

**FEMINIST APPROACH IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POEM, 'THE
COLOSSUS' AND 'FULL FATHOM FIVE'****NEEMA MATHEW**

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath records in her poetry the conflicts and contradictions existing in a woman's life due to the sex roles. Sylvia Plath had a sense of community with the women writers of her times and her stance is deeply committed to the re-orientation of a woman's role. Plath is obsessed with woman's identity and her subordinate position in relation to others. Her outstanding poems- 'The Colossus' and 'Full Fathom Five' have been written with a view to exposing her subordinate position in relation to her father, husband and other institutions dominated by male. Plath was primarily a women poet for whom feminine consciousness was of paramount importance. The major focus of the poem is on Plath's consciousness which is pictured as wounded, tortured and handicapped before male consciousness. The study also aims to show how Plath gives a normal shape to a mutilated female body and maintains a female literary tradition.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchal Society, oppression, gender, victim, repression.

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Sylvia Plath's poems confront the issues of gender constricting social role and unrecognized life from a feminine perspective. Her poems contain a large number of dehumanized portraits of women characters. She becomes a part of the movement of human psyche: her involvement in separating the woman from male aggression. Adrienne Rich discovers a powerful female voice in Plath's poetry, "it is finally the woman's sense of herself-embattled, possessed that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy." Plath, in her search for an identity, plunges to the very roots of inhumanity and destruction caused to the woman.

The women in Plath's times were beginning to reassess the values and question the tradition and Plath's poetry focuses on woman's autonomy and individuality while questioning the conventional values.

It was essential for the women to emerge out of their demarcated limitations to regain the lost power. Simone De Beauvoir says "Now, one must first emerge from it into a sovereign solitude if one wants to regain a grasp upon it: what woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty."

When the woman identifies her potential and kills the fear in her, the rage turns toward the demanding social order. Plath says, "if I want to keep on being a triple-threat woman: wife, writer and teacher.... I can't be a drudge." She rejoices in the image of herself as an arrow, a queen bee, a lioness and a transgressor. 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. The domineering male statusquo includes a system of constricting limitations that go largely unquestioned by the culture. Plath describes women giving into the male structure by consciously hiding their true selves behind the negative roles, "A living doll, every where you look/It can sew, it can cook," as recorded in the poem "Applicant".

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."

In becoming a power, woman has to give acknowledgement to her body and with high urgency, turn to the new forms of survival that would give her strength to endure. For the survival and development of self she has to reject domination and write of her feminine experiences.

The Colossus, published in 1960 is the first volume of Sylvia Plath. It is constructed upon her experience reflecting the regressive tone where self contributes to the literary phenomenon. It is a total commitment to craftsmanship, where the creative art acts and changes the rigidity of literary dogmas in verse.

She adjusted and focused her attention on the feminine modes of life that include the dreary domestic life, alien world of marriage, and forced confinement. In this situation, the woman struggling for identity, learns heroic qualities. She secretly labours in freeing self from sexist limitations and literary constrictions.

These poems are built around situations of despair, loneliness and destruction that claimed on Plath's competence.

Plath exposes the distorted visions of the female trying to emerge out of the restricted circumscription of traditional sex roles. In a letter to her mother, Plath opens out her ego revolting against a hostile world, "My battles are intricate and complex, and that I am, without despair, facing them, wrestling with angels and learning to tolerate that inevitable conflict which is our portion as long as we are truly alive. I am growing strong by practice.... What I am fighting for is the strength to claim the "right to be unhappy" together with the joy of creative affirmation...."

In "The Colossus" Plath attempts to bring him into existence. But she fears this huge figure who is too insulated in his strength to assent to her efforts "I shall never get you put together entirely, pieced, glued, and properly jointed. Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle. Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other. Thirty years now I have labored to dredge the silt from your throat."

The terrifying experiences of the distorted human life is displayed in 'Daddy' and 'The Colossus.' The poem 'Daddy' has the emotional implications and in 'The Colossus'. Here the spectacle of masculine presence, chilled the determination of the woman's sensibility. The energetic self is drawn out into an exacerbated link with remorse.

The colossal statue in ruins has connotations with the past which is dark, dead. It is an attempt for a symbolic reconstruction of the giant figure to revive the past, cultivate insight to investigate the sphere of the dispositioned childhood. The poem moves towards the endorsement of decadence. For thirty years" she has "labored", "Pieced, glued and properly jointed", but the consequential attempts prove futile and she fails to "put together entirely" the ruined statue.

Plath desperately needed a communication with the father for the development of self and in terrible confusion creates a world beyond the realm of reality. A. Alvarez

stresses, the father's absence as the cause for the vacuum in her individual existence. "The root of her suffering was the death of her father, whom she loved, who abandoned her, and who dragged her after him into death."

The mammoth fragments of the father evoke murderous instincts in her. "Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol, I crawl like an ant in mourning over the weedy acres of your brow". Plath venomously approaches the traditional "Roman Forum" and manages to punish him, for the sufferings, distorted existence by pulling the thick covers of the past and dragging out his corpse.

Plath hates powerful maleness and in "The Colossus" she remained rigidly conscious of her false self. She tries to assemble the ruins of the father but the menacing figure threatened her creative femaleness. There is a terrible inwards turmoil in Plath when she rushes to the father figure for resolving repression. A petrified Plath finds herself in a sudden emptiness with shattered pieces of the father. R.D. Laing explores the identity problems. He states a girl's dream, who is raped of her identity and this catastrophe leaves her empty of all hope, "The dreamer escaped into the room of her father. He stood in the middle of it. In her despair she rushed up to him and, desiring his protection, she threw her arms round his neck. But he too was made of stone and to her utter horror, he turned into sand when she embraced him...". The woman is confused of the mask of the disguised male attitude and her own vulnerable self. She gains nothing but a failure, a total loss. The attempt to maintain a proportion becomes an acute problem for her, "No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel on the blank stones of the landing".

The protagonist in "The Colossus" gives into the total domination of the patriarchy and is content in the coordination of the victims and the agents of repression. Both body and mind renounce the desired freedom and enters into an authoritarian area. The helpless subjugated self searches for the father's body for the re-establishment of the natural existence but the failure to achieve this turn her hostile towards life.

In her poetic collection *The Colossus*, Plath employs nature in its dominating rich vivid colours as a medium to contrast with the small size of herself. She is at ease with the natural world and adds brilliant colours to it. Plath's persona engages us in the kingdom of the father which is dangerously enclosed and from where she was ousted "A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet- speckled black. The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks. Their musk encroaches, circle after circle. A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in".

Plath strives to experience the recognition of her physical and creative potentiality and she searches for its conformation outside of marriage and derives worthlessness. "Trumpet-throats open to the beaks of birds. The Golden Rain Tree drips its powders down. In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red. The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings To father dynasties. The air is rich. Here is a queenship no mother can contest. A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings".

From letters Home we find Plath's response to genuine biological needs. The immediate available experiences assembled from the social behaviour and cultural

sources, encourage sexuality. Plath's feminine consciousness artistically drains self into the conventional boundaries and persists in tracing identity. She is concerned with the male ability to generate in her the needful- "I met the strongest man in the world.... a large, hulking: healthy Adam.... with a void like the thunder of God- a singer, story-teller lion and world-wanderer, a vagabond who will never stop....".

Here in the poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter", she fashions as the bride and becomes the goddess of her god.

She attacks upon her king, demands form of existence, destroys this personal relationship and hurls the male, back into the grave. It is a self extraction leading to a social freedom.

In "Full Fathom Five", the father is the king of the sea. "Old man, you surface seldom. Then you come in with the tide's coming. When seas wash cold, foam-capped."

Her hysterical drive into the luxuriant patriarchal sphere endangered self for she discovers the father in a primitive role of the patriarchal head "White hair, white beard, far- flung, A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves Crest and trough."

The mysterious shape of the father with "white hair, white beard "spread hair" is awe incest. Only a father of his form is revealed with the "rising, falling as waves".

This colossal, massive body represents that exploitative society that cripples woman and establishes the specificity of her passive portrait. Plath presents the portrait of the woman, erecting self through her femininity and delinks from traditional male culture. The very female anatomy is transformed here. She refuses the oppressive framework. She is positively concerned with the recognition of her creative art, the artist in her struggles for its achievement. For the affirmation of this reality she exhibits interest in the patriarchal scheme. She invades the gigantic territory, to extract support from the oppressive father for an acknowledgement of her literary talents.

The discovery of the father's kingdom in the sea, his firm feet on the sea, the approaching waves "Crest and trough", all made strong impressions on Plath. It symbolized power and strength grounded in the persuasive male organization. She realizes an echo here as if the approaching wave is the self triumphantly moving towards a viability, after sensitivity is coloured by the sensuous desires for the father who lies under the sea.

Plath is aware of her "own breath". She desires to acquire it in a naturalistic process. As she moves into this chilling universe of nightmare and fantasy, she visualizes that she herself is the goddess destined to get the queen's throne.

The region into which she has entered appears to have a frightening cold air. Her heroic journey once again brings her to the lush, colorful grove of Frazer. The rescue figure attracted her with a promise of a full freedom. But self in the midst of limiting environment necessitated for a destructive encounter and consequently her emergency as the murderer of the father. She has dug the grave for him.

A simultaneous danger lurks to Plath's self. Her communications with this deified patriarch, alienates her from the world and she feels unified with death.

The atmosphere in “Full Fathom Five” remains dominated by a force, a nameless cold feeling that involves a profound transformation of the poet’s consciousness. Through this, her passivity changes into an adventurous move and to treasure freedom and wholeness she returns to the same world.” She discovers the father figure who, “suffers some strange injury”. This colourful landscape is nothing but the coffin of the father and finally her own. He “seems to die” but his rebirth is the pre-requisite for her potential strength. Though “inscrutable” in shape, she hunts for the “godhood”. Plath brings, the literary self in the father’s sphere like a virgin to be accepted and becomes purified by her god. “I walk dry on your kingdom’s border exiled to no good.”

This enriched individual consciousness accompanied with the bold self urges the strict patriarchal head to give authenticity to her literary productions.

Her escape from the patriarchal domination was impossible. She was compelled to accept the oppressive rule of the male. She desperately pulled the shelter offered, snugly covering her body. Acceptance of the male rule was the only way of survival for her.

The whole expanse of Plath’s celestial kingdom glows with the sudden flash of the much apprehended identity. With unusual solemnity, she established a union with the patriarchal head. The sea symbolizes her bridal chamber where she would reveal her physical and the mental to her god “Your shelled bed I remember. Father, this thick air is murderous. I would breathe water.”

The changing feminine portrait is rather condescendingly exhibited by Plath as a woman transcending her strict repudiation to atoning a self. The Letters Home distinctly show Plath’s endeavour to work for a recognition in all reserves “...I am living like mad and would like to find my voice in writing.... I am finding a growing self and soul of which I am becoming proud in a good, honest sense. The one sin in this world is exploiting other people or cheating and fooling oneself, it’s a like long fight to forge a vital life.”.

She struggles to construct a world where woman’s knowledge and creativity would get an opportunity for not a mere physical survival but for a conducive climate so that the intellect would stand out in opposition to passivity.

The poem, “Man in Black” is a defiant tribute to death. She attempts to slip out of the world into the thrilling embrace of the death. The imploring protagonist yearns to be unified with the human ultimate. The initial attraction towards death will admirably suffice to motivate the woman to permit her natural energies to confront reality; shift the self and the body from abstraction and succeed in gaining confidence.

Man’s mental construct constitute cold conceited thinking and the crude brow pose as superiors, revealing impressions of literary inadequacy of the women. Plath deeply aroused by this threat to her art, inspects her capabilities and employs powerful drive acquired through valuable human interactions. She shapes gigantic personality. She achieves the power to annihilate the man and destruct his proud brow which is nothing but a defiant pretense and a deep hollow mask.

Under pain of expulsion from the literary world, Plath breaks the bounds of coquettish, subjective attitude and commands her destiny. She is determined to guard her existence. In its pursuance she would snatch out layers covering the oppressor and thereby, “suddenly transformed herself into bitch.... tigress, mermaid..... as the “White Goddess”. Her strength, lust and power is like “the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death”. Graves’s “White Goddess” has close connexion with Plath’s persona.

Man’s actions exhibit a motive of objectifying the woman. The social need for survival from a twisted and repressed, disordered personality drifted Plath’s deterministic self into an apparently non-peopled published surface. This flight from the perimeters of oppressive effects of the conventional female roles is a straight negation for a compromise with the egotistical ambitiousness of the man. She conceptualizes the construction of this landscape as a commitment to integrate and control the intellectual tradition.

Almost with a sweeping fiendish desire to annihilate the merciless negativism to body she attacks the male world and witnesses it crumbling down into a messy, disorganized filth. This hideous performance is a revulsion to the self’s annihilation and reveals a diluded climax of a sored egoism “Where the three magnets Breakwaters take the shove and such of the grey sea”.

The naked fear of annihilation from literary height to nothingness bites away at Plath’s sensitivity. She says “I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, mimicking nothingness. I want to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going and I am the one who has to decide the answers to these hideous questions.”

Plath has suffered the intolerable male behaviour. Her potentiality has been mercilessly extracted. The body being fragmented, her mental and the physical were restricted from interaction and the enormous pressures were exerted on her intellectuality. The unconscious in her explores the subversive conditions for a release from repression. She works for a woman’s social upliftment and accepts available alternatives for the lessening of barbaric control. Having separated the different components of the landscape, she reassembles it, the trivialities disappear and the significance of the whole structure makes its way. She laurels her own world where man is “dead Black coat, black shoes/black hair”. It is her fragmentation that the unconscious reveals and the conscious self pursues the male wholeness.

The credulous feminine woman hunted for a genuine behaviour towards the other half of the human specie and experienced a burning sense of injustice. The sobs and groans of the unsatisfied woman haunted her and the persona in “Man in Black” bespeaks in their language. The poet’s presence is felt in the scene depicted in the poem. She control this world which is untouched, unapproachable by man. This prevailing situation does not threaten her. The congenial atmosphere that she creates here is protective, comfortable and austere revealing an arduous harmony.”

Communication with man reveals to her withered and shriveled social life. The self compels the body to break away from this surface only to find the whole being involved in making him into a god and believing in his prowess.

Plath's feminine consciousness leads her into a different rational creative existence. This exclusive association shows tremendous surge of exuberance though containing limited radius of activity relying on the complete feminine resources. Here the fragmented components integrate into a unity symbolizing the sprouting of rich artistic life and she feels, "Purged and holy and ready for a new life".

Plath disregards the constraints of form and her poetry flows out of her frame in tune with her femininity. She picks up a wider canvas where instead of fragmentation, continuity is preferred. Soft colours symbolizing the feminine would replace the menacing phallus.

Plath moves beyond the conventional binaries of language and writes of female body and words felt. To Cixous poetic freedom lies "there where alterity is the essence of the "Other" reality". For both these writers the feminine body becomes the engendering source and the simultaneous movement of the mind and the physical produces language.

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