Resistance against Conformity:
A Psychoanalytical Study of Sylvia Plath’s Confessional Poetry with special reference to “Daddy” and “Cut”

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Confessional poetry is a rebellion against the demand for impersonality in poetry by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. These critics laid emphasis on reading of poetry as a self-contained work of art, independent from the poet. Confessional poetry goes against the grains of modern poetry with its abstractness and complexity. The subject matter in confessional poetry was such that had not been previously and openly discussed in literature. It emerged on the literary scene during the 1950s’ and 1960s’ in American poetry and changed the landscape of poetry of the middle twentieth century and after. There had been a tendency towards this mode since the time of St. Augustine but was in prose style. While writing, the pioneers of this school of poetry – like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman – adopted a subjective attitude which had impressions from their lives. The personal issues – especially the appalling, ignominious and reprehensible – were expressed bluntly and candidly and were presented skillfully. The readers were scandalised as the writers exposed their true self and disclosed the intimate and confidential details relating to feelings of trauma, suicide impulses, death, depression, failed relationships, etc. that had never been discussed in poetry before.

Among the notable confessional poets, Sylvia Plath (1932 – 63) holds a special position. In her poems, she has expressed herself through complex imagery and shocking metaphors. Plath seems to have bring to surface her repressed emotions, complexes, and feelings in an effort to identify them and then to relieve them in the hope of achieving catharsis. According to Freud, literary texts are viewed as the imaginary satisfaction of the unconscious wishes of the writers. In psychoanalysis, a text is studied to understand the motives behind a piece work by relating it to the events from the author’s life like childhood memories, relationship to parents, etc.; and symbols are examined to understand the latent meanings behind them. Freud believed that expression of the repressed unconscious desires and emotions is the primal step of psychoanalysis. These “free associations” or confessions in literary texts give an understanding of the writer’s own neuroses. In the late fifties, while Plath was in America, her therapist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, had advised her to unleash her bottled-up emotions pertaining to her parents and career. In the fall of 1962, after her husband Ted Hughes’ betrayal and abandonment, Plath gave vent to her emotions. In his Foreword to Journals of Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes has remarked that it was not until her last collection of poems Ariel (published posthumously in
1965) that Plath finally revealed her true self. She had comfortably transcribed her thoughts to paper without reworking on them much. These poems are self-identifying and a declaration of her guilt as they reveal the complexes which had convoluted her life. Plath had symptoms of the psychiatric disorders of schizophrenia, hysteria, narcissism and was a permanent patient with the manic-depressive disorder. Her poems are an evidence of these psychotic conditions and reveal her repressed emotions, relating to her father-fixation in "Daddy", hostility towards her mother in "Medusa", masochistic delight in self-injury in "Cut", suicide impulse in "Lady Lazarus" et cetera. Plath tried to emerge from the trauma of her failed marriage and she rediscovered and redefined herself in confessional poetry. It seems as if she couldn't help herself as the poems surged from her psyche and liberated her from all the complexes. The imagery which she has employed, though violent and abhorrent, presented Plath's true personality and emotions. Plath's need to write served as an outlet for her suppressed emotions. According to her,

    The blood jet is poetry,
    There is no stopping it. ("Kindness", C.P., 270)

Written on 12th October 1962, Sylvia Plath’s poem "Daddy" is an extremely powerful confessional dramatic monologue in which a daughter verbally and ritualistically assassinates her own father. The poem is a fantasy in which a personal and a political theme get intertwined together. The poem is a declaration of independence by Plath from the male influences and dominances - her father and husband's. She had recorded "Daddy" on BBC radio and introduced it as,

    Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other - she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (1)

Like the earlier poems addressed to her father, including “The Colossus”, “The Bee-Keeper’s Daughter” and “Electra on Azalea Path”, the Freudian concept of Electra complex is at play here but unlike the earlier poems such powerful imagery had not been seen. In “Daddy”, Plath has fervently unleashed the paradoxical emotions of love and contempt for her father, Otto Plath. In psychoanalysis, Electra Complex relates to a daughter’s unconscious libidinal desire for her father. This phrase “encapsulates the belief that turbulence, abuse, or negligence in the relationship with one’s father during childhood results in troubled and insecure relationships with all men in adulthood.”(2) According to E.V. Ramakrishnan, the image of her father as the colossus emphasizes “the theme of incestual awe. The statue evokes both love
and revulsion; it is “Marble-heavy” as well as “Ghastly”.\(^{(3)}\) The mention of the ‘black shoe’ is a reference to her father under whose formidable influence she had been trapped for thirty years, living ‘poor and white/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.’ The ‘black shoe’ is also a metaphor for her mutilated life and maimed self.

Plath has given prominence to her feelings regarding the dead father’s lasting influence and its repercussion in her life. The young Plath’s father worship attained, in his absence due to death, a complex relationship. The repression of this complex emotion convoluted her psyche. In Freudian psychology, repression refers to the intentional blocking of unacceptable or painful impulses, desires, or memories from the conscious mind. The poem reveals the daughter-father relationship that is marked by submission and guilt. Plath attempts to overcome the feeling of being victimised by the dead father and at the same time is deeply attached to him. The imagery of the ‘waters off beautiful Nauset’ is a reminiscence of the early childhood with her father which Plath had spent near the ocean in Winthrop.

Plath declares that she had tried to overcome the hold of her dead father by killing his memory but she has been fruitless in the attempt as his unassailable iconic image has endured throughout her life. ‘Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time’. “It was her attachment to her father that precipitated her mental conflicts that assumed the proportions of a psychotic disturbances.”\(^{(4)}\) In the poem, the father has been portrayed as an authoritarian. ‘Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through.’ According to Plath’s biographer, Linda Wagner-Martin, Otto Plath gave his children personal attention for only thirty minutes each day. Perhaps, such a regimented and disciplined environment surrounding her father, even lack of display of emotion towards her, is the reason which makes Plath see him as an autocrat. But Plath apparently worshipped him. The turning point of her life was the death of Otto Plath. The injustice of his death left eight-year-old Sylvia in an emotional upheaval and insecurity. Plath equates this torment with the suffering of the Jews in the concentration camps of ‘Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen.’ The mention of ‘my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck’ is related with her feeling of insecurity and abandonment and she achieves an analogous companion in a Jew. ‘I think I may well be a Jew.’ Plath has been widely criticized for showcasing herself as a Jew tortured under the totalitarian forces of her father. She has associated her Germanic father with Hitler and the Nazis, ‘your neat mustache/ and your Aryan eye, bright blue’. She uses the imagery of Holocaust and war to relate her mental anguish when her endeavour to find her father’s family ‘your foot, your root’ fails.

Plath's attempt to find a common strain through which she could relate to her father is unsuccessful. Gradually, the father ‘a Fascist’ undergoes a transformation and is called ‘the brute’ and soon after he transforms into ‘a devil’, with ‘A cleft in
your chin'. Even though the father has been attributed to all these negative adjectives, Plath still dwelled under his influence to the limit where she tried to commit suicide as he had committed with his wrong diagnosis. Plath's suicide attempt of 1953 has been stated to be a desperate effort to get back to her dead father. ‘At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you.’ But, Plath could never fully recover from her neurotic state. The recuperation process after her attempted suicide is described where she declares that she hadn’t fully recovered. ‘...they pulled me out of the sack,/And they stuck me together with glue.’ Though the suicide attempt was futile, she knew ‘what to do’, and married a man who was the image her authoritarian, Nazi father.

Although Ted Hughes tried to fill the gaps which the father had left, their marriage was unsuccessful. Earlier the father has an allusion to her husband, ‘the black man’, a devil, who had bitten ‘my pretty red heart in two.’ When Hughes deserted her for another woman, Plath felt the same abandonment as she had by the father on his death. She is tired of them both and tries to disconnect herself from them. ‘The black telephone’s off at the root,/The voices just can’t worm through.’ For her, nothing is left but to symbolically kill both - the father and the husband. The imagery of Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, as a vampire drinking her blood is repulsive. She exorcises her ‘vampire’ husband by drawing ‘a stake in your fat black heart’. According to E.V. Ramakrishnan, “the village stamping and dancing on the father complete this image of patricide.”(5)

On the betrayal of the father on his death, Plath experienced a severe strain on her psyche. This resulted in her suffering from emotional instability, detachment and withdrawal into the self - the basic symptoms of a person suffering from a schizophrenic disorder. And Plath suffered from this severe psychiatric disorder throughout her life. Her poetry is plentiful with evidence of the double life she lived. Plath, in her journal, has outrageously quoted, “I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself.”(6) This is a rather shocking thing to admit. She further adds, “I am capable of affection for those who reflect my own world.”(7) In a number of her poems, Plath has dwelled upon self revelation or narcissism as a mode of confession. Narcissism, a Freudian term, drawn from the Greek myth of Narcissus, indicates an inclusive self-absorption. The person suffering from it is often excessively occupied with fantasies about his own attributes and potential for success, and usually depends upon others for reinforcement of his self-image. A narcissist tends to have difficulties maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, stemming largely from a lack of empathy and a propensity to self-aggrandizement. “I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself.”(8) This incapacity to move out of the self became the central feature of Plath’s creative self. There is dearth of inventiveness in her work. Plath found it difficult to write about the real existing world, its people and
landscape, without relating them with her inner impulses. Every external thing is linked to her perceptions and is presented surrealistically in her poems. Therefore, Plath is the theme of her poetry and fiction.

A. Alvarez recalls, "When she [Sylvia Plath] first read me this poem a few days after she wrote it, she called it a piece of 'light verse'."(9) It is a light verse in the sense that it uses "the rhymes of nonsense and nursery verse as well as an unusually simple vocabulary."(10) The simplistic language attempts to preserve the poem which "could have been destroyed by either self-pity or sensationalism."(11) The colloquial style and tone of understatement play down the horror of the central experience. Thus, the simple language acts as a "defence against the extreme point of suffering depicted in the poem." (12)

The process of writing “Daddy” helped Plath in disentangling her complex psyche by confessing her illegitimate aspirations. The speaker in “Daddy” has a childlike discourse but the articulation of an insightful and sensitive adult. Sylvia Plath skilfully binds her childhood with the end of her innocent world. The death of her father had coloured her 'white' self and trapped her inside a 'black shoe'. The loss of the husband is paralleled with the loss of her father. She uses powerful imagery in displaying her father as a Nazi destroying her world and an unfaithful vampirish husband sucking her life dry and lacerating it. But, at the end of the poem, Plath is strangely calm for a woman suffering from neurosis. She transforms her grief, guilt, anger and loneliness into a brutally honest and overpowering piece of work; George Steiner has described it as the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry.

A few days after “Daddy”, Plath wrote “Cut”, a poem in free verse dedicated to Susan O’Neill Roe, the nanny hired by her for her young children. Plath wrote this poem after she was stimulated by an injury to her thumb caused in a kitchen accident. In the poem, Sylvia Plath’s doppelganger experiences a physical hurt – slicing the thumb – and describes the excitement that accompanies it. Like “Daddy” there are two planes on which this poem is comprehended – one on the personal front and the other from the historical viewpoint. The external hurt and the violent and regrettable episodes of American history correspond with her inner troubled psyche.

The elation of the cut, ‘What a thrill ---/ My thumb instead of an onion’, launches the poem into a heady start. The excitement that Plath feels on cutting her thumb instead of an onion is unusual. She confesses a masochistic delight in her injury. The cut has been described in loving detail and sensuousness that gives the poem “a strong yuk factor.” (13) The metaphor of the ‘onion’ is for Plath’s psyche which had concentric layers beneath the facade she kept for the world. She watches on as the sliced skin on top of her thumb forms ‘a flap’, becomes ‘dead white’ and
then observes the flow of her red blood. The imagery of the ‘hinge/ Of skin’ is an allusion to her dented life retained in one piece. The thumb is personified and is addressed as ‘Homunculus’, a diminutive human being that is a symbol for her own state of insignificance.

Plath indulges herself in the festivity of the emotions which complement the cut. The thumb is connoted as a ‘little pilgrim’ that had been cut by the Native Indian. The imagery employed is to denote her injury with the Indian’s cutting off the scalp of an enemy as a trophy. The turkey’s ‘wattle’ is a reference to the skin which had formed a ‘flap’ due to the cut. She applies medicine on her injured thumb while standing on the bloodied carpet. E.V. Ramakrishnan is of the opinion that Plath uses images from American history to enhance the transformation of the thumb. Her cut is a reminiscence of her country's past as the thumb undergoes a series of breathtaking images. First, it is a scalped Pilgrim – the English Puritans who founded the colony of Plymouth in New England in the 17th century – who was beheaded by the Native Indians. The bloodshed is a reference to the battle which was fought between these two ethnic groups. Plath deliberately chooses words like the ‘pilgrim’, ‘Indians’, ‘turkey’, ‘Carpet rolls’, ‘pink fizz’, bottle of champagne and ‘celebration’ and refers to the first Thanksgiving Day celebrated by the English Puritans and the Natives in 1622. The scene shifts to the American War of Independence, a gruesome carnage in history. The image of the blood streaming from her wounded thumb is seen as a million soldiers running wearing ‘Redcoats’, a reference to the British Army who fought during the American Revolution. The war between the American colonies and Great Britain (1775–1783) lead to the formation of the independent United States. The mutiny of the War of Independence is conjured up to express her own mutilated state of mind. However, she is unable to comprehend whether her psyche will help her in her recovery or deteriorate her condition further. Plath's realisation of her illness, 'I am ill', is a reference to her own mental ailment. She states that she has taken ‘a pill' to soothe ‘The thin/Papery feeling'. Here, Plath is boldly confessing her suicide attempt of 1953 in which she had taken sleeping pills in order to allay the emotional and mental wounds – the flimsy and frail feelings of depression – by suicide. According to Peter Steinberg, for Plath "a pill is a perfect way to get rid of the pain and to let go of life, again, without all that brutal pain" (14) which she alludes to when the thumb becomes a symbol for a vandal and other sources of destruction, ‘Saboteur,/ Kamikaze man---/ ...Ku Klux Klan/ Babushka.../ Trepanned veteran'.

The realisation that her mental debility has sabotaged her recovery leads Plath to portray her psychotic condition through a number of images which convey the ruthless and callous episodes of American history. The bloodstain of her cut on the bandage betrays her wound and is compared to the blot of the terrorist secret
society, Ku Klux Klan. This terrorist outfit was organised by the southern United States after its Civil War (1861-1865) and propagated violence and murder to promote its white supremacist beliefs. Plath associates her reckless and self-destructiveness with ‘Kamikaze man’, the Japanese suicide pilots of the Second World War. With the Russian word ‘Babuksha’, Plath alludes to the Cold War, the hostile yet non-violent relations between the United States and Russia that ‘Darken and tarnishes’ the political history.

Plath feels that though she has the experience of her psyche being scrutinised, the intensity of her emotions on injuring her thumb surprises her. Such ardent reactions are encountered by her mind which is a ‘Mill of silence’. This paradoxical phrase is a reference to her psyche and is connected with her earlier suicidal feeling, ‘The thin/ Papery feeling’. Plath has used the imagery of a paper mill, which is noisy but is silent, to depict her conflicting emotions and state of mind. According to Stewart Clarke, in the end, Plath delivers a “litany of self-reproach and self-loathing” (15) by calling herself a ‘Dirty girl,/ Thumb stump.’ who is putrid and contemptible. Plath believes that her injury had lacerated her and because of its scar she will never be the same again. According to Freud ‘neurotics failed to overcome the difficulties that were resolved by normal people” (16) and Plath ended her life by committing suicide in February 1963.

Sylvia Plath’s poems are an expression of her repressed feelings of mental anguish, guilt and complexes like Electra complex, Schizophrenia, and Narcissism. In her poems “Daddy” and “Cut”, the brutal, vicious and repulsive imagery depicted is a symbol of her mutilated psyche. Discussions of such personal subject matter with honesty went against the conventional and traditional standard of American poetry in 1960s’. Through literature, these confessional poems opened the discourse regarding taboo subjects like mental illnesses, depression, suicidal impulses, etc. to pave a way for their understanding and treatment.
Primary Source:


Works Cited:


(2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electra_complex


(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid., 202.


(7) Ibid.


(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ibid.


