

Feminist sensibility in the works of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

This Paper informs about Sylvia Plath's feminist sensibility and how she tries to gain liberation from the shackles of the patriarchal system. To express feminist sensibility, she adopted the poetic genre and ultimately got liberation through artistic struggle.

Keywords: Patriarchal system, feminist sensibility, stereotypical image, liberation, humiliation etc

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was a remarkable twentieth Century American writer. She expressed her deep feelings about death, nature, identity, feminist sensibility. Plath was the daughter of Austrian mother and German father. Her father died in 1940 when she was only eight years old. Her father's death was an unbearable shock for her because there was no financial security for family after her father. Sylvia had to attend Smith, a prestigious women's college, on a full scholarship from 1950 to 1955. After that she had to join Newnham College of Cambridge University, England on a Fulbright scholarship. Being at the mercy of others sometimes she felt that she had no own identity. She believed in authentic existence and always wanted to be near perfection in every work whatever she did. In her book *Sylvia Plath as a Complete Poet* Majumdar has been rightly observed:

In her school, she was brilliantly successful in everything that she attempted. Apart from securing A and 100 in all her examinations, she scored excellently at painting, at writing poems, at playing basketball and as a girl guide scout, winning prizes effortlessly. All her friends and acquaintances have described her as an anxious over achiever of some very capable ... and a stubborn, even stolid capacity for perseverance. (18)

She believed that writing is one of the highest forms of art that pleases the sense of the human beings. She described about the stereotypical image of a woman and expressed her anguish, humiliation and pain which were pervaded in male dominated world. She depicted that woman treated like a doll which can be handled anyway by man. She portrays woman as a wife and her basic role is fulfilling the physical needs of her husband, as a mother, she has to born a child and give cure for it, as a common woman, she will have to fulfill all the traditional roles whatever expected of a woman, like stitching, sewing, cooking and be with emotional support at the time of need.

She grew up in a relatively stable and prosperous home and got excellent education; but her suffering was in her mind. Whatever Plath said in an interview with Peter Orr; Wagner has been rightly noted:

...out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say that I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle and a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and

intelligent mind. I think personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. (91)

Sylvia Plath presents a pre-woman's studies through her novel *The Bell Jar* which is semi-autobiographical writing deals with feminist sensibility of Sylvia Plath. A sense of individuality is essential for gaining existence in human being world. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's (heroine) battle is gaining a sense of individuality because she feels oppressed in social restrictions and it seems she is living in pressures. She wants to set up herself as a liberated woman. She had talent of writing poetry, novel etc., and she was invited to New York to serve as a guest Editor in a National Fashion Magazine office. In her novel *The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath seems incapable of making healthy relationships with male dominated world. She experiences that she is trapped in a patriarchal society with rigid expectation of womanhood. She feels that women have no own identity because their identity completely with man, not individually. In his book *Literary Theory Today* Nayar quotes the comments of Simone de Beauvoir in which she remarks: Woman has no value or identity by herself - she is defined in relation to the man (87).

Sylvia Plath's writings present the reflections of feminist sensibility which centered on the struggle of a young woman who could not achieve her existence because she did not acknowledge as the best artist and talented writer in the male dominated world.

Sylvia said in her poem *Edge* to be dead is to be perfect. She says: The woman is perfected/her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment (Plath, *Ariel* 85). As her fears become the romance for her. Her life becomes her poetry and poetry her life because life as lived art and art as lived life. She illustrated about her feminist conscience in her poem the "Three Women:

I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman
Neither a woman, happy to be like a man ...
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel....

(Plath, *Collected Poems* 118)

Sylvia Plath described through her writing that male has been dominating for the ancient time, and women are known as the subordinate of man, also in modern time because they worked as the assistants. She noted that within the patriarchal society women's roles have been set already to play; they have to live in a limited circles of life. She portrayed women as if they feel

suffocated within domestic prison. She presented the predicament of women through the image of the moon which Plath uses in her poems as a traditional image of female passivity. The moon is relied on the sun because the moon gets its light from the sun. So in the same way women are said to be reliant on men. Plath remarks:

It has a gothic shape
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother.

(Plath, *Collected Poems* 28)

She has described the moon as her mother. Her passive light is a constant reminder of the pallid role of which women play in a patriarchal society. She believed that fighting for identity is the only way for women to escape from the shackles of the male dominated world. She said in her poem "Lady Lazarus" that she tried to be emboldens herself and she says:

O my enemy.
Do I terrify? (Plath, *Ariel* 45)

But ultimately she noted that within the family unit the father was the ultimate authority and passes all rules for the family. She said that father was the symbolic of fascist. She supposed that the fascist is the ultimate symbol of controlling dictating power, in this perspective Plath is not talking only about her father but also the established patriarchal society in which she lived: "Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the Face/The brute, brute heart of brute like you"(Plath, *Ariel* 54). She further says:

I have always been scared of you
... I have never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw
(Plath, *Ariel* 54-55)

She illustrated that women have no existence because their identity is not independently but with the male in all the spheres of life. She notes in her poem "Lady Lazarus" that:

I am myself.
That is not enough. (Plath, *Ariel* 56)

She feels, something is lack in her perhaps she is talking about the memories of her husband Ted Hughes who left her alone for another woman named Assia.

In her poem "The Jailer" Plath said that she has achieved identity by being the object of desire of the jailer, and now man is depended on her:

What would the light
Do without eyes to knife,
What would he
Do, do, do without me?
(Plath, *Collected Poems* 227)

Plath described that there is a hope and chance to be free from the male dominated world. Plath's search for liberty is a way in which she can free herself from the fetters of patriarchal structure and liberation is possible only through literary struggle. She notes that she wears the smile of completion. She

said that the woman smiles because she has achieved the goal. She is perfect because she has no longer to be judged under anybody's standards.

In her poem Lady Lazarus Plath presented the reflections of the liberation and triumph over man. She says:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat man like air. (Plath, *Ariel* 120)

Plath seemed to believe in Phoenician mythology. The woman rises from the ashes like the phoenix and man's existence is nothing to her; now he is no longer tangible presences in her life. She has gained a new life and a new sense of empowerment.

Plath's world can be at times very bleak, she feels locked up, and bound up by society in which she lived. However, there is a hope and chance of liberty because she is fighting for freedom continuously with her poetic, visual, and literary art.

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