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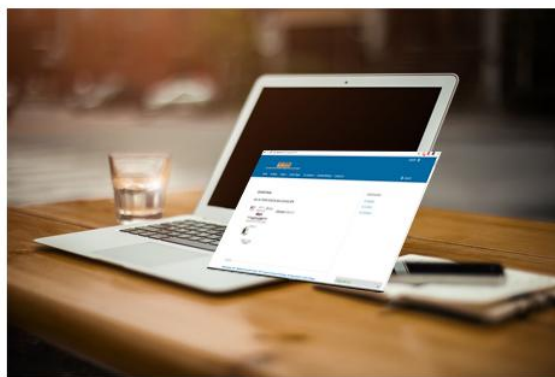
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Ajesh C,
Assistant Professor,
Reva University, Bangalore.
India
atc.ajesh@gmail.com

A semiotic analysis of Sylvia Plath's Poem Lady Lazarus underscoring its socio-cultural implications in the twenty-first century.

Abstract:

The paper focuses on the well-known poem 'Lady Lazarus' by Sylvia Plath which is a treasure house of significant and highly evocative imageries from the Holocaust which is linediscussed in a great deal about the subjective experiences of the author. This paper attempts to do a semiotic analysis of the poem and three major imageries are selected to discuss with its twenty-first-century significance as the imageries play a great role in any poems. This paper argues that Plath as a confessional poet wrote this poem based on her personal experiences and she effectively uses every bit of holocaust events that she used as imagery to shed light on her inward feelings and personal struggles and it has ample implications in this twenty-first century. "Lady Lazarus" is a powerful poem with a strong emotional meaning deeper than the peripheral display of words. The paper has focused on bringing the semiotic analysis of the imagery, tone, and symbolism used throughout the poem narrated an intense implication of Sylvia Plath's words and linking the same to the historical context to shed more light on these with an aim to fathom the meaning intended by the author and its wide implicational avenues for the twenty-first century.

Keywords:

Holocaust, Sylvia Plath, Lady Lazarus, semiotic, Analysis, death, circus.

Introduction:

Sylvia Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus' prominently call for a detailed semiotic analysis to comprehend the original thought of the author and its extensive application even in the present days. Since Plath has not given the speaker a name, the author of this paper refers to the speaker as 'Lady Lazarus' in this paper. 'Semiotics' is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation based on 'semiosis' - the relationship between a sign, an object, and

a meaning. The sign represents the object, or referent, in the mind of an interpreter. 'Interpretant' refers to a sign that serves as the representation of an object. Signs can be verbal (words) or nonverbal.¹ Even though this is an autobiographical and a reflectional poem, it also must be interpreted symbolically and psychologically as to get a rather complete sense of the poem and the intended idea of the author. A semiotic analysis of the poem will help us understand that she has made use of at least three significant symbols or signs which will be discussed in detail which will also appeal the readers about the reasons why she is obsessed with the idea of terminating her life and the reasons for making it as a target of her life. During her lifetime, Sylvia Plath has published just one book of poetry which is *The Colossus and Other Poems* and one novel- *The Bell Jar*, and a few stories in the magazines and even after her death, the bulk of her work including the completed manuscript *Ariel* was still unknown to readers. But, at present, she is glorified as a feminist martyr and posthumously she is psychoanalyzed, anthologized and politicized. Even half a century after her death, Plath's life, and works remain thrilling and astonishing not only to the Americans but to the entire world of English Literature.

The imagery of Holocaust:

One symbol that she has used in her poem *Lady Lazarus* is that of Holocaust. Plath is obsessed with death both in the literal and figurative way. She has already made several attempts to commit suicide in the past and in this poem she imagines that she is a victim of the Holocaust. The Holocaust, also referred to as the *Shoah*², was a genocide during World War II in which Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, aided by its collaborators, systematically murdered some six million European Jews between 30 Jan 1933 – 8 May 1945³. Around 17 million people were victims of this act and out of which 6 million Jews were systematically killed by the Nazis of Germany- is a persisting reference point of 'Lady Lazarus'. Sylvia Plath identifies herself with the victims of Nazi's Holocaust and she imagines that she is one of them. It seems that Plath tries to get comfort by comparing her problems to those who

¹ From C.S. Pierce, *Selected Writings*, 1958

² "The Hebrew word Shoah (שואה), also spelled Shoa and Sho'ah, meaning "calamity" in Hebrew (and also used to refer to "destruction" since the Middle Ages), became the standard Hebrew term for the 20th century Holocaust as early as the early 1940s."

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_the_Holocaust)

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust

were ruthlessly ill-treated during the Holocaust and concurrently she also expresses her intense feelings through this dark imagery.

In Lines, 4-9 Lady Lazarus compares herself to some of the horrific remnants of the Holocaust.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

The Nazis were rumored to have used the skin of Jewish people to make lampshades, and Lady Lazarus associates herself to one of them through a simile. Lady Lazarus compares herself to the Jews throughout the poem as a way of expressing her pain- here the Lady Lazarus is none other than the author Sylvia Plath.

Nazis forcefully evacuated the Jews from their houses and took all their possessions which include even linen garments. Plath makes use of the metaphor to compare her face to the plain Jewish linen. Plath in a way conveys that her condition is just like she is captured by the Nazis. In lines 23 and 24, Plath talks about the annihilation-

What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

When it is about 'annihilation' the picture of World War II and the Nazis come immediately to the mind of the reader.

In lines 64-66, Plath directly uses a couple of German words to add to the intensity-

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

Sylvia Plath uses the word 'Herr', the German word for "Mister," linking this poem back to the Nazis and Germany. Another German word that Plath used is "Doktor" which stands for the doctor, a male physician at Auschwitz, who conduct cruel experiments in the name of science. Using these German words would take the reader to the context of German Holocaust. She takes an extremely bold step of teasing the German *Gestapos* while imagining

that she is being killed in the mass crematorium. The *Gestapo* is an abbreviation of *GeheimeStaatspolizei*, was the official secret police of Nazi Germany and German-occupied Europe.

In stanzas 73-78 she narrates the event of German soldiers walking amidst burned dead bodies to find things that they can use.

Ash, ash—

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

They have burned down the entire humanity leaving behind only ash, a cake of soap, wedding ring and a gold filling tooth. In the last couple of stanzas of her poem, she uses Biblical record of the resurrection of Lazarus after four days of his burial. This event is recorded in the Holy Bible in the Gospel of John 11:1- 44. Just like Lazarus is resurrected out of death, Lady Lazarus comes back to life from her ashes. Here Sylvia Plath is expressing her hope of resurrection to avenge her enemies. Plath instantaneously transposes to the Phoenix of classical mythology. In classical mythology, Phoenix is a unique bird that lived for five or six centuries in the Arabian Desert, after this time burning itself on a funeral pyre and rising from the ashes with renewed youth to live through another.⁴

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

⁴<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/phoenix>.

She boldly tells to the Nazis that they cannot kill her and do away with it like they have done to the Jews. Instead, she will be resurrected like Lazarus, from her ashes to take the revenge and “eat men like air”.

The imagery of Death:

Death is another major imagery that is prevalent in Sylvia Plath's poems and especially in Lady Lazarus. If we summarize the theme of Sylvia Plath's Lady Lazarus in one word- it is 'the theme of Death'. Death is portrayed in Lady Lazarus just like you are right in front of it and this brings a shock factor and this creates an extra effect in the poem. We feel like the poet is taking us through the extreme experiences that she is narrating through the poem and we are forced to contemplate the same.

The title of the poem 'Lady Lazarus' itself is an allusion to the Lazarus of the Bible whom Jesus Christ raised up after four days after his burial. Having understood this imagery the first 3 lines of the poem help us to understand the message conveyed by the poet- she talks about death and rebirth: Plath is surviving just like the Lazarus of the Bible came back to life. Lines 4 to 7 narrates some of the heinous practices of Nazis-

... my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,

It is said that the that Nazis used to make Lampshades out of the skin of the Jews they have killed in the concentration camps and using their bones as the paperweight. In stanzas, 10 to 18 Lady Lazarus asks the enemy to 'peel off the napkin' to see her face and the person sees something like a corpse or a zombie.

Peel off the napkin
my enemy.
Do I terrify?—
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath

Once you remove the napkin, the only thing can be seen is a nose, eye pits, full sets of teeth and sour breath- these are very disgusting things for the readers to see. Though she is still alive, her body is just like a dead body! In line 21 she compares herself with a cat by way of using a simile and she says that she has got nine lives like a cat- or better she means that she died or attempted to die nine times but still came back to life. In stanzas 23 and 24, she is bored with her life and seriously wants to end it and she tries hard to end her life. She even calls her life as a trash!

What a trash

To annihilate each decade.

In lines, 35 to 45 speaker talks about her incident of coming face to face with death and the first time it was an accident at the age of ten. Later she meant to end her life and did not succeed. In lines 44 and 45 she tells that 'dying is an art and she does it exceptionally well'.

Sylvia Plath uses most horrifying and powerful imagery of death through the lines 71 through 78.

I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

She imagines that she is burned to charcoal in the concentration camp and only what is left is some ashes, a cake of soap and a wedding ring! She is even highlighting the death of her marriage. Though she says that she will be resurrected like Lazarus of the Bible, the readers are left with pondering about this horrifying imagery.

The imagery of circus:

Along with the imageries of holocaust and death, Lady Lazarus also uses the imagery of circus or carnival in her imagery opulent poem 'Lady Lazarus'. Sylvia Plath feels that people are observing her in such a way that they expect her to perform something for them at all times. She even takes to the extent that people are even ready to pay for her show and this is the context in which she compares her life to that of the circus. Through the lines 25 to 34, she imagines that a huge 'peanut-crunching crowd' is eagerly looking at her to perform 'The big striptease' for them. She doesn't like the idea and says 'I may be skin and bone, Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman', nonetheless, she is forced to perform for them not having a right for her choice. The lines quoted her loud outcry against making her a piece of the circus.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Following this stanza Sylvia Plath has actually included one more line- 'I may be Japanese' few days after she wrote this poem, but she later omitted it. She wants to identify herself with the victims of Holocaust.

Again through the lines 51-64 she amplifies the same imagery. She imagines that the crowd is waiting to consume her to the extent that they want to touch her, hear her heartbeats and even want "a bit of blood" and they are ready to pay for it.

It's the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute

Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’

That knocks me out.

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart——

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

We as the readers can sense her helpless state without having much control over her life but made subject to the whims and fancies of the leader and the crowd.

Conclusion:

No doubt, she has undergone countless personal struggles and she finds relief by narrating the same through her poems which is her art. Though the writer wanted to die, she is sure that death will not annihilate her, rather she will come back to life like the Lazarus of the Bible. The poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ by Sylvia Plath is a treasure house of significant and highly meaningful imageries from the Holocaust which in turn discussed a great deal about the personal experiences of the author herself. Plath effectively uses every bit of Holocaust events that she used as imagery to shed light on her inner feelings and personal struggles. This poem without any doubt leads the readers in a swing to the past and then to the present with an implication to the future.

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