

The Various Dimensions of Love in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Shruti Sharma

Lecturer, Department Of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, Jagadhri -1350001 Distt. Yamuna Nagar (Haryana) -India

The early poetry of this century explored decadence and breakdown of values in both culture and individuals. At least this could be argued as a central driving force in the Eliot of 'The Waste Land and Other Poems', of Pound's cantos and in parts of Yeats. But in these poets there remains this assumption that they were writing not just of their own sense of a crisis of values, but of that shared by a whole society, and they wrote from the position of a strong and authoritative sense of their own purposeful identity.

More recently, particularly among the American poets, like John Berryman and Robert Lowell, there has emerged a poetry which seems less concerned to generalize its explorations and expressions of poet's own inner state. It is a kind of poetry which M.L. Rosenthal has called 'Confessional'. Here I would like to illustrate the word 'Confessional'. According to Oxford English Dictionary 'Confession' would mean "acknowledging that one has done wrong, make known one's sin to a priest." (Hornby 27). It is obviously a religious definition. But M.L. Rosenthal has defined confessional in terms of literature. When he wrote 'The New Poets : American and British Poetry since World War II,' he used the term confessional to describe the intimate and immediately personal work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton. He further writes that confessional poem brought "private humiliation, sufferings and psychological problems into the poems usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself." (Rosenthal 52)

In this type of poetry the private life of the poet especially under stress, becomes a major theme. Sexual candor, frankness about family life and confessions of private humiliations of varying kinds are common expression, this poetry includes. Sylvia Plath's poetry is of this kind and it makes great demands upon reader.

However, confessional poetry did not begin with Robert Lowell. There have always been confessional artists, some of whom have been poets. We have an example of confessional poetry in the work of Wordsworth. 'The Prelude' is autobiographical. In American poetry, we have Walt Whitman who imparted to his poetry a fresh, personal note. Further, there are different aspects of confessional poetry. Owing expressions to hidden thoughts and feelings which would normally not find expression in the social milieu is one aspect of confessional poetry. Secondly, confessional poetry is more introvert than extrovert. Mental abnormality is one of the common features of all confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Ginsberg and other poets. 'The Bell Jar' is a compelling and moving fictionalized account of Sylvia Plath's breakdown and attempted suicide at the age of nineteen. Following in love persons can speak more freely because they have no public fear or social conventions. Therefore, they can confess more freely without any inhibition. Ordinary men live under all kinds of restraints or fears of public morality. So, many a times feelings are to be repressed. A time comes when it becomes impossible to conceal these feelings and this type of situation results in confessional poetry.

In the case of Sylvia Plath, confession is personal. She is writing about things private and personal. The emotional landscape of the poem is one of a deep personal crisis. So, there are two streams of confessional poetry: the personal and the social. Sylvia Plath is a true confessional poet in the sense that her poetry is the manifestation of all the basic themes of confessional mode. Her poetry includes mental abnormality, father complex, frustration and failure in love, carrier and marriage, private humiliations, sexual frustrations, death and suicide which are the obsessions with the confessional poets. Father complex is very important. In almost all her later poems her deceased father is referred to as a presence which haunts her continuously. Her father's death played a havoc with her life and she never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. Memories of her dead father

aroused ambivalent feelings of love and hate. 'Daddy' is a poem in which the father figure dominates the daughter. The poem is spoken by a girl with Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her love changes into an almost uncontrollable rage at his betrayal and she tries to destroy his memory. Towards the end of the poem she even calls her daddy a 'bastard'. 'Daddy' is a wild dramatic monologue of abuse, screamed at a lost love:

You do not do, you do not do

Any more, black shoe

In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white

Barely daring to breathe or Achoo." (Plath 222)

Her father died of a long illness, but there is no pity for his lost life. Instead he is not the dead one, he is the murderer:

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew. (Plath 223)

Allied to this father complex, is a sense of failure in love, in marriage and career. The rift between husband and wife, is described in 'Event', where long enduring faults in a marriage have dismembered it. Further writing about the cruelty of, Ted Hughes, her husband, who tortured her emotionally by having love relationship with other women, she calls him a 'Vampire' in 'Daddy':

The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year

Seven years, if you want to know. (Plath 224)

The sense of failure leads to an alienation of the poet from the rest of the world. The rift between the poet and the world seems to be such as cannot be bridged by any human being, be it a father, husband or child. The loneliness of the individual is highlighted in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. In 'Suicide of Egg Rock' the man is fed up with life. In 'Tulips' the protagonist is laid up in a hospital bed. The tulips are a bloody intrusion of life into a white, deathly, quite realm where the poet has found peace. She longs to be left alone in peace. The desire to be left alone is so intense that objects like flowers and photographs become unwelcome. As she writes:

My husband and child smiling out of family photo Their

smiles catch onto my skin little smiling hook. (Plath 160)

The subject of death and suicide seems to be an obsession with the confessional poets. She affirms her affinity with death in 'Lady Lazarus':

Dying

Is an art, like everything else

I do it exceptionally well. (Plath 245)

As Anne Sexton has also written "often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides... We talked death with burned up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb sucking on it." (Rosenthal 134)

Her theme is the terrifying vulnerability of the hyper sensitive women in a terrifying hostile world from which the only escape is death. Sylvia Plath longs for death. In 'Poppies in July' she imagines a quiet death with the help of opium. Sylvia Plath had twice attempted suicide. Firstly, she tried to commit suicide just after her father's death, when she was hardly ten year old. The second attempt was done when she was of twenty years and had a nervous breakdown. She took a large number of pills and hid herself in a cellar beneath the house, where she was luckily found alive after four days. Her third attempt would end her a few months after the composition of 'Lady Lazarus': These lines have been taken as her personal suicidal credo her manifests of destruction:

I have done it again

One year in every ten I manage it. (Plath 244)

The subconscious desire behind this death wish is to return to prenatal state.

Again in the poem, 'Suicide of Egg Rock', Plath depicts a man who is going to commit suicide because he feels himself totally alone in this commercialized and materialistic world. In 'Death and Co.' Plath portrays two aspects of death. First death comes in the form of a horrible vulture for whom the poet is 'red meat'. The second image of death is that of a lover who wants to be loved. And towards the end of the poem, somebody commits suicide:

The dead bell

The dead bell

Somebody's done for. (Plath 255)

The subjects of confessional poets are far away from beauty. What inspired them most is the unpoetic and the ugly and the places which evoke their poetic vision are as ordinary as a hospital, an operation theatre, a baggage room or mental asylum. The setting of Plath's 'Two views of a Cadaver Room' is in a dissecting room. The lover (doctor) invites his beloved in the dissecting room where they are working on four cadavers and he hands her beloved "a cut out heart" as a love token. There are also jars in which the dead bodies of unborn babies symbolizing the dead civilization are kept. She writes:

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow

He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.
(Plath 114)

The confessional poets do not hesitate to make their personal sexual experiences public and universal. Sylvia Plath has also depicted her sexual intercourse with her husband. In 'Fever 103' she feels ravished by her male partner.

Darling, all night

I have been flickering, off, on, off, on. (Plath 231)

But what is more remarkable about Plath's poetry is the objectivity with which she has handled her personal material and provides it a general meaning. In a confessional mode, she says:

I think the personal experience should not be a kind of shut box and mirror looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima... so on.
(Peter 169)

She thinks herself the exploited Jew and her father the exploiting German. In the like manner, the woman protagonist in 'Lady Lazarus' becomes a symbol of all women who have to die hundred times in this male dominated society.

Sylvia Plath is usually assigned the epithet of a confessional poet and this view is facilitated by an autobiographical element in her work. Her poetry has been called confessional and personal and has often been placed in the school of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. Nevertheless, she remains a poet of her own kind, different from both of them in content and manner. In Lowell's poetry almost all the information are disclosed whereas Plath's vital information about the tragedy of her life is missing and she does not disclose in her poems all the information. Her poetry is a sensitive record of negative aspects of life. Life's

happier moments are conspicuously absent in her works. She integrates private and personal world and thereby raises the personal experience to universal level. No doubt, she has written about one aspect, that is the negative aspect. But for her, that is the reality of life, and more intense than the happier moments which are very rare in one's life. Simultaneously, she deals with human relationships which interest all human beings- relations between mother and child, husband and wife, father and daughter etc. All these concerns of her, so convincingly in her poems, make her an artist who is talking of human tragedy that we all mourn.

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