

Existential Angst & its Scio-Psychological dimensions in Plath's Poetry

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Abstract

The post holocaust threat precipitated a deep scene of despair and nihilism among the masses in general and poets in particular. This forced poets to compose a distinctive kind of poetry to account for the general bewilderment in the contemporary times. As a witness to the contemporary realities that sparked violence and agony. Plath attempted a unique poetry that thematized the survival struggles of a traumatized human being. The painful digestion of the socio-cultural problems and sufferings culminated in her alienation and estrangement. This paper attempts to analyze the cause that breeds a strong anxiety in her life. It also undertakes to probe the socio-psychological and existential dimensions of her angst.

Keywords - *Sylvia Plath, Agony, Violence, Alienation, Angst*

The socio-cultural climate that modern poets confronted was inherently nihilistic. The two Great Wars had led to the disintegration of European society beyond redemption. This changed the poet's outlook on life radically. Most of the poets watched the perplexing and puzzling scene as conscious men. The void created bred loss, despair, anxiety and isolation in people's life. It virtually led to the disappearance of old poetic practices and poetry as such took a new turn adopting motifs and techniques proper to the experience of contemporary man. These poets tried to come to grips with their psychological problems caused by factors which eroded the sense of personhood. What heightened their sense of loneliness was a horrifying and threatening world whose configuration through recondite reactionary tropes did not suffice as an effective communicative tool.

Among the poets who dealt with such subjects, Sylvia Plath occupies an important position. She achieved the status of a cult figure during the sixties and impressed all those who read her poetry in those tragic times. Under the stress and strain of internal and external drives, she makes herself the

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subject of her poems, evaluating and describing her own psychic landscape. She expresses her own emotional fissures through a language reflective of a violent reality. Her anguish over death, decay, hatred, sexual exploitation and violence made her poetry unique, attributing a new voice to it in the sixties.

A close study of her collections *Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965) and *Crossing the Water* (1971) reveals a speaking voice that feels terribly inadequate – a mistfit always trapped by centrifugal as well as centripetal forces that cast a spell of estrangement on her. Right from her childhood she was a keen observer of nature's duality separating one thing from the other to establish identity and individuality. Her sense of estrangement deepened with the passage of time. In her early poetry one can see her searching for the meaning of life through moods generated by particular situations. In one of the poems called "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" the landscape of wilderness shows an isolated and pathetic person cast away from the human society. The loneliness caused by the naturalistic scene is emphasized symbolically by the shrew that chitters in surrounding wilderness. The symbolic representation of loneliness in the wilderness of life presents an isolated persona caught up in a terrific atmosphere. This is further conveyed through the description of horror evoked in "Wuthering Heights".

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
Among all horizontals.
The grass is beating its head distractedly.
It is too delicate
For a life in such company:
Darkness terrifies it.

The presence of these horrors is not only naturalistic but also psychological. In "Hardcastle Craggs" and "The Snowman on the Moor" the speaking voice is initially carried away by the enchanting atmosphere but gradually leads to the loss of herself that appears to have no substance.

The condition of Plath's alienation is aptly expressed in "Daddy". Here the speaker reminisces of her past life that she lived 'inside a shoe for nearly thirty years' under the influence of the formidable figure of her dead father. Plath ridicules false hope as more and more absurdity invades it. She feels disgusted with her social life, and writes in a letter to her mother that the world does not require the cheerful stuff.

What we perceive is that the process of internalizing what is organically unacceptable has made inroads into the depths of her being. The feelings of loneliness, anguish and fear that the speaking voice expresses are objectified through concrete metaphors and symbols. She pictures her

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inner turmoil by juxtaposing it with the brutal and savage surroundings of the moors that made her condition desperate:

Of stark wind-harrowed hills and weltering mist;
But from the house
She stalked intractable as a driven ghost.

The threat to her adequacy of being operating in her pomes is ubiquitous. It emanates from psychic as well as natural landscape. Her protagonist is busy in blending herself with nature by identifying human beings with the fragile worms. While comparing the human world with that of animals she believes that both cherish an unpredictable life fraught with unforeseen consequences. In “Blue Moles” she writes:

What happens between us
Happens in darkness, vanishes
Easy and often as each breath.

Plath perceives isolation as a means to put up some kind of resistance against the inherited institutions of patriarchy. She felt celebrated institutions, especially marriage and domestic life; reward a woman only with self-disfigurement. Marriage as a social mechanism presumed to unite a male and female in a single soul had lost its meaning in a displaced cultural context. Instead, it led to one’s breakdown and disintegration. In “Lesbos” she laments over the social fragmentation that plays havoc with intimate human relationships. Lack of communication between the ‘Impotent husband who slumps out for coffee’ and the wife, who feels deserted, is a glaring example of fragmented bonds.

Her Bee-poems are a direct attack on the society that worship the phallic symbol as a self-justifying semantic marker. A woman oppressed and segregated is therefore forced to live a life of complete surrender. Like the queen bee, patriarchy and the laws governing it have locked her in a coffin. A symbolic isolation of her women characters from the authoritarianism of patriarchy can be found in the subtle use of her poetic diction. Unable to resist the pressures of patriarchy and failing to accommodate herself in the hostile surroundings of the fifties and sixties and the tensions and conflicts that her married life kept in store for her, created for this tragic poet a dark zone of nihilism. In her poem the “Dark House” she says:

This a dark house, very big.
I made it myself,
Cell by cell from a quiet corner,

For her the pain caused by birth is, one might say, existential in nature. It leads to the trauma of separation from the unity of Being. In her poems “Morning Song”, “Mary’s Song”, “Heavy

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Women” and other, birth is viewed as a process that segregates blood-related biological beings, such as, mother and child. The mother becomes a pathetic figure after delivery. This points to the agony that both mother and daughter experience as their biological bond gets weakened:

And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Plath seems to have cultivated a pathological privacy. Her sense of loss of viable relations does not permit her to achieve union with anything, past or present. In the “Berk Plage” she is afraid of entering the building she once loved so much. It is now an old age home where death lurks and suffering and horror are so pervasive that it could only be visited by ghosts. She meets ‘corpses at the gate’ and ‘hears the notes of dead bell’. It is a house where ‘boomerang like anchored elasties, hurting the owner” spell out death and despair for the incomers. The speaker shows a disliking rather fears to inhabit it:

Why should I walk
Beyond the breakwater, with barnacles?

Although at the end we witness her walking inside the building, yet her desolation intensifies manifold:

There is no hope, it is given up

The hostility of the internal as well as the external environment perplexed her about her fate. Apart from cultural barriers, her personal drives prevented her from developing meaningful relationships with her parents and husband and the world at large. She is subdued by these forces and ironically gets enclosed in a “Bell Jar” where she is left alone to probe the depths of her soul and try to identity her true self. Like Elizabeth Jennings, she produces a highly emotionally charged poetry reflecting ultimately the tragedy of her life.

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