

**THE 'GYRED' IDENTITY OF SYLVIA PLATH: SELECT POEMS –
*THE COLOSSUS AND OTHER POEMS AND ARIEL***

A Dissertation Submitted

To

SIKKIM UNIVERSITY



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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I, **Manisha Shrestha**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this Dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of knowledge, to anybody else and that the thesis had not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

The content of this thesis has also been subject to plagiarism check.

This is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify the Dissertation titled "**The 'Gyred' Identity of Sylvia Plath: Select Poems – The Colossus and Other Poems and Ariel**" submitted to Sikkim University for the fulfillment of the requirement of the award of the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** in the Department of English, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Manisha Shrestha** under my guidance and supervision. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

We recommend this Dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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“The ‘Gyred’ Identity of Sylvia Plath: Select Poems – *The Colossus and Other Poems and Ariel*”

Submitted by **Manisha Shrestha** under the supervision of **Dr. Rosy Chamling** of the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature, Sikkim University.

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NOTE ON DOCUMENTATION

All reference and bibliographic details in this dissertation have been done in accordance with the MLA handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Seventh Edition. Secondary references have also been provided in accordance with the parenthetical specifications of the MLA handbook.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Can a selfish egocentric jealous and unimaginative female
write a damn thing worthwhile?”

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journal of Sylvia Plath* 99)

If paradox were ever to find a personification, it would be called ‘Sylvia Plath’. Obsessed with the idea of balance and perfection, Plath forever found her life to be a see-saw of events. Drowning in a never-ending abyss of darkness, Plath wrote. She wrote not of the joys that she had failed to experience. She did not write sitting on the escapist clouds of dreams. Realistic and honest, Plath wrote from her experience. She wrote of her depression, of her darkness, of her stagnation, of her deadening silence, of death, of pain, of paradox and of every frustration that was clutching her to suffocation.

While there are different styles of criticisms, with many of them not even considering aspects that lie outside the text in its literal sense, it is unquestionably true that every writing and every criticism is the product of the historical, social and psychological patterns of human thought. The human mind is directly proportional to these factors of time and history. It is due to this that writing keeps progressing from one style to another and one genre to another, undergoing massive changes in purpose with every wave of time. It, sometimes, serves a didactic purpose. Sometimes it is a conveyer of a social message and sometimes of mere feelings.

Writing, however, invariably is the handicraft of the writer, who is often influenced by the age, the time, and social conditions. He writes also, from his/her personal experiences and inclinations. Every writer has a different motivation; every writer, a different intention. Plath's writings fall in the controversial yet beautiful sphere of confessionalism.

The confessional school of poetry or confessionalism was ever-present in the long tradition of writing, even though it made its way to today in an erratic pattern. The Italian poet, Petrarch had expressed himself in his poems. Shakespeare's sonnets throw flickering light on parts of his personality to the readers. William Wordsworth bears testimony to this form of writing when he says, "...all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Ramaswami, Seturaman, 292) in his revolutionary work – 'The Lyrical Ballads'. His works expressed his soul through the medium of Nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his contemporary, too, revealed himself through his works.

Functioning in perfect synchrony to the antithetical patterns of history, confessionalism emerged as an immediate contrast, as a direct aftermath to the World Wars and is really a literary aftermath of this political and social occurrence of history. The image of the World Wars is nothing less than a gas chamber wherein all are surrounded in chaos,

breathing death while, due to the repression of fundamental freedom, they screamed a silent scream. The repression of fundamental rights and the loss of identity that people faced during the world wars found a release in the celebrity culture burst open and soon became immensely trending. It was in rebellion against the official ideologies of privacy of the war period - an outburst of expression and freedom to be who people truly were after the long phase of forced repression.

In the field of literature, it emerged as a prominent genre of writing in the 1950's in the United States of America in rebellion against the depersonalised poetry of the war era, as a contrast to the immensely academic and objective writings of Modernist writers. Eminent poets of this phase were great academicians like T. S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, who believed in the theory of depersonalisation and objectivity. It believed in the idea that the poet was different from the poem and that the self must, for all reasons, be kept away from the work of the writers. The objective styles of criticism of that phase, like the New Criticism and Formalism, completely excluded anything other than the text in deriving the meaning of the text.

Confessionalism refused to conform to this idea. In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Deborah Nelson talks about how 'confessionalism' essentially 'arose as a counter-discourse to the official ideologies of privacy and surveillance during the Cold War' (Esterhuizen, 2). The 1950s was a 'period of "unprecedented fascination with celebrity"' (9). Confessionalism developed as a link between this celebrity culture, that had become an on-going trend in that time, and literature – the poets revealed their own selves in their works. The long hiding found refuge in opening revealing. It emerged in direct and immediate contrast of these ideas of strong and form objectivity as a completely subjective work of art that is based on the personal details of the writers and the poets. It was represented by

immensely expressive poets who “balanced strong emotions with imagery, using the personal to express reaction to common situations or emotions” (Al-Shamiri 2). However, unfortunately, there was no coercive group formed by these poets.

Life Studies was the first book of the confessional mode that was widely noticed by the reading public. It had been published in 1959 by Robert Lowell. The poems that were put under the label ‘confessions’ related to the confessions of Lowell, which was about his own struggles with his psychological illness and the hassles of having to go to the hospital. M. L. Rosenthal, in a review of this work, first came up with the term ‘confessional’ to relate to this genre of work. He had described this style of poetry as the ‘poetry of confession’ (2) which later began to be called as ‘confessional poetry’. M. H. Abrams defines confessionalism as

A type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by the American Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959), which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet’s own life. (Abrams, 45)

The most defining characteristic of confessional poetry is its subject matter that is intensely close and personal to the writers. Subjects that were previously considered a taboo or too embarrassing to discuss were expressed boldly and confidently in these poems. Drugs, gender roles, infidelity, suicide, depression, sexuality and even death were some of the primary topics of these poems.

Confessional poetry is personal poetry. It is an expression of the experiences one has – emotional, psychological. The poet himself/herself is the subject of one’s work and therefore, the poem is written in first-person. It is the ‘I’ in the poem that essentially makes it confessional and adds a touch of the autobiographical element. It is the same ‘I’ that binds the poet and the readers in the beautiful bond of empathy, so that the readers not only read but also feel the poem more closely and intensely.

While this genre was new in the literary tradition, confessionalism, still was a brave new field. The poets of the past always hid themselves comfortably under the mask of literature and metaphors and different mediums. There was always a sheet of literary devices against whose sheen these poets sat comfortably narrating or signifying themselves. This new genre distinguished itself from every other kind of writing, however, with the confidence of its poets to unmask themselves to their readers without any embarrassment and bare to them their truths, no matter how 'negative' or harsh they might be. Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass and Allen Ginsberg are some of the notable names in this regard.

Even before this genre came to the forefront as an exclusive style, literature of this era witnessed the publication and authorship of some courageous works. 'Genesis', written by Delmore Schwartz, is a long confessional poem. John Berryman's 'Sonnet Sequence' (1947) puts forth the account of his adulterous affair with Chris, another lady, while being already married to his first wife, Eileen. He published the work after his divorce with her, however. Snodgrass' 'Heart's Needle' deals with the aftermath of his divorce. Anne Sexton is another important confessionalist who often wrote on subjects of psychotherapy, sex, depression and rage. In her work, 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back' she expresses a dreadful account of having been molested by her own father.

There are huge debates on confessionalism, in general, and her confessionalism, in specific, and on how her works and their brilliance often get over-shadowed due to the emphasis on her biography. Many critics write about how her person and persona are confused as one and how often her genius is confused with nothing more than a psychological error. There are different perspectives and approaches to an idea however, and in most cases, none are wrong or right but only different points of view.

The confessional style of writing has been the base ground for various arguments and debates, wherein stands the fortress of Plath's writings, ever attacked with spear-headed questions to prove its worth. A change of the subject changes the meaning of the work itself in the case of confessional writings. In her dissertation, *Aspects of Identity – Ariel*, Leigh Caron Esterhuizen says,

Theorised responses which take cognizance of theoretical understandings that however much an 'I' purports to summon 'self', 'I' is simultaenuosly a figure that is disable from speaking in some authentic 'own' voice; "'voice' is from the start borrowed from somewhere else" (Esterhuizen, 5)

The 'I' can only 'purport' to 'summon' the self of the writer. However, even if it directs the readers to the life of the writer, it still needs the reader to deduce the essential condition of the life of that writer, since with every problem the meaning of the work continues to vary. The objectivity of the writer can never be accurately calculated which leads the readers into finding a comfortable and convincing conclusion for oneself before beginning to evaluate the work.

A paradox like Plath herself, confessionalism too has been equally praised and criticised. It is an honest form of writing wherein the writer clearly expresses oneself in simple, straight and honest terms. There are metaphors and other literary devices that find involvement in this expression but the readers are kept fully aware of it being a means of expression. The poet, in this case, truly and honestly expresses himself or herself, as though in a cathartic trance. For Plath, writing was a 'heuristic experience'. She says,

It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, colour and form, knowledge. You do it for itself first. (Govindan 8)

‘The personal pronoun, ‘I’, creates a deeper point of empathetic connection between the author and readers. Involvement finds a new definition altogether. Many critics, however, condemn this form of writing as one brimming with egotism. The personal pronoun, the emphasis on the self, the taking of subject matter from personal life is considered an emblem of egocentrism.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most renowned poets from this genre. In her journal, she writes:

I would like to be everybody, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person. But I am not omniscient. I have to live my life, and it is the only one I’ll ever have. And you cannot regard your own life with objective curiosity all the time...

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 9)

In spite of living a rather short life of only 30 years, Sylvia Plath could achieve the greatness many take a lifetime to earn. A girl with academic prowess, imagination and skill, she was an avid reader and a ferocious writer. Plath was born on the 11th February, 1963 to Otto Plath and Aurelia Plath in Boston. An imaginative child, Plath believed in the magnificence of magic and the power of fairy tales. She wrote several children’s rhyme, and poetry from a very early age and even published them in the then newspapers. The sudden loss fate wished her to undergo in the tender age of eight, with the death of her dear father, changed her henceforth – her beliefs and her perspectives.

However, there was one thing it couldn’t change – her love for reading and writing. She has 350 pages of published diary records. Her popular verse play called, ‘Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices’ was being even performed, with its performance on the BBC Third Programme in 1962. She was a guest editor of *Mademoiselle* (1952). As an intelligent and a

hard-working student, she wrote one of the best literary theses ever written for her Honor's Degree at Smith's College with the title – 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels'. She also won the Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University to pursue her Master's Degree. Her prowess is evident from the fact that for this scholarship she had chosen above the Ph.D. scholars and the other scholars who had applied for it. Above all these achievements, however, is her sole novel – *The Bell Jar*, and her poetry collections – *The Colossus* and *Ariel*.

Her life is coloured in shades of grey – the colour of paradox, that is neither white nor black and yet both. It is a colour of dullness, of timelessness and the colour of depression. A series of destined encounters, obsessions and losses break her inch by inch while building her up at her creative end. While many critics fiercely argue that Plath's life is more than just her death, and the perspective that her works and all her massive literary effort is nothing more than a mere psychological error, is natural. However, her works are indisputably confessionalistic and thus open to perspectives that the researchers and critics choose within the area of important significance and relation.

Her poetry collection – *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, hold in them, every strand of emotion Plath felt in her life. Her belief system, ideas and ideologies she based her life upon, and even direct confessions, have been effectively and yet poetically been recorded in these pieces of skilfully crafted writings. They perfectly channel the storm and the turbulent ocean of emotions and thoughts that burst forth onto her paper. Her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is semi-autobiographical wherein Plath has cleverly changed the names of places and of people. The protagonist, Esther, is unmistakably with the same ideas she had, the same situation she had been in, with a similar personality. The novel tells the psychological tale behind an original situation that had shocked her circle – her first suicide attempt. It attempts to unravel, from her own personal perspective, the causes that led her into it.

While her poems are testimony to her style of confessionalism already, Plath has, in many of her interviews, openly confessed her confessionalism in her works. She has said that her writings are the literary expressions of her daily experiences. Paradoxical that she is, however, she has also specified the technical ideal for her in her writings. She speaks of how these experiences must be ‘manipulated’ and controlled to be expressed ‘objectively’. In one of her interviews she had said:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensual and emotional experiences I have, but I must say that I cannot empathise to these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle and a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to manipulate and control experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, or being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind... (Govindan, 8)

The problem with confessional works in general, as mentioned before, is the basic interpretation of the obvious subject – ‘I’. It could be the narrator, the speaker or the writer. Relying on her own confessions of the ‘I’ signifying her, however, is yet another challenge. Since the identity of the ‘I’ belongs to her varied selves. Many critics condemn this using of the ‘I’ calling it an unmistakable signature of her ego-centrism. Being a perfectionist by nature, Plath had set as her goal, sheer objective writing – the controlled, manipulated expression of overflowing feelings. This aspect puts forth questions about her being an intended confessionalist. It proves her as a confessionalist more strongly on the other hand. Since an unconscious working of the mind and the heart that denied listening to her conscious mind is clearly a sure indicator of her truer and stronger ideals. Her account of her ideal and subjectivity however throws light on her paradoxical self and her paradoxical identity as such. In one of the journal entries she is seen saying:

I must discipline myself. I must be imaginative and create plots, knit motives, probe dialogue – rather than merely trying to record descriptions and sensations. The latter is pointless, without purpose, unless it is later to be synthesized into a story. The latter is also a rather pronounced symptom of an oversensitive and unproductive ego.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 77)

A researcher could have all the clues into the subject and yet find oneself in the midst of an ambiguity. Plath's mind was a logical maze of her varied selves – Plath, the poet was different from Plath, the person for her and both of these selves often held within themselves, different ambitions which tragically contradicted each other. She was a poet, a person, a woman, a human, a daughter, a wife and a mother. Different roles of one person turned into her different identities and selves which often had an independent wants and wishes that criss-crossed through each other too roughly and too violently to be able to be comprehended by Plath. The subject of her works, include all these selves sometimes and sometimes none. Finding the problem determines the detailed interpretation of her works.

The only valid pointers to the problem could be her works and her journals. However, there is ample proof of these having been tampered and re-arranged to some extent, even edited by her husband, Ted Hughes and his sister, Olwyn Hughes. Another, mountainous obstruction for the researchers is her mind. The severe circumstances she had to face very early in her life left an indelible scar in her consciousness. Her inability to structure this void inside her mind and correctly comprehend its existence consequently led it to silently, bloom louder and larger, which eventually became too much for her mind to handle. She became a victim of bipolar disorder.

Bipolar disorder is a psychological situation that causes the person to have unregulated, dramatic and sometimes, even illogical mood-swings ranging in two perfect

extremes – elation and depression. Tossed and twirled between these two, very unpredictable and seriously affecting phases, one could lose sight of which side of that particular is person is more relatable. In an interview, Aurelia Plath had said that she had vivid memory of two words Plath used most of the times – ‘Always’ and ‘Never’. She had once said, “I like people too much or not at all” (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 18) Intense extremity was her natural personality even though she already knew its self-destructive possibilities. In one of her journal entries, she had said, “I have a choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between.” (59)

Some critics argue that her works and her efforts are nothing more than a simple psychological error. Some others, however, debate about how focusing more on her biographical influence shifts the focus of the readers to her life more than her writing. They express their concern regarding how this could lead to the demeaning of her skill as a writer and all the techniques she imitated, mastered and moulded into her own style.

Owing to all these reasons Plath became to a have an immensely paradoxical personality. According to M. H. Abrams,

A paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense.
(Abrams, 201)

Plath’s identity had elements that contradict themselves. While it seems absurd to an on-looker, it still holds in it a pattern that makes it logically sensible.

While the idea of identity is usually looked at in a very casual sense, this term has been the root of many philosophical ideas. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines this term as, ‘to recognise somebody/something and be able to say who or what they are’ (Hornby, 770). One’s identity is closely related to the selves of a person. It is the many things and the many ways one associates with different things that different identities of the

same person get formed. One has a personal sense of identity, a national identity, a gender identity, a cultural identity, a professional identity, one's identity as a daughter or son, as a parent, and so forth.

Plath portrayed her identities in her writing – poems, novel, journals and letters. It is here that the readers would be able to find sources and further decode them to truly try and comprehend her different identities. Her belief system is an important aspect that gives the readers a peek into her mind and therefore, her sense of self and selves.

With extreme and intense preferences, Plath's contradictory personality asserted ideas that differed from each other, either in the texts themselves or in the texts and in her beliefs. In one of her many interviews, she had once said that her main aim was to write stories and novels but she is ironically known better as the poet who stormed into the literary world and left behind a thunder that resounds in the minds of all her readers till today. Her ideal goal of writing objectively is an irony against how subjective her writings truly are and how evidently they guide the readers to the specific incidents that had really led to the existence of their compositions.

As a woman, she attempted to represent women in their truest light. Some critics say that she wanted to rejoice the true, exterior ugliness of women for she thought it was this that was truly beautiful in them. She condemned the restrictions that the society had made people seem natural. In most of her works she portrays the idea of a free woman who is not bound by even her make-up or clothes, for these according to Plath constituted the artificialities she was forced to put upon her to look beautiful. On the other hand, she was seen burdening herself with these false ideals too in her desire to be the perfect American, popular girl.

Plath detested the idea of how women and men have been enforced with different ideals. She was no spokesperson, but her works hold in them the ideas she believed in and

detested. On the other hand however, she detested being a woman itself. In her journal, she says :

...it is a man's world? For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn up his nose at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman to be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of the soul, body and pride of man? Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries, rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle and action, thought and feeling rapidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity. (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 77)

She also held high the idea of the ideal, free self that was not bound by any identity that the world might want to burden it with. However, owing to her desire for perfection she channelled her oceanic thoughts through the banks of a stream by binding it in disciplined technique. *The Colossus* displays a perfect hold on every imperfect passion it displays. She uses strict forms, counted syllables and writes in villanelles and sonnet forms. She forces herself into obliging to a constraint while all the time expressing her need for freedom in them. While this discipline in technique helped her have a poetic hold over her creative explosion in *Ariel*, this setting free of the self eventually destroyed her. With the freeing of the self she became the prisoner of her mind. Every attempt to release herself bound her stronger.

At another instance she contradicts her eventual end. This statement stands testimony to the irony she embodied in her existence. She had said:

Nothing is real except the present.... Some girl a hundred years ago once lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass. The

high moment, the burning flash, come and are gone, continuous quicksand.
And I don't want to die.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 10)

There was a paradoxical relation between her head and her heart that tied her one being into varied selves, in different extremes all at once. Her want for freedom and perfection together, confused her existence into a frenzy that defined her life and her works. There is an existential crisis she undergoes throughout but paradoxically, also believes intently in the beauty of intensity. She described this void intensely. Paradoxically again, her contradictory nature creates a paradoxical pattern in her life – her gyred identity.

The concept of the gyre was first showcased by W. B. Yeats in his work, *The Second Coming* in 1921. He found inspiration for this concept in the works of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne. Yeats compares this mathematical structure of a spiral spiralling wider from a point forming a funnel, to the growth pattern of plants and animals, since this geometrical pattern essentially forms the pattern of their growth. Yeats was as interested in mathematics as in mysticism and the occult. His wife, Georgie, was into automatic writing wherein the messages focused on these gyred patterns to define history. This directly influenced his thought and he turned to the idea of the gyres.

This has two vortices spiralling over each other but from the opposite directions so that the widest part of one cone occupies the same plane as the tip of the other cone, and vice versa. They stand as symbols to two opposite occurrences – growth and order, and decay and chaos. It could be compared to the symbol of the Chinese Yin and Yang, wherein two opposites hold each other in a pattern that keeps it off falling. Plath's identity has a similar pattern.

While she held herself in control and kept herself off the temptation of giving in to her disturbing muses in *The Colossus*, she remained an average writer. Her life was, till then,

controlled and organised, comparatively. However, when she let go of herself and listened to her calling of freedom, she destroyed her life. Her husband, friends and even she, left her alone to her self-destructive mind so that she eventually destroyed herself completely through her final, successful suicide attempt. It is after this enormous chaos that she achieved her goal of perfection as a poet. The dissolution of her person, thus brought about the evolution and the blossoming of her as a poet.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The critical paradox and the symmetrical asymmetry of Sylvia Plath's life and her identities prompt the harmonious symphony that destiny had created from every noise that made up the tragic life of Plath:

“Self-consciously chosen and personally exploratory,” the “proliferating personae” which emerge in her personal and professional writing “represent her efforts to imagine, dismantle, and reconstruct her ongoing self-narrative into a script she could live with”

(McCort 107)

However, it is mainly her own mind that both, created and destroyed – created the poet in her by destroying the person she was. Depression is one of the most fundamental, psychologically damaging and yet, the most commonly neglected aspects of the world today that kills way before one is burnt or buried. Along with this damaging problem she was also a victim of severe bi-polar disorder of the kind wherein the person undergoes short phases of elation and longer phases of depression. While the research plan essentially concerns the relation between the psychological situation that Plath underwent – as a woman, as a person, and the literature she created from that, it also concerns the objective study of the pattern of

her simultaneous evolution and dissolution – the evolution of her works through her dissolution of her life.

SCOPE

Confessionalism is, today, inseparably and almost synonymously used with her name. Biographers have worked extensively on her work to find links that remained a mystery for very long. There have been works done from the feminine perspective, from the perspective of fear and loss, fear of loss, on the existential realm that her works are often classified into, on her spiritual quest, on themes of death and suicide and so on. Researchers have worked on her psychology and have even worked on the question of her identity. However, these studies have been done based on particular phases of her work, more popularly – *Ariel*.

There is, in fact, a patterned existence of the two forces that consistently moved against each other – one, consistently destroying and the other, consistently developing – both running parallel, breaking her away from the world of materials to the world of the immortals in their own ways. This is a constant pattern that sustains itself perennially, throughout her life. It is this that fascinated me into approaching her works from this perspective. I would strive to discover the pattern in that connects her person, and her poetic spirit and her works. My research would be purely based on extensive readings at the library – real and virtual.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Plath's own writings serve as the most reliable and the open window to her life - her poetry collections – *The Colossus and Other Poems* and *Ariel*, along with her only yet fascinatingly confessional novel – *The Bell Jar*. The pattern of her identity – the development of her psychological and her creative mind, could be understood only by understanding her identity

of herself that she evidently yet artistically reveals in her work – *The Bell Jar*. It is a confessional account of an idyllic dreamer – the bird whose wings were created to soar through the sky of spiritual freedom and wonder – trapped in the world where every unbounded spirit gets tied down, bound by rules – filial, societal, emotional.

Another crucial work is ‘The Last Days of Sylvia Plath’ by Jillian Becker is one of the biographies of Plath. However, this particular work reveals the version Plath had turned into in the last days of her life. Becker was her only solace after having separated from her husband. The work reveals the eventuality of the events that piled up inside her mind throughout her life. Apart from having flavour of sweet friendship, the work essentially deals with the climax of her life.

The Savage God, a work by A. Alvarez, is one of the most crucial works of the modern era. It deals with the one problem that colours this age most darkly; suicide. It is more specifically, a study on suicide. Alvarez discusses this fundamentally psychological problem through the case study of his own suicidal attempts and the suicide of Sylvia Plath.

Apart from these, there are various dissertations, articles and reports that discuss the curious case of Sylvia Plath. Some delve into her confessional aspect, some deal with the domestic situation of her married life, some others deal with her prowess in the literary world and others, her depression and suicidal inclinations.

METHODOLOGY

The work would be a study of the pattern that defines the life and thus, the work of one of the most interesting American poets – Sylvia Plath. Her life forms a beautifully painful equation. Her works are defined by her life, her life by its sorrows, her sorrows by men, her relation with men by her mind which was intoxicated with madness. The external situations moulded

her personality, her mind in turn shaped the external happenings. In her, one finds the woman, the universal being and an individual self bounded by the world and then, in a desperate attempt to unbound, bounded by oneself.

The work would thus, need to be studied through the lens of feminism, existentialism and psychoanalysis. This would be to analyse her feminine self, her 'self' and her mind for it is these together that developed her into what she was.

CHAPTERISATION

1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to introduce the poet – Sylvia Plath, her life, and her works. It also seeks to introduce the idea of confessionalism, its emergence and its features. The chapter also introduces the concept of the gyre and how Plath's life and works could be related to his idea.

2. Growing Up: *The Colossus*

This chapter presents a parallel between the life of Plath, in incidents that shaped her, and the works that emerged out of that personality in the period that led to the making of *The Colossus*.

3. The Decay: *Ariel*

This chapter reveals the disillusionments that Plath underwent. It also shows the way in which these disillusionments shaped her, and the flourishing effect it had on her works.

4. Conclusion : The Gyred Identity

This chapter seeks to trace the pattern that Plath's life and her works had come to form – the double-gyred structure. It seeks to study her life and her works from both the phases parallelly and summarise the entire work.

CONCLUSION

Plath is the bird that was, at first, locked in the cage by the world. But later, unconsciously locked herself. The indomitable struggle she constantly fought, between her own mind and heart entangled her more with her every attempt to free herself. She became a 'glorious mess' who wrote profoundly while life continued to confound her.

CHAPTER II

GROWING UP: *THE COLOSSUS*

As a person with a sensitive heart and a mind where thoughts waved over each other perpetually, Plath would get affected by everything. Owing to her introverted nature, however, she turned to writing as her only means of expression.

“Does my desire to write come from a tendency toward introversion begun when I was small, brought up as I was in the fairytale world of Mary Poppins and Winnie-the-Pooh?” (qtd. in McCort 110)

She published two important poetry collections in her lifetime – *The Colossus* and *Ariel*. Her life can be divided into three significant phases. The first two phases gave rise to *The Colossal* and the third phase moulded and got moulded by the spectacular *Ariel*.

Plath's life is patterned with a series of losses, possessions, obsessions and losses again. This order can be traced back to an early phase – her childhood. Plath had once said that as a child she had believed in goodness and magic and in the powers of god.

“If I tried to describe my personality I'd start to gush about living by the ocean half my life and being brought up on Alice in Wonderland and believing in magic for years and years”

(qtd. in McCort 111 – 112).

She had been a believer of hope. In her semi-autobiographical and only novel, *The Bell Jar*, she has confessed,

How strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old. After that – in spite of the Girl's Scout and the piano lessons and the water-colour lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camps... I had never really been happy. (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 61)

Plath had her first and long lasting encounter with loss at the age of eight with the death of her beloved and severely ill father. Otto Plath had wrongly self-diagnosed himself with lung cancer which eventually turned out to be a severe case of diabetes. This resulted in the amputation of his leg and soon, caused his death. In an interview, Aurelia Plath had said that after she informed the children about their father's death, little Warren clung to her in joy that she was fine while the sensitive Sylvia slid under her bed and said, “I'll never speak to God again” (qtd. in Cannon).

This was her first experience of loss, and to a sensitive heart with a brilliant mind, it got etched as a memory that was to run her life through and through into the ruins of death. It was from this time that fear and obsession became her closest companions, who would not

leave her till her death. Her feeling of her father's death was that of betrayal – by god and by her father, himself. It is due to this that he turned immortal in his mind, as a painful memory of loss. It is due to this that most of her works are drenched in this feeling, while some others find direct mentions of her father as the negative image that haunts her. In her journal, Plath says,

Each person, banging into the facts, neutral, impersonal in themselves (like the Death of someone) – interprets, alters, becomes obsessed with personal biases or attitudes, transmuting the objective reality into something quite personal (like the death of My Father = tears, sorrow, weeping, dolorous tints, numbing of certain areas of sensation and perception about the stream of life moving about the one...)

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 121)

It was a period in history that saw one of the world's most dreaded times – the world wars. The air was ever burdened with the stench of death, murders, loss and pain. One would naturally focus on the psychological situation of the soldiers who fought their lives inside hideous trenches to realise the futility and destructibility of these wars at the end of it all. The situation was detrimental for those who were the immediate victims of the world wars but these wars had a ghastly effect on all the people world-wide. It is due to the state of constant fear, a sudden, shocking awareness of their lives and its impending, abrupt death that the time saw a rise of an uncompromising individualism. This idea had got its support in the denial, almost a negation of the existence of supernatural figures like God which left man as the supreme, apparently, who must take his own choices and shape his life. The ambiguity and absurdity of any choice and yet the necessity of making them led men, massively, into the

abyss of existentialism. In *Existentialism – A Very Short Introduction*, Thomas R. Flynn writes,

...whatever meaning our world may harbour is created by individuals either alone or in social relations... we long for meaning conveyed by a universe that cares but discover only an empty sky. (Flynn, 47)

This was essentially a philosophical movement. However, Plath, who was under the influence of the age and the oppression of her personal life, fell into this too with such force and into such depths that even she would not be able to retrieve herself from it throughout her unfortunately short-lived life. Her belief in God and in goodness having gone, she sought for happiness in things she could achieve or rather, conquer. She became obsessed with the idea of perfection.

Another important loss was her tormenting separation from the sea. During the final phases of Otto Plath's illness, mother Aurelia Plath had shifted to Winthrop with the family in need of emotional support from her parents. Being an intense and an observant child Plath would spend her time looking at the sea surging musically all day long and feeling her spirit resonating with its violent surge. However, after the death of her dear father, when Aurelia Plath decided to re-locate in order to work, Plath got separated from the sea too. It was also, symbolically yet paradoxically her separation from her peace of mind. In one of her interviews, Plath had said that the loss was so intense that she would, sometimes call her grandmother only to listen to intense surge of the sea along with the soft 'hello' of her dear grandmother.

This loss, along with the loss of her father became two important memories that were to haunt Plath's mind eternally. Loss made these moments become forever present. This found expression in her works in the form of metaphors. Her father became a disturbing

image that she would talk to through her poems all through, while she internalised the sea into herself. The wild, uncontrollable, violent and deep sea was quite her already and now it appeared in her works too as a kind of the ‘subconscious sea’ or rather a sea of thoughts that spill over the pages of her works. Her use of stream of consciousness in the second half of *The Bell Jar* and the later phase of poetry also find their justification in this. These images remained recurrent throughout her works.

In her poem, ‘Full Fathom Five’ of the collection *The Colossus*, Plath brings in the imagery of both these losses into the image of the sea and sea god. The work finds its inspiration from one of William Shakespeare’s last plays, *The Tempest*. Plath’s poem finds its name from Ariel’s song:

Full fathom five thy father lies;

Of his bones are corals made;

Those are pearls that were his eyes:

Nothing of him that doth fade,

But doth suffer a sea-change

Into something rich and strange. (Shakespeare, 45)

The context of this song, in the play, is Ferdinand looking for his lost father – Alonso, who has been shipwrecked, apparently. Both Ferdinand and Plath had lost their fathers. In the play, Ferdinand continues searching for his father. The image of Alonso is very mundane. In her poem, however, Plath intensifies the personality of the father and turns him into a sea god – a mighty, over-powering personality that is not just wild, powerful and supernatural but also, potentially dangerous.

The memory of Otto Plath loomed large over Plath all through her life. In the poem she says,

Old man, you surface seldom.

Then you come in with the tide's coming

When seas wash cold, foam –

Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,

A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves

Crest and trough. Miles long

Extend the radial sheeves

Of your spread hair... (Plath, *The Colossus* 38)

She raises his personality to immense proportions. She portrays him to the persona of the sea-god, Neptune or Poseidon. By calling him the sea god, Plath invokes two memories at once – the memory of her father and the memory of the sea. Symbolically, the sea or the ocean represents the subconscious, the surge of emotions, and the wild nature of things. It is a visual representation of that which lies deep within. Plath's portrayal of her memories in the form of the sea and the sea-god makes the intensity and the force of these evident. The narrator's tone in the poem is that of awe and wonder at the expansive and looming image of the sea-god. However, there is also a sense of awareness of the potential danger he holds in him.

It is because Plath is invoking the memories of her distant past in the poem that the setting is this emotional and impossible. The imagery is a place of nostalgia – where one would never be able to go but always go back to in one's mind with a sense of continual haunting – a painful longing for union. Plath ends the poem with this wish:

Your shelled bed I remember.

Father, this thick air is murderous.

I would breathe water. (Plath, *The Colossus* 39)

It is, again, due to these early disillusionments that Plath lost faith in the idea of Utopia. Her works do not adhere to the philosophy of escapism. Neither does she distance herself from the torments that life grants her with nor does she allow the readers to distance themselves from her work and read them with absolute subjectivity. The works are an honest expression of her mind and her feelings. Most of these are contradictions and paradoxes, owing to her paradoxical style of thought and personality. However, Plath does not hesitate to put them down in the same form without trying to organise them. There is no attempt at reconciling her extreme ideas. There is only an honest projection of ideas and feelings.

The two losses turned into the dark muse that kept haunting her mind and her existence through and through. This muse finds a direct mention in her poem, 'The Disturbing Muses'. The poem is significant as it is not a direct invocation of her memories but an expression of her, then, present state of confusion between what her past had led her to and what her mother was presently pulling her from. The work draws its inspiration heavily from the famous painting of Giorgio de Chirico called the 'The Disquieting Muses'. The Muses in the painting depict the muses in surreal light – haunting in their eeriness. The description in Plath's poem is not just sinister but also ghost-like. They are portrayed as the dark shadow that can neither be grasped, nor be gotten rid off. They are almost addicting in their mystery.

...these ladies in her stead

With heads like darning-eggs to nod

And nod and nod at the food and head

And at the left side of my crib? (Plath, *The Colossus* 50)

The effect of the two significant losses in Plath's life drew her into darkness more and more. Aurelia Plath was well aware of this and thus, in an attempt to draw her away from her destructive attractions, diverted her to the brighter side of the world that had hope as its essential element. However, this effort tormented Plath as she felt pulled between her natural dark attractions and the flowery Utopia her mother was trying to illude her into.

The muses in the poem are an allusion to the three Fates who symbolise supernatural forces beyond the control of man that bring about death and separation. The death of her father and the separation she feels from him and from the sea had introduced her to darkness and she had gradually begun to get hypnotised by them. It is due to this that in spite of her mother's efforts of turning them into 'gingerbreads' Plath seems to be drawn to them. Pointing to goodness, Aurelia Plath was trying to pull her into – the 'bluest air... a green balloon bright with a million flowers and bluebirds...' (51). In his work, McCort says, "The final reward that the speaker receives in the poem is not a miraculous return to life, but a dark obsession with death" (McCort 162). Plath erases the existence of brighter possibilities completely when she says,

Never, never, found anywhere.

But the little planet bobbed away

Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!

And I faced my travelling companions. (51)

The poem also depicts her relationship with her mother, which appears rather shady since due to the efforts of the mother. Plath finds herself torn between being an obedient daughter and the poet of the 'disturbing' poems that her muses were guiding her into writing. Plath was feeling forced to turn into the person she was not. It was this that turned their relation grey.

Plath was a child prodigy – observant, intense and a ferocious learner. She had taught herself different styles of writing. Two of the most important styles were villanelle and sonnets. Villanelle was a French verse form strictly structured nineteen lined poems with two repeating refrains and two repeating lines. Sonnets originally began in Italy but were later popularised in England. Plath conformed to these styles and forms for a large part of her short life while all through she was searching for her own voice and subject. In this imitative phase, Plath got astounded and influenced by Modernists – Dylan Thomas, Yeats and Auden being some of them.

In this initial phase, while Plath wrote her first ever published collection of poetry, *The Colossus*, she portrays her situation of distress and identity loss with metaphysical comparisons of these with the objects of the world. Joan Taylor, in her work, ‘Poetic Feminist’, says,

“Within many of *The Colossus* poems she compares her identity crisis to actual occurrences in the universe... to jolt herself from a limited perspective of the world, but more importantly serving as a catalyst by which she is propelled from one level of consciousness to another...” (Taylor 49)

While her eyes gleamed yearningly at open and vast skies of freedom, she sang painful songs about them perched in her tiny cage, built by herself. Plath confined her surging spirit in the narrow banks of strict structures. The rigorous endeavours of her mother and the pressure it built around Plath prevented her from giving into the urges of the ‘disquieting’ muses. She finally found her voice at the end of this phase and the beginning of the next when she gave in to these muses. This led to an outburst of creative energy which flooded her pages with brilliance but drowned her to death.

In the 1950s, Plath joined the Smith College. It is from here that she began to lose control over her life. Being a part of this college kept her away from her mother but the pressures of being in an urban college, filled with an out-going mob, brought in new concerns. Young Plath was intimidated by the thought that most of the other students studying there had come from private schools with a comparatively better standards of education. She felt that due to this, it would be rather difficult for her to compete with them scholastically and stand out, especially in French. There was also another aspect to being a student there. The college endeavoured to make the students not just excellent scholars but also elegant and sophisticated ladies. There were extra efforts made by the college in this regard. Plath, thus, was caught in the crossroads of either mastering her way to academic success or finding her perfect social life as the 'popular' American girl.

In this period, she wrote a poem called 'Cinderella' which is included in the *Collected Poems* that was published posthumously by her husband, Ted Hughes, and won her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1982. It portrays her "anxiety about her status as a lower middle-class girl trying to work her way up the educational, social and economical ladder" (McCort 129). The poem portrays the scene of the 'ball' where Cinderella and the prince are dancing in the whole revolving glass palace hall. Plath chooses to focus on the situation of the joy that is anxious of being lost. The mention of the 'scarlet heels' instead of the original gold shoes depicts her suggestion of a contemporary. It is also suggestive of the autobiographical string that ties the work to Plath's life for she had once written that she loved scarlet shoes.

The imagery in the poem is very vivid and depicts the happiness and joy of the guests who have come to that party. Cinderella is lost in joy, until she hears the 'caustic ticking of the clock'. The anxiety and fear that takes over Cinderella in the poem is suggestive of Plath's own fear of losing in her attempt to merge in this gathering of the urban and the sophisticated. She is fearful of revealing her true rags to this gathering. However, unlike the

real story where Cinderella runs away from the ball, the Cinderella of this story clings to the prince in fear of losing him. This is the most striking difference between the original story and the work of Plath for it is directly indicative of Plath's own nature.

Having faced traumatic losses in the early stages of her life, Plath had developed a low-self esteem and thus, a clingy nature. She was frightened to lose people. The fear of loss had made her possessive and extremely jealous. It is this possessive nature and jealous personality that was a partial cause to her separation from her husband, her eventual breakdown and even her death.

Owing to her efforts and her incredible talents Plath excelled still, and was even received a guest editorship in the prestigious *Mademoiselle* magazine. She and some other girls were, thus, sent to New York in 1953. However, her internal conflicts found another destructive companion here – the cultural tensions she had with the place theatricalised here. Plath's obsession with perfection and her desire to reach the highest possible limits in everything she did, made her feel easily disappointed in herself.

The vigorous but superficial social life of New York and her personal dissatisfactions at her indecisions and inability to cope with them brings upon a sense of dissatisfaction in herself. The novel, *The Bell Jar* effectively portrays another important turmoil that would loom large over her life from here on. In a dream-like manner, she describes it saying:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in a story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a

pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 63)

Plath owned a logical mind but a poetic heart. She viewed things in perfect structure with every relation, every work, different professions and different desires stood completely independent of each other. She was obsessed with doing everything perfectly and having a life that was perfect to her logical construction. This meant having all and to have a balance in them all which was practically impossible. It is due to this that she would get easily disappointed, and depressed. Idealism was a dream that she aspired to realise but neither Fate, nor she allowed this to become a reality, since perfection in one thing is always a want of many others.

After her return from New York, when she was already battling her low-esteem caused by the trip, she was told that she did not qualify for a creative writing class. This caused her break-down. She had let herself down before herself. She was neither able to be good in the social sphere, nor in the academic sphere. According to the interview Aurelia Plath gave to the BBC, Plath had begun to read books of Abnormal Psychology and find different symptoms that she thought fit perfectly on her. She feared being a burden to anyone and this guilt of being so began to choke her into a claustrophobic situation. This is when she made the first of her many suicide attempts that were to follow. Having taken an over-dose of sleeping pills, young Plath slipped under the bed to sleep away to death.

She was subjected to the then, treatments of neurosis – electric and insulin shock treatments. The pain and the psychological effect of being linked with neurosis had already triggered Plath into confusion. She was, later, diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. According to Aurelia Plath, the two words Plath used more than often were, 'Always' and 'Never'. Plath seems

unusually impressed by contradictions and paradoxes. Her research dissertation was on contradictions too – ‘The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels’. Her friend, Clarrisa Roche, had once said that she loved to show her scars. She often talked about suicide. While talking about her first suicide, she had added that her life force was stronger than those pills she had.

Alvarez says that her attempts to death were arrogant endeavours she made, to prove to herself that she was stronger than even death. Clinically, it was an effect of the psychological problem she was living with each day, but it was also the result of her frustration with her life and her fate which had now been linked by her own mind. In every depression she would find herself guilty of not coming up to expectations, socially, academically, not being able to balance all her wants together, she would even feel guilty for the treatment of the Jews that was detrimental then because of the IIInd World War that was going on. “Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well.” (Plath, *Ariel* 9), she had said in ‘Lady Lazarus’. Plath proudly declares her trysts with death.

She was not a feminist in its true sense but she would express her ideas about the hypocrisy of our patriarchal societies openly. In her journal she writes,

I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 98)

It is at such a time that she had written a poem called ‘Mushrooms’. The work depicts the silent but unstoppable growth of powerful women rising in the society. This work resonates with spirit of the era when feminism was rising and spreading among most women who were

tired of living in a women-repressing, proudly patriarchal society. In the poem, Plath takes about the mushroom growth of the sprouting of the spirit of feminism in the heart of the women all over. She says, “We shall by morning,/ Inherit the earth./ Our foot’s in the door” (Plath, *The Colossus* 27). The fiery spirit of Plath, however, also needed love. She wanted to feel strong in life and yet, weak in love.

As she recovered considerably from her first suicide attempt, she also got her Fulbright Scholarship to study at Newham College, Cambridge. This helped her considerably in recovering from her breakdown. There was the academic satisfaction of having won the scholarship. Also, there was a social pressure here. It is at such a time, during one of the parties that she met Ted Hughes. In one of the journal entries, she had written that her ideal man would be ‘the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable’ (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 21). After meeting Hughes, Plath had mentioned to her mother, Aurelia Plath in some letters that Ted Hughes was her ideal man.

Some critics claim, however, that the spark of love that lit Plath’s heart wouldn’t have been possible if he wasn’t poet and popular or a person of an important position. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, she has confessed, “I would catch sight of some flawless man off at a distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn’t do at all. (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 68). Ted Hughes was the ideal man for Plath however, until insecurities built up between them years later.

In her poem, ‘Faun’, Plath seems to exhibit her feelings for Ted Hughes. Hughes was an animal lover and wrote with animal imageries. This was a similar point between Hughes and Plath’s father, Otto Plath, was a biologist. During the intense love affair they shared, Ted and Plath would exchange poems to each other about each other. The poem ‘Faun’ is a work with an animal imagery too but written by Plath, showcasing the impact he had on her, her life and

even her writings. Owing to Hughes' good looks and popularity, he was known as a 'ladies man'.

In the poem, Plath seems to be raising Hughes to the pedestal of the gods calling him one of them. The work does not cry feminism but it also subtly portrays the dominance of 'man' over nature. While Plath acknowledges the dominance, she still says, "how god rose and galloped woodward in that guise" (Plath, *The Colossus* 10). While knowing it all the while, Plath cannot help but admire him and find him as perfect as the gods.

While most of her works entail the different aspects of her life, her various perspectives of things and her feelings that finally found an expression and a release on papers, the most significant poem of this phase is 'The Colossus'. Plath's great love for her father, maybe, turned him into the perfect being inside her head. It is this admiration and grand mystery of his personality that she expresses in this work.

The Colossus is a gigantic statue at Rhodes that represents the Sun god of the Greeks. It is approximately 100 to 150 feet high but was destroyed in an earthquake in 224 B.C. The use of this imagery in this poem and in the title of her first published collection of poem thus invokes the image of a gigantic and monumental statue, a violent form of natural destruction, supernatural powers and an artifices kissed by time.

It is a symbol of Plath's past, a representation of her image of her father, of the destruction caused by fate and time, and her feelings for it. One of the critics had said that Plath loved her father too dearly to be angry with him or chide him. She made a clear distinction between father – Otto Plath, and the dark haunting memories associated with Otto Plath in the mind of Sylvia Plath.

The poem discusses about the ruin time has made of a glorious enormous statue of history. This symbolises the greatness she had endowed her father with. It is the symbol of the remnant of a fallen god. It also talks about how death has marred it. The statue also represents Plath herself. It symbolises her own potential and how she sees it marred in time as disappointments shroud her and break her. There is a hint into disillusionments she faced with regard to what she expected. 'Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles/ Proceed from your great lips' (Plath, *The Colossus* 12), she says.

The tone is that of desperation and grief. Plath eagerly wants to repair the damage of this enormous loss and fix the statue to restore its lost glory to it again. She scales 'little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol' (12), she crawls 'like an ant in mourning' (12). For she feels, fixing this essential loss she could repair the sense of psychological loss that had traumatised her existence. She tries, all the while, to fix such an enormous statue with inadequate tools and fails. She tries to comprehend the figure while trying to fix it for it is only like a vague memory that cannot be glued together. She feels failing to be unable to make it tell her who it really was. 'Thirty years now I have laboured/ To dredge the silt from your throat./ I am none the wiser.', she says (Plath, *The Colossus* 12).

The ruin hauntingly keeps her attracted to it, so much so that even though it causes her distress, she seeks shelter in it. This is deeply symbolic of Plath's own obsession with grief and melancholy, darkness and death. Plath seems to be attracted to them incessantly, to the extent of destroying herself with it. In the poem, she says,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour.

The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.

My hours are married to the shadow.

No longer do I listen to the scrape of a keel

On the blank stones of the landing. (13)

It is darkness, death and a surge of silence that erupts in her works as violent images, dark or red colour imageries, and mysterious metaphors. In the poem too, Plath seems to be invoking the image of the unfathomable silence that death and loss brings upon.

It effectively portrays the effect that loss has on the mind and the heart. It showcases the desperation to build that which has been lost, back to its glorious form, and the grief at being unable to do so. It highlights the feeling of melancholy and particularly, how she seems to have wedded it for her life.

The work consists in it, many instances of paradoxes and contrasts. The massive statue and the tiny ant, a gigantic destruction that is being glued together with in adequate tools, the pain that the statue is brings upon the speaker and yet, her unspoken surrender to that destructive darkness and loss. Plath's paradoxical thought-structure and her love for contrasts is spilt all over the work that depicts the intensity of her feeling.

Through the portrayal of the puny attendant in contrast of the mighty master, Plath portrays herself as a slave of her the ruin her memories had become. There is an evident resignation to fate by the speaker. Her hopelessness to ever be free again, however, contrasts directly to her ready surrender to it. Lynda K. Bundtzen has commented on this poem, saying that it

...depict(s) a daughter struggling unsuccessfully to recover a dead father, to retrieve his voice and persuade him to speak to her. In both poems, too, Plath evokes a mood of futility. Even if the father could speak, it is implied that he would have nothing to say; and the daughter meanwhile wastes her energies in this obsessive activity directed at giving him life. (Bloom 23)

Plath seeks to resurrect her losses into the happy reality they once were. The death of her father, the memory of betrayal of loss and the loss of the place she identified with were her essential motivations in this first collection of her poems – *The Colossus*. With her life swinging from joys and perfection to melancholy and uncontrollably ruining imbalances, Plath expressed her heart on paper.

After meeting Ted Hughes, there began the next phase of her life that was intensely beautiful but slowly began to dissolve after her first child was born. Plath could not balance between her responsibility at home and her profession of writing. During the same time, when Hughes was rising higher in his career, becoming more and more popular for his craft, Plath was caught up by the responsibilities at home. She could not find enough time to write. She had once, written in her journal,

Never will there be a circle, signifying me and my operations, confined solely to home... enclosed in the larger, worldly circle of my mate... rather, there will be two over-lapping circles, with a certain string riveted centre of common ground, but both with separate arcs jutting out in the world. A balanced tension; adaptable to circumstances, in which there is an elasticity of pull, tension, yet firm unity.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 105)

The imagination of Plath and the reality she perceived fell in complete contrast. Also, her idea of having a balanced life got shattered as the most breath-taking realisations dawned upon her. Plath seemed remorseful and began to suffer from an identity crisis while she was pregnant.

In her poem ‘Metaphors’, Plath depicts her physical and emotional state while being pregnant. The work is filled with pictorial imagery. While most women feel delighted and

rejoice the phase of being pregnant with a child, the tone Plath uses in the poem is that of remorse. She uses the imagery of the elephant and the purse that are not valuable for themselves but for what they hold inside them. There is a conflict in her mind regarding her identity. She seems to be confused about her individuality as a person and poet and her duty towards her child. By using the phrase, 'I've eaten a bag of green apples' (Plath, *The Colossus* 33), Plath invokes the image of Eve who was cursed with the pain of childbirth after eating the forbidden fruit. However, the most important clue to her deepest feelings is in the line that says that she has 'boarded the train there's no getting off' (33).

In her dissertation, 'Poetic Feminist', Joan Taylor writes that,

Her suffering, in its early stages began with her choice of profession. The decision to become a poet, and to depend upon her creativity as a means of financial support, was one which caused her a great deal of anguish during her young adulthood. It was as though a woman was incapable of meshing the responsibilities of her social-sexual identity with the demands of poetic writing. (Taylor 54)

The identity crisis that she was always faced with finds its greatest catalyst after the birth of her first child, Frieda. This intensifies even further when her insecurities and Hughes' betrayal tears their relationship apart. Thus begins her third and final phase of her writing and her life.

CHAPTER III

THE DECAY: *ARIEL*

Plath's life had already begun to dwindle but her poetry was now blooming to its fullest. She had grown into adulthood, was a mother already and thus, was faced with a different phase of life altogether. While imagination remained an integral part of her existence, she had come to realise that it was to clash with the dark reality of life. This was to disturb the balance of her mind and rob her of whatever peace remained in her life.

Plath had an artistic heart but a logical mind. She dreamt of fairy tales but had specifications about how exactly that fairy tale must happen. She was a dreamer who did not want to escape, but wanted to re-create her reality through it. With an obsession with perfection and idealism, Plath had created definitions for everything inside her mind. She had logically constructed an ideal idea for everything, to which she was illogically loyal. And yet, owing to her paradoxical mind, she had once written,

What is reality? The definition is so arbitrary. It could be, for each individual, what that other individual chooses to make of his corner of the world. Looking at the world through the distorted coloured lens of the individual, one might see only a few objects clearly – a math problem, a clock, a jet plane. Even the neutral things would seem to be coloured by personal attitudes towards them... reality is relative... (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 121)

Plath's life was a series of meeting people, getting obsessed with them and then losing them all together. However, for a dreamer and a perfectionist that Plath was, accepting such an imbalance - her dreaming of perfection, and those dreams getting shattered, it was not just a disappointing, but also disillusioning. The loss of her dear father had caused her years of pain and anguish. She had tried to seek respite from it in her works and in her academic excellence but her loss and her pain found its most beautiful release, temporarily, in Ted Hughes. He was her ideal man. Meeting him had made her imagination soar. She had dreamt of a perfect life since she had found her ideal man.

However, this imagination was disrupted when she was met with another harsh reality – domesticity. In her poem, 'The Couriers', she says, "A ring of gold with the sun in it? Lies. Lies and a grief" (Plath, *Ariel* 4). Plath's 'concept' of marriage turned out to be an illusion in reality. In her journal, she had stated how she wanted a perfect balance between the two partners after marriage. However, in reality, Ted's career was blooming forth while Plath was held captive by domesticity. Her first poetry collection, *The Colossus*, was not a success as Plath had imagined, even though it was appreciated by some critics. A. Alvarez, in the *Observer*, says,

She steers clear of feminine charm, deliciousness, gentility, super-sensitivity and the act of being a poetess. She simply writes good poetry. And she does so

with a seriousness that demands only that she be judged equally seriously...
There is an admirable no-nonsense air about this; the language is bare but
vivid and precise, with a concentration that implies a good deal of disturbance
with proportionately little fuss. (Plath, *The Colossus*)

However, Plath's intense mind and over-ambitious mind-set did not find its desired satisfaction. This dissatisfaction found an additional catalyst in her realisation of the truth of marriage, as against her idea of it. In her poem, 'The Applicant', she states her feelings of female objectification and of her disappointment with this social institution.

The work is notably satirical and feministic. It evidently and openly displays the plight of women in the 1960s in general and significantly confesses her disheartening realisation of her marriage. It begins in a neutral gender mode, in an office. The readers are made aware a little later that the applicant is in reality, a 'he', who has everything with him but a wife. It is then that he is offered a hand that would "do whatever you tell it" (Plath, *The Colossus* 6) The woman is shown to be taken out of a closet which confirms her objectification and Plath's sarcasm as she talks about it in the most comfortable way.

She is addressed as an 'it' all through the poem. There is an instance where the narrator is seen to be asking the candidate, "what do you think of that?" (7) The individuality of the woman and her identity is completely destroyed as she is treated like one without a mind of her own or without choices and thought. She is called,

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk. (Plath, *The Colossus* 7)

The poem leads one's thought to the idea of marriage but the technicality and triviality of the process leaves Love repulsed. The heart seems to have nothing to do with the process, as the applicant is given logical reasons and is expected to think logically only, before coming to his choice. He must decide according to her usefulness. Plath sells the idea of the woman satirically,

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it is an image.

My boy, it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. (Plath, *The Colossus* 7)

It is almost robotic with rigid repetitions. There is an angry submission into the reality. There is an agonising silence in her passivity. The work clearly depicts the derogatory state that women were in that age, and the position Plath believed she had been put into after her marriage.

The marriage, in general, had deteriorated Plath's condition. Domesticity was amusing for Plath in her previous stages, in her imagination, but now she realised that living it was an immense challenge that she needed to overcome. In one of the interviews she gave with Ted Hughes, she says that their lives are as normal as anyone's in their district. The only difference however, was that Hughes did not go to a nine to five job but retired to his room at nine so he could create literary pieces. The tone in the voice of Plath becomes more dry and hesitant however, when she talks of herself. She says that unlike Ted, she lived a life that was dry. She says that most people might hardly be able to imagine her doing anything other than regular household chores like washing dishes, shopping and so on.

Plath's living in an enclosed, small flat, feeling trapped within its walls led her into the depressing tunnel of existential nothingness. Her brilliance, however, still shone from there. Owing to that time in history when women were considered to be worthy of only the house, Plath found her imagination of her happy marriage crashing down. She found herself trapped inside her house, and yet, in that state she wrote. In her journal, she writes,

...set alarm for 7:30 and get up then, tired or not. Rip through breakfast and housecleaning... by 8:30.... Be writing before 9 (nine), that takes the curse off it. It is now almost 11. I have washed two sweaters, the bathroom floor, mopped, done a day's dishes, made the bed, folded the laundry and stared in horror at my face: it is a face old before its time. (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 457)

The house became the raw material for many of her poems. Her daily chores became her medium of expression in her poetry. In her poem, 'Cut', Plath describes the little experience of having cut her thumb while cutting an onion in the kitchen and yet, expresses the extraordinary intensity of thought it gifts her with.

The poem was written in the same time as she was writing one of her masterpieces, 'Lady Lazarus'. The poem significantly starts with the lines,

What a thrill ----

My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,

A flap like a hat,

Dead white.

Then that red plush. (Plath, *Ariel* 15)

It is significant how she says that she is 'thrilled' at the sight of the wound. She says that even with all the pressure that she applies on the wound, her blood continues to flow "straight from the heart" (Plath, *Ariel* 15). She associates this image with red pilgrims, and redcoat soldiers. However, as soon as she takes the painkiller, the same cut becomes a symbol of a Saboteur, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a Kamikaze man (a Japanese suicide bomber in WWII), a trepanned veteran, a Babushka, and a dirty girl. Both these images are linked to the thumb with a sense of detachment to the member. Plath, as seen from both the images, only observes them and does not experience it.

The use of this simple experience she has in the kitchen, her sense of lost attachment and her feeling of detachment from this physically painful experience speaks volumes about her state of mind at that moment. Her act of writing in such a situation, thus, is an act of bravado. Leigh Caron Esterhuizen, in the dissertation, 'Aspects of Identity – Ariel', says,

Unmistakably, Plath's relegation to the female private sphere of wife, mother, homemaker, collides with her public interests as a creative woman in a male poetic tradition and with her aspiration to become a literary celebrity. (Esterhuizen¹²)

The depression Plath had slid into had begun to consume her mind away from her body. She was already feeling detached from it. It also highlights how Plath gave more importance to her mind and her heart. Her body was only a structure that carried them, which justifies her suicidal tendencies. It was her body that was bound in marriage and had led to the binding of her heart and mind. It had become a threat to the writer in her. She had once said,

So I began to think that when you were married and have children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.... Some pale, hueless flicker of sensitivity is in me. God: must I lose it in cooking scrambled eggs for a ma... hearing about at second hand, feeling any body and letting my powers of perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic with disuse. (Sharif 10)

While the situation had dragged Plath down into depression, Plath also made comments where she hinted at living a Utopian life. She had said, “I have everything in life I’ve ever wanted: a wonderful husband, two adorable children, a lovely home and my writing” (10). This is an instance of her bipolarity. Her works, however, establish the truth of her difficulties with firm literary grounding.

When Plath had met Hughes at Cambridge, for the first time, he was a popular poet but unpublished. Plath, on the other hand, was a published and a prize-winning poet already. A poet and friend of the Hughes’, Ruth Fainlight, had said in her interview with the BBC – “Being in a position of power was important to each of them, you know. And the one who wasn’t in the position of power wasn’t altogether happy about that state of affairs” (*Ted Hughes – Stronger than Death*). Both of them had read each others’ works and had loved them. Their meeting and their subsequent affair had an unconscious power play while love was evidently blooming too.

While for Plath, she could comfortably be sympathetic with Hughes and ‘help’ him, for Hughes, she was his Muse. Hughes was a man who is known to have been with many ladies. Most critics justify it with the explanation that Hughes would see them as his Muse for his next work. Plath could have been one of his Muses whom he loved most intensely and who haunted his memory with love and guilt till the end of his life.

Their love bloomed to ripeness very early, in a period of only four months and they soon found themselves getting married. For a short time after that, they lived their happiest time together. They became each others' support systems. Plath has often mentioned how Ted has been a great influence in her works, for he not only became her raw material but also helped her think from perspectives novel to her. In their brief period of courtship, they would write poems to each other in expression of their love for each other. Slowly, as Hughes grew mightier in her life, he held her hand and guided her into his world of abstractness, which touched Plath and her works.

Plath on the other hand, found ways to bring Hughes into the world of literary publications. When the a major New York publisher ran a competition for the best first collection of poems, Plath complied and submitted Hughes' poems instead – *The Hawk in the Rain*, which got Hughes published and rose him to fame. In her journal, she writes,

Worst: it gets me feeling sorry for myself, that I get concerned about Ted: Ted's success, which I must cope with this fall with my job, loving it, and him to have it, but feeling so wishfully that I could make both of us feel better by having it with him. I'd rather have it this way, if either of us was successful: that's why I could marry him, knowing he was a better poet than I and that would never have to restrain my little gift, but could push it and work it to the utmost and still feel ahead of him. (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 295)

This passage in her journal reveals the contrasting reality that Plath had imagined she could balance. The future brought with it harsh truths and Plath did not seem to be ready for them. After their marriage, Plath had already begun to feel her individuality getting dissolved. She realised that she was more of Mrs. Hughes, than 'Sylvia Plath'- the poet, or even 'Sylvia

Plath' - the person. In her poem, 'The Beast', she almost turns the image of Hughes into that of a beast because it is Plath's expression of her disappointment in their marriage. It is owing to this sentiment that she writes in the poem, "I have married a cupboard of rubbish" (Plath, *The Colossus* 75).

In 'Tulips' 'the speaker laments and is reluctant to return home after she had recovered from an accendectomy : "My husband and child smiling out of the family picture/ This smile catch into my skin, little smiling hooks". (Tulips) Home making, taking care of the husband and children seems to be purgation rather than an enjoyment for Plath. Thus, she again and again wanted to escape from reality, responsibility, loved ones etc. The only way out of this bitter situation is death which she ardently prayed for. (Sharif 13)

One of the crucial years of their marriage was 1960. It was in this year that both their works got published at once. While Hughes' *Lupercal* became an immediate success and sealed his reputation as a writer and poet, Plath's first ever poetry collection, *The Colossus*, was comparatively overlooked. The power balance had shifted dramatically and suddenly. Even though she was very happy for him and appreciated the success of his work she was always aware of what it had brought about. This realisation, with her everyday experience of the post-partum depression, made it worse for her. Her mind began to deteriorate in its condition and even began to grow seeds of another future disaster – her separation from her husband.

In the midst of this reality, history and Fate created another situation for Plath. The most admired poet in America at that time, Robert Lowell, published his new volume of poems called *Life Studies*. This work was a revolutionary. It was about his personal mental breakdown. It contained poems that were written in a mode of a confessional directness that had not been seen before. Confessionalism had been born as a genre.

While Hughes was sceptical about the idea of adding autobiographical elements into poetry, Plath embraced it immediately. For her, it was a means of releasing the traumatic chaos that her life and her mind had filled her with, onto pages as poetry. She had finally, found a cathartic means to heal herself, or so she thought. It is after this that she begins to write a series of works, poems, directly about her nervous breakdown. It was at this time that she was working on her novel, *The Bell Jar*, which is a semi-autobiographical novel – almost confessional. Her other work, *Ariel*, on which almost her entire poetic reputation found its popular existence, was a result of this movement too.

Plath had always been a technically accomplished poet and with confessionalism as her tool she was, now, rising into a poet of extraordinary power, force and intense originality. In her dissertation, Anumarla Govindan writes,

While she benefited from all her literary elders in learning the nuances of the craft, she was also faced with the problem of finding her own voice to express the traumatic experiences of her personal life. (Govindan 19)

Hughes tried to reach into her deeper self and unravel her inner being before her. Even poetically, her first collection, *The Colossus*, was an experimentation with different styles and different poetic forms. *Ariel*, her next collection, on the other hand, was almost revolutionary in most senses – fiery in its intensity. In her journal, she writes,

My husband supports me in soul, body and by feeding me bread and poems. I happen to love him. I can't hug him enough. I love his work and it fascinates me every minute because he is new and changing minute by minute and making new things every day. He wants me to change and make things too. What I make and how I change is up to me. He says Okay he is glad. (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 434)

As an intense person with a sensitive heart, Plath was a person with a fierce spirit but a fragile self. She needed immense support from Hughes and according to various sources, he gave it to her. According to Elaine Feinstein, he was extremely protective to her and especially to her wish to write. Professor Jonathan Bate, Ted's biographer says, "When Ted gave her resources for writing a more mythic kind of poetry, the demons did come out. The result was great poetry but it also, perhaps, tipped her over the edge, mentally" (*Ted Hughes – Stronger than Death*). It is in this phase, especially, that Plath began to write, not with a hatred for life but with an eccentric obsession with death.

In one of the incidents, Hughes gave Plath an exercise to write on the yew tree that stood tall in the churchyard next to their house. It was the same tree and yet, Hughes' perspective of the tree and Plath's perspective differ almost completely. Plath's work was far away from what Hughes might have expected. In the poem, Plath had depicted the dysfunctional relation she shared of her family. The moon represented her mother and the yew tree, a symbol that looked Gothic to her, came to depict her dead father. The poem holds in it, an atmosphere of bleakness – Gothic and mysterious.

The poem reveals her inability to escape the hold of her mother even after all these years. The memories despair, of having lost her father, and the claustrophobic hold of her mother on her being, as she viewed it, continued to haunt her till this point but with a Gothic bleakness and an eerie silence that wasn't there before. In the poem she says,

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,

White as a knuckle and terribly upset.

It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet

With the O-gape of complete despair...

The yew tree points up, it has a Gothic shape.

The eyes lift after it and find the moon.

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.

Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls. (Plath, *Ariel* 40)

In her poem, 'Tulips', Plath expresses her love of death and how peaceful and simple she finds it in contrast with the struggle she feels with life and having to choose to come back to it. The poem is about a woman who is recovering in the hospital after an operation. Hughes had confirmed at an interview that the person was Plath herself, and the poem had sprout from the real incident of her receiving tulips in the hospital after she had had an operation for her appendix, as a gift for a sooner recovery.

Plath contrasts the calm of the room with the brightness of the tulips. The red and bright colour of the tulips, symbolize the robustness in life. It is this that disturbs her from the white, dead calm of the hospital room where she says, "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons" (Plath, *The Colossus* 12). Recovering from her treatment, in that room, she feels the peaceful 'nothing' that dawned in the simplicity of calm upon her. Here, she was finally only 'her', having been 'swabbed... clear of... (her) loving associations' (Plath, *The Colossus* 12). She says,

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses

And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

(Plath, *The Colossus* 12)

The lines hold in them, an existential detachment and yet, have peace in them. The anguish that her mind was tormenting her with, finds a healing in this existential calm, in Plath's case. It is in these moments that she finds a release from being everybody's something to being just 'her'. The tulips and its bright red colour are a distraction to her peace at such a time. She says,

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

How free it is, you have no idea how free –

The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,

And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.

(Plath, *The Colossus* 13)

The poem does not reveal her distaste of life. It rather highlights how enchanting the idea of death or a state of 'nothing', was to her. She would rather be a nothing, and yet she strived for such fame and perfection that drove her into madness.

'Lady Lazarus' is another poem speaks in a fierce existential fury, about dying, suicides and death. The name, Lazarus, points to the biblical story wherein Jesus had brought her (Lazarus) back to life from death. However, in this poem, Plath depicts the woman to have come back to life all by her own self, giving the power of spirit and a feminine strength too her personality. It is almost an angry poem as A. Alvarez had put it. It speaks about the fiery power that is involved in the process of 'choosing' to come back to life from death. There is a sense of victory, even when this death was called in by the same person to herself, in the state of depression.

The poem holds in it, Plath's feeling of conquest over even death, as Alvarez puts it. In many of her poems she symbolises death as being her only means to find peace and calm and even perfection. As a person obsessed with the idea of perfection, Plath was met with restrictions and contradictions, even disillusionments in everything she had and in everything she did. While balance was her dream, she was always met with disturbing disharmony.

As a person, she saw loss and betrayal and when she sought for perfection in poetry, she was met with dissatisfying reviews. It is in her last years that the disquieting memories screamed and gathered into a destructive thunderstorm that led her into thinking that the truest perfection could be found only after death. In her poem, 'Lady Lazarus' she writes,

Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be

At home on me

And I a smiling woman. (Plath, *Ariel* 8)

In 'Tulips' and in this poem too, Plath expresses her frustration with the reality of having to come back to life from the calm of the nothingness death made her feel. She says, while trying to bring her back, her loved ones would "call and call/ And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" (Plath, *Ariel* 9). Paradoxically, yet understandably, Plath uses the positive and peaceful image of pearls while describing the worms of death that had stuck to her. However, it is the power she exhibits in her image of conquest over death that turns the poem resplendent with an overwhelming energy.

Plath's cyclic depression had led her into attempting suicides several times in her life. However, she considered it as a part of the art she was creating. In the poem, she writes,

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well. (Plath, *Ariel* 9)

Death is a challenge she gave herself in a dissatisfied rage that surged against herself. Diving into it and rising again, victorious, gives her the contentment of having won over something that most people succumb to. When seen from the feminist perspective, the poem is a rage against the existence of a female writer in the patriarchal world. It is in this light that she writes that she is 'a miracle' (10). With an almost arrogant confidence, she says,

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I will rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (Plath, *Ariel* 11)

In May, 1962, Assia Wevill and her husband went to Devon and visited Plath and Hughes at their home. It was here that romance began to brew between Hughes and Assia. Plath's life had seen loss in many forms and by this time, she had already become obsessed with the idea of possessing. She mentions in her journal,

All my life I have been "stood up" emotionally by people I loved most: daddy dying and leaving me, mother somehow not there. So I endow the smallest incidents of lateness, for example, in other people I love, with an emotional content of coldness, indication that I am not important to them.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 455)

Plath was immensely insecure about Ted. This insecurity found a volcanic force when Assia came into the picture and she realised that all her fears had come to be true and that she was, now, going to lose her love, her husband.

After many, continuous rough incidents, some of which even contained incidents when Plath burnt some of his works, and after a significant incident of fierce argumentation between the two, Hughes finally walked away from Plath. Plath was devastated at this loss. She had suddenly turned into a single mother of two – Frieda, who was two years old, and Nicholas, who was only months old. Hughes shifted to London with Assia and Plath shifted away from the countryside and took a flat in the town – the flat where Yeats had spent many years.

Years of repression had now turned into an uncontrollable eruption, which had begun to destroy everything – her, most importantly. However, simultaneously, her works became more and more deep, intense and original. She would wake up before the children might stir and write for a while. She had grown into a fountain of poetry that kept overflowing on pages, spilling into three or four poems each day.

In her poem, 'Cut', Plath uses the word 'homunculus' which means 'little man'. The word 'homunculus', points to Hughes who had been called a 'little man' by Plath in the quarrel which eventually brought about their final separation. Assia had telephoned at their place and had tried to conceal her identity by trying to fake a man's voice. When Plath realised the truth, she pulled the telephone wire off the wall, threw the telephone on the ground. In one of her letters ensuing this incident, she had written how Ted had changed and that now, he had become a 'little man'.

In her fury with that which had occurred and disrupted the foundations of her present life, she sees the thumb as a symbol of the phallus and the cutting of the thumb as the process of castration, say some critics. They say that it is because she imagines to be attacking him. Her

calling him a 'trepanned veteran' (Plath, *Ariel* 16) could indicate her accusing him of being someone with low intelligence; someone who needed an operation. It is her anger that erupts into this poem.

In another poem, 'The Hanging Man', the persona gets abused by a god figure. The poem is an outright expression of the torment she undergoes inside her. The title 'The Hanging Man' is a mystical tarot symbol that also means 'turning inwards'. In the poem, Plath before the readers, her deepest torments. In the poem, she sees the persona as the victim that must undergo such extreme torments and pain that the god figure might endow her with.

The image of the blue volts refers to the torturous electro-convulsive therapy of those times that Plath had to undergo after her first suicide attempt. The line, "The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid :/ A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket" (Plath *Ariel* 65) depicts another tormentous image where the eyeballs must be without lids. The poem is a silent scream that Plath lets out, with every painful memory surfacing before her at this last phase.

In this phase, Plath was undergoing not just emotional and mental but also physical challenges. She was trying to cope with the feeling of immense loneliness, of the responsibility of two little children who were under her single care, a cold winter so extreme as had not been seen for years, depression and physical ailments. The thought that she was meant to be lonely haunted her being.

Her poems, in this phase, find their subject in her past. They touch upon the loss of her father, the distance and coldness she felt towards her mother, her relationship with Hughes, her pregnancy, post-partum depression, her dissolution and dissatisfaction with marriage and her eventual separation with Ted. However, it is at such a time that she writes three cathartic

poems. While almost all her poems were written for a cathartic purpose, these hold significant meanings – ‘Medusa’, ‘Daddy’ and ‘Ariel’.

Plath uses ‘Medusa’ and ‘Daddy’ to exorcise herself of the pain she was feeling agonised with. ‘Medusa’ is a poem that is concerned with her mother – Aurelia Plath. Plath’s father is often considered to have an authoritarian stature in the family. In the Interview with the BBC, Aurelia is heard saying that the house became a freer place to live in after he had passed away. However, the control she tries to have over young Sylvia tears her apart at that phase of turmoil when she was already agonised with the loss of her beloved father. This had a lasting and a destructive impact on her. In her journal, she says,

So how do I express my hate for my mother? In my deepest emotions I think of her as an enemy: somebody who “killed” my father, my first male ally in the world. She is a murderess of maleness. I lay in my bed when I thought my mind was going blank forever and thought what a luxury it would be to kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat which could never be big enough to protect me from the world. But I was too nice for murder. I tried to murder myself: to keep from an embarrassment to the ones I loved and from living myself in a mindless hell. How thoughtful: Do unto yourself as you would do to others. I’d kill her, so I killed myself.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 433)

Plath was a bird that had been trapped in ties, bonds, relations. While she knew their worth, she also sought freedom to be herself. The over-protectiveness of her mother and the attention she gave her, felt suffocating to Plath. She expresses her annoyance with the constant gaze of her mother in this poem by comparing her to the Medusa – a mythical figure who was said to possess snakes as hair and whose gaze would turn people into stone. Plath

uses harsh and violent imagery in the poem in expression of her anger. As a natural symbol of the Medusa, she uses the image of the jellyfish whose genus name is *Aurelia aulita*.

Plath tries to dissociate herself completely from her mother in the poem. The most evident way she does this is by mentioning the phrase 'barnacled umbilicus' (Plath, *Ariel* 38). She names the essential bond of a mother and child 'barnacled' which refers to the clingy personality of her mother which she felt tied to because of the umbilical relation she bears with, which is always, unfortunately to her, "in a state of miraculous repair" (Plath, *Ariel* 38). In the poem, she says

I didn't call you.

I didn't call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless

You steamed to me over the sea

Fat and red... (38)

'Daddy' is a poem wherein Plath exorcises the memories of her father, which had haunted her very existence and the memories of her husband and love, Ted Hughes, who had left her alone with two little children, for another woman. "If I have killed a man, I've killed two" (50), she says.

In the poem, very significantly, she re-creates her father. She stitches him together but when it is done, very surreally, she finds him to have turned into Ted Hughes. In a BBC interview, one of Plath's friends had said that when Plath says, "Daddy, I've had to kill you" (48) she could not have addressed it to her father since she loved him too dearly. She, instead, says that it was the memories of her father that loomed larger on her life than he himself and which enveloped everything in her life into bleakness and a Gothic darkness. This seems to

have been especially true in the case of Hughes. The mention of the black telephone and of it having come off its roots, in the poem, makes this evident. In the poem, she says

But they pulled me out of the sack,

And they stuck me together with glue.

And then I knew what to do.

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through.

The black telephone's off at the root,

The voices just can't worm through. (Plath, *Ariel* 50)

The poem is a resurrecting of her memories of pain and horror and the burial of them all, all at once. She talks about how she lived all her life "like a foot/ For thirty years, poor and white,/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (48) inside the "black shoe" (48) – an image that she uses for her father in this part of the poem. The blatant images come forth, out of the darkness and the claustrophobia Plath had suffered with all her life.

In her poems, generally, Plath shows various insights into that age of such war and destruction. However, in this poem, she uses the war as a symbol. Otto Plath was a German and it is in this consideration and otherwise, that Plath uses him as a symbol of cruelty. She calls him a Jew. She puts herself in the character of the victim in many poems. However, here, it becomes of symbol of not only her personal expression but even of a significant historical incident. She says,

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back to you.

I thought even the ones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack. (Plath, *Ariel* 50)

In the poem, she says that her suicides were only her attempts to get back to him. However, when she wasn't allowed to die, she came back and tried to resurrect him and found Hughes – another Fascist, as she calls him. However, she says that at this phase and time of her writing she has already killed them inside her heart. She declares in an angry arrogance – “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through”. This declaration, however, might not only be a confirmation but an attempt Plath makes to convince herself of having got over it so it calms the turbulence that she had become.

The work, *Ariel*, shows tremendous changes in Plath as a person and as a poet and both these personalities find a particular expression in her poem – ‘Ariel’. The work gives a visual presentation of her creative process that had, in this last phase, come out of the dark stables and was galloping vibrantly towards the dazzling sun. The poem is not only significant as a literary masterpiece, but also as an important psychological revelation of Plath, to her

readers. The release of the horse in the poem is symbolic of the release of the repression of Plath. While it looks vibrant and intense, the image of her creative spirit and her spirit heads towards the cauldron of a dazzling death.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: THE 'GYRED' IDENTITY

I cannot live for life itself: but for the words that stay the flux. My life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time. I forget too easily how it was, and shrink to the horror of the here and now, with past and no future. Writing breaks open the vaults of the dead and the skies behind which the prophesying angels hide. The mind makes and makes, spinning its web.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 286)

Everything is only an effect and yet, the cause of other things. While the chain of cause and effect affects everything and everybody, Plath's life finds this significant pattern in a more obvious and specific form because of her logical

perspective and her subjective and confessional style of documenting it in her works – journals, stories and poetry. Her confessionalism, however, reveals and conceals her at once, making it an ambiguous and a challenging task to undertake.

As an over-thinker with a sensitive heart but a logical mind, Plath seemed to have got affected by every incident that she underwent, in a drastic and dramatic way. The death of her father, which became her introduction with loss and death, diverted her from being a girl with a bright imagination to a lady who found companionship in darkness. The control of her mother made her desire for freedom so acute that she sought refuge in death for it. Perfection became her substitute for love and creativity became her cathartic comrade.

While Plath was always an incredibly gifted talent and an amazing scholar she spent her first phase of writing in finding her voice and her subject. *The Colossus* was written in this phase when she was still in her imitative phase. This work was a result of Plath's first two phases wherein she had met with a loss, seen success in academics, had felt tremendous disappointment in herself, had attempted suicide for the first time, had found love and had got married. While Plath's life was not as smooth as she had wished it to be but there was a calm she could somehow bring herself to.

In *The Colossus* Plath writes incredibly but perfectly. The perfection that Plath had strived for and had worked incredibly hard for, had eventually brought her down in respect of poetry. The poems collected in this first collection of poetry have a perfection about them. The stanzas are clear and crisp. Although she mostly writes in a free verse form and there are enjambments that occur here and there, the works can be safely called technically correct and adept.

In 'Faun', 'Mushrooms', 'Full Fathom Five', 'The Disquieting Muses', or even 'The Colossus', it is evident to the readers that her works are related to her life. However, in this

imitative phase, she hides this reality, very intelligently, in the garb of far-fetched images. They are more universal. Their true meanings must be deduced. Her use of the pronoun 'I' directs the readers to her and yet the ambiguity of her symbols re-direct them to an imagined persona.

The last phase of Plath, on the other hand, was an explosion that resulted from her years of repression. The disillusionments that came upon her after her marriage had begun to destroy her. In a journal entry that she made in her sophomore year, she had written down her fears of losing her individuality to her husband. She had said,

For instance, I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man's insides, submerging myself until his purpose becomes my purpose, his life, my life, and so on. One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with my newfound selfless self.
(qtd. in Carey)

However, it was Hughes' affair with Assia and his leaving Plath for her that made Plath burst into a thunderous turbulence, the echoes of which were to be heard for years and years by the generations to come. Significantly, the emergence of the confessional school of poetry in that age became a catalyst to the rise and the simultaneous fall of Sylvia Plath. While it gave her a medium to explore and express her torments more freely, her repression exploded onto her and destroyed her. It is due to this that,

...in the late poems, Plath reversed her earlier practice of hiding her experiences under formal structures and started to speak her experiences directly. (Govindan 153)

If one analyses the titles of her two poetry collections, one would feel the difference in their spirit. *The Colossus* is the image of perfection and stillness, even though it is the sculpture that has broken down in reality. There is a sense of stillness and wonder. The image arouses

awe in readers with regard to the enormity that looms large. *Ariel*, on the other hand was the name of the horse that Plath would often ride. It has a stunning sense of movement. According to Hughes,

Ariel was the name of the horse that Plath rode at a riding school on Dartmoor, Devonshire, 12 but the horse itself bore very little resemblance to the Ariel of the poem. While the actual Ariel was "old and rather reluctant to move", the poetic Ariel gallops so fast that "the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances" and the "furrow/Splits and passes." (Govindan 41)

‘Ariel’ was the name of the holy city of Jerusalem, in the Old testament, which means “God’s lioness” (Plath, *Ariel* 28). Also, in Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, it was the name of a character that represented the spritely embodiment of the poetic imagination of his master, Prospero. The title is thus, significant because it symbolises release.

In her last phase, Plath had found reasons and situations that helped her to finally release her creative force. The wild spirit of her anger and creativity, that had been waiting for long, in darkness, finds a release. In the poem, she says,

...And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Plath, *Ariel* 29)

Almost all the poems of the last phase find a release from perfection and the forced calm. There is a sense of movement in them. There is dazzling imagery, a vivid emotional energy, historical and biblical allusions and a breathtaking sense of turbulence.

Since this research seeks to study the life and the two poetry collections of Plath simultaneously, it would seek to study it using the double gyre. Every occurrence and every situation forms a pattern and again, often, there are patterns which bring about the occurrence of various situations. The life and the works of Plath can be perceived from the perspective of the Yeatsian gyre. As mentioned in the introduction, a gyre is originally a mathematical, geometrical concept.

In basic terms, it involves a spiral or something that moves in a circular manner and forms the pattern of either growth or dwindle. There could a single gyre that either dwindles or grows. There could a dwindling gyre that begins to grow after it has reached its final point of dwindling. This gyre has two separate vortices – one growing and the other one dwindling, placed on each other. In this condition, while one gyre grows, the other one dwindles simultaneously, forming two opposite, complementary patterns. In the context of this research, there are two vortices.

The life of Plath, her psychological situation, her emotional condition and her personal baggage that led into dwindling into the person she was form vortex. Plath's creative spirit and her works form the other vortex. Since, her works fall into the confessional genre and have a distinct resemblance with her personality – her personality, being the reason for its existence; the second vortex can safely be called Plath, the poet. The work has attempted to show that while vortex A (Plath, the person) dwindles into destruction, there is the simultaneous and the complementary opposite vortex B (Plath, the poet) growing into fruition.

When Plath is obsessed with perfection in her life and tries to repress herself in order to set things in a calmer state, her poetry remains tied to technical correctness and hidden behind the masks of metaphors. It stands in darkness, full of rage but with a calm stance. However, as soon as she finds Hughes cutting their bond, she cuts off every bond that had tied her to 'correctness' and perfection. It is then, that she allows her spirit to run wild. Her art at this time finds a release from perfection and her poems turn into art.

While Plath was in her younger days and was coping with loss and death, she had sought to perfectionism as her resort. She had repressed her truest disquiet behind the happy mask of correctness and conformity. Her life was not as she had imagined it should be and there were many instances of disappointment. Plath's first suicide attempt also falls in this phase and yet, she represses her disappointment and continues to strive for that which she thought could compensate for every disappointing occurrence or situation – perfection. It is due to this repression that her personal life and her emotional and psychological condition could be pacified. This helped her to maintain a near balance.

However, this phase saw her disappointing poetic career. It was her imitative phase and Plath was still attempting to learn and perfect different poetic styles. She was also under the influence of different writers of the age. She had not found her voice or her subject and was only attempting to explore different possibilities. She was more of a confessional however, even before the genre had found an official and a popular name. However, the repression that her personality had forced itself with affected her writing as they became forced to wear a stoic veil. The equation between her real feelings and her stoic work mismatch, and owing to her confessional style of writing, therefore, it gained a disappointing success.

In her first and second phases that led to the making of *The Colossus*, Plath seems to have much to say. However, she tries to say too many things in too less words. There was an

intensity in its essence but a stoicism in her words. In her poem, 'The Disquieting Muses', Plath seeks to portray her pain and the turbulence that was surging within her. She tries to portray the bleakness that had begun to swallow her mind and the distress that her attraction to these muses and her mother's pulling her away from her was causing her. However, the work seeks to do this through seven perfect stanzas with eight lines each. The poem wears an imposed structure and a sophisticated language. While the essence of the poem is that of turbulence, the images Plath uses are 'still'.

In 'The Colossus' too, Plath seeks to portray an image of brokenness. However, to convey this she uses an imposed structure – six perfect stanzas with five lines each. The syllable count has been kept approximately the same. There is only one enjambment. Plath assumes a forced distance from the work through her language.

The intensity Plath contained within her was waiting for an eruption but she continued to control it in the narrow alleys of perfection and accuracy. While her poetry, in the first collection – *The Colossus*, has been written in free verse there are lesser enjambments, almost a rigid syllable count in her lines, strict structures and distant images. Plath assumes a forced distance from the work.

However, in her later phase, her life and the times gave her reasons for release. Her disillusionments about marriage and her broken relationship with Hughes pushed her into a void of loneliness and existential crisis. The establishment and popularity of confessionalism as a genre also encouraged and inspired her to write about her mental agony in blatant expression.

While this served as a cathartic experience, she began to get drawn into her deeper selves. The repression she had pressed herself with began to melt away and her wild, dark and untamed spirit found release. She began to get so engrossed with that self that it led her

to believe that it was the only truth there could be. Her dreadful depression and her eventual suicide became her ultimate relief.

While depression and death began to engulf Plath's being, her wild spirit had brought with it a frantic and an unstoppable creative force. Her floodgates had opened and while she was drowning in it, her poetic side flourished in its surge. The stoic stance had been blown away and her poetry became bolder and starkly real. There was a free flow of words and emotions. The masks had been thrown away in angry rebellion. There were more enjambments. The structure of the poems were not restricted to the idea of correctness but were used to compliment the subject of the poem. The syllable count became flexible. The poems became truer to themselves.

Her poem 'Ariel' seeks to express the essence of release. The poem too, finds release from poetic structures. The syllable count is flexible. Some lines consist of only intense and pregnant phrases. The work comes alive with more expressive punctuation marks such as the exclamation marks and the question marks. It not only made the poem more lively but also more engaging. It seemed like a natural monologue and resonates with her feelings in an honest way.

Research has proved that depression can trigger creativity and also, creative minds are more prone to depression. Studies say that people who are more creative, artists, writers and so on, have greater chances of being affected by depression or of their having some or the other depressive disorder. In his dissertation, 'Depression and Creative Intelligence', Michael L. Fialkoff says,

Mental illness and creativity are commonly associated with one another. There are countless examples of painters, writers, and musicians who have suffered from various forms of psychopathology. Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickenson are just several examples of writers whose creativity was

associated with major depressive disorder... research has suggested that symptoms associated with depression, such as feelings of social rejection and self-reflective rumination, are associated with increased creativity even in the general population. (Fialkoff, 3)

It could also be true that Plath was intentionally, unwilling to part with depression for it catered to her creative self. In her journal, she had once written,

I could go down with letter paper as an excuse for my presence, but I won't... I won't try to escape myself by losing myself in artificial chatter... I'll stay here and try to pin that loneliness down.

(Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 30).

While Plath had bipolarism of the second type where she had more, and longer phases of depression than of elation, the last phase of her life triggered it to the level where its intensity amplified to a disturbing level. With her accepting of confessionalism as the genre she would write in, her realising that she would be the subject of her works and her diving deep into her darker and repressed selves, this depression enveloped her almost completely and even devoured her in the end. However, from this abyss of darkness bloomed forth a spring of poetry that was so mesmerising the generations that came after her willingly gave in to that spell.

Critics often talk about the unreliability of confessional works because of the debatable autobiographical elements they are discussed with. In an interview, Robert Lowell, who is believed to be the person responsible for the foundation of this genre of writing says:

They're not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the

poems. Yet there's this thing: if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing--you want the reader to say, this is true.... And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry--the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell. (Govindan, 40)

Every autobiography has a tampering and juggling of truth. There is always some decorative additions and some silent emissions. However, the essence of anything done with an intention of expression holds in it an essence that cannot be lied about or misunderstood.

Plath's story has many antagonists. Hughes, however, is considered the most important of them all. In the interview with the BBC, Frieda Hughes had said that often her parents were fictionalised to the point that even she cannot recognise them. In his dissertation, Govindan says,

The sensationalism generated by Plath's separation from Hughes over his alleged infidelity and Plath's subsequent suicide provoked a flurry of critical opinions based on the information provided by a variety of people.

(Govindan 30)

Everything is after all a perspective that can be more, or less correct according to the person perceiving it. However, the essence of her life states it clearly that while dreams are important and perfection is necessary, the strength to accept things in all their imperfection is being truly perfect. The inability to accept gave Plath her fame, which is neither fortunate nor unfortunate. However, her art, while it captured the beauty of creative spirit in its full force and froze that moment in eternity, destroyed her and marred her before she could evolve as a person and decorate it incident by incident to create a poetry that could have not just fascinated but inspired the world. However, as Hughes has rightly stated in her epitaph,

owing to her circumstances in life, and her own mental disturbances, Plath's art stands testimony to beauty that can bloom even in the most adverse circumstances.

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