

## Women's Voice in the Poems of Sylvia Plath

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### ABSTRACT

Women share equal rights and responsibilities in society but unfortunately, they suffer a lot based on their gender. Since time immemorial, women have been subjected to innumerable atrocities in humankind. Sylvia Plath has been a prominent figure in 20th century American literature. She is a well-known literary figure worldwide for writing on womanhood and a leading figure in the feminist literature of the 1960s. She has written about the woman, her sufferings, search for identity, and struggle to lead a happy life in her works. The present paper discusses her poems in which she has shown the condition of women in society. She has examined the problems in the poems like 'Jailor', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Mushroom', 'The Applicant' etc. are some of her poems that present the miseries of women that Sylvia Plath has faced in her life.

**Keywords:** *Womanhood, Sylvia Plath, society, trauma, feminist literature.*

Sylvia Plath penned several poems presenting the image of women and their struggle. Her individual experiences and fight against the restrictions forced on her made her raise her voice against the patriarchal society. She was a good writer from the beginning. Still, she had to struggle hard to identify herself as a literary figure because of male dominance. She used her poetic voice as the voice of womanhood. Her poems repudiate the expectations placed upon women. Sylvia Plath intrigues her readers with her tenderness and deep emotions. Her poems have the voice of the women struggling against society. A woman reading her poems can very easily understand the feelings, situations and pains which Sylvia Plath has tried to present before the readers. Linda Wagner Martin states:

One imagines that when the Hugheses are invited to T. S. Eliot's home for dinner, Plath is hardly a participant in the conversation; she would certainly not talk about how many poems she had recently published. Australian poet Charles (known as Mike) Doyle remembers being invited to Ted and Sylvia's Boston apartment for dinner the year before, and having no idea that Plath also wrote poetry. (Wagner-Martin 108)

She lived a concise life, but she had all the qualities of a great poet. Through her poems, she identified herself with the literary world. Her poems explore her mental illness and inner trauma. Sylvia Plath was desirous of breaking the barriers by writing which was not accepted at her time. She focused on the subjects which were unusual and controversial for a woman. She got the attention of the readers very early and got recognition as a great poet for her

confessional and personal matters. She is regarded as an icon of the women's movement in America. Though she was not so famous when she was alive in today's world, she does not need any introduction.

There were several reasons behind her suicide, but the main cause was her inferiority complex towards the males around her. She and her husband, Ted Hughes, both were writers, but she was always regarded as secondary to her husband. It seems that Ted had complete control of her literary talent. Her unsuccessful marriage, Ted's infidelity, her mental trauma and her suicide are all proof of her psychological condition. She was not ready to bear whatever she suffered. So, poetry became the medium by which she represented herself. She was not an exceptional character. Her condition was the reality of that time. The women of America of that time were suffering the hardships that Sylvia Plath has presented in her poems. Plath will always be remembered for her poetry and her struggle with life. She suffered under the control of a patriarchal society, first under the authoritative power of her father and then under the abusive behaviour of her husband. She constantly desired an escape from this male-dominated society. She believed herself. She was ready to go beyond the limits that were made for women. Through her poems, she expressed her anger toward the society that caused injustice to the women. In her poems, she not only presented her frustration and agonies but also voiced the sufferings of her gender. She has presented the social status of women in society. While reading her poetry, we come to know how she longed for a balance between men and women. Her mighty poetry echoes that woman should not be treated only as housewives. They are not made to raise the children or to do household work. They are similar to men, and they also have the power to get whatever desire they have. She was a courageous woman. She fought with her difficulties up to the last moment of her life. She had a great desire to live a free and peaceful life.

Sylvia is regarded as a great feminist poet of America during the 1960s. She had negative views toward society as it always underestimates the value of women. She viewed that woman must be understood on their merits not only by their husbands but by society as well. She wanted to live of her own will. Being a woman, she could not get those opportunities that were open to men. She always felt a rivalry toward men. In the poem 'Daddy', she states:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two-  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,

Seven years, if you want to know. (Plath, Laday Lazarus 224)

The poem was published posthumously in her poetry collection 'Ariel' in 1965. She was very angry with her father and her husband, Ted Hughes. When she was a child, she lived under the dominating temperament of her father. When she married Ted Hughes, she found him much like her father. She calls Ted a vampire who sucked her blood for seven years in the poem. Ted's behaviour towards Sylvia was cruel. She wants to erase the memories of two people, her father and her husband. She does not want to live the life of a victim. She wanted to free herself from the bondages. When it became difficult for her to bear those difficulties and restrictions, she committed suicide. She tried to change everything unbearable for her. It became challenging for her to make a balance in her life. Her world was full of miseries. She suffered depression; she was a lonely mother, her husband cheated on her, she was treated inferior to men etc. All these things made her a rebel. She raised her voice in her poems. Till the very end of her life, she worked as a great poet and as a good mother.

Her poem 'Three Women' was written for radio broadcast and was published in 1971 in the collection 'Winter Trees'. The poem presents different experiences of three women having the same problem in three different situations. The three female characters are a wife, an office worker and a college student. In the poem, all three women are pregnant. The wife undergoes the standard delivery. She gives birth to a son and leaves the hospital with him. The second woman suffers a miscarriage, and the college student delivers a baby girl and gives her for adoption. Her pregnancy was unwanted as she was raped. At the beginning of the poem, we see that their situation is the same, but in the end, we find them in a pretty different position. The poem presents the experiences of reproduction from three different angles.

Her poem 'Mushroom' was published in 1960 in the poetry collection 'The Colossus and Other Poems.' It has a tone of protest against male oppression. The poem encourages women to rise and fight for their rights. Mushrooms are presented as a symbol of women and their struggle for their rights. The poet describes mushrooms growing silently. The growing of mushrooms is symbolically the uprising of women for protest. Women are gaining strength very silently. Mushrooms are gasping for air as they come out of the soil. Symbolically women are oppressed and restricted. They are feeling suffocation under the pressure of patriarchal society. Like the mushrooms, they are coming out to free themselves from the dominance of male culture. As the mushrooms are unnoticed, women are also unnoticed and unappreciated. They have the

abilities to stand similar to men, but they are living a life of rejection. Like the mushrooms, women will grow and achieve their place one day. Sylvia Plath states:

Even the paving

Our hammers, our rams

Earless and eyeless, (Plath, Laday Lazarus 139)

The lady mushrooms are expected to be earless and eyeless. The women are expected not to hear or see anything outside of men's command. As the mushrooms grow and become strong, women are also becoming intense. They are delicate, yet they are trying to emerge as a robust population. They protest whenever they get a chance. They are assumed voiceless, but they work extremely hard to find their place in this male-dominated society. She states that women have to protest hard to free themselves from the title of homemakers. Women are treated as tables and shelves in their homes. They have no right to give their opinions. As mushrooms are used as a food, women are also totally used and consumed by men. In this poem, Sylvia Plath has commented on women also for not standing for their causes. In the concluding stanza, the lady mushrooms seem confident about getting their rights. They will get whatever they deserve. In the poem 'The Applicant', She satirically presents a woman as an object. The woman raised as a wife to the applicant is not given a name. She is represented merely as a hand. For her husband, she is only a caregiver. She does all the household work for him. The poem is a commentary on women's role in society. Women are treated as living dolls. With time, she will be more valuable. In this poem, marriage is not romanticised by her. In the poem, it is shown that the brides are chosen through interviews. The verse 'Jailor' shows the abusive relationship between a jailor and a prisoner. Through the poem, Sylvia has presented her husband as a jailor and herself as a prisoner. The poem shows her hatred toward her husband. Sylvia portrays the condition and mental trauma of a wife who her husband torments. The wife feels like her house is a cage. Her marriage works as a locker of that cage. She has to suffer because of that marriage. At that time, the wife was expected to play the role of a housekeeper. They had no right to object to anything. Sylvia Plath was also facing those realities. She was forced to live with her husband with false love. Such women had no other choice but to die, and Sylvia Plath also chose death to free herself from that abusive life. She lost all her hopes and committed suicide. She wanted to live her life fully. Karen V. Kukil writes, "I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life, and I am limited." <sup>4</sup> (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (1950-1962)* 74)

In the poem 'Pursuit,' She writes about a victim chased by a panther. In the poem, she is the victim, and a panther is a man likely to be her husband, Ted Hughes. The man has the strength of a Panther, and he is chasing her. She is trying to save herself, but she also knows the truth that she will be caught and ultimately killed by the panther. There is a power which is working like a magnet. She cannot control herself from going toward that man. The poem shows how men seduce women, and women become their prey very quickly.

In the poem 'Lady Lazarus' she presents a woman through Lazarus's biblical character. The woman is Sylvia Plath herself. She describes her suicide attempts and how this society enjoys her escape from death each time. She defeats death repeatedly and is willing to take her revenge by killing the people who save her every time. She blames the male society for making her condition miserable. She tries to die repeatedly, but every time, they hold her. She portrays the situation of women who has no right either to die not to live. In the poem, she draws the woman as an object. She writes:

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby. (Plath, Lady Lazarus 246)

In the poem, 'Widow, ' Sylvia talks about the miseries and loneliness of a widow. According to her, it is very difficult for a woman to live without a man in this patriarchal world. She experienced the dominance of men when she and her mother were left alone after her father's death. She faced many difficulties in identifying herself with the world. Her mother struggled her whole life without her husband. She writes that the widow suffers mental and physical tortures. Her sufferings take out her heart from her body. She struggles with the memories of her husband, which leads to nothingness. She passes her whole life alone in distress. Though Sylvia was not a widow, she suffered loneliness as her husband committed adultery and left her alone. She relates her experience of abandonment and sorrow to the feelings of a widow. Whatever Sylvia Plath wrote was her own experience. She witnessed the cruelty of men from her childhood. She always assumed men as hunters who enjoy torturing women mentally, physically and psychologically. In her poems, she very neatly wrote about the real problems of women. But she did not tell the solution to those problems as she was not a social reformer. She was just a great poet who wrote very honestly. According to Susan Bassnett:

A confessional poet, an extremist poet, a post-romantic poet, a pre-feminist poet, a suicidal poet- all these terms have been used (and are still being used) in attempts to define and explain Sylvia Plath's writing. (Bassnett 120)

She wrote several years ago, but still, her poems seem familiar with the conditions of women. Time has changed a lot, but women's situation in society is still under the dominance of men. The world in which she was living made her condition from bad to worse. She took her own life, and we lost a great literary mind.

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