self. 'Widow' is another poem, which presents another aspect of womanhood denied of freedom and a loving and fulfilling relationship. Loneliness, lifelessness and hopelessness define a widow. The word itself has many connotations in the poem. It is a word replete with lonely despair and likened to a passage which leads nowhere. Even the presence of the hopeful beauty of nature cannot cover up the lonely suffering of a widow:

Widow. The word consumes itself ...
Widow. The dead syllable with its shadow
Of an echo, exposes the panel in the wall.
Behind which the secret passages lies – stale air,
Fusty remembrances, the coiled-spring stair
That opens at the top onto nothing at all. (CP, pp.164-165)

There is no reprieve from loneliness and the condition of a widow is indeed depressing. Sylvia Plath's study of the three aspects of womanhood, of a spinster, a whore and a widow bring to light the challenges that face a woman. Love and respect is out of reach for them and self-respect is a far cry for they are caught in a quicksand, which sucks up their identity.

It would not be wrong to say that Sylvia Plath is holding a dialogue with herself. She is probing the intricacies of womanhood, and trying to comprehend its divergent aspects. Her poems about women also offer an insight into her understanding and response to the issues of womanhood. She cannot detach herself from them and her poems are a reflection of how she puts herself in their place and experiences a similar kind of frustration. She clearly understands the constrictions and the limitations of a woman who lives in a society, which does permit her to be what she wants. An explicit translation of a woman as mother, wife, spinster and widow are offered in her poems. The poems also present Sylvia Plath's sense of satisfaction at being a mother in the character of the wife in 'Three

Women'. She expresses her fear of being underestimated as a woman in her poems 'Spinster', 'Strumpet Song' and 'Widow'. 'The Applicant' also echoes very strongly the diminished sense of self of a woman who is treated as a commodity for the benefit of men. It "brings out the risks faced by true selfhood."⁴⁰ The woman is stripped of her individuality, she is reduced to a sort of a machine with a guarantee card attached to her stating the things she can perform:

... willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed ...
A living doll, everywhere you look
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. (CP, p.221-222)

The woman is seen as "a desexed object, "it" – a commodity for sale in a depersonalized and dehumanized society".⁴¹ Nothing is mentioned about the inner qualities of the woman. Only her performing ability is dwelt upon, reducing her to a mere "it" or an object specifically meant for doing certain things; "self-will or volition is denied to her".⁴² The value and worth of a woman is not considered. Perhaps Sylvia Plath is mocking herself and other womenfolk who allow themselves to be trampled upon by men.

Looking at 'The Applicant' from another perspective, it is also possible to assume that the sarcastic bitterness of the lines also reflect the poet's anger at men who treat women as articles rather than as human beings. Sylvia Plath ardently wants to fight back against the biased treatment meted out to women who submit themselves to the power of men. In a subtle way, the poem is a mocking verse directed at male chauvinism. It is also a call to her self to rise up and strive for an identity of her own, free from the overshadowing personality of her male counterpart.

Sylvia Plath is not a feminist in the categorical sense of the term. But "Plath's range in her study of women is truly comprehensive and touches upon every aspect of feminine emotion ... The mood moves from joyful exhilaration to anger and despair, depending upon the occasion described."⁴³ Her poems about women only echo her desire to emerge as one who puts her sole trust upon her own capability. Thus Sylvia Plath is able to universalise the characteristics of womanhood in her poems, which portray her sensitivity and concern to issues pertaining to this important aspect of life.

With a view to creating a new image of the self, Sylvia Plath speaks about unloosening herself from the shackles of male domination. In

Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note ...

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose. (CP, pp.242-244)

The phrase "I shall unloose" is a refrain, which attests to the resolution of the speaker to emerge from the veil that has hidden her for so long. The veil needs to be torn apart so that her independence is not jeopardised. The speaker is determined to break loose from her confinement, and through the poem she declares her freedom.

'Purdah' is a frank reassertion of Sylvia Plath to emerge as a woman with a self of her own. Perhaps it also refers to her resolve to set herself free from the overshadowing personality of her husband whose work as a poet might have overshadowed her own. It is also an assertion that she is no longer willing to play the role of a submissive wife. Written in 1962, a few months before her suicide and after her separation from her husband, the poem is Sylvia Plath's declaration of her own independence. In one of her letters to her mother she says, "living apart from Ted is wonderful. I am no longer his shadow."⁴⁵ This is also an echo of what she says in 'Purdah'. It brings out the poet's resolve to carve a self, which is unique.

'Purdah' can also be considered as a final statement of freedom directed against the limitations of women as portrayed in poems like 'Spinster', 'Strumpet's Song', 'Widow' and 'The Applicant'.

Sylvia Plath's life undergoes a tremendous change after her husband betrays her. From being a loving mother and wife, she becomes a wronged victim who lashes out against her oppressor in viciousness and rage. At this particular stage of her life, her poetry also witnesses a certain violence, which is hitherto absent. Her poems speak about the frustrations and she mocks herself for being submissive. She is filled with self-hate:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak (CP, pp.227-230)

Overburdened by the task of looking after her children singlehandedly, she is confronted with one of the toughest challenges of her life. The poet is disgusted with the kind of life that she is now leading, a life of no respite:

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken.
Water, water make me retch. (CP, pp.231-232)

In a self-mocking tone she likens herself to a puppet-wife whose last trace of self-respect is erased when her husband leaves her for another woman. She remarks, thus, "The little toy wife –/Erased, sigh, sigh" (CP, pp.232-

233). Poetry, thus, provides Sylvia Plath with an opportunity to express her extreme emotions. The honest way in which she portrays her emotions of frustration and anger reveals the manner in which she transcribes her bitter experiences into art. The tone of Sylvia Plath's poems, therefore, is never consistent. It alternates between fear and anger, doubt and confidence, hopelessness and strength. In the face of such conflicts, she chooses suicide and dares to step beyond, to attain the highest degree of aesthetic perfection.

Unlike other critics who are of the unanimous view that Sylvia Plath willingly transcends life through death, A. Alvarez believes that her suicide is a "mistake".⁴⁶ It is an act which is not deliberate, it is a cry for recognition, a cry for help. This opinion of Alvarez is strongly based on the fact that Sylvia Plath "had left a note saying "Please call Dr. ___" ... But it was too late".⁴⁷ He further remarks that it is a "risk" that she undertakes. Out of this "mistake" Sylvia Plath has become "a myth" and "a sacrificial victim, offering herself up for the sake of her art".⁴⁸ Taking another view into consideration, it would not be wrong to remark that Sylvia Plath's suicide does not come as a shock to us because whilst her poems speak about her disturbed emotions, they also reflect upon the choices that she ultimately makes in life. And in the case of Sylvia Plath, suicide is given a wider connotation for it provides her with an opportunity to step beyond and

be ahead of the rest. It is a challenge that she undertakes; a final path that she treads.

The woman is perfected –
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment, (CP, pp.272-273)

are lines from the poem 'Edge' which Edward Butscher calls "an extended suicide note".⁴⁹ There is clear evidence of Sylvia Plath's anticipation of her own death which will be achieved with perfection. This is true about her because the above lines are also a repetition of "Dying is an art" from 'Lady Lazarus'. Suicide is the ultimate expression of her poetic voice. Through suicide she achieves the fullest means to express herself, and the readers are made aware of the impact of her poems through it.

NOTES

¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 112.

² Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 92.

³ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 152.

⁴ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989) 23.

⁵ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989) 23.

⁶ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 5.

⁷ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) 17.

⁸ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 126.

⁹ Nancy Hunter Steneir, A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper Magazine Press, 1973) 43.

¹⁰ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (University of Michigan Press, 1983) 84.

¹¹ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1989) 212.

¹² Edward Butscher, Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973) 320.

¹³ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 223.

¹⁴ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1989) 15.

¹⁵ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1989) 163.

¹⁶ Gary Lane (ed.), Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979) 159.

- ¹⁷ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 40.
- ¹⁸ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 40.
- ¹⁹ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 13.
- ²⁰ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 45.
- ²¹ Aurelia Schober Plath (ed.), Letters Home (London: Harper and Row, 1975) 132.
- ²² P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 182.
- ²³ Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1984) 244.
- ²⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Biography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) 195.
- ²⁵ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) 64.
- ²⁶ Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 72.
- ²⁷ Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 72.
- ²⁸ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Woman and the Work (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1977) 172.
- ²⁹ Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 52-53.
- ³⁰ Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 53.
- ³¹ Pamela J. Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 74.
- ³² Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 110.
- ³³ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 110.
- ³⁴ Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 173.

- ³⁵ Lynne, Salop, Suisong (New York: Vantage Press, 1978) 11.
- ³⁶ Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 128.
- ³⁷ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 63.
- ³⁸ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 63.
- ³⁹ Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 135.
- ⁴⁰ Irvin Ehrenpreis, Poetries of America (University Press of Virginia, 1989) 247.
- ⁴¹ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 185.
- ⁴² P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 186.
- ⁴³ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 161.
- ⁴⁴ Leonardo Sanazaro, "The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, A Reconsideration", Centennial Review Vol.XXVII Issue No.I, 1983, 65.
- ⁴⁵ Aurelia Schober Plath ed. Letters Home (London: Harper and Row, 1975) 479.
- ⁴⁶ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 40.
- ⁴⁷ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 38.
- ⁴⁸ A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 40.
- ⁴⁹ Edward Butscher, Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973) 360.

CHAPTER III

**CHILDREN AS FULFILLING IMAGES OF
CREATIVITY
IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS**

Sylvia Plath's poems about children are comparatively few, and have been written only after the birth of her two children, about four years before her suicide. Her interest in the subject of children and her awareness of childbirth as a definition of her identity begins to surface only in the later part of her life. When she becomes aware of it, the appreciation that she has for her children is so tremendous that she rejoices in motherhood. At the same time, however, she is apprehensive of the threats that await the lives of her children once they become adults. Not much has been written by Sylvia Plath about her children, but the few poems that have been written define her as a mother whose focus is centred wholly upon them. A re-examination of her poems about children would:

lead to a better understanding of why she was able to produce such powerful poetry as a theme more likely to inspire sentimental verse and perhaps explain some of the fascination her work has as a forerunner of the contemporary female poet successfully uniting self and poetry.¹

In the poems written about her own children there are a commingling of the personal and the poetic which leads to a better appreciation of her attitude

towards life itself. The uncanny element of the personal, therefore, reflects each rise and fall of her poetic temperament whilst portraying a new dimension of Sylvia Plath as a poet-mother. The manner in which she talks about childbirth and the joy of motherhood in her poems is intense and vivid because of the fact that she is a woman who is able to experience the different phases of a woman's life first hand. Through the medium of poetry, she uses children as her subjects to identify herself as a woman who is an embodiment of creativity for she is able to prove her fertility through childbirth.

Children form a basic theme of her poetry because they represent an idyllic world, which stands in sharp contrast to that of adults; they project a yearning of the poet to retreat into their world of innocence; and they also bring out her childlike nature. Sylvia Plath's poems about her own children are filled with a special kind of warmth and affection that can only exist between mother and child, thus, creating "a symbiotic relationship".² The overwhelming love that she has for her children is evident in one of her biographies where Edward Butscher quotes her, " 'I want a lot – as many as possible. God! won't they be marvellous giants in the earth!' "³ True enough her aspirations came true when she gave birth to a daughter, Frieda Rebecca, and a son, Nicholas.

she expresses her longing to fill the life of her children with happiness, a world free from hardship, a world which would:

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical. (CP, p.265)

The poet desires to impart to her children qualities fit for noble living, and this is suggested in the words “grand” and “classical”. ‘Morning Song’ also focuses upon the child who demands her attention and keeps her busy. One cry of the child is enough to set her on her feet. The “child who she effortlessly nurtured in her womb now requires her constant vigilance”.⁵ The quick attention that she provides to her crying daughter is represented in the lines: ¹

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square
Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowel rise like balloons. (CP, pp.156-157)

It is a typically domestic picture of a busy mother tending to her child. The poem, thus, “recreates joyous mothering occasioned by the infant who wakes during the night.”⁶

There is an element of sentimentality in Sylvia Plath’s poetry concerning children. Such poems express her tenderest emotions. They exist

as an oasis in a body of poetry which is otherwise replete with conflicting views. 'Balloons', a light verse about a child's toy communicates itself to the reader in a relaxed mood. The balloons are "guileless and clear" (CP, pp.271-272) like the purity of a young child. The appearance of the balloons arrests the poet's attention who watches their movement interestingly. The balloons hold a symbolic significance capable of giving joy and delight to the hearts of those who are sensitive to their simple beauty. At the same time it is an infantile projection of the poet who derives joy in watching the balloons. It seems as if the inanimate object possesses a hidden ability to make her happy, and the presence of innocent happiness is strongly felt. The balloons are like "... travelling/Globes of thin air, red, green/Delighting/The heart..." (CP, pp.271-272). The poet also describes how her son sits on the balloons like a "fat jug" (CP, pp.271-272) making it "squeak like a cat" (CP, pp.271-272). Possessing sentimental qualities, simple and childish though it may be, the poem is a poem for "children, in which a sense of pure joy is experienced by the poet as she revels in describing the balloons. The poem also symbolises the lot of the innocent and the meek."⁷ The innocence and simplicity of childhood is clearly projected in the poem, which also reveals another side of Sylvia Plath. She is one who appreciates childhood simplicities, deriving joy even from an insignificant object like a toy.

Sentimental elements can also be detected in poems like 'Candles', 'Nick and the Candlestick' and 'By Candlelight', which deal with the poet nursing her son. In 'Candles' the candlelights create a romantic image against a dark background. The melting wax dripping from the candles are like "...haloes,/grown milky, almost clear, like the bodies of saints" (CP, pp.148-149). 'By Candlelight' describes the unity of mother and child achieved through the act of the mother nursing her child. Addressing the child in her arms as "small love" (CP, pp.236-237). She says:

...
I hold you on my arm.
It is very late.
The dull bells tongue the hour.
the mirror floats us at one candle power.
This is the fluid in which we meet each other, ...
(CP, pp.236-237)

The sentiments of the mother are convincingly portrayed in the poems, which also suggest the overwhelming quality of maternal love. At the same time the underlying air of pensiveness suggest the fears that she has for the security of her children.

It is ascertained that Sylvia Plath's love for her children is unquestionable. But her concern is more than often tinged with anxiety. Most of her poems addressed to her children "are all expressions of

tenderness and protectiveness for the child combined with personal feelings of despair and loneliness.”⁸ For instance in ‘You’re’ she lovingly describes her joy at being able to feel the growing baby inside her, but at the same time she is worried about her children’s future which might be hounded by trouble with no hope to offer them respite, like a “... dark/ceiling without a star” (CP, p.265). A strange kind of peacefulness that co-exists with anxiety also pervades the poem ‘By Candlelight’. Though the poet speaks of the oneness between mother and child, yet the opening lines of the poem presents a backdrop of “winter” and “night” (CP, pp.236-237) suggesting the ever-present threats that can disturb the serenity of the atmosphere. This self-enclosed reality exists together with the chilling reminder that it is not a place free from turmoil. While nursing her child whose eyes are “scarcely open” (CP, pp.148-149) the mother thinks about the difficulty of making her child understand the inevitable problems that will crop up like the “draughty ephemerids” (CP, pp.148-149) and the transitoriness of life. The child “becomes the threatened, vulnerable, weak self surrounded by dark outer forces that would overpower it in “Candles”, and the mother is a helpless witness”.⁹ The infant is now but a small helpless being whose ignorance of the world is symbolic of his half-closed eyes, “still in a birth drowse?” (CP, pp.148-149). The mother is worried about shielding her child from the

Sentimentality is, therefore, tinged with anxiety. Worry is a natural feeling because the mother foresees the frightening truth that her children would have to stand up on their own in a world of trials and tribulations.

Despite fears for her children's future, there prevails a sense of assurance in the lines:

I am reassured. I am reassured.
These are the clear bright colors of the nursery,
The talking ducks, the happy lambs.
I am simple again. I believe in miracles
I do not believe in those terrible children
Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their fingerless hands.
They are not mine they do not belong to me. (CP, pp.176-187)

Sylvia Plath wants to chase away the doubts and fears which disturb her thoughts. She wants to disown them and live only with the thought that the childlike happiness of the "nursery" (CP, pp.176-187) shall be ever present in her children's life. The soothing picture of a child's playpen is one that is symbolic of an atmosphere free from the harrowing problems an adult has to face. There is a glimmer of hope in the vision that she has of the child being able to grow and develop himself, expand his horizons and exploit his talents. Although the dream-like picture of a "nursery" the poet contrives for her children is far removed from reality, yet it provides her with an assurance of the happiness of her children. It is in fact symbolic of the

yearning that every parent has, that their children's life be free from problems and worries.

Fear for her children's future, which hangs in the poet's mind, is of course a natural feeling. But at the same time she wishes her children to grow as strong individuals who can overcome the odds in life. It is her belief that one should be allowed to be one's real self without the exertion of external influences. This is what she longs for her children. In 'Three Women', she subtly voices her disagreement to dictate her son on how he should lead his life. Instead it is spontaneity that she wants as it will help him unfold his traits naturally without anyone overseeing his life:

I do not will him to be exceptional.
It is the exception that interests the devil.
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill
Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother's heart
I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him,
And to marry where he wants and where he will. (CP, pp.176-187)

It is "her blessing for her child is that he be normal, not exceptional".¹¹ There is a clear echo of Sylvia Plath's unwillingness to rear her children in the way she was raised when she was a child. The above verse is also an indirect expression of her disagreement at her mother's overprotective attitude for she would try to "go on providing her children with life supports long after they have developed systems of their own".¹² Aurelia Plath's

ambitions for her daughter has destroyed Sylvia Plath's ability to take pride in and be happy with small achievements. This has resulted in dissatisfaction on her part, for she thinks that success is never realised until she occupies the highest rung in the ladder of success. Leading an independent life became a far cry for Sylvia Plath, hence, she always had to keep in mind her mother's aspirations on her behalf. Moreover, Aurelia Plath had been overprotective, wanting to keep her children away from the hard realities of life. As such, she "resented her mother's overpowering hold over her and now that she had become a mother she wanted to grant her child the right to an independent life without smothering it with overbearing motherly love".¹³ Sylvia Plath is acutely aware of the shortcomings of her mother. Her poems about her own children reflect this consciousness where she voices in a subtle way, how she tries her best not to follow her mother's manner to conduct her own children.

She is determined to allow her children to grow up in a normal atmosphere without pestering them about the importance of being "exceptional". No matter how much she wishes to protect her children, there will come a time when they will have to stand on their own without her acting as a wall of protection for them:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off? ...
How long can my hands
Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words
Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling? ... (CP, pp.176-187)

The above lines bring out her farsightedness as a mother who does not want her children to be dependent on her or on anyone without trusting their own selves. She is a parent who is loving, and at the same time practical in wanting to equip them with the strength to deal with the complexities of day to day life. Although Sylvia Plath might have expressed dissatisfaction over her mother's overprotective influence, yet she cannot deny her own children the same protection she had received from her own parent when she was little. The maternal feelings of love, warmth and care cannot be erased with a view to strengthen the child's independence. She wants her children to be aware of the hard realities of life, but at the same time, it is a truth the mother becomes aware of, that she cannot protect her children from worldly care. Sylvia Plath is strongly of being haunted by personal problems, which are difficult to handle. Therefore, "the mother cannot protect the child fully because of her own fears and inadequacies and also that the present of the child does not provide a sufficiently strong charm against the prevailing despair and menace of the mother's world".¹⁴ Although a child can arouse deepest instincts of love in the mother, yet the child cannot efface the fears

that torment her from time to time. The child is indeed proof of the mother's identity, but it cannot provide any source of support if the mother's sense of self is threatened by forces beyond her control.

The satisfaction that Sylvia Plath achieves from the ability to bear children is immense. In spite of experiencing intolerable discomfort during childbirth, she remarks, "My eyes are squeezed by this blackness/I see nothing" (CP, pp.176-187), she is filled with love for her newborn. She passes through a stage of unexplained emotions. One moment she suffers severe physical pain, the next moment she is drowned by a strong feeling of love for her child. She lovingly observes:

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear.
His lids are like the lilac flower.
And soft as a moth, his breath.
I shall not let go.
There is no guile or warp in him. May he keep so.
(CP, pp.176-187)

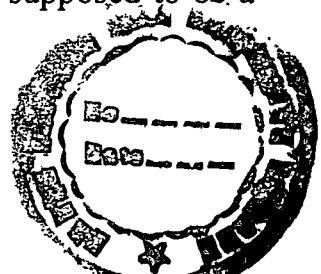
Now that she knows what it means to be a mother, she is able to plumb the depths of maternal love and articulate its significance. The love she has for her child is so overpowering that she vows never to let go of it:

...
Here is my son
His wide eye is that general, flat blue.
He is turning to me like a little, blind bright plant

One cry. It is the hook I hang on.
 And I am a river of milk.
 I am a warm hill. (CP, pp.176-187)

The pure innocence of the child arouses the mother's sense of protectiveness and she promises to do all she can to keep him safe. One cry of the child is enough to capture the mother's attention. He is like a "hook" to which his mother hangs on. She is the child's provider and source of strength. Childbirth for Sylvia Plath, therefore, is not merely biological, it is a new phase in her life, which involves a recognition of herself as the creator of new life which is also a definition of her identity. It also enables her to partake of the joys of motherhood. Motherly affection is supreme and priceless, acting as a cushion against all the hardships of a child's life. In her poems about her own children, she echoes her aspiration to be a source of support to her children. This in turn reflects upon an unconscious desire to be a perfect mother, which will define her as a woman who is creative and responsible.

An awareness of the inevitability of a sense of separateness between mother and child once the child grows up is a painful truth Sylvia Plath has to accept. Allusions to the poet's detachment from her own children; the fact that they are born into a world which cannot offer them hope are elements present in her poems about children. 'Morning Song' is supposed to be a



joyful address to her child who is a new being surrounded by “love” (CP, pp.156-157). But the “bald cry” (CP, pp.156-157) of the child suggests the emptiness of the world, into which the child is born. The coldness is further suggested in the line which talks of the child as a “... New statute./In a drafty museum” (CP, pp.156-157). There is an absence of warmth even among the onlookers. They stand round the child “blankly as walls”, (CP, pp.156-157) admiring “a new work of the mother’s art”.¹⁵ The arrival of the child is but another episode of decorating a “new statute” in a “museum” which is symbolic of the world as a place for exhibiting oneself. The mother realises that once a child is born, he must eventually be his “own independent self”¹⁶ managing his own life and depending upon his own capabilities. Further, the mother also realises that a sense of detachment will prevail once the child is born. The closeness between mother and child will be lessened and this is evident when she says, “I’m no more your mother” (CP, pp.156-157). This is an expression, which reflects the conflict within the poet’s mind. Even though maternal instincts are strong, yet she cannot ignore the fact that the distance between mother and child will prevail once he grows up and leads a life of his own.

While talking about her children, Sylvia Plath voices an unconscious longing to retreat into a perfect childhood world with a perfect family life.

She indulges in a kind of wishful thinking, which carries her to a world of make-belief, an ideal set up where she is able to savour the pleasures of a happy childhood. Thus, she undoubtedly achieves a peculiar kind of wish fulfilment when she talks about her children. By talking about them she substitutes the vacuum that has been left ever since the death of her father. In her own children and her husband, she seeks to experience a complete family life. A satisfactory family life is preconditioned first of all by mutual love between husband and wife, and the joy that is derived from their offspring. In his biography, Paul Alexander mentions an instance of a happy event in the Hughes's household, "Sylvia and Ted had taken Frieda into the living room to see their Christmas tree for the first time. How her little face had blossomed with delight as she gazed up at those sparkling ornaments – the silver birds, the tinsel!"¹⁷ The apparent happy family atmosphere is, however, harshly disrupted when the husband betrays his wife's trust with his unfaithfulness. In a way, the heartless behaviour of the husband also shatters the dream of a happy family life she had perhaps nurtured ever since her father died. Her desire to share the joy of parenthood with her husband is out of reach. Her own happy childhood had been thwarted by her father's death. So when she gives birth to her children, the prospect of a happy family life brightens her. Unfortunately, this dream evades her and

she is confronted with the cruel reality of marital separation, of being a single parent and depriving her children of perfect family life.

Sylvia Plath's childlike nature is explicitly revealed in 'Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats', a poem about a woman who kept many cats in her "ramshackle house" (CP, pp.53-54). It is an amusing tale of how the neighbours give the woman the name of "Cat-Lady Mason!" (CP, pp.53-54) because of her strange obsession with the animals. The woman is "rum and red-faced as a watermelon" (CP, pp.53-54). She welcomes no one to her home and her door is shut to everyone except cats, "... she's a spinster whose door shuts/on all but cats" (CP, pp.53-54). It is a fun-filled description about Ella Mason and her cats:

Once we children sneaked over to spy Miss Mason
Napping in her kitchen paved with saucers.
On antimacassars
Table-top, cupboard shelf, cats longed brazen,
One gruff-timbred purr rolling from furred throats
such stentorian cats! (CP, pp.53-54)

The poem is indeed different from the other children's poems, which are often tinged, with pessimistic fear. It highlights the childlike imagination of Sylvia Plath and her ability to weave an interesting tale for children. Such poems reflect the lighter side of the poet.

On a superficial level, 'Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats' presents an amusing tale of the spinster and her excessive love for cats. It also captures the imaginations children. Viewed from another perspective, however, the poem speaks of a woman who unconsciously suffers from extreme loneliness and tries to fight it by keeping a good number of cats. The poem highlights the extremities of loneliness and a loveless life also described in, 'Widow' and 'Spinster'. The spinster's life is enclosed by a "barricade" (CP, pp.49-50), which disallows any advances of love and warmth, while that of the widow is surrounded by "death" (CP, pp.164-165). The term "death" which is equated to a life devoid of love and hope deters her from living her life fully. A widow's life is a "great vacant estate" (CP, pp.164-165), which she has to endure on her own without being able to enjoy love and companionship. Sylvia Plath employs the situation of Ella Mason to project her fear of the self being diminished as the unusual case of the spinster and the widow. Their lives seem incomplete because they struggle each step of the way without the presence of mutual love. Childbirth, however, assures her that all is well providing her with an edge over those who are childless and barren. More than often she echoes her fear of sterility and also mockingly talks about it in 'Childless Woman' and 'Barren Woman' where she uses the word "empty" (CP, p.157) and refers to the

barren female “body” as “ivory” (CP, p.259) which is no doubt priceless, but unproductive.

Motherhood is a realisation, which brings home the reality of selfless love, a love that can be experienced and shared with one’s own kin. Although this dream of Sylvia Plath is unfulfilled because of the tragic separation she has to endure from her husband, yet she is still able to experience the love and attachment of her children. The mother-child relationship is an embodiment of a superior kind of love because nothing is demanded in return. The pure innocence of her children is what Sylvia Plath longs for because their tender universe is not narrowed down by the obligations of adults. No matter how much she wants to go back to the world of a child, she is not able to do so. It is as if the adult’s world is a point of no return. The “clownlike” (CP, p.141) happiness of a child is a remote possibility for an adult since there is no spontaneity left. The adult’s world is governed by innumerable rules, which have to be followed inspite of the fact that life is to be lived according to one’s own free will.

Sylvia Plath seeks to define the self in relation to her children in poems, which give completeness to her poetry. Without an understanding of these poems, it would be difficult to appreciate her as a poet and a woman. Children, therefore, are analogues of fulfilment since they motivate her to

write new poetry; explore new horizons that have never been done before. It can also be remarked that there is a new thrust in theme and subject matter, with her focus diverted to her own children in relation to her own life. Although she does not attempt to offer any definition of maternity, yet she strives to make an impact upon the readers about her sense of motherhood – its demands and the satisfaction that she gains from it. It is an exceptional relationship that exists between mother and child. Although the separation between them is inevitable, yet the closeness that is there will be one that she can cherish throughout her life. Her children are an important means through which she transcribes herself as a complete woman with an identity of her own. Giving birth to her children is the final act of achieving an identity as a woman. Through her poetical ability, she translates the joy of being a mother as well as the anxieties that she experiences because of love and concern for the welfare of her children. Deeply embedded in the heart of these poems, however, is that familiar sense of insecurity, regarding life in general and with regards to her children. Hence the double-edged nature of poems like ‘Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats’ which entertain and undercut at the same time. There is a haunting sense of poignancy that is never resolved even as Sylvia Plath enters once again into the world of the child.

NOTES

¹ Lois Rosen, "Sylvia Plath's Poetry About Children: A New Perspective", Modern Poetry Studies X, (1980): 99.

² Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (University of Illinois Press, 1979) 134.

³ Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 193.

⁴ Aurelia Schober Plath ed. Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 452.

⁵ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (University of Illinois Press, 1979) 133.

⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) 96.

⁷ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 201.

⁸ Eileen M. Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 67.

⁹ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (University of Illinois Press, 1979) 135.

¹⁰ Lois Rosen, "Sylvia Plath's Poetry About Children: A New Perspective", Modern Poetry Studies X, (1980): 110.

¹¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) 102.

¹² Linda W. Wagner, Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath (Boston, Massachusetts: (G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 178.

¹³ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 177.

¹⁴ Eileen M. Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 54.

¹⁵ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (University of Michigan Press, 1983) 228.

¹⁶ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (University of Michigan Press, 1983) 227.

¹⁷ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (Viking Penguin, 1991) 268.

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath has been able to devise a legacy of her own characterised by her frankness and her willingness to take up the ultimate challenge of death through her suicide. The choice of her subjects, which is closely related to her own life, captures the reader's attention in a way that no other poetry can. Sylvia Plath's "poetry is an attempt to synthesize life and art",¹ she is not detached from her own personal experiences when she writes her poems, even as she is concerned with the question of selfhood. In her poems she speaks sadly and bitterly about her father's death; she frankly deals with her feelings of disapproval with regard to her mother's over-protective nature; she unleashes her anger at her husband who leaves her for another woman and lovingly writes about her children who are the most important beings of her life. At the same time she is deeply etched with an emphatic sense of self. A re-examination of her poems, thus, gives a clear picture of how she transmutes her life into poetry.

She has often "been accused of blowing up the tiniest personal experience into an event of universal significance."² But she has the ability to imbue personal events with uncharacteristic gravity, thus transposing it to the realm of the universal. She utilizes all adversities and wins the

sympathy of the readers, forcing them to put themselves in her place. One admires Sylvia Plath's ability to transform intensive personal feelings into poetry. Moreover, in her poems about her father's death and her husband's betrayal, she seems to portray herself as a weakling overwhelmed by self-pity, and "such a self is said to be weak, submissive, indulging in regressive fantasies".³ But it should be understood that she is a sensitive being who though traumatised by these experiences actually involves herself in a psychological analysis of her own self, trying to figure out her position in the world in relation to the various experiences she has had to undergo. At times she is a wounded speaker who is filled with a strong sense of self-hatred and at other times she is determined to fight the odds. "I think I am going up, I think I may rise—" (CP, pp.231-232); "And I/Am the arrow", (CP, pp.239-240) are expressions- of the poet's yearning to rise against all odds inspite of the tremendous strain of a broken marriage and being abandoned singlehandedly to rear her own children. Therefore, Sylvia Plath's poems plot the rise and fall of her mood governed mainly by the events of her life. Her sense of loss and pain is intense, and it is for this reason that she is able to write about them so explicitly in her poems.

Finer sensibilities, inner thoughts and private emotions can best be expressed through poetry. The superiority of her poetry lies in the fact that

human emotions can be laid bare with all honesty, without any holding back. Thoughts, which would have otherwise been concealed, are brought out in the open. The successful impact of her poems lies in her honesty. She possesses a voice, which rings with the truth. In her Introduction to her work Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath, Linda W. Wagner remarks, “the hallmark of the important modern poet is the distinctiveness of voice, the poet’s identity surging forth in all phases of the poem’s expression”.⁴ Sylvia Plath has a poetic voice, one that is hers alone, which reveal a deep sense of self. Moreover she is a “modern poet” and a woman who steps beyond the confinements of domesticity. She dares to venture into the world and build up a myth of her own creation. Finally, she boldly affirms her identity through her death actually challenging and confronting it. The death that claims her so tragically is also the means, which raises her not only to the stature of an artist, but also converts her to a mythic figure. Her death has “allowed her to be appreciated and even venerated as a wonderfully sensitive soul who transcended life by death and art; a myth; a prophetess.”⁵

Poetry does not involve mere writing alone. It is an art, which calls for an involvement of the heart and mind. It should be inspired and motivated by powerful thoughts, which can affect the reader in a way that is not done by any other forms of writing. There is a two-fold involvement of

thought and language in poetry; the two complement each other and lend strength to a poem. Sylvia Plath's poetry is a reflection of how she artfully employs her emotions and how she uses language to discipline her emotions in order to wield power over the reader. In his *Preface to Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, Paul Alexander writes, "at once, I was struck by each poem's arresting emotion by the sheer power of its language."⁶ Her poetry combines effectively, emotion and language, emotions springing from the poet's innermost being, and language, which is the result of the poet's dexterity to choose the right words suited for the situation.

Sylvia Plath's poems, however, has often been mistaken as "one long confession and chronicle of a nervous breakdown."⁷ This can indeed happen if one reads her negatively. It must be remembered that she is a poet who unfolds herself in her poems so that the ultimate act of transcribing herself culminates with her suicide. Her "poetry is like the heart pumping her life's blood"⁸ and her suicide can definitely be considered as the final poem of her life, one that has not been written in words, but one that has been enacted. Suicide defines her life as an artist who aesthetically translates herself in death. It is not the end result of despair, it is an aesthetic mode, which she resorts to in order to achieve a proper definition of her self. Although, Sylvia Plath does not live to talk about the immense fame that comes her

way through suicide, yet she has been able to carve an identity of her own as a poet who has created her own personal myth. She is like a mystery, who will continue to arouse the curiosity of readers, to re-examine her work despite the fact that there have been innumerable critical writings that have been done on her.

NOTES

¹ P. Rajani, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000) 3.

² Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 13.

³ Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 6.

⁴ Linda W. Wagner (ed.), Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Company, 1984) 1.

⁵ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern Poetry by Women: A New Tradition (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 86.

⁶ Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (New York: Viking Penguin 1991) 1.

⁷ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983) 7.

⁸ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983) 7.

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