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Dialectics of Love in Sylvia Plath' Poetry

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Introduction

The justification for the present study is both simple and complex. Simple, because the aspect of love, in Plath, is a comparatively less explored area as compared to the other beaten thematic aspects, which provides an opportunity to work originally and justify the need and value of this study. Complex, because on reading the horde of criticism of the poet's works, it is baffling to observe that on examining the various aspects of poetic diction, literary indebtedness, biographical sources, dramatic aspect and the different thematic aspects, an overall impression is established that what concerns the poet was: disillusion, despair, destruction, horror, mutilation, disintegration and above all DEATH. It is non-convincing that this genius of a poet, a pretty woman of 30, mother of two children, daughter of a self-effacing mother, a daughter ever-in-mourning for her dead father, wife of her peer in poetry__ "a large, hulking, healthy Adam, with a voice like the thunder of god "could be so morbidly negative towards the natural fountain of love and tenderness. To dig out the cause of this overt inversion it becomes necessary to study her works from an angle which should enable one to know how, where and in what disguise does the milk of human kindness and a faith in the tender strength of love relationships, so central to a women's heart and so indispensable for human existence, gets expression in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

Abraham Kaplan, a psychologist in his book, *love.....and Death* talks of the various hues 'love' may acquire or in which love may express itself. He takes up love basically as a 'commitment,' 'caring,' 'acceptance,' 'respect,' a 'sharing,' a 'joy,' and a 'growth,'. He says__ "There are many species of love in addition to the love between a man and woman: the love of parents for children and of children for parents, the love of friends for one another, and a man's love for his country, his people, his profession, or his hobbies__ everything that is his. For, the self is fulfilled and enlarged precisely by this; when we love, we reach out to the other and embrace him. The boundaries of the self are thereby enlarged. The other is brought in, is incorporated into 'myself,' not first by being made over into my image, but as the person he is. When we love neither of us is quite the person that he was before. Both of us are transformed by love. Both of us have grown; the self finds its fulfilment."

Poets of the bygone days have been eulogizing love, have recognized the healing power of love and have sought in steadfast love a remedy to the ills of this life. Modern poets in general and Sylvia Plath in particular, may be somewhat removed in their treatment of the love theme but not as far removed as to efface the element of love from their poetry altogether. She does explore in her writing, within the framework of art forms, relationship with mother, father, husband, children, her own self and the society of the age of the atomic bomb. Shortly after her marriage to the English poet, Ted Hughes, she writes to her mother that she had composed "happy poems" and that some new acceptances were examples of "what true love can produce".

The perspective of love in Sylvia Plath's poetry is very wide in range and exhaustive in meaning. It is love unbound and uncontrolled. Of the 224 poems contained in *The Collected Poems* most of them deal with love__ either with its positive aspect or with its natural antitheses: hatred, anger, anguish, violence or its most extreme form 'death'. David Holbrook observes that, "Hate is not the opposite of love, but its inversion __ and basically it manifests an aggressive and hostile attempt to coerce 'the other' into loving." Holbrook's conclusion is grounded in the psychoanalytical theory propounded by Michael Balint in *Primary Love and Psychoanalytical Technique* that in a situation "when the individual becomes desperate, he may adopt an immoral position: The immoral motive is determined by the consideration that,

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since the joy of loving seems hopelessly barred to him, he may as well deliver himself over to the joy of hating and obtain what satisfaction he can out of that." Interestingly the number of negative references increase dramatically as her poetry matures, reflecting Plath's anger and resentment. Her last poetry however, sifts both emotions and exhibits and ascetic poise.

In the poems she refers to her loved ones as 'hooks' that catch and pull and attempt to drag her under: "I am not smiles. /these children are after something, with hooks and cries," ('Berck Plage') or "A brace or a hook," ('The Applicant'). Her poetry sketches up a love – hate bond between the Jew and the Nazi, daughter and the authoritarian father, wife and the "Goliath" husband, bee and beekeeper, in short, victims and oppressors. Sylvia Plath's imagination does not, like D.H. Lawrence's merely oscillate between feelings of love and of hatred. With her the two poles seem completely fused so much so that some explicitly spiteful utterances are dimensions of her emotions of love. More often than not it is tragic love that finds expression in the form of comic hatred. Elaborating on her poem 'Mirror' in the light of psychoanalytical theories, particularly the interpretations made by R.D. Laing in *The Divided Self*, David Holbrook comments on the importance of the primary mother-child relationship in the poem: "In the 'mirror- role' of the mother__ the way in which her response to her child, expressed in her face is a way of establishing his sense of his own identity_ what the child sees in her face is himself; and this seeing is the basis of creative looking at the world." Holbrook feels that, *The Mirror's* attitude is one of hate, its faithfulness is that of a hate that has the intensity of love. This ambivalence is true not only in the case of inter-personal relationship but vis-à-vis her own self too. She can detest herself vehemently and still be a narcissist. The same dialectic of love and hate that the mates feel for one another is experienced within the self. Expressions of anger, resentment, violence, mutilation, and annihilation act as guises for love as the death drive and love force run parallel to each other. Death can be seen as an associated thought or theme in love contexts or vice-versa. She wrestles with the dichotomies of love and death and imparts them newer meaning. She does not allow herself to be awed down by these forces. She would not accept them as controlling or guiding forces rather she maintains full control over these two abstract and the oft regarded awful and respectable poetic themes. She is the enchantress, and love and death come dancing, wailing, whimpering at her beck and call. The deft movements that they make result from the perfect control her magic finger which writes as if possessed, has on the strings by which they are held. She even has the guts to laugh at them, make fun of them or mock them and place her subjects in farcical situations. Death is made to feel itself powerless, almost impotent as it fails to generate the desired effect on the poet, who refuses to accept its supremacy.

At places the poet very effectively differentiates between pure love and degraded sexuality. Sex versus Chastity is the theme of 'Mad Girl's Love Song, a solipsistic villanelle dating from her pre-Cambridge days. In her later work, however, love and its distortions are often joined:

Bastard

Masturbating a glitter

He wants to be loved.

(Death & Co.)

Here, as also at other places, her poetry makes no distinction between a verbal abuse, a perverted sexual act and the emotion of love. Ariel poems underline the links between sexuality and esthetics, death and love. Sylvia Plath's love poems cover an enormously wide range of experience. There are poems of passion, of exaltation, poems of jealousy and bitterness and poems written as though in a state beyond love, horror, hate, morbid playing-up of self- pity, and finally move towards a perfect composure.

Sylvia Plath's texts sometimes offer unbelievable extreme contradictions. Whether we accept it or not we as complex human beings are made up of glaring contradictions and convictions which are mutually incompatible. Plath's poetry too, is full of contradictory impulses and feelings. She was capable of huge swings of mood which is a very normal human state of being. As a writer, perhaps more honestly than many, she left us a record in print of some of those contradictions and shifts of mood. "O heart, such disorganization!" she says, in 'An Appearance'. As contradictory as she had been gifted, Plath remains throughout her poetry a woman with "Too many dimensions to enter" ('A Life').

If Plath wished her poems to stand as love letters to the world, the perspective from which they proceed may in the end have made that wish impossible. Choice of metaphor defines the possibilities or impossibilities of love, for example, metaphor of the world as prison and hospital may well have been a response to a loveless world. By the time she came to write her last poem there was less and less room for and patience with love. Serious threats to love become obvious in the Ariel poems. Throughout these poems, love and the poet's need and often lack of it are thematically and dramatically prominent. A study of the memoirs and biographies shows that her friends and close acquaintances were insistent on celebrating her generosity and her capacity for happiness and love while critics of her poetry are by and large insistent on establishing her, a poet of death. In both cases she was her true self.

Response to the poetic themes exploited by Sylvia Plath is as polemical as the response to Sylvia as a person has been. She is as genuine in her convictions regarding love or the want of love as she is in her convictions regarding death. It is perhaps in our loving and dying that we are most ourselves. The genius for love she certainly had. She had a capacity for happiness and elation which expressed itself in relation to even small insignificant things and creatures with the same intensity as one would sense towards one's most loved ones. Into her poems, those incredibly beautiful lines and hallucinatory evocations, she hoarded as much of all that love as she could. Love possessed her and Plath feared whether she would ever be able to manage love. Love for her was a state of being, a thrilling transience, the more she needed it to be palpable, the more it ebbed into abstraction and remained at equidistance from her comprehension. When she says, "Love is the bone and the sinew of my curse" ('the Stones'), she is identifying the root cause of her malady. Her inability to relate or to find a language of love is at the centre of her breakdown.

Love, for Sylvia Plath, is no dallying in loveliness or basking in happiness that is showered on her by an otherness. Rather it is more often a responsibility which usually becomes oppressive. And love hurts because it demands responsibility. The persona in the poems seeks riddance from this oppression and takes refuge in the

hospital world, which by its very nature allows her to be irresponsible:

They have swabbed me clear of my loving association
(‘Tulips’)

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty (‘Tulips’)

In the poems questions of love are most painfully at stake. Plath’s moving universe is animated by love, rage and fear. In her poems the opposites clash and mangle one another, humiliating hatreds and intimate loves are so immediately present as to seem almost deranged. This contradiction is what her poems are about. They hit the reader with all the passion and pathos of a mind simultaneously fused with love and hate. Passions of hate and horror prevail in the poetry of Sylvia Plath running strongly counter to the affirming and life enhancing quality of most great English poetry even in this century. Her poetry rejects instead of accepting, despairs instead of glorying. But these hating and horrifying passions are rooted in love, are rational as well as irrational, lucid as well as bewildered.

Some of her poems deal with a kind of love that can be termed perverse, a shocking reversal of the established and the expected. Categorizing the poems thematically under the titles ‘love’ and ‘death’ is a common critical approach. Yet the situation is that love and death instincts are in fact indivisible. Many of her poems are about the establishment of radical correspondences between love and death. Also love and life instincts are just synonymous. The use of the word ‘love’ is very frequent, though it is not necessarily used in the context of celebration of life. It is used more often as a yearning, it recurs to suggest lack of love, the presence of the word means an absence of the emotion. In several poems love is repeated as an apostrophe:

Love, love, my season. (‘The Couriers’)

Love, love,
I have hung our cave with roses,
(‘Nick and the Candlestick’)

Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora’s scarves, (‘Fever 103’)

Love is willed and summoned and invoked, it does not arrive, it does not descend. Plath had never written simple love poems or regarded love as a feeling or concept, she would easily handle. And progressively, love became an inordinately complicated and difficult matter. Love is alternately for her a gift and a curse, a red presence and a white absence. She is nowhere sure what love means for her and whether it is actual or even wanted. Her poetry reveals a fascination towards the personas of spinsters, widows and childless women, all figures cut off from love or its realization. Sylvia never stopped recording in her poetry the wish and need to clear a space for love. The loving intention which some of the first lines of poems announce, the tone of the whole poems or the endings commonly belie. Love was so much a part of her world that it often stood in her poetry for that world itself. When the world seemed unreal love too did. There is a recurrent disbelief that true love does or can exist. The persona asks in wondering disbelief:

Oh love, how did you get here? (‘Nick and the Candlestick’)

Part as boast and part as amazement to herself. Her wish and need to love are complicated by a counter impulse towards abstraction.

If we go why what the poet says about love, life itself is love. To quote the poet: “For me, real issues of our time are the issues of every time_ the hurt and wonder of loving: making in all its forms, children, loaves of bread, paintings, building; and the conservation of life of all people, in all places.”

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