

Feminine Angst in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract- Women have been struggling to liberate themselves from subjugation by their male counterparts from times immemorial. The various factors responsible for their suppression were misogyny, romantic glorification and patriarchy. Illogically romanticized, they are not permitted to play a significant role as independent, self-assured individuals and this was compounded by other unfair social, political and biological factors. As a result, they did not enjoy a contented position in society. History inclined to link man to wisdom and biological dominance and women were associated with confined concerns of household chores and childcare.

This provoked some prominent women in America and England to launch a movement called feminism demanding equivalent rights and equal status for themselves. They also resisted the menacing power of the literature that portrayed a woman as a subordinate to patriarchy. To end this suppression and exploitation they set out to create a literature of their own. As such, most of the feminists got entangled in a twofold approach. On the one hand, they wanted an authentic voice to assert its sovereignty, and, on the other, to make their mark felt along gender defined lines, so as to mend laws governing their social, psychological and biological behaviour. Still, some of the women writers felt the brunt of male dominance and oppression so enormously that they developed the feelings of resentment and vengeance against them. In this, Sylvia Plath, a vigorous and highly competitive and self-centered woman of the fifties was no exception. The aim of the paper is to highlight that Sylvia Plath who at first relished the domination of her male counterparts, at the later stage of her life became a sworn enemy of male dominance and aggressively challenged the patriarchy. Her feminine angst transformed her from a lamb to a lioness hunting for men's head.

Key Words- patriarchy, feminism, gender discrimination, male dominance

At quite a tender age Sylvia Plath fell into the trap of gender discrimination compelling her to submit herself to its repressive measures and harsh regulations. As a reaction to it she made use of her creative faculty to come out of its trappings. In this regard she was equally influenced by her mother. As a kid and later as a grown up girl, she had developed a deep attachment to her. In those bitter and hard times, the rapport affected her outlook profoundly. Her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, wanted to inculcate a sense of 'womanliness' in her, she wanted Sylvia to behave like a gentle and delicate English girl relishing the role given to her by the patriarchal system of English society. However, Sylvia Plath took the system as too authoritarian and autocratic. She felt an inner urge and rage to write against the social and political pulls and pressures that snatched a woman's freedom and acted as an obstacle in her growth as a poet. Trapped completely in this vicious process Sylvia Plath failed to live the dream of normal family life. She participated in social life by marrying to English poet Ted Hughes, and gave birth to children and also remained committed to writing. In this she respected her mother's outlook but unwittingly got trapped in a knot from which she could never escape in spite of her best efforts. She lost her fervor and

increasingly realized the hollowness of being a mere agent of procreation as if she had been eternally married to nothingness. In one of her diary entries she writes:

I am part of the world's ash. Something from which nothing can grow, nothing can flower or come to fruit... I have worked, bled, and knocked my head on walls to break through to where I am now.... I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me. And what do I meet in myself? Ash, Ash and more Ash. (Plath, Journals 311-

In Sylvia Plath, there was not the apparent and open aggression towards the so called superior sex until she felt that she had been wronged by them. More often than not, her endeavor was to please the opposite sex, be it her father, husband or the succession of men she met or dated in her life. Though the elements of non-conformity and rage were still hidden somewhere in the deepest recesses of her mind. Anywhere a part in her was still longing for her autonomous self, a part which got censored by her mother's traditional upbringing. But the time of her husband Ted Hughes's adultery and the subsequent period of separation only helped in the eruption of these emotions and she burst into rage against the men-folk. Ted Hughes'

desertion freed Sylvia Plath to write, and write voluminously, as she had been never to do before. It also freed her as never before to express all the evil, the impiety, inside her self. Her wrath, greed, vindictiveness, pettiness, cruelty, jealousy, and dejection all came pouring forth. Separated from Ted Hughes, she was also separated from her mother and all that her mother and husband stood for; the standard of so called normalcy that she had never really fit but that she had so desperately struggled to achieve. She took the shape of a red-bodied lioness with wings of glass in "Ariel" for whom, it was the time to break the fetters and come out of the chains which had been imposed by male dominance. Nevertheless, this myth of lioness represents Plath's best effort to ground her sense of self and womanhood on something other than the love and approval of her mother, her society, or a man. Sylvia's lioness, her vision of herself as independent woman, springs directly from the lions of the "little toy wife" (233) she felt she had become. In poem after poem written immediately before her death, she frowns at the old image of herself, and with it the institutions, she believes cause angst to women. In her poem 'A Birthday Present', she declares:

*Is this the one I am to appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one with black-eye pits
and a scar?
Measuring the flour, cutting of the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.
Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh! (Plath, Collected Poems
206)*

In 'The Detective', Plath is "a case of vaporization", a woman pressed into a wall, wiped out, "The mouth first...The breasts next." (209). In 'Stings' she has "eaten dust" for years, allowing her "strangeness" to "evaporate", behaving like a "drudge" as she "dried plates with [her] dense hair" (214). In 'Amnesiac' she is the little toy wife - / erased" with barely a sigh. (233). In 'Purdah' she is a "Jade - / stone of the side" of an agonized "green Adam," a veiled woman and a "small jeweled / Doll"! (242,244) – all images that refer to woman's role as object or victim or both. Marriage in these poems is depicted in derogatory terms. It is a relationship of abuse, a "wax house", a "mausoleum," an "engine" that kills. (215), where the woman is either kept for sexual purposes as in 'Purdah' and 'Lady Lazarus' or confided to domestic chores until her "strangeness", her self or spirit, vanishes as in 'Detective.'

But now the submissive female is plaint no more and, "poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful", is ready at last to recover the self – the lion-queen – she now claims in 'Stings', she actually is:

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

At the end awake to the fullness of her fury and the breach that have been perpetrated upon her, the little toy wife changes into Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife in Greek mythology, a woman who is all set to kill in order to satisfy her lust for revenge.

Plath's lioness, her vicious, independent woman poet, is the small jeweled doll unloosened, freed from the emotional and social shackles that subdued her life and her art and made it unattainable for her to bring her true emotions and her words together. The lines become more emotional and significant, when we consider that the real cause for the assassination of Agamemnon was not the king's adultery or Clytemnestra's hunger for power but the sacrificial execution of their submissive, doll – like daughter, Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis. So, for Plath it was the identification of the death or repression of herself as woman and writer, that was the principal cause of her anger. This was the self she had shunned and denied for love and social approval virtually since birth. And for this woman poet to write livid, sadistic, murderous poetry therefore becomes a means of vengeance. In 'Fever 103' her rage becomes, as Margaret Uroff has written, creative violence:

*Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.
I think I am going up,
I think I may rise –
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I
Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses. (232)*

In her more famous poem 'Lady Lazarus' the persona is no pitiable animal sneaking away and surrendering; instead she is strong, hostile and dangerous. In the power game the balance of power has now shifted towards her:

*There is a charge.
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge.
(246)*

In a new description of self as sovereign or self-empowered woman, the winged lioness of 'Ariel' is a woman and woman-poet empowered, a being who has the capacity and capability for flight continually and who, therefore, is capable of crushing all pre conceived notions about women. In a moment of blissful blending with her self, she becomes one with the forces, the active, creative impulses, that she possesses. She becomes more authoritative only by moving her fully exposed female self towards the power which she so longs for, the power of light and heat and vision – the sun. She has the vigor, the competence to rise above the engine of the social system and marriage. To make this lofty journey, she must convert herself from wheat and water to something much more precarious and conventionally powerful –an arrow:

*And I
Am the arrow.
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive*

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (240)

Here the speaker of 'Ariel' becomes an "arrow" which merges with the eye of the rising sun, which is not a mere suicidal death wish, but is rather a reaffirmation of life. For Sylvia Plath, to achieve the self-sufficiency meant that she had to destroy the reliant, attachment – prone side of her self. Once that self was smashed, all that remained was a woman too cunning to live. That Sylvia was then ready to show her bald and wild side to the world appears evident from an anecdote Edward Butscher records in *Method and Madness*. According to Clarissa Roche, he writes:

After Ted's departure, Sylvia would collect her husband's letters and manuscripts from desk, along with pieces of his fingernails, and burn them in the backyard. She then danced around the fire chanting the proper incantations for casting an evil spell on him. (Butscher 424)

Whatever else may be believed about this weird story, Sylvia's image is hardly the all-American apple pie that the poet so diligently cultivated throughout her college years. The image fits the witch-woman voice of the last poems, the voice of a woman who had taken the bald, wild moon for her mother and is no longer expecting or seeking tenderness.

Some poems contained in her volumes of poetry *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* like 'An Appearance', 'Amnesiac', 'Eavesdropper', 'The Other', 'The Tour' and more prominent ones like 'Medusa' and 'Lesbos' are a kind of a personal satire on the society. These poems contain all the malice, all the fierceness, all the unwomanly, competitive, violent attitudes her good girl, plaster saint, toy wife image was meant to hide. Like many of her journal entries, these poems are exercises in cruelty. They make it clear just how much Sylvia Plath did have to conceal from the world. Like her moon-mother-muse, her blue garments could let forth small bats and owls, vermin and predators. For her, therefore, the good girl image, like the plaster cast in 'In Plaster', was not just a mask but a matter of survival. To discard this image – as she was forced to abandon it in maturity without compensating support – was a confession of defeat and a relinquishment of death. As she wrote in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree':

*I have fallen a long way, clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness –
blackness and silence. (173)*

To overcome the brutal force of the post-holocaust world Plath makes her woman an awe inspiring being, a semi-mystic and semi-mythic woman who inhales the air of autonomy after her metamorphosis. Mario Praz believes that "such women always existed both in mythology ad

literature." (Praz 19). Her woman speaker is like Coleridge's "Christabel" or Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy" who has the power to hold man in imprisonment, and even become diabolical to redeem her wounded self. This mysterious female figure of *Ariel* Poems conjures herself in many fantasies. From reducing herself to bits and pieces, she goes on to turn them into 'clubs' to assign a new role to herself in the world, so that she could become a presence to negotiate with her inadequacy. In "Elm" she says:

*Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs,
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no by standing; I must shriek.
(Plath, Collected Poems 192)*

With her domestic energy the zealous lady in the poem warns the tormenter to be aware of her wrath enabling her challenge his authority. The former tortured victim now clearly intends to demand compensation for her pain from the father, husband and overall from the whole society. She specially asks the controlling patriarchal figure "Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy." The male regards her as his commodity, he can use where ever he wants to, but in the end she warns:

*Herr God, her Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (246).*

These forceful lines of "Lady Lazarus" profusely specify the relevance of the feminist agenda that set out to negate the dominance of institutions set by patriarchy. The poem's concluding lines underscore the wish to appropriate the powers that terrorize to destroy her. Through her verbal gestures, the speaker tries to reverse the supremacy, she identifies with the male figures. The poet's vengeance is to demolish both the father and the husband whoever would come to contact with her. She tries to make her success by imagining a terrifying new integrity for herself.

To Sylvia Plath marriage means the complete submission and surrender to males, making them a mere appendage. Household chores and drudgery causes a severe blow to the psyche of women. In "The Applicant" and "A Birthday Present" she shows the monotonous regular work can cause to a sensitive married woman:

*But in twenty – five years she will be silver,
In fifty, gold,
A living doll, everywhere you look,
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. (221-2)*

Sylvia Plath is a feminine self. It displays how, why and what a woman should think, feel and become. She writes forthrightly about self, sex and angst. Her woman speaker suffers anxieties and agonies. She shatters, disintegrates and succumbs but daringly poses a challenge and transgresses the traditional notion of womanhood. Her woman protagonists are enthusiastic, vivacious, sometimes

nasty and liable to make a revolt whenever they need to do so. In this way she constructs a seriously radical image of her woman persona only to deconstruct a too deterministic socio-political order.

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