

“Half -confessions: Solipsism, existential crisis and impersonality in the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath”

Saha Malay

Assistant Teacher

Srikantabati P.S.S. Shikshaniketan

Raghunathganj, India

Email-malaysaha2512@gmail.com

Abstract:

In the confessional poetry of the 1950s and 1960s some poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath et al. incorporated in their poetry personal experiences of failed filial piety, sufferings, illness, morbidity, insanity, suicide and things that most would like to suppress. Though Sylvia Plath's poems are professed to be written in the confessional mode, yet they are half-confessions or camouflaged confessions. The readers of confessional poetry least expect hidden propaganda like feminism, solipsism, objectivity and impersonality in the confessional poems. But we do find such elements that prompted the researcher to pen this article.

Keywords: ‘confessional poetry’, ‘solipsism’, ‘existential crisis’ and ‘impersonality’.

Introduction: Known for her ‘glamour of fatality’

And ‘heroism of sickness’, the American poetess Sylvia Plath led a kind of death-in-life existence before she committed suicide on her third life-attempt. To Plath, the value of life lied not living it fully but squandering it away as it was too good a gift to keep in possession. Whether divorce with her husband Ted Hughes caused fissure in her psyche or whether she had in-built fractured psyche is debatable. But what is sure is the fact that she was a solipsist, a person who believed that only one's self exists or may be proved to exist. She had doubts over her existence and tried to achieve a kind of impersonality in her confessional poems.

Self-obsession

In most of her poems she recurrently uses the first person grammatical utterance ‘I’. Though Sylvia Plath revolted against the

'Dracula-like' patriarchy she found in her Nazi father and husband, she was more bent on putting

'herself into the text - as into the world and history-by her own movement' (Cixous, Helene. 'The Laugh of the Medusa') than 'write about women and bring women into writing.'

Why Sylvia Plath chose to commit suicide is arguable. It may be a protest against her husband who dumped her; it may have been caused by schizophrenic self-obsession or may be in search for a life of ecstasy, thrill or egotistical pleasure in self-denial and self-annihilation.

Self-obsession may often throw a person into various psychological crises; for example, it can make one depressed and kindle suicide-instinct. Plath's poetry is a twilight-zone of life and death- where there are 'indefatigable hoof-taps' of death and suicide. Here

'everything is a symptom of the same holocaust' (Spender, Stephen. 'Warnings from the grave', in 'The Art of Sylvia Plath', ed., Newman, p.203).

In a way most of Plath's later protagonists 'die' into their respective 'her-stories' because they prefer death to patch-up existence. Plath's attitude to death was ambivalent. It is possible that she did not wish to die following her life attempt in

the kitchen. She might have visualized her death and had test-drives which are evident in her last two failed life-attempts. In the poem 'Lady Lazarus' or in her novel 'The Bell Jar' dissolution is followed by attempt at resurrection-the patching-up act by the doctor. But the 'miracle birth' could not altogether change her lot. Her bid to achieve oneness with the universe fails because she was too much obsessed with her sole self.

Plath did not believe in love as a sacred religion. She was incapable of tender feelings. If her poetry rouses tender feelings, they are mostly manipulated, contrived. Love was sought after by her as: 'being afraid of our needs, but least the need to love and to be loved.' (Suttie, Ian D. 'The Origin of Love and Hate'). Plath's obsession proceeds from a kind of inner void, her feeling of meaninglessness of life which Harry Guntrip calls, a 'schizoid problem'. One may discover in his poems the buried self of an 'unborn baby' crying under the statues of a city and probably she thought an extreme action like suicide might give birth to the unborn baby. The masculine protests against patriarchy that appears in some of his poems are 'defence mechanisms'-evasive techniques to put a veil upon her sadomasochistic and nihilistic beliefs. That Sylvia Plath felt a

certain lack and uncertainty in her life is evidenced from her portrayal of herself in the radio-play "The Three Women" (1962):

"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 a lack."

Consequently she decides to be "heroine of the periphery"-a "female eunuch".

Impersonality

Sylvia Plath's confessional poems are not confessions. They extend to comprehend the social and cultural history of the West in such poems as "Fever 103°", "The Munich Manroquins", "Lady Lazarus" "Daddy", "The Colossus" etc. In such poems as "Daddy", Plath alludes to the Holocaust and Nazi atrocities. It achieves a classic act of generalization transcending the private domain. The poem "Lady Lazarus" called the "Guernica of modern poetry", has rich tonal variety not frequent in confessional poetry. Not only in "Lady Lazarus", but also in such poems as "Cut", "Fever 103°" and "Mary's Song" Plath weaves a rich texture of personal sufferings and public tragedy, genocide, a "Dance of Death" etc. The poem "Lady Lazarus" is a

"walking miracle", the first person narrator is a volatile, fluid character rather than a static one.

Existential crisis: In his essay "Creativity in children's writing and contemporary culture", the poet-critic David Holbrook observes that "We have come to recognize man's need for meaning, his natural dimensions of culture and morality, and intentionality-that is his need to be continuously groping towards new possibilities-his creative. This urge for creativity answers the existential questions like "What is to be human? "What is the purpose of life?" etc. Plath's poems certainly raise such questions but the conclusions that she draws baffles us. That suicide can become an art-a tragic necessity' raises questions about her mental sanity and points to her existential void. Plath's "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" opens with the one-letter question "I." The next line-

"I walk alone"

points to the speaker's sole concern and doubt over her own self. Plath, when she was studying at Smith College, she wrote a thesis paper on the Double in Dostoyevsky and became acquainted with the idea of the "doppelganger", the Double. In many of her poems she has tried to explore her alternative selves.

In an Interview given to the British Council, Plath said,

“I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying....I think that personal experience should not be a kind of shut - box and a mirror-- looking narcissistic experience.”

Findings & Conclusion:

In Sylvia Plath's poetry we find her thoughts on death, suicide, identity crisis, impersonality and so on. But what is notable is the fact that her confessions are tailored to give them artistic finish. Mostly, confessional poetry is chaotic, irregular and incomplete. But Sylvia Plath in her poems achieves that fusion of thought and expression that makes her confessional poetry unique.

References

- (1) Cixous, Helene et al., “The Laugh of Medusa”, vol.1, University of Chicago, 1976.
- (2) D.Suttie, Ian. “The Origin of Love and Hate”, Routledge. Psychology Press, 1999
- (3) Eliot, T.S. “Selected Essays”, ed. John Hayward, Harmondsworth, Middlesex. Penguin Books, 1953

(4) Holbrook, David. “Creativity in children's writing and contemporary culture” in “The Present”, vol.8, ed. Boris Ford. Penguin Books, 1983.

(5) Spender, Stephen. “The Art of Sylvia Plath”, ed. Newman, Indiana University Press, 1970.