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SYLVIA PLATH: A STRONG FEMINIST, MISANDRIST AND NARCISSIST

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ABSTRACT

This paper unveils the different shades and colours of *Sylvia Plath's* poetry. Being a woman, she could understand the problems of a woman in much better way. Her poetic career and her matrimonial life are very much resembling to those of *Kamla Das*. She has beautifully scattered the fragrance of feminism and *Narcissism* in most of her poems. We would come across to trace out all those qualities of her poetry in the ongoing discussion of this paper. As a misandrist, she has expressed her hatred for the male domination, the phallogocentric society where a woman has to fight a very tough battle for the maintenance of her self-esteem, dignity, love and freedom. *Sylvia Plath* (1932 – 63) happened to be a leading *Anglo-American* poetess having a lot of resemblances with *Kamla Das* as a poet concerning self-assertion, misandry, narcissism, feminism and pursuit of the genuine and sincere love. She did maintain her glamour and charm during her life as well as in death. Though her poetic career was very short, yet full of ups and downs. Her marriage with *Ted Hughes*, beginning of her poetic career, her break-up with her husband and her shocking suicidal death came out to be the historical events in the literary world. Her poetic creations happen to be the brilliant outcome of her frustrations, anguish, irritation, mental harassment, grief and death-wish etc. She took up poetry as a very potential tool to fill up the *Vacuum* of his life. She successfully composed a poetic volume titled – '*Ariel*' containing 40 poems. These poems basically deal with the themes of love, marriage, mother, father and small children, hospital experiences, barrenness, sensation and death etc. Thus it (*Ariel*) is, in fact, a representative collection of poems widely acclaimed for its themes, pictorial quality, poetic sensibilities and her feminist experiences etc. Some of the best-known poems of *Plath* such as '*Daddy*', '*Lady Lazarus*', '*The Applicant*', '*Tulips*', '*Totem*' and '*Edge*' do figure in this poetic volume and also express her intensive imagination, the poetic sensibility, the feminist consciousness, her narcissistic approach, her lovely application of the versification and the rhetorical devices. Thus her poems are the brilliant creations of her personal experiences, sorrows and sufferings of this physical world, matrimonial frustrations and her strong dislike for the male world – where a woman is treated as a puppet in the hands of her male-partner.

Sylvia Plath holds a dominant place in the realm of novel and poetry as a competent writer, a feminist thinker, as a sound observer of the existing society, as a realist and narcissist. She was born in 1932 and got nourished in the **U.S.A.** Her father happened to be a **Prussian** and mother **Austrian**. She was only nine years old when her loving father passed away. She received her university education from **Smith College, Massachusetts** and **Newnham College, Cambridge**. She got married with the competent English poet of the contemporary period – **Ted Hughes** in 1956. For a time being, she kept teaching at **Smith College**, but in 1959, she got permanently settled in **England**. In 1960, she happened to bring about the publication of her first volume of poetry. **The Colossus**, and her only novel– **The Bell jar**, under the penname of **Victoria Lucas**. In 1963, she committed suicide due to certain problems. Her fame as a fine poet shot up by leaps and bounds for and wide in the galaxy of English poetry, when her famous poem – **Ariel** was posthumously published in 1965. In the **British Council**, she boldly commented – **“One should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying with an informed and intelligent mind”**.

Her other significant posthumous publications are **Crossing the Water (1971)** and **Winter Tress (1972)** etc.

Thus it is a universal fact that poetry springs from the depth of poet’s emotions and feelings and his aesthetic experiences. Poetry does express one’s very personal emotions whether it is subjective or objective, personal or impersonal. The poetry of both the woman-poets– **Kamla Das and Sylvia Plath** is explicitly personal and subjective.

As far as **Wordsworth** and **Keats** come to the point of discussion in respect to their subjective poems, they happen to communicate to readers their universal ideas and spontaneous feelings in a very touching way. **Wordsworth’s ‘Solitary Reaper’** can be easily understood without the reference of **Wilkinson’s** account of **“the female who was reaping alone and who kept singing very silently”**. **The sweetest voice that Wordsworth had ever heard**.¹

Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ can be easily perceived without knowing that **Keats** was deeply motivated by the song of a nightingale, while he was sitting in the garden of a house in **Hempstead**, during his stay in the summer of 1819. A poem is self-defined without the history of its composer. Thus **‘Solitary Reaper’** and **‘Ode to a Nightingale’** are remaining as such romantic classics which are enjoyable every time by the scholars of English and common men alike.

Under the light of these two references, it is debatable whether we can understand **Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’** without the proper reference¹ of the history of the poet. Any sort of poetry either emotional or intensional, subjective or objective, personal or impersonal should not be a direct outcome of the poet’s mind and heart. Such poems springing up from the direct heat of emotions or overflowing of emotions seldom have the lasting effect on the reader’s mind. Even **Wordsworth** defines poetry as **“it springs from emotions recollected in tranquility”**. **T.S. Eliot** too defines it – **“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality”**.²

Ultimately **Eliot** emphasizes it repeatedly that one should appreciate the emotion of a poem not the history of the poet. He believes in the impersonalization of the poem and submerging that poet’s personality while expressing his feelings and ideas.

Her poetry looks very much ambiguous and obscure. In this respect, she is very much common to **Kamla Das**. She took up poetry as the medium of expressing her personal feelings and emotions, but her unrealized desires lying dormant in the conscious mind also play a vital role in the process of her poetic compositions. The commonest quality between the two are their **narcissism, feminism, misandricism**, the gender-complex, their sorrows and sufferings and their matrimonial frustrations. They tend to dominate their self-ego – inner and outer and their poetic spirit gets deeply affected by the gender-complex. Both of them have displayed misandric approach in their poetry as they had been equally treated as puppets into the hands of their male-partners lacking the sentimental feelings of love and respect from the other side. It is in this light that we would like to examine some of **Sylvia Plath’s** poems. Having felt a great urge, she did write —

*I write only because,
There is a voice within me,
That will not be still*³

P. Rajani in his praisable work – *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, finds poetry her compulsion to compose. **“Sylvia Plath considered writing a way of life an expression of being alive, writing was at once an expression of her personality, a preservation of sanity”**.⁴

After the marriage to **Ted Hughes**, she jumped into writing. She herself said — **“I will write until I begin to speak my deepself”**.⁵

And after her break-up from **Ted Hughes**, she wrote to her mother —

“It is hurtful to be detached but thank God I have my own work”.⁶

The significant thing to observe in her poetry is her ownself.

“I shall perish, if I can write about no one but myself”.⁷

Richard Howard very rightly comments on her poetry —

“It is not, therefore surprising that her poems look like chapters in a mythology”.⁸

Under the light of this aspect of **‘Ariel’**, **Robert Lowell** very relevantly comments in his significant observation —

“In these poems written in the last months of her life and often rushed out at the rate of two or three a day, Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another ‘poetess’, but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines”.⁹

She has beautifully scattered the fragrance of her feminine sensibility in most of her poems, having responded very well to the feelings of love and sex which are back and backbone of the matrimonial relationship. The feelings of love and sex run quite parallel to **Sylvia’s** stepping forward towards love and sex in her real life. First it maintains a forward movement, then later on it has a repulsive one. **‘Pursuit’**, **‘Ode for Ted’**, **‘Wreath for a Bridal’** and **‘The Glutton’** etc. are the illustrations of the different colours of love. Her love-poems deal with high intensity of emotions, passions and feelings as well as the sharp touching-reactions.

In **‘Pursuit’**, she is pursued by man’s lust:

There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I will have my death of him
His prowls more lordly than the sun.¹⁰

and in the same poem, she surrenders to the panther of lust :

I hurl my heart to halt his pace
To quench his thirst I squander blood.¹¹

In a poem **‘A Secret’**, she expresses her sex-feelings quite openly —

An illegitimate baby
That big blue head
How it breathes in the bureau drawer
Is that lingerie, pet.¹²

But in **‘Street Song’**, **Plath** tries to emphasize the pains of love. We observe in her love-poems as **P. Rajani** says – **“a steady movement in the direction of disillusionment”**.

Along with **Kamla Das**, she intends to share her misandristic attitude towards the male world. Like her, she believes in complete independence of woman. She critically criticises herself for being under the influence of her father. She boldly speaks in **'Daddy'** —

You don't do, you don't do,
Any move black shoe,
In which I have lived like a foot.¹³

Sylvia Plath expresses her sharp opposition to the phallogocentric or patriarchal society. But her unsuccessful marriage with **Ted Hughes**, shattered all her dreams, hopes, aspirations and ambitions. That's why in later poems, she presents man as violent and aggressive. **Zookeeper's Wife** and **'Early Leaving'** are such poems in which man has been presented himself as an exploiter.

Apart from all these characteristics, she happened to be a strong narcissist. Her self-love causes betrayal and she strongly craves for *death-wish*. The same story does take place in the life of **Kamla Das**. And she suffers from the outer conditions and society, but **Plath** has to suffer from the inner conflict, and self-ego. She fails to control her inner conflict and she suffered from the double conditions — both inner and the outer. She was a broken personality with little courage and low confidence. Her suicide was an outcome of her failure in satisfying her self-ego. Thus she failed to resolve this conflict and her poetry is a reflection of her life.

'Morning Song' figures out as the first poem of Sylvia Plath's poetic volume- **'Ariel'**. This poem deals with a cold and detached relationship between the mother and the daughter. The conventional spirit of love between the mother and the daughter is missing in the whole of a poem. As a feminist observer, she happens to pour out the real face of the modern society where a lack of mutual love, response and communication is resulting in most of the families.

'The Couriers' unveils the another shade of her feminist consciousness and imagistic technique. The speaker of the poem gets trapped in her female and domestic roles. The two distinct images are contained in this poem. The first one is related to the matrimonial life and domesticity which confines the speaker to stereo-typed female roles. The second one represents her sense of independence from the domestic strains and passivity. She (Plath) sharply comments on the bitter matrimonial relationship and disillusionment between the wedded couples.

Another colour of feminism does glitter in her famous ironical poem **'The Applicant'**. In this poem, she raises her strong protest against the female exploitation and her being treated as a puppet and as a sex-slave in the present scenario. In the beginning of the poem, an applicant has come as the chooser of a wife with a direct address for marriage. It ironically opens the real face of the institution of marriage where a woman is treated as a commodity. **A.K. Oberg** rightly comments about **Plath's** poetry — **"The poetry that Sylvia Plath sought and came to write is so pure and perfected that at her death, several journals and newspapers printed her last poems as they stood, with little or no editorial comment, as her most suitable epitaph"**.¹⁴

Thus **'Ariel'** contains such poems that are mature, complex and challenging. It is an undisputable evidence of her poetic achievement. She deals here with different relationships among father, mother, children, husband and wife. She also deals with her misandristic, death-wish, suicide, sterility, sensation, necrophilia, hospital, sickness, disease and sickness etc.

'Words' is the last one composed by her. She expresses in this poem her attitude towards language and death. **Rosenblatt** comments aptly on its theme —

"The poem thus defines Plath's fundamental sense of doom and fatality, the hand of the dead rules, the living language cannot overcome the primordial disturbance created in the self by the consciousness of the dead and death".¹⁵

Thus it can be briefly summed-up to say that she looks like a photocopy of *Kamla Das*. She shares a lot of similarities with her. Both of them happen to commit suicide and they have to suffer from break-up in their matrimonial relationships. Both raise their voices against *male-domination*.

As a woman poet, she pours out her bitter experiences of every sort of relationship in a family and society as revealed in her poems. She scatters the fragrance of her feminine sensibility, misandrism and narcissism in most of her poems. She fails to satisfy her self-ego and commits suicide. Her poetry presents the different colours of her feminism, narcissism and misandrism. Like *Kamla Das*, she has exposed the secrets and mystery of her personal life in the most touching way. Most of her poems are highly autobiographical dealing with her personal frustrations, sorrows, sufferings, matrimonial frustrations, exploitations, death-wish and her preference for suicide rather than survival. She represents herself as the real face of a modern woman who demands love, honour and freedom in this phallogentric society.

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