

CHAPTER - I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), occupies a position of considerable importance in the poetry of 1950^s and early 1960^s. As one of the foremost American poets in English, Sylvia Plath has attracted considerable critical attraction from scholars in America and abroad. She has established her reputation as one of the talented new poets. Yet she belongs to that small band of illustrious poets whose fate it has been to suffer a long period of neglect. She may not be a poet of the first order so far as her craftsmanship or artistic quality is concerned; but she is certainly worth our consideration. In range of interests and depths of sensibility, she remains unsurpassed in the confessional poetry that plumbed the depths of modern psyche.

Sylvia has been described as a poetess of despair and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind. We find a close connection between her life and poetical works. Her poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of her attempt as a woman to come to terms with herself. She is primarily a poet seeking, sometimes in vain, other times successfully, a balance between involvement with life and detachment from it. Her poetry emerges from a tension between

two opposites, an emotional plunge into life and a desire for detachment from it.

In his foreward to her posthumous collection, Ariel, Robert Lowell characterized Sylvia Plath as "something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created - hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another "poetess", but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines"¹ and her poetry as "controlled hallucination".² Philip Larkin has labelled her as the 'horror poet' as her themes were "neurosis, insanity, disease, death, horror and terror".³ Barbara Hardy wrote:

Passions of hate and horror prevail in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, running strongly counter to the affirmative and life enhancing quality of most great English poetry, even in this century. We cannot reconcile her despairing and painful protest with the usual ideological demands of Christian, Marxist, and humanist writers, whether nobly or sympathetically eloquent, like Wordsworth, breezily simplified, like Dylan Thomas, or cunning in ethical and psychological argument, like W.H. Auden or F.R. Leavis.⁴

Alfred (Arthur) Alvarez, poetry editor of The Observer and the first champion of Sylvia Plath gives a personal account of her last days of fierce creativity and says, "Her poems will speak so distinctly in her accents: quick, sardonic, unpredictable, effortlessly inventive, a bit angry and always utterly her own".⁵ He also included Sylvia Plath in The New Poetry as the poet of the modernist tradition of experimentation and has explained

the nature of her extremist poetry in Beyond All This Fiddle.

Like her contemporaries such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke and Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath was a confessional poet and her poetry deals with her self, her physical and mental disabilities and frustrations in a wholly original way. M.L. Rosenthal's The New Poets treats her as one of the confessional poets and argues that, "confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering".⁶ While examining the work of the confessional poets, Arthur Oberg in his Modern American Lyric,^{ref?} condemned Sylvia Plath as "a contemporary decadent"⁷ and Elizabeth Hardwick, too, expressed the same opinion in Seduction And Betrayal.^{ref?}

Nancy Hunter Steiner's A Closer Look At Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath, clarifies the contrast between Sylvia Plath's public image and poetic personality and finds a vivid portrait of Sylvia Plath in youth and maturity. Mckay (D.F.) in Aspects of Energy in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath interprets her poetry as the emanation of a schizoid individual and is of the view that Sylvia Plath has been "preoccupied with the charge of language, the energy with which meaning is conveyed".⁸ E.M. Aird upholds Sylvia Plath as a poet of despair and considers the development in her poetry from the viewpoint of structure and imagery.

Ted Hughes, her husband and eminent British poet describes her technical development in his Sylvia Plath's Crossing the Water: Some Reflections. But his reflections being

restricted to a few poems deal with her art of description, musical quality and imagery.

Margaret Dickie Uroff in Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes discusses their poetic collaboration and tries to rescue Sylvia Plath from the critics who see her as neurotic. She has studied Plath's later poems, especially the bee poems with a feministic approach. Mary Lynn Broe tried to shatter the Plath myth in her Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. She provides an analysis of her development as a major poet and the notion of her poetry as "a fence to keep psychological disturbances at bay".⁹ In her feministic approach, Lynda K. Bundtzen in Plath's Incarnations : Woman and Creative Process tries to demythologize Sylvia Plath from myths of Plath the psychotic, narcissist martyr and death goddess.

But the most remarkable treatise on Sylvia Plath is Jon Rosenblatt's Sylvia Plath : The Poetry of Initiation in which he treats a movement towards a symbolic death and rebirth of the self with particular reference to the poems in Ariel and Winter Trees. Another outstanding work is Anthony Libby's Mythologies of Nothing : Mystical Death in American Poetry in which there is a discussion of mystical death with reference to the poetry of Stevens, Lowell, Roethke, Plath, Robert Bly and W.S. Merwin.

As far as Indian contribution to the Sylvia Plath - Criticism is concerned, very few articles have been published. J. Birje-Patil has read paper entitled "The Autobiography of a Fever : The Poetry of Sylvia Plath", at the Bombay University

Conference of Indian English and American Poetry held on
October 29 - Nov. 3, 1972.

Issac Sequeira's "From Confession to Suicide : The poetry of Sylvia Plath", a paper read at the seminar on contemporary American poetry held in ^{Where?} ~~July~~, 1975 deals with the confessional tone of her poetry. E.V. Ramakrishnan's "Suicidal Poetry and Confession", is a paper presented at a seminar held in Marathwada University in January, 1983. It deals with the confessional poetry. K. Radha throws an interesting light on the relation between Plath's biography and creative writing in her "The Bee Poems of Sylvia Plath". Another Indian scholar, Ujjal Dutta regards Sylvia Plath's poetry as a performance and comments that her "poetry was not an act of exorcising private emotional conflicts, but of exercising them."¹⁰

It is clear from the critical remarks quoted above, that Sylvia Plath is the remarkable English poetess. The poetic output of this poet of Austro-Prussian origin is large. Besides, she deals with a variety of themes and concerns ranging from external experiences to interior experiences. However the critics and scholars have concentrated upon her confessional poetry, poetic craftsmanship and imagery. Some have dealt with the Plath myth and Plath the decadent and others have studied her poetry from the ~~feminist~~ point of view. Only a few scholars have tried to penetrate the theme of symbolic and mystical death in her poetry. Yet the study is insufficient as it deals with the later poems and her early poems seem to be neglected, and hence, her poetry as a whole requires a special thematic study.

and yet you seem to have no awareness of Plath's
Collected Poems which contains the juvenilia poems not found in
her individual vols. of poetry — you do refer to the CP
on the next p

But the most dominant theme one finds in her poetry is the theme of death. Hence it is intended in this dissertation; ^{!?} (to plumb) domination of death in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. This topic has not been closely and deeply studied by the critics. In the Plath world, we have an impressive picture of decay and death and her poetry, too, is dominated by the same theme. Even the poems that do not deal with this theme are written under the clouds of deathly ^{!?} tensions. Indeed, no poetry has depicted death so vividly and with such sublimity and human warmth as Plath has done. The death theme is [?] thus central to Plath's work and colours her entire poetic universe. Hence, the topic is very significant.

This study aims at exploring Sylvia Plath's attitude to death through a close study of her poetry. As far as the method of research is concerned, ^{or} ~~the~~ chronological study of the poems is avoided. The grouping of the poems based on various aspects of the concept of death is made. All the collections of her poems have been considered and the poems having a bearing on the idea of death from each of the collections have been grouped so as to indicate Sylvia Plath's consolidated approach to death.

In the later pages of this dissertation all the collections are separately considered so as to graph the development of her attitude to death. The theme of death has been intricately interlocked with other themes of her poetry. A few pages, therefore, on their relationship are written. Juvenile poetry, and that published posthumously in Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hyghes, in 1931, has been

data - m - s - n j.
data - p l.

7

taken as a primary data. The views of Plath on death as reflected in her letters and the reviews of her poetic works are also considered while making statements in this dissertation.

The moods of Sylvia Plath were mostly depending on the personal surroundings, her reading and her psychology and all these have to be considered in the earlier part of the dissertation.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. Sylvia Plath, Ariel,
Foreward by Robert Lowell, New York :
Harper and Row, 1966, p.vii.
2. Ibid.
3. Philip Larkin, Horror Poet : Sylvia Plath, Poetry Review,
Journal of the Poetry Society, vol. 72,
No.1, London, 1985, p.52.
4. Barbara Hardy, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath : Enlargement or
Derangement? in Martin Dodsworth (ed.)
The Survival of Poetry,
London : Faber and Faber, 1970, p.164.
5. Arthur Alvarez, The Savage God : A Study of Suicide,
New York : Random House, Inc., 1972, p.41.
6. M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets : American and British Poetry
Since World War II,
Oxford University Press, 1967, p.130.
7. Arthur Oberg, Modern American Lyric : Lowell, Berryman,
Creeley and Plath, New Brunswick, N.J. :
Rutgers University Press, 1978, p.166.
8. D.F. McKay, Aspects of Energy in the Poetry of Dylan
Thomas and Sylvia Plath, The Critical
Quarterly, (ed.) C.B. Cox & A.E. Dyson,
vol.16, No.1, Spring 1974, p.53.
9. Mary Lynn Broe, Protean Poetic : The Poetry of Sylvia Plath,
Columbia : Univ. of Missouri Press, 1980,
p.44.
10. Ujjal Dutta, Poetry as performance : A Reading of Sylvia
Plath, The Literary Criterion, (ed.) C.D.
Narasimhaiah, vol.xvi, No.3, 1981, p.2.