

### CHAPTER - III

#### T H E I N F L U E N C E S O N T H E P O E T R Y O F S Y L V I A P L A T H

Every writer is a product of his time. He is influenced by the race, the milieu, and the moment. These forces are the formative factors in the personality of any great writer and his work. Sylvia Plath is an American poetess of high merit. One can find influences of various things on her creative mind which has produced highly academic poetry. It is, therefore, necessary to take into consideration the literary, social and psychological forces which have shaped her poetry.

The post-war period was a period of considerable social change and America didn't escape from it. In those days, the world was torn by the Vietnam War and nuclear power. The decade 1950<sup>s</sup> was the decade of hope and frustration and progress and regress. There were nation-wide problems such as racial discrimination, social injustice and poverty. Violence crept into society. Many poets spoke about these violent aspects of the world and Sylvia Plath was one of them. But she spoke particularly of the inner violence in a feminist zeal.

Sylvia Plath was an American by birth. She became a British poet only after her marriage with Ted Hughes. Both of them have rendered a great service to British poetry. She being

an American, Sylvia received her poetic training and started her poetic career in America. The American influences can be observed in her verse. The contemporary American poets - Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton - have talked of the human voice, of the bruised self, of alienation and of inner matters; Sylvia Plath is not an exception to this. She talked of the most basic pains and truths of the soul, suicide and death. She has situated her poem 'Edge' in the zone, far away from life and very close to death. She had put aside the earthly trash and seems to be indifferent to material things. She wanted to go beyond ordinary experiences in order to realize the higher intellect. This constitutes the cardinal principle of her faith and forms the basis of her poetic inspiration. Martin Booth has praised her doctrine of "brutal language, exacting imagery and the sense of personal searching within the soul for meanings to apply to the universe".<sup>1</sup>

A remarkably attractive young woman who was educated in public schools and who had a distinguished academic record, Sylvia Plath came under the influence of Americans like Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Wallace Stevens. She also came under the influence of British poets such as W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes. The poets of the 1950<sup>s</sup> in America were in search of a new style. They were individual stylists. Sylvia Plath's early poetry is overcrowded with various influences. From Wallace Stevens, she learnt the

usage of apt phrases and esoteric and archaic terms. Her first collection The Colossus is saturated with Stevens<sup>ian</sup> cadences. In 'Night Shift', 'Native, evidently, to', is a poetic phrase in the manner of Wallace Stevens. 'Fluted' and 'Acanthine' are architectural terms in the title poem 'The Colossus'. In 'Ouija', Sylvia Plath imitates the fops and gauds of Stevens' 'Le Monocle De Mon Oncle'. The esoteric terms such as 'ruddle', 'maundering' and 'aureate' add gaiety to language.

Like Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath has written about madness, loneliness, sexual identity and female relationships in a kind of psychic shorthand. She learnt from him that objective reality can serve as a medium to release the inner drama. The rhythm of her poem catches the rhythm of mind itself. 'Poem for a Birthday', deals with various states of her mind associated with her pregnancy, parents, breakdown and recovery from it. In this poem she is trying her hand in the style of Theodore Roethke. In 'Lady Lazarus', she is speaking about her death-drive in the objective manner as if she were somebody else talking about her suffering. 'I am Vertical' is another Roethkean poem in which the poet longs to become one with the flowers and trees. The spectacularly painted beauty is not a flower but a modern woman who has to 'unpetal' for the male in the marriage bed.

Another vital element that has given a new direction to her later poetry is the impact of Robert Lowell's Life Studies published in 1959. Sylvia has told a British Council interviewer:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experiences in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar private and taboo subjects I feel have been explored in recent American poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Like T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', Life Studies has paved a way for her to express her personal innermost emotions. Following Lowell, she moulded her style to express tensions and disorders inside herself. Her style became vibrant and more personal. 'Point Shirley', an elegy on her dead grandmother is modelled on Robert Lowell's famous elegy 'Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket'. Ted Hughes speaks of it as a "deliberate exercise" in Lowell's "early style".<sup>3</sup> Sylvia derived inspiration from Lowell and composed poems on inner matters, but in a different style. As regards the private and taboo subjects, she has handled them in a superb way in 'Fever 103°', 'Death and Co.', 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy'. She gave stress on self-exposure, self-assault and self-revelation.

She has explored extreme psychological states and this psychic pattern dominates her later poems.

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton have used personal material and written about daughterhood and motherhood, nervous breakdown and madness and suicide and death. They wrote as if "poems flowed out of their nerve-ends."<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath became sensitive to the world in which she lived and absorbed the concerns of her age into her nerve-ends. Though her poems are very private, they are close to the soul. She has written some poems for the female cause. 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in Winter Trees is such a poem in which the poetess plays tripple role of Muse, Mother and Poet. The Stevensesque candences, Roethke's objective manner and Lowell's private and taboo subjects have enriched Sylvia's Poetry.

The poetic output of Plath has been greatly enriched by the presence of her parents, husband and children in it. The Plath World is dominated by her father-fixation. Sylvia's father, who died when she was nine, is always, on some level, present in her poems. In the poem 'The Colossus' crawling ant-like child searching for dead father is nobody else but Sylvia Plath. She has commemorated her dead father in the bee poems such as 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', 'The Bee Meeting', 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', 'Stings', 'The Swarm', and 'Wintering'. In 'Daddy' she presents him as a Nazi and herself as a Jew in Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen and finally blames him as a bastard.

Sylvia had a powerful and adoring mother. Sylvia, too, loved her. Most of her life was influenced by her mother's magnetic personality. It can be observed in her writings. Sylvia's mother has taken every care to teach her proper arts. Yet Sylvia disliked her. In 'The Disquieting Muses', she blames her mother who has shaped her life:

And this is the kingdom you bore me to

Mother, mother.

The 'Kingdom' referred to is the motherly kingdom of some dos and don'ts. Sylvia's mother, Aurelia Plath played the roles of academic wife, mother and homemaker. She provided Sylvia with piano lessons, dance lessons, scout camps, riding and literary evenings. But Sylvia thought her as a monster overreacting to everything. She was even much embarrassed and upset by her letters.

In 'Poem for a Birthday', she refers to her mother as 'mother of otherness', 'the mother of mouths' and warns her:

Mother, keep out of my barnyard,

I am becoming another.

Sylvia being pregnant feels her stomach round as an owl and regards herself as a 'cuddly mother'. She imagines herself as a mouth and her mother as the mother of mouths. Then she asserts her proudly that she is going to be a mother very soon.

These poems reveal that there existed a subtle strain of tension between the poet and her mother. The main cause of her anger towards her mother can be found in her mother's

indifference towards her beloved daddy. Thus we find her emotional attitudes of love and hate towards her parents in 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Edge', and many other poems.

Sylvia Plath has composed some poems in an autobiographical vein. She has written some poems about her own children, pregnancy and motherhood. She had a daughter and a son. She refers to them as 'two roses' in 'Kindness'. Two poems in Ariel - 'Morning Song' and 'Nick and the Candlestick' treat her children affectionately. 'You're' is written just before the birth of her daughter, Frieda. She has even dedicated her most famous collection Ariel to Frieda and Nicholas. 'Metaphors' is a poem about her pregnancy where she says:

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

She had a miscarriage in February, 1961 and 'Parliament Hill Fields' in Crossing the Water refers to it. In her last collection Winter Trees, poems such as 'Child', 'Childless woman', 'For a Fatherless Son', 'Mary's Song', and 'Three Women : A poem for Three Voices' are dealing with the above mentioned areas of personal life.

The birth of her children not only flourished her motherhood but also enabled her to write confidently. Thenceforth, Sylvia changed her style. She found her own voice. Her imagination like her motherhood became fertile and she wrote poems of high order.

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes are ~~the~~ distinguished poets. Both have contributed importantly to each other's poetic development. Ted Hughes' influence has, of course, been considerable. He has worked as "a transmitter to the English poetic scene of a peculiarly American ability to reinvoke the 'modernist' tradition of experimentation as a means of coping with the distress and unease of modern life."<sup>5</sup> After marriage, they lived together and tried their hands in the art of poem-making. Sylvia has remarked about their literary life together in America: "We do criticise each other's work, but we write poems that are as distinct and different as our fingerprints themselves must be."<sup>6</sup> Yet one finds the echoes of Ted Hughes in her early poetry. Sylvia learnt from him about ~~the~~ poetic language, poetic devices and poetic themes. Many of the poems in her first collection, The Colossus have been written under his shadow. 'The Manor Garden', 'Sow', 'Strumpet Song', and 'Spinster', are the Hughesian poems.

The natural world and the animal kingdom is the stuff of Ted's poetry. Sylvia Plath has used the vocabulary of woods and animals in the manner of Ted Hughes. We find pigs, fishes, wolves, spiders, worms, bees, crows, sows, boars, horses, beasts, birds, cats, rats, ants and many other birds and animals in her poetry.

Poems like 'Cut', 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Kindness', 'Contusion' in Ariel, 'Wuthering Heights' and 'In Plaster' in Crossing the Water, and 'The Swarm' in Winter Trees are saturated with Hughesian influences. Ted Hughes fostered



in Sylvia liking for occult, witchcraft and mythology. Her later poetry is greatly influenced by his myths of creation and destruction and life and death. She has employed spirits in many of her poems and they revolve round the themes of violence and death which are the central themes in Ted's poetry. Ted has once said, "What excites my imagination is the war between vitality and death."<sup>7</sup> And this death became the main stuff of Plath's poetry.

Though Sylvia's poetry is greatly influenced by the poetry of her husband, their cultural, sexual and psychological forces were different. Hence her voice became utterly different from his in her later poetry.

Sylvia Plath was a voracious reader. As an undergraduate she had read Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Donne, William Blake, William Faulkner, O'Neill, G.M. Hopkins, W.H. Auden, D.H. Lawrence and Dylan Thomas. She was also interested in witchcraft, the occult, astrology, mythology and psychology. She had read psychologists like Jung, Frazer, Rank and Sigmund Freud. And the result was the creation of devastating poems which have established her reputation as a remarkable poet after 1950<sup>8</sup>.

Like Ted Hughes, she was interested in dreams, magic and African folklore in general. There is ample use of myths and legends in her poetry. Her short story, 'Initiation' ends with: "And she knew that her own private initiation had just begun."<sup>8</sup>

It reveals that she was influenced by ritualized patterns in Paul Radin's African Folktales and Sculpture. She also believed in the poetic mythology of Robert Graves' The White Goddess and it can be detected from her poem 'Two Sisters of Persephone'. In another poem 'Spider', Anansi is the famous trickster hero of West African and Caribbean Folktale. Sylvia Plath was always in touch with some primitive arts to tap her own nightmares. 'The Stones' a poem in a series of 'Poem for a Birthday', is about her personal disintegration and Paul Radin's influence in it is discussed in later pages of this dissertation.

'Two Campers in cloud Country', 'Hardcastle Crags', 'Sleep in the Mojave Desert' and 'Wuthering Heights' are the poems situated in the primitive environment. 'Lorelei' is a German legend of the Rhine Sireus. The poem is based on the plaintive German song. Sylvia was pleased with it and praised it for "the German legend of the Rhine Sireus, the sea-childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song's beauty."<sup>9</sup>

Sylvia Plath has also written some poems based on paintings. Poems like 'Virgin in a Tree', 'Perseus : The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering', 'Battle-Scene from the Comic Operatic Fantasy The Seafarer' and 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' are based on paintings by Paul Klee. 'Conversation Among the Ruins' and 'The Disquieting Muses' are on the paintings by Giorgio de Chirico. 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room' is based on The Brueghel

painting, 'The Triumph of Death'. Mythological references can be found, in 'Ouija', 'The Hermit at Outermost House', 'By Candlelight', 'Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest', 'The Death of Mythmaking', 'Full Fathom Five', 'The Colossus', 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' and many other poems by Sylvia Plath.

So far Sylvia's poetic development is concerned, her poetry is influenced by various forces such as family atmosphere, readings, American influences, contemporary poets and various mythologies. Alongwith mythology, psychology has left its mark on her poetry. Psychology has played a lion's role in her poetic make-up. Her readings of Frazer, Freud and Jung resulted into discarding the early influences. She discovered her own voice and her poetry turned inward.

Sylvia Plath's poetry is made out of her personality and her life. One finds a combination of personal and impersonal elements in her poetry. But the very personal experience had become the main spring of her poetic creation. She herself has commented on the relationship between art and personal experience in the following words:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying - like madness, being tortured; this kind of experience - and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and



mirror-looking, narcissistic experience <sup>10</sup>

Perhaps in her last poems, she has adopted W.H. Auden's up-to-date psychological language to penetrate her deep neurotic experiences. Her poetry is also influenced by Dylan Thomas' incantatory celebration of the life and death movements of the seasons, the body and nature. Even there, is a significant influence of D.H. Lawrence's new religion of 'blood-consciousness' on her poetry. "Plath found in these poets' exploration of the death-and-rebirth themes a model for an initiatory poetry."<sup>11</sup> She has used many symbols of life and death in the poems in Ariel and Winter Trees.

The emergence of a new kind of poetry - confessional poetry - became popular in American literature. As already mentioned its practitioners have dealt with the 'self' in a realistic manner. Lowell talked of his alcoholism; Berryman of his divided self, Roethke of his illness and death-wish, Ginsberg and Anne Sexton of madness and Sylvia Plath of her frustrations. The confessional poet depicts reality as schizoid and the self as being divided. In The Divided Self, R.D. Laing has explained the term 'schizoid' as:

an individual the totality of whose experience is split into two main ways. In the first place there is a rent in his relation with his world and in the second there is a disruption of his relation with himself.<sup>12</sup>

Another theorist of psychoanalysis, Harry Guntrip in his Schizoid Phenomena; Object-Relations and the Self has found the

fundamental human problem in a schizoid problem. This schizoid problem consists of "our fear of emptiness, of weakness, of the identity; and a fear of the meaninglessness of our existence."<sup>13</sup>

She being a confessional poet, Sylvia Plath suffered from an ontological insecurity. She is always in quest of identity. She talked of split personality, of the old yellow and the plaster saint in her 'In Plaster'. She pursues her quest of identity in 'Three Women' and says:

It is not I, it is not I

And Again,

It is I, It is I

'Lesbos' is a poem on a schizoid child. There is a schizoid image of mirror in 'The Courage of Shutting up' :

Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms

In which a torture goes on one can only watch.

The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man

Sylvia Plath felt that she had "psychic gifts".<sup>14</sup> Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar says to herself, "You Esther, you've got the perfect set up of a true neurotic."<sup>15</sup> And again, she felt, "as if I had a split personality or something."<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Plath has made the following comments in her honours thesis on The Magic Mirror : A Study of the Double in two of Dostoevsky's Novels; whose photocopy is present in the Cambridge University Library.

In such situations (i.e. such as Jekyll and Hyde and Dorian Gray), where the Double symbolizes the evil or repressed elements in man's nature..... man's instinct

to avoid or ignore the unpleasant aspects of his character turns into an active terror when he is faced by his Double, which resurrects those very parts of his personality which he sought to escape. The confrontation of the Double in these instances usually results in a duel which ends in insanity or death for the original hero.<sup>17</sup>

In her own life, the repressed emotions were turned into an active terror and finally compelled her to face the eternal darkness. She has also quoted from Sigmund Freud's The Uncanny, that the Double becomes "the ghastly harbinger of death."<sup>18</sup> There was a great impact of Freudian psychology on her poetry. Freud thought of man as a creature having instinctive urges. It was very difficult for Sylvia to come to terms with her intense instinctual desires. Her 'Daddy' is saturated with Freudian overtones. It is a poem about her dead father whom she loves and hates simultaneously. He is called a heavy marble statue as well as a Nazi. Thus she has presented an ambivalent attitude towards her parents in 'A Birthday Present', 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus'.

Sylvia Plath was a neurotic. She suffered from a mental illness and had a nervous breakdown at the age of nineteen. She received psychiatric treatment and her psychiatrist found no schizophrenia symptoms in her. Yet her mind was always filled with strange ideas such as egotism, madness, destruction, suicide and death. Her mental confusion was alarming. She showed

eccentricities, shifts of mood, nightmares and obsessive behaviour. Her psychotic behaviour is a consequence of the disintegration of her personality. Her delusions and hallucinations were about herself, her sexual identity and her identity as a being. Hence she lost her interest in the earthly world and dealt with inner matters. It has led her to face sudden attempts of suicide. Her mind was preoccupied with the idea of death. Always there is conflict between what is wished and what is feared. Finally, she became the victim of her obsession with death. All this has been reflected in her later poems. 'Tulips' deals with psychic states. 'Death & Co.' deals with the double nature of death. 'Little Fugue' is a memorial to her father and perhaps it has a shadow of her psychiatric treatment. In this way she had shown remarkable zeal in working with poetry.

The various aspects of Sylvia Plath such as her biography, her poetic achievement, formative influences and her psychology have been discussed in order to provide a general framework within which <sup>t</sup>is possible to offer a comprehensive critical statement on her obsession with death.

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