

The Conflctt between Self and Society

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's attractive personality, academic achievements and rigid mental makeup did not allow her to compromise and take failures. Self imposed restraint, both in her life and in poetry as well leads to despair. The wonderful years of her life with Ted which she writes and tells her mother, could not find a place in any of her poems. This camouflage forces her to lead double role in life, psychologically, a split personality. In art, this can lead to silence but in real life to suicide. She comes to stage where death and birth mean one and the same. She wanted to go back to the womb in exposition of "lost self". This strain runs throughout her poems and gives a feeling that she might have died to give authenticity to her poetry. She could neither live with the mask on nor was prepared to expose her real self to the society in which she was an alien and

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here comes the breaking point. Kamala Das too fought with the society which looks upon women as sexual objects. She was a rebel and does not make any attempts to hide it. She fought with herself to become a unique person and articulated it through poetry.

Keyword: Individuality, Obsession, Psychological, Split personality.

She was a tall, spindly girl with waist length sandy hair, which she usually wore into a bun and that curious advertisement trained, transatlantic air of anxious pleasantness. But this was merely a nervous social manner, under it, she was ruthless about her perceptions, wary and very individual.¹

This strong individuality of Plath was an asset to her as a poet but a handicap in real life. It came in her way of playing the other roles - daughter, wife and mother - successfully. The basic ingredients of high intelligence and extreme sensibility made her different from everyone else. Her inability to identify herself, with the society and refusal to accept the tragedies as part of life, lead to a struggle of self and society. As a result she had to wear a mask and play a double role. Another problem was that she wanted to play both these roles efficiently and there comes the crisis.

Plath was a precocious child and seemed effortlessly good at things. She was a prize scholar as well a prize poet; and later when she married, was good at having children, keeping the house clean and cooking, making money and even at riding horses. “There was a ruthless efficiency in all that she did which left no room for mistakes and uncertainties . . . and when efficiency finally failed, her world collapsed.”²

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If Plath were to be like anybody else, the death of her father would not have disturbed her so much. It is a tragedy for any normal child. Plath being precocious and creative, at the best, she could have written a few poignant poems. She was a child of eight and a half years at that time and could think of so many things including suicide and to join her father.

Plath's assumption, that her mother was responsible for this tragedy that befell her, sounds strange. She takes a vow from her mother that she would not get married again. Auriela Plath steadfastly clings to her obligations throughout her life. Her efforts to compensate the paternal love struggle to keep the hearth going, but did not change Sylvia's hatred towards her mother. The reason for hating her mother is not that she failed in her duty but simply because she loved her father more. Her love towards him was not judicious like "Cordelia's love" towards Lear. It becomes an obsession.

The conflict does not really start here. Many people do live with obsessions in any society of some kind or the other; it is only a question of degree, not of kind. The problem was the conflict which made the themes of her poems find no place in real life. Her *Letters Home* are full of love and affection showered on her mother. The very idea that she could write nearly six hundred letters (all of them are not addressed to her mother) shows her concern to hide the "hatred" which was developing in her. Her pretentious of a good daughter "Sivvy" sounds authentic because of her beautiful language. The whole bunch of letters can be read as a bed time story book by any lover of literature.

Plath's uncompromising nature does not decline with age but becomes more and more strong. She tries to make up for her "lost father" through her poetry. She brings him to life through her "Bee poems". She becomes the "Bee keeper's daughter" and looks at the moon as

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“The Rival” to Otto Plath. She writes “Letters November” to remember her father who died in that month. She looks at him through “Ouija” board and sighs

No day is safe from the news of you

Walking about in Africa may be . . .

(The Rival)

She was not just happy in “creating” him through her poems but wanted to identify herself with him completely and this process of conflict leads to sexual obsession. Plath knows that she was attempting the impossible. She struggles to forget him. Her cry that “I am lame in the memory,” was not heard by anybody nor could she hear it herself.

Plath could not be happy as a wife also. She lost all the opportunities of getting a good alliance because of her queer behavior. She didn’t like the idea of being an ordinary housewife. Her contempt towards this idea is beautifully expressed in the poem “Applicant”. She ridicules the institution of marriage where the women are treated as an object.

It can sew, it can cook

It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a whole, it’s a poultice

You have an eye and it’s an image.

My boy, it’s your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

(The Applicant)

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The conflict did appear to come to an end when she found a partner of her choice in Ted Hughes. But her restraint in expressing her disappointment after marriage is commendable. It hardly finds a place in her poems except a few. In the poem “The Beast” she says:

He was a bullman earlier,
King of the dish, my lucky animal.
Breathings was easy in his airy holding.
.....
I have married a cupboard of rubbish,
I bed in fish puddle.
Down here the sky is always falling
Her Hogwallow’s at the window.
The star bugs won’t save me this month.

But what saved her marriage temporarily at least, was her children. In the beginning she told herself: Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children. But the birth of her son Nicholas made her a complete woman.

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

(Morning Song)

This was the most creative period of her life and she wrote poems in a mad frenzy at the rate of two to three a day. Motherhood, it appears, had liberated her into her real self. She said, in a note written for the BBC:

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These new poems of mine have one thing in common. They were all written at about four in the morning – that still blur, almost eternal hour before the bab’s cry, before the glassy music of the milk man, setting his bottles.³

She could neither live with the mask on nor was prepared to expose her real self to the society in which she was an alien and here comes the breaking point. Peter Ackroyd, in *Notes for a New Culture* calls her poetry as the poetry of “breakdown”.

It is the characteristic quality of this poetry that the description claims no false ‘symbolic’ or ‘imagistic’ potential; it tends towards the visual. . . . The tone of Sylvia Plath within her poetry is a dominant, personal one; it is the self at its most transparent, without the resources of irony or inherited discourse.⁴

Plath’s efforts to hide this “transparent” quality brought in destruction. Her death does not come as a surprise because she sufficiently warns the reader. She kills the character of Esther Greenwood in her novel *The Bell Jar*, who was Plath herself.

Esther’s attempt to destroy herself is linked specifically with the destruction of her beauty, not merely in the sense that all death is decay, but that by obliterating herself as an object of sexual appeal, she can attack the role expected of her as a woman.⁵

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Kamala Das too fought with the society which looks upon woman as sexual objects. She does not require a veil or a mask to bring out this. Her early arranged marriage with the man much older to her creates an aversion. His demanding nature made her frigid.

I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed
me off physically and emotionally.⁶

Kamala Das was a rebel and does not make any attempts to hide it. Her husband's attitude of "a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him"⁷ sealed off her emotions.

She comes to a conclusion:

I knew that if love was that I had looked for in marriage, I would have to
look for it outside the legal orbit.⁸

Her ideal love, she wanted to be "a Radha" which by all accounts remain unfulfilled. She waited long enough

The long waiting
Had made their bond so chaste
.....
And Virgin crying
Everything in me
Is melting, even the hardness at the core

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O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting.

Nothing remains but

You. . .

(Radha)

She comes across many people, goes through many emotions but could not sustain. She becomes helpless.

It required drinks

To hold him down.

To make him love

Believe me,

All I could do was sob like a fool.

(The Suicide)

Kamala Das looks everywhere for Love. Towards Sea, towards friends, towards lovers but she gets it only in her dreams:

Why do I so often dream

Of a house where each silent

Corridor leads me to warm

Yellow rooms –

. . . .

They love . . . and once awake, I

See the bed from which my love

Has fled, the empty room, the

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Naked walls, count on fingers

My very few friends . . .

(The Corridors)

Kamala Das's tradition or religious background did not come to her rescue. Her health broke down and when she recovered from her death bed, she was a new person.

I had shed casual desire as a snake might shed its skin. I could no longer pretend either. . . my articles on free love had titillated many and poems had been read by several people. It was obvious that I had painted of myself a wrong image.⁹

She continues to write love poems but in a different tone.

The emotions do not literally boil over like in the recent ones. They are now "dipped in the rouge pots of happiness." Her going back to Malabar has given her a lot of strength. Ruminating her childhood memories makes her a child again. She wants even her lover to be a child,

. . . If you had come to my home

A few years later, as a child, I would have

Led you to my play rooms, I would have shown

The only doll I ever had. . . .

(Love Poem)

Kamala Das' sincerity and straight forwardness, expressed artistically in many of her poems, speak for themselves. She fought with herself to become a unique person and articulated it through poetry.

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