

Vol. 2, No.2, July - December 2013

ISSN 2277 - 1786

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THE DAWN JOURNAL

Reforming Beliefs

SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH**Rajesh Bojan****Kavitha Rajesh****ABSTRACT**

Sylvia Plath, a name that could never be forgotten. She is remembered as a brilliant American poet for the bulk of touching poetry she had left drawing most out of her own tragic life. Up to the very last moment, she led an unfulfilled life. She disliked of being a woman specifically due to the constraints the society imposed on her gender. Her soul thrived to leap far beyond this uncultured patriarchal system. As a young and growing poet, she strongly believed in the capacities in terms of what women could achieve. Her powerful, sometimes violent verses transparently express her anger towards social injustice caused to women. Her poems bring to light the defects of the patriarchal society in which she had lived. Poems like Daddy, Ariel, Jailer and Pursuit echo her struggles against the male-dominated society. In this way, her verses express the need for emancipation of her gender socially and politically. This paper aims at finding how Plath has successfully incorporated the social status of women in her powerful poetry.

Introduction

Plath's poetry is not only restricted to her own agonies but also represents her gender in every way. Her electrifying verses have stood the test of time representing the social status of women in general. Plath's poetry shows us how terribly her soul longed for an acceptable position in the men's world. She lived in a time when women were considered unimportant and were predominantly confined to domestic life. There were only few with opportunities to explore their capabilities and desires like men. Sylvia Plath's powerful poetry from the feminist view echoes that just because women were meant to take care of their family does not really mean they were unfit to handle outside situations like men.

The world has changed since then. Now, we see women pioneering in every field and often they outperform men. But, Plath's world was different. She possessed the skill, the knowledge and

even the courage to outperform to the very last moment of her life fighting as much against the cruel patriarchal society. But, to her it was impossible in reality. Plath desired to be set as free as a bird and this could be perceived from her journal remark:

My consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars – to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording - all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yes, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night (Journals 30).

It was liberation that she wanted in life as well as in her poetry. Plath was definitely not like other women who were voiceless. She disliked being a victim and tried her very best to come out of her bondage. Plath wanted to live, enjoy the comforts and fulfill her heart as men do. She wanted to explore the world in depth and ultimately change everything in her way. She in vain dreamt of a world that could never be practically possible. She was indeed afraid of merely being an object of sexual desire. She notes in her journal:

My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent (Journals 35).

Plath knew how difficult it was for women to balance both their career as well as family life. They could always stick to any one at the loss of the other. For Plath, career was more needed and she tried to balance both roles as a poet and as a mother and wife till the very end of her life. It was primarily for this freedom that she envied men to the core. Men had the wonderful opportunity to enhance their career as they needed and were free from all sorts of familial difficulties. She hated being “passive and listening.” At the time Plath was being recognized as an emerging poet, there

were great men dominating the field of poetry. It was not an easy job for her to attain the status of being recognized as a successful female poet in such a male-centered society, yet Plath overcame that challenge.

In *Daddy*, a poem written shortly before her suicide in 1963, Plath discusses about her torn relationship with both her father and her husband. She writes:

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. (1-5)

Plath has compared her life with her father to a shoe in which she has lived for thirty years. The colour black represents something bad and it is evident that she was certainly unhappy about the way she had lived. She goes on to say that her life is totally trapped inside the confined shoe where she had hardly able to breathe or sneeze. This way she makes it clear that she did not have the liberty right from her childhood and was always at the risk of being treated like women. She goes on to compare her father to a Nazi and then to a blood-sucking vampire with whom she could hardly ever speak. This reveals that Plath was either terrified at the sight of her father or at the way of his speech. She writes:

I never could talk to you
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare
Ich, ich, ich, ich
I could hardly speak. (24-28)

There could be no better example than the above lines to show how it feels to be a women oppressed by men. She notes, "I have always been scared of you" (41) and it is something that could be universally applicable for all women in distress.

In yet another beautiful poem titled *Ariel*, Plath imagines herself to be the arrow that holds the power to move forward but in the journey the speaker comes to an understanding looking at

the powerful sun which is compared to the male figure that she could no longer proceed as an arrow instead she is only a vulnerable dew that ultimately perishes by the power of the sun. She writes:

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning. (28-31)

In reading her poem *Jailer*, we understand that a woman's life is compared to the relationship between the jailor and his prisoner. The prisoner is completely dependent on the jailor and has to act according to his orders. There cannot be any fruitful or positive feeling between them and for the jailor the prisoner is always a criminal whom he looks and treats scornfully.

"Is that all he can come up with / The rattler of keys?" (4-5).

The speaker envisions the jailer to be a male and calls him "the rattler of keys." It is the jailer who holds the keys to liberation. Unfortunately, he is also the person who brings strict restrictions and control. The word, "rattler" could also point the rattling sound made by the rattlesnake which serves as a warning sign of danger and destruction. The line, "He has been burning me with cigarettes" (18). implies the rudeness with which the person is being handled.

Plath's tries to compare her marriage life to such devastating experience and says that she has been locked up in this eternal misery. Lines like, "I have been drugged and raped" (6) and "I die with variety - Hung, starved, burned, hooked" (34-35) portray in general how women are being ill-treated. She goes on to say: "I wish him dead or away / That, it seems, is the impossibility." (39-40). It is evident that she knows it is difficult to get rid from being tortured. All she could do is just wish him to be away from her or dead.

Similarly, in her poem *Pursuit*, she imagines as if she is chased by a cruel panther. The panther is a symbol of power and the black colour represents death. The speaker of the poem is pursued by a man who is as much in strength like a panther. The speaker who is probably a female tries to hide and stay away from it. She knows that she will have to lose her life if she is caught. She writes: "There is a panther stalks me down / One day I'll have my death of him" (1-2).

Conclusion

Men in Plath's poetic world are seen as persons with negative qualities bringing utmost despair to women both physically and psychologically. They are more like this dark panther which intends to kill its prey mercilessly. She writes:

In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait (21-24)

Look at the words Plath uses to emphasize this brutality. Men appear to her as a wild and *fierce* cat that for the sake of its own pleasure and need savages innocent and defenseless women who are *charred* and *ravened*. Plath's anger towards her husband and towards men in general is echoed throughout her violent poetry. What Plath has expected in women is something that could be achieved. Though, in our modern society we see women capturing all our attention as leaders in many fields, at the same time, it is still been impossible for many others to rise up. Plath's need and struggle for emancipation in her life can be comprehended easily because what she has written several years ago is still applicable to what we have been experiencing now at this moment. Only when women are being stopped looking as mere objects of physical desire shall real emancipation be attained.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rajesh Bojan is currently employed as Assistant Professor of English at Sri Eshwar College of Engineering in Coimbatore, India. He received his B.A. in English Literature from Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya College of Arts and Science in 2006 and an M.A. from Loyola College, Chennai in 2008. He earned his M.Phil. in ELT from Bharathiar University in 2009. He is now pursuing his Ph.D. in Literature at Government Arts College, Coimbatore. He is an ardent lover of literature and has been composing poetry since 2004. He has published a collection of poetry titled, *Maiyai Thotta Nodi* (2008) in Tamil. He has published several articles in leading national and international journals. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of The Dawn Journal, a multidisciplinary peer-reviewed online journal published bi-annually focusing on English Language Teaching, Literature and Tribal Studies.



Kavitha Rajesh is presently employed as Assistant Professor of English, Dr. R.V. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore. She received her B.A. in English Literature from CSI Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore. She obtained her M.A. in English Literature and her M.Phil. in ELT from Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. She is specialized in the area of language teaching and has published several articles in various journals. She is also an associate editor of The Dawn Journal.