

Confessional Poetry with Special Reference to Sylvia Plath



P.C. Cambodia

Associate Professor,
Deptt. of English,
B.S.R. Govt. Arts College,
Alwar, Rajasthan

Abstract

In the united State of America, during 1950's and 1960's a group of poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg started composing poems which were termed as poetry of confessional mode. It was M.L. Rosenthal (1959), American poet & critic who used this term confessional poetry first of all while he was writing a literary review related to the life of Robert Lowell. If we pay attention to the chief characteristics of this literary movement, we find that it is a kind of poetry wherein a poet takes a chance to reveal his highly hidden or personal experiences which he would generally not prefer to manifest publicly. This issues which he takes up may be considered under the category of taboos. The other issues which a confessional poet takes up in his poetry are the psychic experiences, mental sickness, emptiness, mental disorder or sexuality. All of these topics when put together also became the strands of post modernistic style of composing poems. In ordinary sense of the term '**confessional**' people relate it to a visit of a person with a sense of guilt that over burdens his mind and heart and that he wants to get rid of it and with that intention he goes to a clergyman cloistered in a religious institution wherein the guilty conscious man is to reveal his guilt and ask for remedy through absolution from the clergyman which he lets the grief stricken man know. This meaning of confessional is not to be co - related with the group of American confessional poets who practice this kind of poetry. The chief characteristics of this kind of poetry would be taken up in this paper and of course, the other powerful strengths of this type of poetry will also be considered in this paper with special reference to Sylvia Plath.

Keywords: Admittance, Trauma, Depression, Psychoanalysis, Pain & Suffering, Psychic Levels, Turmoil, Blankness, Isolation, Veiled Aspects, Ambivalence, Isomania.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts (1932-1963) in the United States of America. As she won Fulbright Fellowship for higher education so she came to Cambridge, United Kingdom and she did her B.A. from Smith College, Cambridge. She established as a poet and also as a prose writer. Her poetic works include *The Colossus and the Other Poems* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and her prose works include her letters in two volumes, her journals in two editions (1982 and 2000), her collect of short stories. She remained mentally upset and clinically depressed for most of her adult life and she made at least two suicidal attempts to destroy herself. Once she consumed over dozens of sleep inducing medicines kept for her mother who was a patient of insomnia and once she dashed her high speed moving car into a river with an intention to end up her life but by the grace of almighty she was saved. She established herself as a poet of confessional poetry which has been quite popular during those days in U.S.A, U.K. and in our country poets like Kamla Dass, Eunice De Souza (1940-2017) popularised it in the last few decades. It needs to be investigated from various angles such as literal, social, gender based probing and finally psychoanalytic focussing in the light of modern latest psychological theories. An attempt has been made in order to point out the chief ingredients of this type of poetry and the other strengths of this poetry such as auto biographical touch and the issue of identity with respect to location, dislocation, relocation have also been revealed.

Review of Literature

Confessional poetry in the united states of America developed as a by product of the impacts of second world war. The immediate impact and product in the literary field of the second world war was the theatre of

absurdity in which the chief personalities were Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and the other British and French play wrights and thereafter second by product of this war was confessional poetry as the sense of fear of the war continued to be transmitted in the mind of the persons from every walk of life including the literary personalities. This type of poetry involves and under lines freedom and liberty for women, their struggle for the upgrading of their position. A lot of literature in the form of primary sources and secondary sources has been produced almost on every confessional poet whether living in the united states of America or elsewhere in the world. Books such as *Sisterhood is Powerful : An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* by Morgan Robin (1970), Random house, New York, ISBN 0-394-45240-2, *The Silent Women: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* by Malcolm Janet (1995), Perennial Classics, New York, ISBN 0-06-093018-7 could be read. For critical reviewing of literature and to feel first - hand experience of confessional poetry by Sylvia Plath, books such as *Winter Trees, Crossing the Water, Ariel, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, Colossus* published by Faber and Faber Limited, London could also be read.

Objectives of the Study

To trace out salient features of confessional type of American poetry during 1950's and 1960's and to know whether this kind of poetry could inspire the other poets in contemporary times in the other parts of the world.

To find out which poets followed this type of poetry so as whom to call as the ring leader of this school of poetry.

To know if revealing highly personalized issues through poetry could provide any solace, cathartic impact (lightening of diseased and oppressive mind of the poet). It may also be called as an investigation to know if they could beget any consolation or relief by revealing personalized issues.

To pursue psychoanalytical studies of the confessional American poet Sylvia Plath and to find out the impact of location, dislocation, relocation (with reference to the world map) on her poetry which she composed time to time in her changing location on either side of the Atlantic ocean as we know that after her marriage with Ted Hughes, she and her husband kept on living

To know if the poetic technique of Sylvia Plath or the contents of her confessional poetry had undergone any changes by her marriage with the contemporary poet Ted Hughes.

Hypothesis

It is assumed that over ambitious nature and the tendency to have fast and quick gain within short time span becomes the root cause of mental trauma & psychic depression and this is the back bone of development of confessional American type of poetry and secondly it is assumed that a deep psychoanalytic probing of the personal life and the poetry composed by the confessional poets can provide a solace to these poets and can save them from falling in to a pit of utter depression that ultimately leads to self - destruction.

MainText

The brand with which Sylvia Plath's poetry is tagged with is confessional and that is the poetry of admittance of highly personalized views. The other strand of her poetry is traumatic mentality and hospitalisation. Words and phrases such as diagnosis, pathological, tissue – culture, migraine, belly – ache, repetitive references to blood, needles, plaster, doctors, nurses, hospitals, depression often keep on appearing in her poetry Who or which poet has dared to give full and truthful account of the labour room settings of a hospital where infants are born before the bold American poetess, Sylvia Plath? The obvious answer to this question is none so it was Sylvia Plath who opened a new type of poetry by referring to white bed sheets and green movable curtains of hospitals where disinfectants and a lot of bodily entering apparatus and equipment are used and kept. There are untimely and occasional cries coming out of the mouth of highly matured pregnant ladies lying listlessly in labour room and after delivery of a baby (infant) there goes stitching of private parts of a mother's body with silken threads thinking her to be a parcel to be packed as a material. Undoubtedly the entire accounts that a reader of these poems is provided with is highly realistic as he comes to know that an infant having been taken out of the womb of her mother changes his blue colour of the body to pale out of fear and when he is given an instant bath by dipping him into a bowl full of water "a red lotus" (smiling face of the newly born baby) opens in the bowl of blood (water becomes blood red because of the washed motherly blood sticking on the body of the infant) : poem **Three Women**. There after care begins for the pinkish infant. In order to have a real touch of such a privatized type of poetry with labour room setting of a hospital the following lines by¹Sylvia Plath (2017:39) could be quoted :

"And what if two lives leaked
between my thighs?
I have seen the white clean
chamber with its instruments.
It is a place of shrieks. It is not
happy.
This is where you will come when
you are ready.
The night lights are flat red moons.
They are dull with blood.
I am not ready for anything to
happen."

The readers of the poetry of Sylvia Plath and other confessional poets will commonly agree that their poetry was full of depression and disappointment or trauma stricken but does it mean that these poets ever remained to be within such fits of depression and sickness? The obvious answer to this question is no as repetitive attempts were made by these poets to come out of depression as ²Sylvia Plath writes herself (2017:23):

She wanted to leave me, she
thought she was superior,
And I'd been keeping her in the
dark, and she was resentful –

Wasting her days waiting on a half-
corpse!
And secretly she began to hope I'd
die.
Then she could cover my mouth
and eyes, cover me entirely,
And wear my painted face, the way
a mummy-case
Wears the face of a Pharaoh,
though it's made of mud and water.

.....
.....
She may be a saint, and I may be
ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that doesn't
matter a bit.
I'm collecting my strength; one day I
shall manage without her,
And she'll perish with emptiness
then, and begin to miss me.

The pronoun she in the above lines means Sylvia Plath's nurse or the maid servant who served her during her terrible illness and the above quoted poetic lines are from the poem **In Plaster** where the poet is fatally sick so as to be considered as half corpse or she could be considered by her nurse as a dead body like that of a Pharaoh (Egyptian Civilization wherein they keep their king's dead body protected and anointed with preservative mixture of chemicals) placed in a mummy – case but one day her nurse will find out that the poet could get up out of her bed to be fully healthy and at that time the maid or the nurse would face her disillusionment and she would run away with her misconceptions regarding poetess's illness.

The same resolute determination to recover from depression, despair, frustration & futility could also be seen in the poem **Three Women** composed by³Sylvia Plath (2017:37) :

I have had my chances. I have tried
and tried.
I have stitched life into me like a
rare organ,
And walked carefully, precariously,
like something rare.
I have tried not to think too hard. I
have tried to be natural.

Confessional poets accept their growing love affair with so many persons publicly and so does Sylvia Plath she admits her sensual attachment even with her own brother as⁴she writes (1979:206) "The only perfect love I have is for my brother. Because I cannot love him physically, I shall always love him and be jealous of his wife to a little. Strange that having lived in such passion, such striking and tears, such fierce joy, I could turn so cold, so disgusted, at all the superfluous playing with other, those flash attractions that seem my doom." She thinks of loving another man Richard and she imagines a conception (conceiving) with him and assumes of growing bigger in size with a child in her womb. She considers Richard a vigour lacking weak man to beget a child for her so she fears of a deformed or mentally retarded delivery of a child so she would inform Richard that he

lacks manly power (Youth) to beget a healthy child for her and would refuse him a mating together. In her Cambridge Notes written on 19 Feb. 1956 she wanted to have a husband, a lover and a son all at once and at a time and in continuation of the same feelings⁵she writes (279:207) "I long to permeate the matter of this world : to become anchored to life by laundry and lilacs, daily bread and fried eggs, and a man, the dark-eyed stranger, who eats my food and my body and my love and goes around the world all day and comes back to find solace with me at night who will give me a child."

We should note that she admitted her love for Welsh poet Dylan Thomas whom she could not get a chance to meet even when he was in U.K. and at that time she wasn't married to Ted Hughes. She met Ted Hughes on 25th Feb. 1956 in a party in Cambridge in England there after she got married but still cherishing love for others. The characteristic of confessional poetry that we would like to underline by these comments, criticism and illustrations is the aim of publicly revealing those issues which are highly private say for example cherishing love for other men then husband in case of married ladies or cherishing love for other ladies in case of a married men or the same could also be true for any other unmarried men or women. In the other poem **Three Women** she writes:

I have tried to be blind in love, like
other women,
Blind in my bed, with my dear blind
sweet one,
Not looking, through the thick dark,
for the face of another.
I did not look. But still the face was
there,

This way we see that revealing love for other men in case of married ladies was also a conventional theme of the confessional poetry. Her counter example in the contemporary Indian English literature is that of Kamla Das who makes a complaint through her poetry against her husband for not entertaining her marital womanhood and she publicly accepts her sexual relations with other persons.

Which other features could be the strength of Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry other than privatized issues or depression or hospitalization or taboos. Let us investigate. The other powerful issues which she has taken up are psychological symbolism, colour discrimination, the issue of identity, the role of spaces, historical echoing, nihilism, beautiful presentation of nature and they are the issues of consideration which provide strength to Sylvia Plath's poetry. It will be worth mentioning to note how beautifully she presents nature in the poem⁵Departure (1981:51)

"The figs on the fig tree in the yard
are green:
Green also the grapes on the wine
green,
Shading the bricked porch tiles,
The money's run out."

In the other poem she writes :

“How nature sensing this,
compounds her bitters
Unfitted, ungrieved, our leave
taking.
The Sun shines on the unripe corn,
Cats play in the stalks.”

Confessional poetry has been poetry of revolt, in case of female poets, against male dominance, kitchen bound duties and crushing female intellectualism, injustice, persecution to which women have been put to. To express this characteristic of poetry we notice that Sylvia Plath calls her dead father as a bastard in the poem **Daddy** and her husband doggy and impotent in the poem **Lesbos** and in the other poem **Panther** she calls her husband Ted Hughes a ⁶Panther (2008:22)

“There is a panther stalks me down,
One day I'll have my death of him,
His greed has set woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the Sun
Most soft most savagely glides that
step,
Advancing always at my back;
From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak
havoc;
The hunt is on, and spruns the trap.
Flayed by thorns I track the rocks,
Haggard through the hot white
noon.
Along red network of his veins
What fires run, what craving
wakes?

.....
.....

Of course, Sylvia Plath had been living separately with her children at the time she composed the foresaid poem and peaceful time of her marriage didn't continue more than seven years and there after her relations with her husband grew tense and they led to a timely but permanent separation. She was in a traumatic mental setup as her husband Ted Hughes started living with other lady named AssiaWevill with whom he had extra marital relations. Whatever she writes in this poem **Pursuit** came fully true as only after a couple of months of composition of this poem she committed a suicide by placing her head into a gas oven and switched it on to destroy herself and later on Ted Hughes forcefully became the owner of entire property of Sylvia Plath by framing a board named Sylvia Plath's Estate and claimed himself as surviving husband and legal heir of her remaining fortune. Of course, several groups of ladies in the name of save women and save women hood threatened Ted Hughes to shoot him to death to punish him but they were kind not to do that and later on Ted Hughes died is nature death in 1998.

Sylvia Plath and the other confessional poets thought from a different angle and it is only for this reason that their poetry is different and distinguishable say for example she in the poem ⁷**A Birthday Present** writes (2001:42)

“I do not want much of a present
anyway this year,
After all I am alive only by
accident.

I would have killed myself gladly
that time any possible way.
Now there are these veils
shimmering like curtains.”

If a poet composes a poem on the topic of his birthday, we expect him to make the setting joyous, pleasant, mirthful and marry making. He expects others to say “Many Many Happy Return of the Day.” If a poet himself talks about his death on the grand occasion of his birthday then who would like to compliment him and who would like to be with him on such joyous occasions which have been converted to grim event. How oppressive it would have been for those who read such a poem when pleasant time becomes a tragic experience and words and phrases such a dead breath, ghost-column, last supper, killing days, grave decorating materials such as shields in the poem entitled A Birthday Present makes the poem horror stricken against our preview of finding something interesting in the poem related to Birthday. Colours have been used by Sylvia Plath as symbols. The use of black and white is more than the other colours in connotative contexts. In the language of science, black and white are not colours as black is the absence of the colour and white is the combination or mixture of other seven colours and this fact could be proved by highly rotating Newton's disc. White in her poetry means fearful (Poem: Lesbos), it also means doctors and nursing staff (Poem: Berck-Plage), white also means expressionless (Poem: Three Women). Likewise black in her poetry means mysticism, darkness, ignorance, mourning, degraded. White in her poetry means fair colour of the skin and black refers to the dullness of the skin and the both black and white are associated with colour discrimination or racism or racialism which in her poetry finally becomes the issue of search and establishment of identity and to have a detailed study of such issues as cultural conflicts, growing tension in racial communities in the united states of America the books such as Fires in the Mirror : Crown Heights, Brooklyn and other Identities by Anna Deavere Smith could be read. Besides black and white the other rainbow colours in her poetry mean differently. Pink, pinkish, pinky mean good and healthy physique, red & yellow mean fearful or wrathful, green means greenery or thick foliage, yellow means filth, pale means diseased, blue mean the sky and purple means death. No doubt, she makes a rich use of all the colours connotatively and to have a first - hand experience of the use of colours and their symbolic contexts the poem Three Women could be read.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath along with the other groups of poet such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell originated confessional mode of poetry initially in the united states of America and it was a kind of poetry highly involving personalized issues of one's own life such as hidden love affair, traumatic mental conditions, hospitalization. Of course, it was an

attempt by the female poets to struggle against their own identity which remained concealed, covered under the identity of their father, husband or any other powerful men of their time. It could also be called as a poetry of revolt and in India it is represented by Kamla Dass.

References

1. *Sylvia Plath: Winter Trees: Bloomsbury House, 74-77, Great Russell Street, London, Faber & Faber: 2017.*
2. *Sylvia Plath: Crossing the Water: Bloomsbury House, 74-77, Great Russell Street, London, Faber & Faber: 2017.*
3. *Sylvia Plath: Winter Trees: Bloomsbury Houses, 74-77, Great Russell Street, London, Faber & Faber: 2017.*
4. *sylvia Plath: Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Bloomsbury House, 74-77, Great Russell Street, London, Faber & Faber: 1979.*
5. *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems , Harper & Row Publishers, New York:1981.*
6. *Sylvia Plath: Pursuit, The Collected Poems, New York, Harper Perennial, Modern Classics: 2008.*
7. *Sylvia Plath: A Birthday Present: Ariel, Bloomsbury House, 74-77, Great Russell Street, London, Faber & Faber: 2001.*