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**THE VICTIM AND VICTIMIZER: A SELECT STUDY OF THE
POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH IN *ARIEL* COLLECTION**

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Sylvia Plath belongs to the Twentieth century generation of the 1960's in which writers, especially the poets, hoped to create a total environment in which the Self could be realised. It is in the *Ariel* collection that Plath's dilemma which constantly afflicted her mind, the antithetical confrontation of Eros and Thanatos impulses becomes strongly apparent to any discerning and devoted reader. As a confessional poet, Plath with her absurdist vision of the world makes extensive use of surrealist imagery in the *Ariel* collection and most of the poems in this collection look neurotic, formless and even bizarre. A consuming search for the ethos of Self-fulfillment becomes central to the poems in the *Ariel*, making confessional poetry as something spilling over with an element of uniqueness in Plath's personality which had to be realized. The poems in the *Ariel* written mostly between 1962 and 1963 conform to, "a willed poetic process that has behind it a sustained effort to relate and explore." Ramakrishnan 216. In a poem titled "Ariel", Plath describes a ride on her favourite horse by the same name and the poem comes alive by getting loaded with a charged language that drives right into the very centre of experience:

“Stasis in darkness
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! The Furrow”

And again,

“Black Sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air---
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel-----
Dead hands, dead stringencies.” TCP 239

What makes the collection *Ariel* quite disturbing from the reader's perspective is that these last poems written shortly before Plath's suicide withdraw deeper and deeper into an existential, psychological wordless state of stasis.

The poems in the *Ariel* command a bone-chilling authority and, “No artifice alone could have conjured up such effects, yet such is the paradox of art, these poems would never have come into being without the long, deliberate, technical training that had preceded them.” Wagner 39. The world of the poems is full of despair, bleakness and grotesque suffering. In the world of *Ariel*, “Love is shadow”. Here marriage is a final, desperate effort to gain peace and communication but even this marriage to Ted Hughes as the husband is hopelessly

rejected as an artificiality, almost a deception. Finally, throughout *Ariel*, “Language hardens or seeks to harden , on the truth of a shriek.”Robert L.Sitwell 520-35.

Ariel explores a state of consciousness on a more personal level and certain poems depict a daughter struggling unsuccessfully to recover a dead father whom she lost at a tender age and a consuming desire to retrieve his voice and persuade him to speak to her is quite visible. Thus, Plath becomes the symbolic victim and the haunting memory of the dead father as the victimizer delving deep into her mind and psyche. The impression conveyed to the reader in some poems from *Ariel* revolves round the fact that a spousal type of relationship haunted Plath’s mind with the colossal figure of her father acting as the bridegroom and Plath’s soul as the bride, something akin to the image we come across in the English metaphysical poetry of John Donne, Francis Thomson and Coventry Plafmore. Austensibly, it is the seeds of this very spousal instinct embedded deep within the inaccessible recesses of Plath’s inner world of the Self which, later on, germinated fully in the form of an Electra- type Complex, the very nucleus of the emotion of Eros. In other words, she is looking for an oracle, a father who will be the “gwarantor of all values”Lynda K.Bundtzen 187 and absolute measure of meaning in her life. The imagery of death and rebirth are the constituent elements which make the *Ariel* collection quite distinct in itself. Certain poems like “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, “The Applicant” and “The Couriers” express great anger and vengeance towards men, articulating what virtually Plath’s entire body of poetry represents : the striving of the fundamentally powerless woman for an autonomous , independent Self separated from the shadow of her husband.

The poem “Daddy” does articulate Plath’s desperate announcement to kill the past with her father as the chief protagonist in it. All the same, such a confession becomes only a symptom of the poet’s initial attempts to bury the torturing “Ghost” of her father. It can easily be seen at this point of Plath’s poetic career that the emotions of Thanatos were slowly but surely assuming control of her mind. Paradoxically, it became quite evident that the figure of the dead father striding across the psychic landscape of the poetess became the archetypal source of sensuousness as well as destructiveness: the pleasure of Eros mingled with the agony of Thanatos. Talking about the poem in a reading prepared for the BBC radio,Plath said:

“Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other. She has to act out – the little allegory once over before she is free of it”Sylvia Plath 293.

The poem is a figurative drama about mourning- about the human impulse to keep –a dead one alive emotionally. And it is about mourning gone haywire- a morbid inability to let go of the dear dead one. The opening lines of the poem display a child- daughter’s choked emotions who could not get rid of the memory of her dead father and considers him a “Black Shoe/ in which I have lived like a foot”. The line is heavily loaded with a suffering which eight year old persona of a small child underwent reminding the reader of a equivalent nursery rhyme “Young Miss Muffet/ who lived in a Tuffet”. Plath confessing that she felt like afoot inside a shoe who was her father totally denotes the unsettling reality of a very young and unpredictable mind, a destabilised personality, feeling itself completely encapsulated within the existential shell of the father-daughter syndrome:

“You do not, 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.”Sylvia Plath 22

In the lines above, Plath was unready for her father’s death and his unnatural existence in her psyche continuously haunted her for thirty long years but she now realized that his father

worship was self-destructive. In other words, the resurrected Daddy image anguished and tortured her life chronically and thus, she had to kill him in order to attain some semblance of dignity and honour:

“Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time----
Marble- heavy, a bag full of God.
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal”TCP, 222

Later, as the poem unfolds the persona of Plath starts lamenting in confessional voice about the things which a daughter could not share with her father:

“So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue struck in my jaw.” TCP, 223

Daughter calls her father a “German Nazi” which serves as a universal symbol of aggression, abuse and torture and identifies herself with the Jews. Finally, the daughter perceives her relationship with her father in terms of the victim-victimizer axis.

The theme of intermingled love and hate again and again in the poem as the daughter persona comments on the sexual fascination of cruelty. Plath admires her father with his dictatorial essence and does possess some love and affection for him but she is heart-broken by his death. She wants to unite with him by committing suicide but as she is saved, decides to marry a man of similar looks. The daughter wants to have a husband resembling her late father, thereby confirming the fact about the Electra Complex as furnishing the existentially poetic vocabulary not only in “Daddy” but in some other poems of *Ariel* as well. “Daddy” eventually climaxes with images of the two most important men in her life, the father and the husband psychically comingling into a single visualised entity.

The next poem echoing similar sentiments is the “The Applicant”. The poem is explicitly a portrait of marriage in contemporary western culture. However, the courtship and wedding in the poem represent not only male and female relations but human relations in general. The central metaphor of job-seeking in “The Applicant” suggests a close connection between the capitalist economic system, the patriarchal family structure and the general depersonalization of human relations. “The Applicant” employs the “first person” singular mode of narration, with the voice of the poetess herself acting as the transmitting agency. The words “you” in the poem identifies the reader and as usual, the confessional technique of Plath resounds throughout.

People are described as crippled and as dismembered pieces of bodies in the first stanza of “The Applicant”. Thus, in the very beginning of the poem the imagery of dismemberment verging on *Sparagmos* strikes hard reminding the reader that the personal violence had by now become a poetic routine with Plath:

“First, are you sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch.”TCP 221

The pieces described here are not even flesh, but “a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / a brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch” indicative of a demonic Mineral world full of the essence, of dehumanization and mechanization overcoming life’s happiness and contentment. In the second stanza, Plath describes the emptiness which characterises the applicant. The hand of the applicant is “empty”, as a hand is provided to him. Throughout the poem, humans are envisioned in bits and pieces like the broken pieces of furniture. The entire

poem echoes images of deconstruction:chopping and cutting everything, implicitly Plath's own Self somewhere comes under the same cutter. The next two stanzas introduce the "suit" at least as alive as the hollow man . The woman is presented as a mechanical doll. At this point, "The marriage is seen as a contract and the merits of the bridal suit are advertised with the words:

"I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit---

Black and stiff,but are not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof,proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Infact ,the suit,an artefact, has more substance and certainly more durability than the person to whom it is offered "in marriage". Ultimately it is suit which gives shape to the applicant where before he was shapeless, ajunk heap of fragmented parts. The man in the poem is finally defined by the black suit he puts on, but the definition of the women shows her to be even more alienated and dehumanized.In this way" the Applicant" as a poem can be defined as the poetry of comodification, whether it is a man or a woman, both are taken as mere commodities, consumed by the ravages of demonic human world . Plath's aesthetic as well as existential credo in the poem is one of total negation, of a tribulatory refrain upon a meaningless existence with an unpredictable and disjointed Self as the motivating agency.

Another poem in which Plath considers marriage as an entrapment is "The Couriers". It is a brief, brilliant lyric that can also be taken as introduction to her approach to the marriage and the family. The poem has the double objective, disassociating the poet from the symbols of the married life and of projecting a vision of love outside the marriage. The poem has two groups of stanzas followed by a final one line stanza.

The first group of the stanzas suggests of domesticity,"the snail on a leaf," "the tin of acetic acid" and the "gold ring", the second group affirms the poet's use of pastoral symbols ,"frost on a leaf," "the burning cauldron on mountain tops"and the "the violent surface of the sea";and the final stanza stresses the poetess's triumphant ability to love in her own fashion. Thus,"The Couriers" deals with the polarity of static domesticity and the charged dynamic world of the Self that concerns several *Ariel* poems:

"The word of a snail on the plate of a leaf?
It is not mine. Do not accept it.

Acetic acid in asealed tin?
Do not accept it. It is not genuine.

A ring of gold with the sun in iy?
Lies , Lies and a grief.

Frost on a leaf, the immaculate
Cauldron, talking and cracking

All to itself on the top of each
Of nine black Alps.

A disturbance in mirrors,
The sea shattering its gray one---

Love, Love, my season." TCP 247

“The Couriers” becomes another expresses exercise to give vent to the language of a disintegrating problematic Self. Finally, it can be said that this poem is one of those Ariel poems,” which find their analogies in the visions and emotional states and awful insights of psychosis”Linda W. Wagner44

In yet another poem “Lady Lazarus”, the adopted persona expresses great anger towards her oppressors who are male. In a reading prepared for BBC Broadcast , Sylvia Plath introduced the poem like this:

“The Speaker is a woman who has the Great and terrible gift of being reborn.
The only trouble is she has to die first. She i The Phonenix, the libertarian spirit,
what you will. She is also just a good plain, very resourceful woman”Plath 294

Throughout the poem, Christian symbolism is yoked to three other actions: the sideshow strip tease; the suffering inflicted by the Nazis on the Jews and the personal acts of self-destruction compulsively repeated after every decade Metaphorically experiencing death by killing herself everyday in her mind became a creative routine for Plath,the “art” pf a sequestered Self tittering on the brink of extinction. In the Fifteenth, sixteenth and Seventeenth stanzas of the poem, the contextual implication vis-a vis the autobiographical juxtaposition becomes crystal- clear:

“Dying
Is an art, like every thing else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.
It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.
It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.
It’s the theatrical”TCP 245

The preceding lines amply illustrate the subject of death as Plath’s metaphor for external violence . Her eventual suicide can also be described is this very context as an inflicted act of violence coming as the natural corollary to the metaphoric inner violence Plath’s agonized, suffering Self experienced

Taking the cue from the Biblical story of Lazarus, Plath envisions herself as the female counterpart of the scriptural character, simply to put herself with in the context of death as a rebirth, the resurrection of a mind and a mind and a psyche seeking deliverance from the torture of living a fruitless and futile life.

Lady Lazarus’s suffering is also a religious calling, a vocation. Her comeback or resurrection is a miracle like Christ’s resurrection of Lazarus and the purpose is apparently the same to provide visible proof of God’s power over life and death to a sceptical audience.

“Lady lazarus” like “Daddy” and other *Ariel* poems incorporates historical material into the initiary and sepulchral imagistic patterns.Allusions to historical events form part of the speaker’s fragmented identity and allow her to portray herself a kind of an eternal victim. The lady is a legendary figure,a sufferer, who has endureds almost every kind of torture. In Plath’s own words, this lady feels,”stuck down here as into a sack--- fight for air and freedom and the culture and the libraries of a city.”Aurelia Plath 465

Plath identifies Lady lazarus’s characteristics with the contemporary examples of brutality and persecution : the sadistic medical experiments on the Jews by Nazi doctors and the use of the dead bodies in the production of Lampshades and other objects:

“ A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen. TCP 244

Hitler's genocide of Jews during the second world War is still counted in history as one of the most gruesome massacres in the history of modern mankind. This program brought about by Hitler's Nazi party is transcreated by Plath into a personal metaphor as another added weapon in her personal armoury of disintegration and death. As such, Plath's *Lady Lazarus* considers herself as a bizarre amalgam of inanimate objects, barely patched together into a living being-- a true master--woman. Only the lady's sense of death and rebirth as an art of self--creation instills these lifeless objects with any power to fascinate a peanut crunching crowd. *Lady Lazarus's* shifting attention to her audience at intervals in the poem shows her own suffering and at one moment, an introduction to the audience turns into a painful supplication:

“ Gentleman, ladies
These are my hands
My knees
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. TCP 245

These multiple, contradictory relationships between *Lady Lazarus* and both her audience and her creator are resolved in the last four stanzas of the poem. The “Lady” is resurrected twice, first as the “opus”. The “valuable” of Herr Doktor, the artist who melts her down to the accumulated trash of her life. “A cake of soap, A wedding ring, A gold filling”. *Lady Lazarus* is a scapegoat, “The pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek” of the “doktor”. But the scapegoat turns into a predator in the end as the resurrected *Lady Lazarus* rises out of the ash and threatens to kill her tormentors.

Here, it can be said that the monster woman celebrates, “her escape and vengeance on men” Bundtzen 28 who once sacrificed a promising career for marriage to Ted Hughes whom she thought, “was wonderful and perfect but turned out to be a deserter and philanderer.” Bundtzen 27

The poems of the late period which comprise the *Ariel* collection were completed by Sylvia Plath with incredible rapidity. Most of the poems were composed within the last four months of her life. As a result “there is a high degree of consistency in thematic and imagistic elements in the late poems”, Jon Rosenblott 88 particularly in the use of pastoral images. In adopting towards a poetry of initiation, Plath quickly altered her use of Nature images as well as her perception of the external world. In poems like “Ariel”, “Daddy”, “The Applicant”, “The Couriers”, “*Lady Lazarus*” what we witness is that Plath affirms and participates in many of the stereotypes about woman's dreamy, intuitive nature and also achieves a critical view of this female sensibility” Bundtzen 206.

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