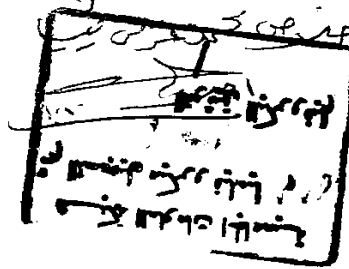


Ain Shams University
Faculty of Arts
Department of English



SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

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By

Mohammed Mahmoud Fahmy Raiyah

Under the supervision of

Prof.

Ikhlas M. Azmy

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APPROVAL SHEET

Ain Shams University

Faculty of Arts

Name of Candidate: Mohammed Mahmoud Fahmy Raiyah

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BJ: Sylvia Plath. The Bell Jar. London: Faber, 1963.
- CP: Sylvia Plath. The Collected Poems. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper, 1981.
- I: Sylvia Plath. The Journals of Sylvia Plath. Ed. Frances McCullough. New York: Dial, 1982.
- JP: Sylvia Plath. Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts. New York: Harper, 1980.
- LH: Sylvia Plath. Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963. New York: Harper, 1975.

PREFACE

PREFACE

Throughout her life, Sylvia Plath (1932 - 63), was engaged in a continuous search for identity. Her poetry exhibits a persistent struggle to know her authentic self and to discover her true identity. Self-discovery and self-definition constitute the central preoccupation of all her work. Dissatisfied with the definitions imposed upon her by others, she sought a redefinition of herself. Her entire career can be seen as a dialogue or conflict between different identities and roles, and the portrayal in her poems of the different warring selves, along with her own sense of being split and her fears of being subsumed and absorbed by others, testifies to her insecure sense of identity. The conflict in Plath's poems is an inner conflict which reflects social pressures. It is a conflict between her true self and her false self, or as Pamela Annas puts it, between the "self-defined self and another-defined self" (6). Thoroughly probing the depths of her psyche, Plath depicts a fearful state of fragmentation and self-division, which reflects the conflict in her mind between the different roles and concepts of self.

This study puts Plath's search for identity in its proper social, biographical, and literary contexts. Her search for self-definition is presented as the outcome of her keen awareness of the social conditions and the domestic ideology of the fifties and her aversion to the prevalent traditional gender roles. Plath's poetry reflects the identity crisis in the minds of her contemporary women, the result of the pervasive influence of the current public image of womanhood perpetuated by the media and the climate of opinion, which hindered their growth as full human beings.

It was, however, Plath's particular biographical circumstances which sharpened her sense of the injustice of the prevailing social codes and enhanced her anger and dissatisfaction. Throughout her life, she wavered between conformity to the prevalent social norms, passed to her through her mother, and rebellion against the family conservative social ideals. She considered her parents as representatives of the inimical values and social codes which sustained her false self. The maternal figure in her poems is conceived as suffocating, destructive, and petrifying. Nevertheless, while the poems record the dangerous closeness of the mother, they also register the difficulty of separating

from her. The father, on the other hand, who is idealized in the early poems as an adored and admired powerful god-like figure, becomes in the late poems a despot and a sadistic German tormentor, a symbol of masculine oppressive authority. In "Medusa" and "Daddy," the poet changes from the victim of her parents' oppression to a spiteful avenger, exorcising her parents to get rid of their influence, in search for an autonomous self.

Plath's personal experience of marriage and motherhood led her to the conclusion that marriage is a dehumanizing institution, which is presented in her poetry as a snare, entrapment, or imprisonment.

Although she glorifies female creativity in her poems, she often conceives the maternal role as self-effacing, regards children as a source of danger to the poet's identity, and sees motherhood and writing as two incompatible roles. The failure of Plath's marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes intensified her despair and rage, enhanced her sense of victimization, and stirred her disillusionment with her past, releasing her hidden self in the form of unprecedented poetic energy.

Plath's quest of self and self-definition is also seen as the ultimate theme of modern women poets,

writing in search of authentic, whole, and autonomous existence. Images of fragmentation, dismemberment, and depersonalization, which fill Plath's poems, are recurrent images in all modern women's poetry. Like Plath, other women poets write about the dangerous influence of their parents upon their identity growth, and write angry poems in protest of their victimization. In their effort to correct their cultural and social image, they are engaged in a project of revising patriarchal mythology, invoking mythic female figures, like the Medusa, as their poetic muses. Thus, Plath's pursuit of her feminine self puts her at the centre of the female literary tradition.

Plath's poetry revolves around her effort to reconcile the opposed demands of the domestic and the creative selves. Whereas it bespeaks an intensified awareness of the alleged dichotomy of creativity and femininity, it represents her challenge of the authenticity of this cleavage and her lifelong pursuit to succeed both as woman and as poet. Notwithstanding her tone of self-mockery and self-laceration or the loathing for women which fills her writings as well as her repudiation of femininity in some poems, Plath often emerges as seeking a unified self, and she never

forgoes the goal of achieving an integrated whole being. The unmistakable feminine character of her poetry attests to her disbelief in the incongruity between femininity and creativity.

This study examines the development of Plath's achievement, showing her particular poetic manipulation of her autobiographical material. Notwithstanding the excellence of much of the early poetry, published during her lifetime in The Colossus (1960), or her transitional work, collected posthumously in Crossing the Water (1971), and Winter Trees (1972), it is the last poems which she produced in the final months of her life and published posthumously in Ariel (1965), which bear her unique stamp and represent her greatest contribution to modern American poetry.

In the early part of her career, Plath writes in a rather objective manner, concealing her inner self behind the thick layers of an elaborate well crafted style. But in the last months of her life, she develops a highly subjective style, telling sincerely of her innermost feelings and using her life as the basic material of her work. The Ariel poems are written under great emotional stress, telling of their author's intolerable suffering in the months which preceded her suicide in

February 1963. Deserted by her husband and living alone in a London flat, away from her relatives and friends, with two very young children, little money, nobody to help her, and in the coldest British winter for more than a century, Plath wrote the poems which made her name. The terrible October poems were composed at the terrific speed of twenty-six poems in thirty days, bespeaking the poet's rage and overflowing with vengeance against her victimizers.

However, the violent emotional content of these poems does not overpower the skill of execution. In fact, Plath finds in her last poetry the exact formula to combine the troubled content and the accomplished form in a perfect balance, creating an innovative powerful style, which faithfully and effectively reflects her intense psychological torment. The confessional breakthrough in the last poems is thus communicated by means of the most appropriate technical devices, which fittingly correspond to the poet's anguish. It is to Plath's merit that she never loses control of her poetic tools even when she is expressing the most troubled and extreme feelings.

Plath's life and art are so entangled that a consideration of her poems is impossible without access

to their biographical sources. However, in spite of their autobiographical content, the poems succeed primarily by virtue of their artistic skill. Thus, although the study draws heavily upon the biographical subject matter to illuminate the reading of Plath's poetry, the poems are not read mainly as documents of her life, but rather as her literary production. Confessions alone do not make good art. Early biographical critics tend to trace Plath's poems in search for facts about her life and the reasons of her suicide. Those critics, exemplified by A. Alvarez and Robert Lowell's preface to *Ariel*, miss the mark about the essence of Plath's achievement and fail to recognize that Plath uses her life only as a point of departure towards larger horizons.

As the study avoids the defects of biographical criticism, which sees Plath's work merely as her commentary on her life or as her suicide note, it also avoids the distorting effect of the psychological approach which treats Plath's work mainly as the manifestation of particular mental states, interpreting every detail as related to specific pathological symptoms, and reading the poems as the production of a mad or schizophrenic woman. David Holbrook's psychoanalytical study of Plath is a typical example of

this kind of reductive criticism which approaches Plath's poetry as a mere case history of a mental state. Sherry Zivley, too, agrees that "the behavior and logic of the speakers in Plath's late poetry are common symptoms of schizophrenia" (239). As the introduction of this thesis makes clear, the self-division in women's poetry is actually an indication of a cultural state imposed upon women, rather than an indication of schizophrenia.

The present study relies largely on the findings of modern feminist criticism as represented by such critics as Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert, Suzanne Juhasz, Alicia Ostriker, Marjorie Perloff, and Linda Bundtzen. The emphasis in these critics' works on the impact of the lives of women writers on their art and their stress on the significance of gender in literature is highly useful in studying works by women. It is true that attention to the relationship between biography and art is a prerequisite of feminist criticism, but the biography is related to social and cultural issues. Plath as a woman expressing her self and defining her feminine identity is thus the subject of this thesis.

The thesis is composed of four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one is an introduction on "Modern American Women's Poetry and Identity," attempts to put