

DECONSTRUCTION OF PSYCHIC ISSUES IN PLATH'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT: *Sylvia Plath's poetry offers a wide range of ideas and themes. The article uses Derridian deconstructive ideology to break up the meanings of the text and highlight the wide range of meanings it offers to the readers of different contexts. Deconstruction is the theory that challenges the centrality of any phenomenon and breaks up its structures to generate endless modes of signification. In this article, the study deconstructs Plath's poems to generate a plurality of meanings related to human behaviors and psychology. It would be debated that various psychic states emerge in her poetry that resists any uniform reading of her poetry. It will be argued that deconstructing the text creates a multiplicity of meanings related to the human psyche and attitudes. This aspect of her work adds meaningfulness to her text and enables the readers to bring out a plurality of meanings associated with a particular mood and behavior. Carl Jung (1975) states that poetry is instrumental in understanding the psyche of the poet. The archetypal patterns and symbols that are recurrent in Plath's poetry are the expressions of the psychic continual potential for transformation. Her themes are universal because they deal with the traumatic nature of human experience. That is the reason her poetry has influenced half a century after her committing suicide in February of 1963.*

KEYWORDS: Madness, Fear, Masochism.

INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction is a post-structuralist theory that stems from Jacques Derrida's critique of structuralism and the tradition of western philosophy. Structuralism emphasized that linguistics structures determine individual thought and the subject is dissolved into the larger forces of culture. Deconstruction challenged the notion that these structures of meanings were inflexible, universal, or ahistorical. Deconstruction implies that texts mean whatever a person wants them to mean. Culler claims that it is a multi-faceted critical approach. It has been known as a philosophical position, a political and intellectual strategy and a mode of reading (Culler 85). Deconstruction demonstrates that the texts are overflowing with multiple and often conflicting meanings. Balkin argues that deconstruction possesses technical sense. It refers to the different techniques employed in reading text by Derrida and Paul de Man and others. Deconstruction is a way of reading any text and revealing the fluidity of meaning which the text tries to cover up. The key terms of deconstruction are "logocentrism", "differance", "supplement", "misinterpretation", and "reversal of hierarchies", have enriched the vocabulary of literary discussion.

In this research paper, the study focuses on psychic issues which are present in Plath's poetry. There are several psychological archetypes that are recurrent in Plath's poems. Some of these like depression, ambivalence, and Electra complex have already been taken up, the present study will focus on psychic issues like madness, fear, masochism. A dissection of her poetry

reveals that these psychic issues serve as a creative force in her poetry. These issues would be discussed below with reference to her poems.

Madness

Pascal states, “Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would be another form of madness” (qtd in Felman 36). Nietzsche’s madness stands before the modern world as both an invitation and a warning. It is thought that the people who are the victim of psychological shock try to achieve a sense of order by putting the disturbing ideas in narrative form (Casey & Long). Kaufman (2001) and Jamison (1989) assert the strong relationship between creativity and mental disorder (Kaufman 38). This article provides deconstructive analysis of Plath’s poetry to highlight how madness on the part of the poet is generating her art.

“Mad Girl’s Love Song” highlights contradictions in the text. The following binary-opposition can be found in the said poem, life versus death, kind versus cruel, loyal versus disloyal, white versus black, good versus evil, and sanity versus insanity. These binary oppositions reveal the main pair that seems to be the main theme of the poem that is life versus death. In the very first stanza the speaker is pondering over the philosophy of life and death. Life is associated with the open eyes and death with closed eyes as described in the lines: “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; I lift my lids and all is born again (Plath 310)”.

Another reading of the definition poem lays stress on the presence of the good versus evil. The speaker is uninfluenced by these concepts. The speaker is neither of God’s party, nor of the Satan’s. She looks upon herself as dead being who has nothing to do with good and evil forces.

Reinterpretation of the text reveals the significant contrast between madness and sanity. The very title of the poem carries these contradictory ideas. The word “mad” is linked with abnormality whereas love with sanity. There is no madness in falling in love with someone, remaining faithful to him to whole life as sincerity in love and loyalty is claimed by the speaker: “I fancied you’d return the way you said, But I grow old and I forget your name (Plath 310)”. There is no reason or sanity to try to take one’s own life as a result of the disloyalty of the lover. The speaker is innocent and devoted lover while the person who is being loved is a cruel person who has no regard for the speaker’s true feelings. She raises a wistful cry against her insincere lover in the lines: “I should have loved a thunderbird instead; At least when spring comes they roar back again (Plath 310)”. She is determined to say goodbye to the world through the door of death that is obvious in the repeated line: “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead (Plath 310)”. It is the madness of the speaker to make an end to her life for the sake of her disloyal lover otherwise no one takes such type of action for others.

A rereading of the poem “Paralytic” reveals the binary opposition of life and death, reason versus madness. One’s positive attitude towards life and wish for living are no doubt rational whereas one’s mad pursuit of death seems to be irrational. The first line contains the image of continuity of life, whereas the most parts of the poem are about death. “My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs, Mouth full of pearls, (Plath 266)” refers to the dead body or the speaker’s death wish, but soon after these lines a wish for life is implied in upcoming lines: “Two girls As flat as she, who whisper 'We're your daughters'(Plath 266)”. Children are a sign of life and source of perpetuating their parents’ name. How much parents are sick of life, but they wish to live for their children’s sake and tolerate the odd circumstances of life. The mention of children is the indicative of a wish for life. The text presents an unstable mind or insane mind working behind it.

Deconstructive analysis of some of Plath's poems reveals the elements of madness. The poem "Lady Lazarus" is a vivid example of Plath's morbidity. She views suicide as a game that she plays again and again until she wins the victory by removing her existence from the surface of the world for ever.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air (Plath 198).

The imagery in the last stanza can only be the product of a mad mind. It seems quite absurd that she wants to come to life and eat men like air. She wishes to be resurrected to annihilate men.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box" exhibits the perplexity of her mind. It speaks for her insanity that she compares the box with the square baby. The square is the sign of the coffin.

I ordered this, clean wood box
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby (Plath 177).

In "Edge" the madness is obvious in these verses:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty (Plath 224).

These lines reflect the mental illness of the poet that she imagines her own children dead and compares them with the poisonous creature that is serpent. Children are the dearest to mother and she can lay down her each and every thing even life for their safety. She cannot tolerate that any harm should come to them. But here the situation is reversed.

In the poem the persona states that:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment (Plath 224).

Here it is the insanity of the persona that he wants to achieve perfection through death and regards death a road to victory.

Although these poems are carrying the element of madness, yet there is interrelation between madness and her poetry. The morbidity of the poet becomes a source of her superb art. These poems are worthwhile and worth-reading because these make us peep into the poet's mind and feel what she feels.

Fear

Biologically, and psychologically fear is taken as a warning. Biologically it signalizes that death, injury or destruction is going to happen. Psychologically, it accelerates the chances of personality disintegration. The sufferer considers fear dangerous to his identity and regards his well-being at stake. Fear may be termed as an extreme form of anxiety. Anxiety takes birth from an alarming situation linked with a person's environment as well as in Freudian language the id. Thus fear is of two types, environmental and psychological. The former is rational and can be controlled while the latter is irrational and difficult to be overcome. In Plath's case, both type of fear are present, but the psychological one is dominating one. Many of her poems can be measured from this aspect. Robert Phillips (1972) locates fears in "Sheep in Fog". In this poem, the speaker is afraid of her search that may take her into dark water.

Deconstructive analysis of the poems "The Beekeeper's Daughter" and "The Arrival of the Bee Box" pinpoints the binary opposition between bravery and timidity, fearless father and fearful daughter. The former poem claims the boldness of the father who is a beekeeper while the later poem professes the coward approach of the speaker or the beekeeper's daughter towards the bees or bees' hives. The father is the master of the bees, easy to control them. The text asserts that the father is bold like god or priest in these lines: "Hierarchical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees, You move among the many-breasted hives (Plath 118)". He is moving among them as if he had been immune to the stings of the bees. The daughter in the latter poem is afraid of the bees and reluctant to go near them. "Small, taken one by one, but my god, together! (Plath211)". Being the daughter of the beerearer, she must be strong and habitual to their company, but her reaction towards the bees is quite opposite.

According to Gilbert (1989), unlike Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, Plath's works exhibit the sublimation of inner personal conflicts that find expression through the self-splitting, doubling and mythologizing itself until it scarcely looks to have existence within it. Ferrier in her article "The Beekeeper's Daughter" emphasizes the exploration of female empowerment in the bee poems.

Deconstruction of the poems "Poppies in July" and "Poppies in October" present contrasting ideas regarding the poppies. Poppies of July are seen as hell flames of which the speaker is afraid. She asks the poppies, "Do you do no harm? (Plath 203)". The speaker seems to be in trouble in seeing these flowers. They are not a source of enjoyment rather accelerating her fear. Poppies of October are opposite to those of July. They are instruments of happiness and enjoyment as suggested in the words, "A gift, a love gift (Plath 240)". Mental agony of the speaker in both the poems is clear. In the third stanza of the first poem, poppies are red like blood, but the text asserts their colorlessness in the closing line. In the second poem, the speaker becomes overjoyed on the view of poppies and utters the word gift but in the very next line she expresses her sadness indicated in the words "utterly unasked for". Gifts are always welcoming, but the speakers' reaction is contradictory. Both the texts employ the words blood and red for poppies. The words blood and red are alarming and symbolize, pain as well as danger. Reexaminations of these two pieces of poetry highlight the fear of the speaker. Mukherjee (2013) states that her poems stand out as brilliant manifestations of the troubled and creative personality of Plath.

Deconstructive analysis of "Bee Meeting" brings into light the binary opposition of fear versus boldness, security versus insecurity. On one hand, there is present element of bravery in the shape of the fully covered villagers who are described brave as knights: "They are knights in

the visors (Plath 211)". On the other hand, the speaker is in the tight grip of fear. She feels nude as chicken' neck in her summery dress. The villagers' secure bodies are enhancing her fear "They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear (Plath 211)". The speaker is expressing her multi-furious emotions. The sentence: "why am I cold" refers to the subsidized emotions of fear or the death of the speaker due to fear.

It is a common notion about Plath that death is the most cherished thing to her. This may be true, but rereading of some of her poems reveals that she is as afraid of death as any common human being is. Restatement of the poem "Pursuit" illustrates the speaker's fear of death. In this poem, the persona is afraid of a panther that is pursuing her and may cause her death. Its greed is enough to burn the woods. Death is personified in the form of panther here.

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice (Plath 3).

The persona tries to stop the panther's advancement towards her in different ways. She offers her blood to quench its thirst and body to satiate its hunger, but panther is still unsatisfied and requires her body and soul together. Only complete destruction can satisfy it.

His voice waylays me, spells a trance,
I shut my doors on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.
Blood quickens, gonging in my ears:
The panther's tread is on the stairs,
Coming up and up the stairs (Plath 3).

Its voice halts the speaker and makes her half-conscious. Out of fear, she closes the door and her circulation of blood becomes fast. The persona's fear is multiplied by the panther's fast movement towards her as the sounds of panther's footsteps are echoing in her ear.

The term paper "Sylvia Plath's "Pursuit" in Relation to Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler"" locates internal emotions (may be fear) of the persona in the poem and those of Hedda Gabler in the play bring about the destruction of both. The persona in the poem is dying of fear of fast approaching panther while Hedda kills herself due to her fear of Brack's exploiting nature. Perhaps in Plath's case, these were some unknown fears that lead her to death and destruction.

Masochism

Masochism can be taken as a type of psychic issue. When a person cannot take revenge on other for the deprivations in his life, he begins to tease himself to keep his anguish soul in peace. Forbes (2009) articulates that "Lady Lazarus" is the modern version of the discussion related to Tennyson's "Ulysses". Plath's this piece of poetry works as an instance of how

modern American poetry sharpens the tension that characterizes the Victorian dramatic monologue. The titles of both these above stated poems denote that the speakers are separate entities from the poets. Forbes is of the view that Plath distances herself from the speaker. Mores enlists Plath in prominent Gothic writers like Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte due to her employment of element of terror in her poetry. Mores concludes her survey with “Lady Lazarus” that is the best instance of horrifying imagery. Susan Van Dyne finds the Gothic elements in “Lady Lazarus”. She professes ““Lady Lazarus’ is one of the most Gothic of the lot (Dyne, p 134)”.

But deconstructive analysis of “Lady Lazarus” unravels that Plath was a masochist who tries to make an end to her own life time and again. In this poem she has mentioned her different attempts of suicide. A minute study of the poem unmask that Plath uses Lady Lazarus as her spokesperson to share her own fruitless efforts of suicide. 'Lady Lazarus' depicts the mental agony of the person who has met failure repeatedly in the accomplishment of suicide. The poet tries to make an end of her life once in a decade, but she meets disappointment every time.

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it----- (Plath 244).

She considers the people gathered around her are voyeurs or sadist. They will pay a large price to watch her scars and listen her heart. They are there to accelerate her grief of being alive. She regards them the Germans and feels herself helpless and one with a distorted identity like the Jews in the Nazi Holocaust.

Sylvia Plath herself has been the persona in most of the poems. In the poem “Cut” the persona is Sylvia Plath herself. She was one of the first American women writers who bluntly express their true emotions. She effectively challenged the traditional literary position of female by expressing her aggression, hostility and despair in her work. Plath has been the victim of melancholy and depression in her life. Natasha (2013) says that “Cut” was composed in 1962 when Plath was in severe depression. The definition poem shows her feelings at that time and her self-destructive behavior that contributed to her suicide attempts. Natasha argues that there is a battle being fought between the narrator and her depression in this poem. A deconstruction of “Cut” throws light on the morbid personality of Plath. She emerges as a masochist here. She intentionally cuts her thumb and drives fascination out of its bleeding. The lines:

Out of a gap,
a million soldiers run,
Redcoats every one (Plath 235).

These lines symbolize blood emitting from the wound. But Plath seems to be rejoicing at the sight of these drops of blood.

CONCLUSION

Deconstruction of Plath’s poetry explored Plath’s multi-sided personality. It brought forward certain psychic issues such as madness, masochism, fear. Dissection of her poems illustrated an important psychic issue, madness. There seemed to be a correlation between her art and

madness. Plath looked to be mad in her work, but it was the madness that brought order in her otherwise chaotic life. Restatement of her poetry revealed Plath to be a masochist. She derived fascination by torturing herself. Rereading of her work brought into light how she used to inflict pain over her body parts and felt rejoiced. Reinterpretation of her poetry exposed Plath to be a victim of fear. She seemed to be overwhelmed by excessive fear. Her environment as well as her perturbed mind contributed to her fear. Poetry provides her an outlet to express her violent emotions and feelings in order to make her life worth-living. These psychic issues help in understanding the dilemma of Plath's life. It is the trouble in her life, whether mental or physical that sharpens her artistic abilities and as a result she emerges as a potent poetic voice. The recent analysis of Plath's poetry not only helped the reader in peeping into the multiple aspects of Plath's personality, but also provided the reader an opportunity to have glimpses of her time.

The study is significant as it brought into light new angles of interpretation of Plath's poetry and left room for further interpretations of the poems. It attracts the readers to explore new layers of meanings according to their understanding of the poems as the theory of deconstruction claims that there is no end of meanings. The meanings of the text can vary from person to person as they rely on the power of comprehension of the reader or the researcher and the various contexts. Contrary to Saussure's theory of structuralism that does not allow the readers to move away from the fixed meanings of something, Derrida's theory of deconstruction allocates freedom and liberty of interpretation to the readers and the researchers. As a result of this deconstruction of the texts, multiple meanings appear before us.

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