

The Abject in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Samia Tabassum

Assistant Professor, Govt. College for Women Bhimber (AJK)
samiatabassum1947@gmail.com

Dr. Muhammad Waleed Butt

Assistant Professor, Grand Asian University, Sialkot
waleedbiniqbal92@gmail.com

Dr. Ghulam Ali

Associate Professor, Centre for Languages and Translation Studies (AIU) Islamabad
g.ali@aiou.edu.pk

Abstract

A recent trend in studying the poetry of Sylvia Plath is to dissociate confessional poetry from autobiographical element and the subject of the writer. It claims that the work of any confessional writer has the least elements of simulation as the artist is in a complete control of her work. Nevertheless, the current study proposes that subjective traits like abjection and negativity produced an influential transformative dialect. The individual became the representative of female as a whole. Reading the text in the light of Kristeva's abjection theory, presents the formation of an ego. This ego is formed from the identification with abject like blood, death, dead body and suicide. This is a descriptive study employing psychoanalysis approach proposed by Julia Kristeva. The sample is purposive nine poems are selected for the study. According to Kristeva this psychological state of abjection is produced when one experienced a lack of recognition or misrecognition in the eyes of others. This realization creates a feeling of cast down or cast aside. This consideration not only supports a direct link to the real life of the poetess but also focuses on poetic language and creative process which is stimulated by instinctual drives. The subject of the poetess is significant as it carries aesthetic identity and this subject is rooted in real life.

Keywords: *Confessional Poetry, Abjection, Psychoanalysis, Transformative Grammar*

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1. Introduction

Confessional poetry was a term coined by M. L. Rosenthal in 1959 to describe a new type of poetry which was autobiographical. It puts the speaker at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his shame and psychological vulnerability an embodiment of his civilization. It was therapeutic type of poetry. This poetry shows a break from the formalist, impersonal poetry. Confessional poets have a high rate of committing suicide so the critics avoid ranking such poetry as a subject of artist. Sylvia Plath is a shining star of this class of poets. Sylvia Plath's poetry has autobiographical elements; a common trait of confessional poetry. The symbols, metaphors and themes are organic and vivaciously support each other. First person narration in her poetry can be seen as an element of confessionalism.

Adrienne Rich was a peer of Sylvia Plath and according to her, anger of marginalized is real. It has resources everywhere in the environment and built into society. These are the feelings explored by the poets. These are the birth-pains we are experiencing ourselves. This statement of Adrienne

marked Sylvia's poetry as a work of art that can be interpreted through a study of 'inwardness'. Her poetry is a testimonial of the conscious absorbing of the world where she lived. Her work is certainly a focused on personal experience. Her confession does not mark her emotional instability which later leads to her suicide rather it marks her migration from joy to loss, from exhibition to vulnerability and from love to loss. The element of anger is not suppressed in her poetry. Her poetry is a drive of controlled energies. It represents an interconnection and regeneration what is labeled as 'negative, regressive and Sisyphean' inwardness, a medium of looking outward. This violent energy expression becomes an integral part to signify heterogeneity. David Holbrook (1976) launched first psychoanalytic study of Sylvia Plath's poetry. In his book 'Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence – 1976', he attempted a psychoanalytical study of her poetry along with others discipline such as philosophy and psychology. He claims that he cannot restrict himself only to literary analysis. He finds certain elements of autobiography and fiction in her poetry. He classified Sylvia Plath as schizoid individual with the desperate desire to find opportunity to communicate.

Lynda Bundtzen (1988) (Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process – 1988) relies heavily on autobiographic elements in her poetry. She finds autobiographical elements more significant than literary history for understanding her poetry. The most significant aspect of my research is to have insight on biographical tendencies to study the poetry of Sylvia Plath and to explore the implication of Kristeva's abjection theory in her poetry. The following research questions are formulated for the following study.

- 1) How Kristeva's abjection theory is relevant to the study of Sylvia Plath's poems keeping in view the autobiographical elements in her poems?
- 2) How can we establish the relationship between subject and physical world of the poetess?
- 3) How can we explain the imaged and thematic complexities while exploring the conscious complexities between feminine and masculine ideas resulting in gender transcendence?

2. Literature Review

According to Kristeva, prospectus to ensure the poet's subjectivity and singularity a turn to psychoanalysis is necessary. In this way, Kristeva develops a link between the destiny of the poetess and her work. She is of the view that poetry does not follow mimesis in the conventional sense. It does not portray reality but it works like a cave of mirrors where words and subject are in process with the possibility of transformation. The subject does not suppress her instinctual drives and thus is unsettling identity, allowing the thetic (symbolic) to be breached (Kristeva). David Holbrook, in 'Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence', labels Plath as clinically schizoid. He further adds that she has 'false maleness' and promoting 'irrationality and paranoia'. Butscher (1976), in 'Sylvia Plath: method and madness', views her work as a reflection of her neurosis. But to adopt psychoanalysis approach to her work does not mean to understand the cause of her suicide. As suggested by Schwartz and Bollas we need to "understand her work and life as unity". Grosz (1994) also develops a link with the ideas of abjection offered by Kristeva with reference to Mary Douglas's theories on purity and pollution in purity and danger. They are convinced that abject is related to those elements which disrupt the social order.

As already suggested, Sylvia Plath's poetry is highly autobiographical. Her poetical oeuvre depicts her course of life. So, different phases of female life like virginity, sexuality, menstruation, conception, pregnancy and breastfeeding are presented in her work.

3. Theoretical Framework

Kristeva defines Abjection in the following terms

"something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit—it

is an extremely strong feeling [...], which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside.”

This ‘menace’ is not “an object facing me, which I name or imagine. It has only one quality of the object that is being opposed to “I”. Thus object is not me. It is a state of rejecting and abjecting something what is other to oneself (McAfee: 2004). Furthermore, it is horrifying because it is not a thing but a potentiality, a gravitational field which calls subject from its proper place to a no-man’s land where the subject is not only ‘beside himself’ but also cease to be.(Becker-Leckrone). This summoning happens within the vortex of loathing and elation. Object is sinister, scheming, shady and immoral: a hatred that smiles, a terror that dissembles. It is a passion using body for barter instead of inflaming it, a friend that stabs you (Kristeva).

Kristeva shuns everything that is improper and unclean from the realm of abjection. She considers that everything that is uncivilized, disorderly and filthy is in the same place. Death is also included in abjection. Abjection “involves a crisis of place” (Becker-Leckrone), it draws subject to the limit of its own defining boundaries bring forward crisis of identity; what am I? what is that? and, is that me?

The poetry of Sylvia Plath does not only depict the repressiveness of a female subject in a male-dominating society. She is in fact obsessed with her-self. Reference to her suicide attempts in her poetry shows that she pays more attention to her subjectivity than the femininity. Kristeva’s psychoanalytical concept of abjection is a dominant concept that can be applied to Sylvia Plath’s poetry. According to Kristeva, abjection is sign of body fluid, excretion, wound or body. “It is not lack of cleanliness that causes abjection but it is something else that disturbs identity, system, order [that is abjection]” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). So, abjection is not found within the body. It can only be found outside the body. The wound on our body is outside and it disturbs subject’s sense of self, reminding us of the place where we once were: the mother womb.

Julia Kristeva departed from traditional linguistic model to critical stance. This critical stance advocates rigid systematic structures which results in rationality. She has this model for poetic language. She states that poetic language is not set of rules in a rigid system of signs rather it is a system that inscribed emotion and dialect of the subject against social constraints and ordinary language. So subject and language are inseparable in this sense. “Any theory of language is the theory of the subject”. (Oliver; xviii).

The subject’s drives and pulsions cause heterogeneous and disruptive features of language. (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 161) Kristeva labeled such disruptive features as semiotic particularly death drive which ruptures the symbolic. This confirms that violence is the root cause of such language and subject. This violence is evident in Kristeva’s definition of abjection. Abjection is the necessity to dissociate oneself from the mother by killing her. “Matricide is our vital necessity” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 27-28) we have to suppress drive in order to enter symbolic. But their violent return disrupts revolutionary subject and language.

Revolutionary subject is defined by Moi as “a subject that is able to allow jouissance of semiotic motility to disrupt the strict symbolic order” (sexual/ textual 169) According to Kristeva motility is related to language particularly rhythmic element of language. This aspect of language is maternal. Negativity is a way of releasing semiotic drive in the text. It marks death drive and that is an important semiotic drive in Kristeva’s theory. (Moi; *Sexual/Textual*169). Death drive is a term proposed by Freud in 1920 to refer to individual’s instinctive propulsion toward self-destruction and death. This discharge of destruction and aggressive death can be well understood through the concept of masochism. Freud (1989) defines masochism as pertinacious pleasure

sought in inflicting pain on sexual object. This is a sort of sadism imposed by the subject's own self. The drive of masochism is oedipal conflict; particularly it is related to the relationship with father. Freud's new concept of Masochism has its origin in the death instinct. Kristeva shares this idea of Freud with a certain level of disagreement. She redefined the mother's role in masochism and refutes Freud's notion that it is father-centered theory. To redefine mother's role, she placed this phenomenon in pre-oedipal stage where mother is hated and loved, which creates ambivalence in the child. Kristeva looked masochism as aesthetic experienced related.

4. Research Methodology

The current study is a qualitative research employing descriptive approach. Nine poems are selected for microscopic analysis. The data for the current research is purposive. Some of the selected poems are included in the syllabi of graduate and post graduate courses offered by various universities of Punjab while some of the poems are chosen according to the special images and themes. It loosely follows chronological structure. The current study emphasizes a new study on confessional poetry combining personal and aesthetic elements.

5. Discussion

According to Julia Kristeva it is extremely difficult for a mother to let her child enter the symbolic order and she is not willing to do so as her child is her only means of authentication in the patriarchal symbolic order. The mother persona, in the 'you're' (1960), Parliament Hill Field (1961) and 'By candlelight' (1962) are releasing the child thus enabling the entrance of the baby into the symbolic order.

The speaker in Plath's Ariel confesses to her readers her gestation, decay and rebirth. This collection of Sylvia Plath begins with the birth of her daughter Frieda, as narrated in the poem 'Morning Song' and ends with a rebirth as the final poem of the collection, 'Wintering' anticipating spring. This collection moves around Plath's broken marriage, her early years of motherhood, new realization and understanding of 'Self' evoked from the ashes of her early self.

The poems in "Ariel" registered this resignification of abject as regenerative. The first example of abject resignification is noted in the poem 'Morning Song' where the poetess celebrated her newly gained feelings of motherhood. The poem depicts her feelings of detachment, love, rejection and bewilderment. The poem begins with

"Love set you going like a fat gold watch"

This single line combines the timeline of love, marriage, conception and birth. The poem is about Frieda, but this line can also be seen as describing the labor and delivery of Ariel itself, a combination of parenthood and authorship that marks the whole collection. To answer the hungry cries of the new born,

"I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian gown"

This description associates motherly self of Plath to a cow. The cow and the poetess both are heavy and leaking with milk. On the other hand, the mouth of her daughter "Now . . . opens as clean as a cat's," depicting the needs of her new born child which the poetess herself can fulfill. Time moves on, "and now you try/your handful of notes/ the clear vowels rise like balloons" the expression 'now' is used paradoxically as it simultaneously indicates the present action of the passage of time. The description of Frieda "rise like balloons" reminds Plath's conflation of authorship and parenthood in the opening line of the poem. Furthermore, Plath's deliberate focus on her abject, "cow-heavy" body has given birth to new life, the one is Frieda and the other is Ariel itself.

The exclusion of the mother is converted into successful mourning in 'Parliament Hill Field'. The

poem was written on February 6, 1961 five days after her miscarriage. The poem is an address of the mother to her unborn child. The poem is important as it focuses on dissolution of the fusion between the unborn child and the mother. The expressions like 'bald hill' and 'faceless and pale' are not empathic with the speaker 'minding its business' shows that the loss of the baby is her own business only, as the baby has been 'incorporated' by the mother who guards it like a 'cemetery guard'. The image 'gull' carries the capacity to convey the ability to fuse to 'thread the river's mud's bed' with the 'crest of grass'. This choice of words also seems to have linguistic capacity to argue and 'settle and stir' like 'blown paper'. This implicit reference to language gives an edge to hide the speaking persona. As in the words of Homer 'flying words, in the hands of an invalid' implying her own linguistic sterility. 'Blue' is prevailing color in the last stanza, 'blue plants', 'blue shrubs', 'the little pale blue hill' all these expressions depict her depression. But the solace which her other child gives her is acknowledged and appreciated. The speaker has successfully managed to pass through the process of introjection over the loss of her unborn child. Obviously, the process is gradual as the speaker passes through several stages to accept her loss and eventually transcending it in the realization other child's existence.

The poems 'The Queen's Complaints', 'Maudlin' and 'Rhymes' were composed somewhere between April 1956 when she met and married Ted Hughes after seeing each other for three months. These poems depict the superiority of semantic (the maternal, the female) over the symbolic. 'The Queen's Complaints' is projected that it must have been composed in April 1956 when Plath was infatuated by Ted Hughes. This alliance broke her writing blockage. She asserts this fact in the following words "I am writing poetry as I never have before." The poem "Pursuit" is written about Ted Hughes. "There is a panther stalks me down" the poetess presented herself as infatuated with the renowned poet. At the same time the element of violence is traced in her poetry. She is talking about Panther and this violence is associated with creativity. In a way the speaker acknowledges the black side in the character of admired figure.

For Kristeva, menstrual blood is also an embodiment of abjection as it signifies corporeal bond to mother. Plath's reaction against menstruation can be viewed as an example of infantile castration complex representing her relation to her mother, a relation that is connected to mother's menses. In 1990 a scholar Catherine Thompson attempts to associate Plath's case with PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome). She theorized that Plath's mood, depression, her instability and many of her chronic diseases which later lead to her suicide were traceable to the poetess hormonal disruption and menstrual cycles. The poetess has manipulated her menstrual cycle in her writing and her references to it encompass all aspects of motherhood like fertility, creativity and above all maternal influence. 'Maudlin' is one of such poems. The first stanza of the poem depicts birth scene where 'sleep-talking' virgin gives birth' in 'a clench of blood' to jack, 'faggot-bearing in his crackles bearing'. The elements of these images are taken from four different sources: fairy tales, Bible, J. Frazer and R. Graves. Jack is suggested as 'moon's man' and moon is associated with menstruation. In the book "The White Goddess" R. Graves the author states that the moon, being a woman, has a woman's menstrual cycle (menstruation is associated with the word 'moon') of twenty-eight days. Another favorite book of Plath "The Golden Bough" by Frazer, the author asserts primitive belief, 'the things touched by menstruous woman kill' in other words a woman is cursed during menstruation. Helene Deutsch discusses menstrual depressions before menstrual cycle. She connects them to women's 'prepuberty' expectation that something terrible is supposed to happen with their first period. These cycles are also associated with their mothers' menses and to the feelings of cruelty, uncleanliness and disgust. Plath associates moon with the mother and to some extent with menstruation. Whenever she states infertility, she states the vain visit of the moon

which leads to no conception and the wastage of the blood. According to Julia Kristeva, the mother split in two: abject and sublime; if the child (referring to male child) makes the mother abject. It is easier to separate from mother and become autonomous. In the poem 'Maudlin' the separation is not materialized although the figure of mother is abject (hag, blood, curse) but there is no paternal agency to facilitate this separation.

This process of rebirth through decay happens in microcosm is depicted in the poem "Lady Lazarus". The poem depicts Plath's successful "resurrection" followed by her suicide attempt. The body is passionately 'abjected' in the poem. The body is situated somewhere between life and death. The poem opens with the description of post-mortem decay. The poetess addressed the readers by asking them "do I terrify? / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? ". This decaying body in fact captures the process of reanimation, therefore in this process of reanimation "the sour breath/ will vanish one day" and the rotten body will once again be "at home on me". This body's abject materiality is multifaceted by the inverted temporality of the poem, rather than the natural process. This is not the linear course of life that ultimately ends with death. Death is depicted as a source of this corpse's life. Plath presented the internal audience of the poem, "a peanut crunching crowd", who "shoves in to see/ them unwrap me hand and foot ___ / the big strip tease". Plath not only describes her nakedness in her writing but also stripping of her body. She is playing with the perception of the audience. By presenting a sick spectacle she is setting the projected response of the audience. As suggested that a commodifiable object needs an unwavering and identifiable essence in order to gain a projected value and worth. So, the audience in the poem requires her to be a frantic spectacle so that they can consider themselves normal and acceptable. All these aspects about the audience literalize the element of abject itself: Plath placed her body in opposition to an audience that recognized her strange and repulsive. Moreover, the direct address of the poetess to her readers assumes them to be one of the cannibalistic "peanut crunchers". The poetess embraces her own abjection in the concluding lines of the poem. She writes "I am your valuable/ the pure gold baby/ that melts to shriek". The lines clearly depict Plathian stereotype that would probably dominate her imagination: a capable young woman who is valuable when she melted to shriek. At the end of the poem the body bursts into flame thus completing the process of rebirth from decay. The multitude of metaphors like "ashes" depicts this rebirth. These ashes come from the Phoenix's regenerative fire. These "men" becomes the fuel of an essential fire through which it is born anew. In her early poems Sylvia Plath tries to depict her loyalty to her father but at the same time she tries to defy him and look for independent, unconventional and authentic voice. The psychological reasons which cause violent negative moves in her body which instigates her creative powers as transformative energies. At this stage the theme of her poetry was immobile and non-subjugated. In this mobility she moves between "I" and other, presence and absence, semiotic and symbolic. This heterogeneous movement between 'I' and other is sometimes conscious and sometimes it is unconscious.

Kristeva's imaginary father is loving and symbolic father (the law). The oppression of the father is also the oppression of language. Transgressing the law of father is translated in Plath's poetry as killing and dying. These ideas are repeatedly exhibited in her poetry in a variety of ways with the expressions like cannibalism, burning, shedding blood and slaying. The poem "Daddy" depicts an internal dialogue between "you" and "I". Sometimes this relationship can be reciprocated. The heterogeneous dialogue depicts symbolic father modifiable and defiable, though with serious consequence. The female subject registers her resistance by repeating twice to the symbolic, choking father "you do not do". This repetition is a part of semiotic singing. The poetess has denied the possibility of "achooing" but now she is doing so in the form of employing nursery-rhyme

(shoe, do, achoo). It is this rhythm that depicts the pain, eroticism and jouissance. The oppression of the symbolic father is in fact captures in oppression of language. Plath's father is a German and she found it difficult to learn German. This foreignness of language which finds difficult to deal with is in fact the foreignness of the language of her father. So the "I used to pray to recover you" also means to recover the love of her father. The poem depicts a ruthless patriarch, power of law who is trying to keep the subject silent. This thing is explained by Kristeva in term of abjection: the subject in process asks, "Where I am" instead of "who am I?" When the poetess depicts herself as Nazi and her father as a Fascist she establishes a relationship of torture. To describe this poem more bluntly this is a "tantrum of style", a moment of abject. That moment was at its extremity that the speaker "kills" the object of its rage. As in "Lady Lazarus" the poetess is drawing life from death she is drawing power from the death of her father.

The drama of father continues in its companion poem "Medusa". This poem captures a separation from a mother and develops a relationship to narcissism (identity) and dynamism for the purpose of transformation. At the same moment this narcissism covers an abyss at the point where this identity is threatened with being engulfed (Kristeva, *Tales of love* 42).

According to many critics medusa was Plath's real mother. The end of the poem is viewed as Plath's ability to get rid of her mother or her inability to do so. Christodoulides was the first one to view her in Kristevan sense as abject mother. The daughter is struggling against stifling mother who is horrifying and fascinating her at the same time. This thing depicts a love-hate relationship between mother and daughter. The poem "Medusa" depicts Plath's effort to separate from her abject mother. She is terrified and overwhelmed as she states in the poem

I did not call you

I did not call you at all

This is because the mother, powerful as she is, calls the subject. This is what Kristeva states "call of the mother". The poetess smoothers her fusions with the mother by responding her call as she is waiting for her response at the other end of the telephone. After this union with her mother Plath posed the most important question, "Did in escape, I wonder?" can the poetess releases her from this sweet stifling relationship? The last line of the poem "there is nothing between us" depicts the inability of the daughter to set herself free from the influence of her mother. There are certain elements in the poem which indicates temporary release from the stifling hold of her mother. This is the reason why Medusa's "old barnacled umbilicus" keeps itself in constant repair. The subject in the poem moves between "I" and "not-I". Every time she is a winner in her attempt to release herself from the hold of her mother but this victory proves temporary as the mother relapses and returns to her again. The subject of the poem is able to antagonize her abject mother. The subject manages to shun the influence of her mother and survives creatively. This ability to separate herself from the influence of her mother enables her to continue the process of transformation.

Vacillation between this separation and fusion with mother, between motility and indifference is observed in both the poems "Daddy" and "Medusa". This kind of movement is also observed towards the end of her poetic career. This is what labeled as death and rebirth by many critics. Each poem offers a fresh start where silence, transcendence at the end of every poem is a contingent and temporary solution. This aspect of her poetry categorized her poetry as Kristevan body "digitalized in a kind of off-on, off-on or "open versus shut" (Foster et al. 13, 18).

The theme of veil has extensively used in the sequence of bee poems. It seems that she wants to create her unique voice through this theme. In the poem "The bee meeting" the speaker is unprotected before the attack of instinctual drives without this symbolic veil. In the poem "The

arrival of the bee box” the speaker receives a terrifying box. This is in fact a box of language which has harnessed the semiotic drive. It acts as a veil which suffocates the creative drive of the poetess.

6. Conclusion

Kristeva associates the writing of woman as an oscillation between power and denial. The woman writer wants to relate the story of her family. When she cannot reproduce her real family, she constructs an imaginary identity where narcissism is safe and ego becomes eclipsed after freeing itself. About her writing career Plath once wrote in her diary “in the midst of this terrible sorrow, this sickness, this weariness and this fear, I spin still there is still the blessing of the natural world and those simply loved ones and all to read and see.” So, it is clear that a subject is constituted both through happiness and pain. Examining the poetry of Sylvia Plath through the lens of autobiography it is clear that text reveals the truth of personal freedom or limits this “spinning”. It does not let it move towards “I”. Interconnected confessions motivate the reader to be an active participant to visualize the world proposed by the poetess, taking this contemporary act of reading to something shared. Instead of setting herself free from social norms the poetess depicts her relation with love and pain. She truly locates herself between life and death, femininity and masculinity, object and subject, world and self.

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