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The Metaphoric Misery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Critiquing Mental Pathology, With the
Acceptance of the Self

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The woman is perfected.

Her dead

The body wears a smile of accomplishment...

We have come so far, it is over.

-excerpt from the poem 'Edge' (her last Poem, written six days before her death)

The oeuvre of Sylvia Plath has been studied from various perspectives, her limited life has become a haunting obsession of many literary scholars all around the world. She has been renowned for her confessional verses, inspired by a life so dramatic and riddled with uncomfortable creative bursts that proved her existence overwhelmingly unbearable. She tried to commit suicide three times, becoming successful on her third attempt, when she shoved her head in an oven and died while her two children slept in the next room.

The expansive nature of Plath's poetry has allowed it to become an indispensable part of modern literature. Her poems are riddled with metaphors that have the duality to critique both the personal and the larger socio-global aspects. This paper will attempt to locate her poetry, Lady Lazarus, and Tulips, to be precise, into the larger Disability Studies discourse, to understand the metaphoric challenge she faced throughout her life when it comes to Mental Health. Her struggles with the social model of disability were one of the greatest crises she faced which made her unable to 'move on'. This Paper aims to critique the Pathological Institute of Mental Health by reading Plath's Plea to Embrace the Identity Poetics, in her poems.

James Kauffman in his survey of depreciating mental health among creative people in America comes up with the theory of 'the Sylvia Plath Effect', an umbrella term that represents the uncanny yet usual characteristics of mental disturbances found among poets and creative writers whose evocation of a poetic muse often leads them to feel life and its negative aspects in too severe concentration. Though Kauffman's study tones down individualization to such a point that it seems highly generalized and problematic, an artist's choice of vocation can have

an indirect relation to their mental stability. As Kauffman in his essay ‘*The Sylvia Plath Effect: Mental Illness in Eminent Creative Writers*’, elucidates;

“Poets mentally assign credit, indirectly, their locus of control such as a muse, inadvertently placing themselves at a higher risk for depression and other emotional disorders. And women, especially those suffering from low self-esteem, may be more likely to have external rather than internal, loci of control.”

For most of her life, Plath was haunted by the weight of expectations. She craved to please her mother and kept the stakes too high for herself as a writer. Starting from the death of her father, then her non-acceptance of a creative writing program, and last of all, the end of her marriage with Poet Ted Hughes were the boulders that substantially wrecked her mental health. Her anger was also towards the irrationality behind the medical sciences, who chose inhumane medical treatments for the sake of ‘fixing a person’s brain’. After having repetitive electric shock treatments, and numerous staycations in Mental asylums, Plath wanted to accept her mental health for what it was- unabatable.

Tulips and the Red Rage Against Body Politics:

She suffered from melancholia which led her to show vital signs of Bipolar disorder, which comes under the type of Psychiatric Disability in Disability Studies. Though published in 1961, Tulips was written way before Plath’s suicide in 1963. She was inspired to write her when she received a bunch of Tulips just after she was recovering from appendicitis. The starting healthy beauty of the tulips stands in contrast with her fragile health. She finds the flowers both beguiling and appalling at the same time. She might be envious of the Tulips’ blooming health, the perfect petals on a sturdy stem, but seems to mock her as she lies helpless and dependent on nurses for her every basic need. As is evident in the verses below:

*The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper, I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.*

Readers at first sight, if they aren't aware of Plath's medical history around which she wrote this poem, would find the poem riddled with metaphors. But *Tulips* is written very plainly. The metaphors she uses convey despair regarding her failing health. The mere sight of the tulips breathing in the same spatial proximity is upsetting to her as she feels like a submissive at the hands of the institution of a hospital, which sounds like a totalitarian regime. The fresh redness of the tulips hurt her because their bright health challenges the 'snowy white and wintry' aura that surrounds her in the hospital. She feels her identity reduced, her individuality threatened ("*And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself*") as her belongings had been taken from her, her life reduced to a series of 'history and events' which she has conveyed to the anesthetics. The medical model of disability is widely challenged in this poem. As she rebels against the idea of 'perfect health' embodied in the figure of the tulips, she evokes identity poetics, giving the concept more stature than Body Politics, which secures dominance based on physicality and bodily well-being.

The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;

They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,

This was a time when she wasn't not only healthy in mind but also in body, hence the effacement took place on dual aspects. Tulips are the metaphor for the rigid notions about health and well-being on which a person is judged, that's why she is appalled by their 'healthy presence in the room'. Her identity and her temporal anxiety are peeked and harmed by the Tulips and what pristine righteous health they represent. She physically feels miles away from the conceptual and conventional world of 'health' which is inaccessible to her, like a country that permits passports only to perfectly abled individuals. At the end of the poem, her tone becomes complacent and resigned, as if she wants to express more anger but her body is numbed with drugs, to rest endlessly, '*The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea/And comes from a country far away as health*'. The haunting nature between health and the lack of it is so strong in this poem, as expressed aptly in Jacqueline Rose's book '*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*';

It has often been remarked that commentary on Plath tends to split into two antagonistic camps. Some pathologize Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, and read her writings as symptoms or warnings, something we should both admire and avoid. Diagnosis of Plath tends to make her culpable - guilt by association with the troubles of the unconscious

mind. The specter of psychic life rises in her person as a monumental affront for which she is punished.

Lady Lazarus and the Dual Politics of Holocaust and Medical Paralysis:

When Plath wrote, '*Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ and eat men like air*', we know it's a defining moment in the poem 'Lady Lazarus', a direct connection with the Biblical legend of Lazarus has been made, and an indirect hint towards her forced resurrection to life, which she has tried to give up for the third time. Lady Lazarus was written in 1962. Plath took her life in 1963, she wrote the poem during a creative burst of energy, around the same time she wrote Daddy. Hence one can say that while writing this poem, filled with melancholia and an ironic hold on life, she was on the verge of committing suicide for the third time.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

The muse of this poem is surprisingly the biblical figure of Lazarus, who was resurrected by Jesus after his death. Well, Lazarus and death. Throughout the poem, Plath pursues death like a lover, detailing her history with it and its persistent resistance of her. The poem, though vivid with Holocaust imagery, is also a window of how society treats people who are branded with the mark of 'suicidal'. At length, Plath talked about her ebbing passion for life both in her journals and during Interviews. To do a reading of Lady Lazarus from the Disability Studies point of view would require us to stoop to Plath's point of view, someone who agrees with suicide so well, that she is comparing her existence to a forced one, repeatedly pulled back from the peace of death because the world hasn't normalized it.

What a million filaments.

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

The social model of Disability is framed in these lines, the apathetic society doesn't care about her misery but they become a spectator nonetheless. The homogenous crowd, which represents the society at large doesn't identify with her unhappiness, with her rationality to find peace in death. After every suicide attempt, she has been forced to go through a procedure, reduced to

nothing but a specimen of research and rehabilitation at the hands of the doctors and a juicy paragraph in the newspaper for the people to chuckle at.

She compares the tyranny of the medical institute, to that of the robotic motions that Nazi officers go through the ashes of the dead after they burned a heap of Jews, poking the ashes for something valuable, something which withstood the heat of the burn. She sees the medical practitioners who are always so intent on bringing her back from death, who are so obsessed with 'fixing her mind', as dictators, as tyrants, like Hitler, who worships the idea of 'perfect health' so much that they won't leave her alone, won't accept her imperfection that marks her apart from the society. The notion of the medical model again has been critiqued, as her Identity Poetics dominates over the medical institution and thrives each time, shocking her, claiming to have resurrected her.

o, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Allan Day, in his essay "*Of Death and Paradox: Examining Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'*", brings in the fact that she was also suffering from borderline Personality Disorder because she is obsessed with perfection yet not attaining it, leading to a lifetime of insecurity, he writes, "*To this end, Plath battled with 'a false outer self and a real inner self and her self-destructiveness sprang from the yearning of her real self to kill her false self'. It is suggested that this 'false self' is the one lived by her unattainable standards which Plath described as a 'terrifying fear of mediocrity'*"

In Conclusion, I would like to conclude that Plath, for most of her life after her second attempt of suicide, was against the sanctioning aspect of society which was dead set on 'normalizing her'. Plath herself was terrified of her, of her depleting mental stability but she tried her best, in

work, as a mother, and as a wife. She tried so hard to accept herself so much, that one wonders if she had been alive, if her personal life hadn't gone downhill so drastically. We know that she would have been thriving professionally, the world knows that. Suffering from a disability that can be concealed easily with a smile, which is not tangible, except in the metaphoric misery of her poems, Plath had accepted that her condition was beyond health, perhaps if she had been alive then she would have critiqued the pathological persistence of this world. I would like to end this essay by quoting Plath herself, from her diary;

"Please don't expect me to always be good and kind and living. There are times when I will be cold and thoughtless and hard to understand"

-From the Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath

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