

**FEMININITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S 'ARIEL', POEMS- 'DADDY'
AND 'LADY LAZARUS'****NEEMA MATHEW**

PhD, English Lecturer,

GHS & College,

Allahabad, U.P. India

**ABSTRACT**

Plath's poems confront the issues of gender, constricting social role and unrecognized life from a feminine perspective and ultimately develop into a female statement of the sexual battles between intellectual men and literary women. Western culture had always trapped the woman in divided loyalties, ambivalences and ambiguities. Plath recognized that the dichotomy between the self and the body symbolized the psychic fragmentation of her social and spiritual heritage. She exits from the patriarchal cage and thereby challenges the oppressive forces. The protagonist speaks in a voice wounded to death. Plath reveals a world which does not provoke for reformation but lays down the bare truths of a woman's self. Plath saddled on "Ariel", boldly rides straight into the dark, injured world of a woman and surveys the rigid social fabric created by man. The poems of Ariel reveal a complete hatred for the existing social order, painful ecstasy and a lost battle.

Keywords: Male oppression, liberation, self-definition, artistic energy, struggle.

**FEMININITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S 'ARIEL', POEMS- 'DADDY'
AND 'LADY LAZARUS'****NEEMA MATHEW**

PhD, English Lecturer,

HS & College,

Allahabad, U.P. India

Plath attempts to communicate in her poetry the recurring problems of discrimination in the society without actually mentioning their private effects on her. Plath confronts the sexist ideologies as it imprints itself on her sense as an excessive, oppressive drives. The sensuous, submissive woman that Freud discovered became an exploited class, within an order prescribed by the male. Under Freud's study each gender becomes severely polarized when he attributes "passivity" to the female sex. The anatomy, the history and the division create an irrational feminine shrinking her to a narcissistic and intuitive role.

Helene Cixous insists the women writers to return to their body. She says, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth." The poem "Daddy" shows her bitterness towards male domination, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through".

Sylvia Plath, through her poetry, keeps an ongoing dialogue with the male culture. She was not the one to tolerate powerlessness and, with unusual capacity, she thrusts response to the subjugation of her womanhood, "They thought death was worth it, but I have a self to recover, a queen".

As a poet, Plath makes a choice regarding the content, material and structure- the essential components of writing form. She is proud of the female body and emphasizes on the inclusion of the female experience into poetry. The various physical developments, desires and fantasies of the female body become a part of her poetry. This is her final

triumph over social constriction and a firm resolution to make a place for the woman in the society.

Plath explores woman's feminine experience in *Ariel* and transforms into "one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines". She plunges into a female's domestic life, her feelings and emotions and emerges with handful of feminine material in this collection of poems.

The speaker of the poems in *Ariel* speaks in a voice wounded to death. The bare truths of a woman's self have been artistically revealed in the poems of this book. Anatomy becomes her destiny and this is the truth for her. Plath writes boldly and courageously, undisturbed by the difficult path. She moves straight into the dark, injured world of a woman and with a cool, ironic look surveys the rigid, social fabric created by man. The speaker of these poems want to withdraw herself from the imperfections of life and venture into a purification of self. The poems reveal a complete hatred for the existing social order, frustration, painful ecstasy and a lost battle. Finally there is a familiar smell of death. *Ariel* becomes an expurgation of evil. The solution of the woman's oppression lies only in a complete deterioration of the social communal group or to make death inescapable.

A. Alvarez writes about Plath's creative intensity in the *Ariel* poems "A combination of forces, some chosen deliberately, others chosen for her, had brought her to the point where she was able to write as from her true center about the forces that really moved her".

Anne Sexton, stunned by her poems and her life's sudden, abrupt end in one of the lonely London flats, in 1963; cries out "O Sylvia, Sylvia, What is your death, but an old belonging, a mole that fell out of one of your poems?"

Ariel poems explore and reveal the emotional state and insight of a woman's unbearable experience in an identity devouring world. In these poems Plath, undergoes labour pains to give birth to a new world where domination will not exist and she will be

the master of her body- where woman would play a significant role in the creative process. Her attempts of suicide and finally her success in it led the critics to relate her creativity to madness and she as a female poet had been totally ignored. She faced the male blows as a woman and as an artist. But the tremendous chaos and anxiety from which she suffered broke her.

The American male society victimized her and devoured her to bits. The portrait that lies before us is that of a marred woman. Plath's unpublished letter of Oct.25, 1962, to Olive Higgins Prouty exposes the isolation and the pathetic plight of a woman writer: "My study has become a heaven, a real sanctuary for me: I have late poppies, bright red, and blue-purple cornflowers on my desk now.... Here is my hearth, my life my real self. I have never been so happy anywhere in my life as writing at my huge desk in the blue dawns, all to myself secret and quiet".

Plath, a figure of the double worked her way through all the repressions, constraints and the dilemmas and produced writings of rarest achievements. She was conscious of the incredibly complex situation, the discrimination and the dogma lay before a female artists. The fear and conflicts of a woman writer's identity, her emotions and her chaotic state of mind, her awareness of her body represent Plath's panorama of the Ariel poems.

She was dedicated to the artistic commitment and indulged into poetic creation. The imperfections of the existing order make her uncomfortable. She wishes to isolate, herself from the monstrous male gods.

Plath tries to revive the male oppressive design in poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus". These poems are the portrayal of Plath's reactions and assaults on the male oppressions. She creates a model of a father that symbolizes the patriarchal domination. As a representative of the women, she operates the role of the victim. By making of her father a prototype of the male, she projects the psychic situation of the victim. The poem is a declaration of her hatred of the oppressive fabrication of society and the gruesome

patricide committed on the feminine body. Plath draws upon the sufferings of the exploited women to express the pains inflicted upon them. In this poem she becomes a sacrificial object in reviving a dead father's image to give shape to the patriarchal culture. In restructuring the father image, she confronts the subjugated body and mind. It is an attempt for an imaginative seizure of the male world and a repossession of the female body. Thus it becomes a vehicle for escape into autonomy. With shameless harshness and intensity she punishes the father for the evil and brutality to which she is subjected.

George Steiner considers the ritualistic recreating of "Daddy" as "an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred." The speaker's own state is represented in the oppression of the Jews by the Nazis. The hideous and the atrocious oppressive acts of the Germans on the Jews symbolized the ugliness of the dominant class. For the poem "Daddy", Plath wrote an introductory note: "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was god.... She had to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it".

Plath's "Daddy" is identified with the Germans and she regards herself as an oppressed community. To heighten the effect of the victimization, she connects it with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Plath had a deep attachment to her father. But the absence of the father in her life turned everything unreal and left her isolated and unfulfilled. Childhood attributed to him, the places of a diety. She wishes to recapture, live and experience that inaccessible time order for the realization of her true self.

The discontinuous existence, incompleteness and unreality enclose in her psyche and mar her development. Plath's self attempts to rejoin history and make the stagnated time her own. "You do not do, you do not do any more, black shoe in which I have lived like a foot for thirty years, poor and white, Barely daring to breathe or Achoo". When male defined role cripples the woman, the diety image of the father assumes the form of demon and then there is a wish for a free existence: "Daddy, I have had to kill you".

Her development is hampered by the untimely death of her father. She hates the father for alienating her. She rebukes at this demon, male god: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time- Marble- heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one grey toe Big as a Frisco seal”.

The male figures appear in her poems as huge, large and big representing oppressive, cruel attitudes. Plath describes the male god as “Ghastly statue with one grey toe/Big as a Frisco seal”. She tries to destroy the memory of the father by killing him.

The Nazi imagery suggests power and the Jews symbolize the subjectiveness of the emotions. These Nazi/Jews images relates to masculinity and femininity. The speaker experiences the subjective sexuality. It is a hatred towards the male power: “Every woman adores a Fascist, The boat in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you”. The speaker reacts cruelly to the subjectiveness of the woman within sexually passive areas.

The obsession with the father has not let her true self develop. The hampered self seeks a liberation, a freedom from this obsessed life: “I have always been scared of you, With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. And your neat moustache and your Aryan eye”.

The usurpation of the woman’s body and mind by the “black man” with “bright blue”, “Aryan eye” hampers the development of her potentialities into free forms of energy and desire. “Any less the black man who bit my pretty red heart in two. I was ten when they buried you. At twenty I tried to die and get back, back, back to you. I thought even the bones would do”. The speaker is very vicious towards the patriarchal lives and in order to discontinue the oppressive time-order, she wants to “get back” to “Daddy”, or “even the bones would do”, “Kill” the “Fascist”, “Blackman” and return with her “pretty red heart”, only to merge herself in another “Man in black with a meinkampf look”.

Through marriage, the woman tries to free herself from the false living: “And then I knew what to do. I made a model of you, a man in black with a Meinkampf look”. The “model “with a Meinkampf look” resembles with her father. Here, she reveals no secrets.

She surrenders to another “black man”. “And I said I do, I do. So daddy, I’m finally through”. She now associates herself with the husband image.

The psychological portrait of the woman reveals her regressed potentiality. Now she has to kill two unrealities, two false selves: “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two- The vampire who said he was you and drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you want to know. Daddy, you can lie back now”.

If we concentrate on the total psychic situation of the persona, we get the vision of a distorted being. The self remains enclosed within the jar. For “seven years” the “Vampire” oppressively possessed her and left her dehumanized. The poem is an echo to evoke some strange charm of a demon-lover. There is Daddy’s guilt and the speaker’s sense of loss and betrayal.

The “Model” marriage confirms the tortures felt in marriage. The loss of the “Ghastly statue” with “black shoe” and “A man in black with a meinkampf look” is like two shocks that leave its scars on the poet.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood defines man’s true self with a touch of bitterness, “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from. Plath denies this arrowless state of the woman and she attempts to merge with the phallic man. Finally with “Daddy Daddy you bastard I’m through”, the ritualistic murder of the phallic man is performed. The poem ends with a loss of self and nothingness. The struggle to reclaim the self leaves her depleted. The “dancing and stamping” of the villagers is death becoming real in its cruelest form. The model of the father and the husband demolished. She experiences emptiness, an effacement and has a threatening hope of a mental release for her creativity and a rebirth of a being from a non-being.

Plath’s attitude becomes hostile to life, to nature and to all the pessimistic area into which the woman is trapped. She designs in “Lady Lazarus”, a feminine body which is a flame rather than a mutilated being. She detaches the body from self pity and

employs it for the defiance of her liberty. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" represents the Jewish body scarred by the atrocious Nazi inhumanity and persecution.

The protagonist in "Lady Lazarus" fiercely rises to fight against the barbaric inhumanity of man. Her rise out of the flame will become a vehicle for human salvation. Her repetitive exaction of the evils of man would determine the human capacity for a moral purpose: "Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well. I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels real. I guess you could say I've a call". Her risen corpse provides a release to an otherwise abused body.

There is urgency for self-definition here. We experience the persona's struggle for a new self. The very history would be dragged towards release. Against the grossest inhumanity and the traditional concept of passivity, the persona transfigures to a new self. This transcendence to a released self will be the personal voice of the woman as a whole who would abandon the dehumanized body and out of that a pure spirit emerge.

"Lady Lazarus" speaks of the triumph over the male-defined female roles. There is a union of true self with purity and what emerges is the rebirth of self. There is a sense of the woman avenging for their oppression. This could be achieved only through the death of the oppressed self. As Judith Kroll says: "Either directly or indirectly, the drama in which the true self and false self struggle for dominance is expressed by the double sided process of death and rebirth".

Throwing off the disguise of false self the woman would rise like a fiend out of the ash: "I rise with my red hair and I eat men like air". Through her will she distanced the sufferer from the concentration camp of "Herr Doctor," and "Herr Enemy"- and ironically she addresses man: "Do not think I underestimate your great concern".

Here perfection enables her to devour man. With the repossession and domination over her body she becomes invulnerable to the demands of man "She has folded them back into her body as petals".

With a fierce drive the woman demolishes everything. “Flesh bone, there is nothing there” with the divide struggle and will of “Lazarus”, she rises as a beautiful image of liberation and shrieks out: “Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Beware Beware. Out of the ash I rise with my red hair and I eat men like air”.

Like Christ’s resurrected body “Lady Lazarus” “with” “red hair” breathing poisonous air takes its determined, divine flight for the destruction of the male dominant circle. It is the demanding hunger of an artist for the status of a poet that forces the woman to “rise” and “eat men like air”.

Plath’s woman performs the murder of “Daddy” and like “Lady Lazarus” repossesses her body from “Herr Doctor”, “Herr Enemy” and galloping as God’s Lioness reached inside the female psyche and vibrantly involves herself in the battle of self-definition and freedom. What appears in “Ariel” is the figure of a determined woman, fighting for the survival of the artist within her. Jon Rosenblatt says that the poem “Ariel”, “entices us into a kind of death- the experience of abandoning our bodies selves”. Here the speaker’s psychological state is revealed, which is totally blank and static of all movement. The consciousness pulls the woman from the darker regions of life towards a fuller expression of her potential. The woman achieves the released artistic energy and sexual ambivalence becomes valueless.

The poem speaks of a woman’s dangerous flight on her stallion, “Ariel”, towards “the cauldron of morning”. In this process her identity merges with the masculine power of the horse. Like a “God’s lioness”, she moves out of the “stasis” and the blankness towards a consciousness. The horse, a sacrificial animal of the ancient Israelites, carries off the “White Godiva”. With the masculine power the “God’s lioness” transforms into an arrow that “drive” “Into the red Eye”. There is surrendering to the male constraints but a destruction of “Dead hand, Dead stringencies” that denies the woman all powers.

With an identity of an “arrow” that kills the “red Eye”, Plath attains the great poetic powers. Here, she does not wait for a power to come to her but with a furious

flight of an “arrow” against the “red Eye” she moves out of the “darkness” into the “cauldron of morning”. The female body is no longer a burden but becomes light like an “arrow” and attains the fullest power of a “Gods’ lioness”. It is a thought that come out of the mind and transforms into poetic art. Sex is “Substanceless” here. The body responds to the feelings and acute sensitivity of the mind. Energy accelerates motion, violently releases itself and reaches out to all writings. The determination and violence of the animal is compared to the woman’s breathless run for the terrifying fulfillment of her poetic art.

Simone de Beauvoir too calls for the woman’s awareness of her femininity: “The domain in which she is confined is surrounded by the masculine universe, but it is haunted by obscure forces of which men are themselves the play things;”

Plath had an exuberant consciousness of the American writing scene of the 1932. She was undergoing an anxious dialogue between male creation and female creativity. She was ferocious and shocked at the male reaction towards female writings. The time was male-dominated. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Emily Dickinson and Ann Bradstreet struggled hard to establish a female literary tradition. Plath, Livertov, Virginia Woolf participated in the new literary tradition.

Plath confronted the American male writing scene with great sophistication. Her poetry cultivated into a female statement out of the sexual battle between intellectual man and literary woman. From the letters written to her mother. Aurelia Plath, we find Plath an ambitious woman poet who expresses her desire to achieve a name. She defined herself as, “a woman poet like the world will gape at One of the few woman poets in the world who is a rejoicing woman.... a woman singer. Robert Lowell’s “feminine” heroine was destined to become a victim of male constrains to the female artist.

Though, Plath battled against her male counterparts in the intellectual field, she expresses intense love and reverence towards them. After the separation with Ted Hughes Plath settled in a cold London Flat. Here this outstanding woman poet ended her life by

committing suicide. Her death is not an escape from life. But it should be seen as a purification of self and an outlet to the emotional agitations. It represents a cry of pain, an echo of a poet: "I am I" which will haunt the male domination in all generations.

References:

1. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Vol.2. (New York: Pelican Freud Library, 1962) 147-148.
2. Robert Lowell, "Foreword to Ariel", *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath (New York: Harpewr & Row, 1961) vii.
3. A.Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath: A Memoir", *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath* 200.
4. Ann Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to sign", *Ariel Ascending: writings about Sylvia Plath* 184.
5. *Plath Letters Home* 248-256.
6. Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, (New York : Harper & Row, 1976)12.
7. Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath : The Poetry of Initiation* (Chapel Hill : The Univ. of North Caroline Press, 1979) 147.