

*THE EVOLUTION OF THE
FEMINIST SELF
IN
SYLVIA PLATH'S WORKS*

*Thesis
submitted to the University of Calicut
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in English Literature*

BY

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C E R T I F I C A T E

Certified that the thesis entitled, *The Evolution of the Feminist Self in Sylvia Plath's Works*, submitted by **A.J. Thankachan** to the University of Calicut in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, is a bonafide record of the research work done by him under my guidance and supervision.

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D E C L A R A T I O N

I, A.J. Thankachan, do hereby declare that this thesis entitled, *The Evolution of the Feminist Self in Sylvia Plath's Works*, is a bonafide record of the research work done by me under the guidance of Dr. M.Snehaprabha, former Head of the P.G. Department of English, Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, Calicut. I further declare that this thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar titles of recognition, at any time.

Place: C.U. Campus,

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Date : 28-09-2008.

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It was nearly twenty years ago, while doing Post-Graduation in English Language and Literature that I was introduced to Sylvia Plath for the first time. The disturbing nature of her two poems viz., “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” included in the syllabus, did kindle in me an interest in her work. Hence, when I was awarded the Junior Research Fellowship of the UGC, I joined the University of Calcut in 1992 and took up Plath’s work as my area of research. However, owing to certain unforeseen setbacks in personal life, the project could not be brought to its successful completion in time. Now, after seventeen years, as I complete my work, there are a number of people whose help and support, I should acknowledge with gratitude.

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A.J. Thankachan

**C. U. Campus,
28-09-2008.**

A Note on Documentation

For the preparation of this dissertation, the documentation guidelines of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, (Sixth Edition), by Joseph Gibaldi have been followed. All references are incorporated in the body of the thesis itself. In parenthetical citations, the author's last name and page number are given in parentheses. In such contexts, where the author's name is incorporated within the body of the text, only the page number is provided in parentheses. In the case of parenthetical reference to one of two or more works by the same author, after the author's last name, a shortened version of the title is also provided in brackets.

For quotations from the author's works concerned, the abbreviated title and the page number are incorporated. All quotations from Plath's poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems* and a chronological list of poems referred to, is provided as an item in the appendix. The parenthetical page references in my text to Plath's major works have been abbreviated as follows: *The Collected Poems: CP; The Bell Jar: BJ; Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: JP; The Journals: J; and Letters Home: LH.*

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CHAPTER – 1

The Design: Life that Shaped the Work, Hoopla Surrounding the Work

Introduction

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,

And the echoes!

Echoes travelling

Off from the centre like horses.

– Sylvia Plath

As the interpretation of a literary work is endless, there is no one true place where it can be halted. A text cannot be arrested at the point where it comes into conflict with how a writer sees his own depiction of others or of himself. Once a piece of writing is put into circulation, it ceases – except in the most material sense – to be the property of its author. Nor can it be controlled or limited by the views of any one individual, no matter how close to the point they may have been, or still feel themselves to be.

Just as it is impossible to discover the truth about any one else's heart, so also it is impossible to have a single true reading of a work. The Post structuralist revolution which shook and shocked the entire literary world, initiated in the second half of the 1960s by the renowned French Philosopher and Yale critic Jacques Derrida, with his unique notion of 'deconstruction' exposed before the intellectual world, the truth of the fact that any text is an open entity.

With his scathing attack on the so-called logocentrism of Western thought and armed with his self-coined term 'différance' – which contains both the idea of difference and the process of deferral of meaning – Derrida tries to prove the undecidability of a text, no matter whether the text is literary or non-literary. He further argues that a text never achieves 'closure' and a final meaning is an impossibility, as the text remains a field of possibilities. In Jeramy Hawthorn's apt formulation, "Thus for Derrida the meaning of a text is always unfolding just ahead of the interpreter, unrolling in front of him or her like a never-ending carpet whose final edge never reveals itself" (39).

Since literary texts, realistic or otherwise, generate an infinite flow of meaning, interpretation is a matter of the reader. Hence, there are as many versions of a text as there are readers reading it, though there have been some attempts to restrict the anarchy of such a suggestion. A piece of literature, once written, is rewritten in every reading and the notion of a single definitive reading of a text becomes an absurdity itself. This is voiced by nobody better than Harold Bloom when he meditated upon misreading thus, "... that there are no texts, but only relationships *between* texts, their relationships depend upon a critical act, a misreading, or misprision that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in the kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters" (*Map 3*).

The power of an author's writing, combined with the power of the reader's reading or 'misreading' or 'rewriting', can transform a work into a higher intellectual plane, where a work generates numerous works, leading to the 'death of a single author' concept and advocates the theory of intertextuality. For the French critic Roland Barthes, "the death of the author" simultaneously is "the birth of the reader" (150). Here the emphasis falls on the consideration that what exists in reality is not a single 'written text' by a particular author but only a record of the responses by readers.

The reader-response theory becomes all the more pertinent as it offers almost infinite scope to the reader in the process of interpretation and critical evaluation of the work of a particular author. As long as a text remains an open entity, the critical comments about it as well never ends. Hence, in literature seemingly any trifle can assume, the bone of contention. Down through the centuries men have come up with new theories and insights, which infact have won the English critical tradition the pride of place it enjoys today.

In such a critical endeavour the individual talent is complemented by tradition, where according to T.S. Eliot every previous work is a tool in the hands of the new writer/critic and the new work influences and alters the order of the 'existing monuments'. He voices it as, "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it... the whole existing order must be, ... altered" (49-50). Hence, even today unending researches go on in the works of even the most discussed writers in English like William Shakespeare or John Milton.

In the poem “Words” as quoted above, Sylvia Plath offers the image of words as riderless horses proceeding to manifold directions, the echoes falling into numerous ears, creating responses and counter responses, the amazing, interminable transforming power of words. Of course, the power of readers’ response cannot fail to transform a work. If a text is an open entity, that openness is particularly evident in poetry, even more so in a poetry as bafflingly imagistic as Plath’s; for each rereading of her poems uncovers layers of significance that each reader constructs for himself or herself. In “Poppies in October”, when the poet writes:

Oh my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of
Cornflowers.

(CP 240)

the ‘I’ that Plath refers to herself in writing immediately dissolves into the ‘I’ of each of us reading and the readers’ subjective response to those lines can be myriad and unending.

This reaffirms the fact that the interpretation of a literary work is unending and that there is no one true point where it can be halted for good. Lulled by the security of this firm faith that a seemingly impossible task of writing on Plath oeuvre is undertaken, even at the juncture when Plath had already been explored almost exhaustively as far as literary criticism is concerned. Moreover, the moment one attempts to scribble anything on her, one is immediately exposed to the danger of extreme angst of the “anxiety of influence”– the same inexorable “immense anxieties of indebtedness”, to be eclipsed by the precursor’s shadow, as felt by Plath herself at a crucial juncture of her poetic career, (Bloom, *Anxiety* 5).

It is by knowing full well that one cannot add significantly to the much that had already been written on Plath, that this study is undertaken. However, certain comments and insights provided in the approach to the Plath oeuvre in the thesis of this study may sound pertinent and cogent in the field of Plath criticism. For a student of Literature, what counts in the final analysis is the stance taken in conjunction with an issue and the vindication of such a position or hypothesis. Hence, this seemingly belated attempt at the following discourse on Sylvia Plath.

Poetic Personality: Biographical Notes

An artist makes use of materials from personal life, but in the work of a truly great artist, the personal element when treated artistically, is changed beyond recognition and acquires a universal applicability. Nevertheless, the roots of all his accounts may lie in private experience and consequently the study of the biography of a writer can prove useful as it helps to unfold the compulsive urges underlying in the work of art, illuminating some hidden aspects.

As the entire Plath oeuvre has deep roots in autobiography, it has become almost indispensable to trace an account of her personal details at the very commencement of an attempt to trace the growth of the mind of the poet. But often than never such an approach has met with stiff resistance and a number of questions were raised to this effect. However, a truth which answers all these queries is that while most works of art have a life of their own, in the case of Plath, her work is inextricably associated with her life. As she observes, "... my happiness streams from having wrenched a piece out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed it to type written words on paper" (*J* 16).

As Plath aspired to be a writer even as a child, for her writing was a way of life, an expression of being alive. It was an expression of her personality and a way of holding on to sanity. She observes, “I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste...” (*J* 131). In another occasion she wrote with much conviction, “I shall perish if I can write about no one but myself” (*J* 325). Most of her poems and prose work contain lines and passages respectively, which are partially or wholly incomprehensible without biographical explanations.

Nearly twenty years after her death on Feb. 11, 1963, Plath’s *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, in 1982, which was a rare event, as the award is never given posthumously. But the poems which she wrote in the last five years of her life were so distinctive, dealing almost entirely with her inner life and conflicts, that the Pulitzer jury could award the prize to no other work. Had she been alive, Plath would have relished both the prize and the reasons for which it was given.

Plath’s life was shaped by her ambition to be a writer and the consequences of her important personal choices permeate through her work. Though in almost all her poems, she wrote about the crucial issues of her

life, she was ingenious enough to make expert art from these issues. She believed in her poetry and she knew her art well. As her verse is often enigmatic and resists any attempt at interpretation, but in the light of her biography, a cursory look at Plath's eventful life is furnished below. A chronological record of her work, both poetry and prose with brief but sensational comments by eminent critics is as well deemed worthwhile to trace at the outset of this study.

All her life Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) had known that she wanted to become either an artist or a writer. The older child of well-educated Boston parents, Aurelia Schober and Otto Plath, Sylvia collected a number of academic awards during her childhood and adolescence. An English major at Smith College on Olive Higgins Prouty scholarship, she won all the major prizes for writing and scholarship. But she was also very much an American woman of the 1950s. She was plagued with the notion of marriage, child bearing, as well as having a career. Some of these conflicts took over her life's direction – career vs.marriage, sexual experience vs. chastity – combined with a strain of depression in her father's family to cause a breakdown in the summer of 1953, shortly after she had come home from a month of the *Mademoiselle* College Board in New York.

On returning to Smith College after six months under psychiatric care, in June 1955, she graduated *Summa cum Laude*. This was followed by a Fulbright grant to Cambridge University where she met and married Ted Hughes, her equal in “poetry and passion” in 1954 (Uroff 71). She exclaimed about him, “To find such a man, to make him into the best man the world has seen: such a life work” (*LH* 252).

In 1957 she and Hughes returned to the United States and Plath taught Freshman English for a year at Smith College. They lived for another year in Boston, establishing themselves as professional writers. For a brief period Sylvia attended Robert Lowell’s poetry classes at Boston University. Lowell recalls Sylvia as a “distinguished, delicate, complicated person in whom there was no intimation of what would come later.” He characterized her poetic approach as “controlled and modest”, and was “startled by the burst of talent she later displayed” (Lowell vii-ix). Later in 1959 they returned to England and lived for more than a year in London. The next three years were crucial in the life of Plath, both as a wife and mother, and also as a writer.

The publication of her first collection of poems, *The Colossus* (1960) and the birth of two children, brought in their wake the shattering knowledge of Ted Hughes’s infidelity. Separated from Hughes, she moved with her

children into a flat in Yeats' House in London. She then threw herself into writing at a prodigious rate. "A series of chocking but startlingly brilliant poems – her swan songs – where the distance between art and experience is completely annihilated..." (Jha 1). Finally, at the pretty young age of thirty she committed suicide, just a few weeks after her only novel, *The Bell Jar* was published in London. Thus Sylvia Plath's short span of creativity has all the potentialities of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishments.

(CP 272)

But the perfection was indeed, terrible.

Literary Output: Plath's Work

In her life time, Plath published stories in a variety of magazines, both in the United States and in Britain. Most of her surviving stories are collected together and published in a volume called *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* in 1977. Of her other prose, her notebooks and Journal were collected and published as the *Journals of Sylvia Plath* in 1982.

Frances McCullough, Hughes' co-editor in this enterprise maintains that except for the poetry, Plath's journals are "her most important work" (J ix). Most responses echoed this assessment. Her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, was published shortly before her death in 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Most reviews did not know that the novel was by Sylvia Plath and it failed to attract much attention until after her death, when it was reprinted in 1967 under her own name.

There is some mystery surrounding the unpublished second novel, which was provisionally titled *Double Exposure*, and which Plath rated more highly than *The Bell Jar*. The novel was supposed to be about a marriage that had appeared to be happy but had been flawed with deceit. Judith Kroll, the author of *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, who saw the outline reports that the main characters were a married couple, a rival woman and her husband. It was rooted in autobiography as she wrote to her mother that far from wanting to forget what she had to suffer, she intended to "commemorate" it in her next novel (LH 417). Ted Hughes says, "After *The Bell Jar* she typed some 130 pages of another novel, provisionally titled *Double Exposure*. The manuscript disappeared somewhere around 1970" (J 11).

The radiant letters full of love, hope and dream about future, written by Plath to her mother and brother were collected together into a book and was published as *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath, Correspondence 1950-1963*, in 1975, by her mother Aurelia Scober Plath. The publication carried a lot of sensation, critics were once again confounded. Everyone seemed to ask the single question: How could the writer of these letters and the poet of *Ariel* be the same person? Review after review made the point that either Plath had a split personality or the self she exposed to her mother was a carefully maintained act, contrived to gratify her mother with the notion that Sylvia was an exuberant, healthy, extremely talented and successful all-American girl.

Sylvia Plath's first collection of poems, *The Colossus* was published in 1960. *Ariel*, a second collection which she had been preparing before her death, came out in 1965. Also in 1965 Turret press issued a volume entitled *Uncollected Poems*. Her next volume *Crossing the Water*, containing most of the poems written between the two previous collections and labelled as 'transitional poems' by Hughes, appeared in 1971. In the same year *Winter Tress* also appeared, a volume containing some of the last poems and her 1962 verse play for radio, *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices*.

Finally, nearly twenty years after her death and after at least ten years of ardent plea and bickering by critics, Ted Hughes edited, arranged and published Plath's *Collected Poems* in 1981, which includes the four collections and some of her 'Juvenilia'. The volume gained nearly universal high praise and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982. The recognition was well deserved, for, as Linda Wagner remarks:

The 274 poem in the volume show *why* Plath changed the direction of contemporary poetry. They prove repeatedly that a versatile structure – the poet's ability to reflect mood in every nuance of the poem. From image to single line to patterns of sound repetition – is more important than any prescriptive technique. And they show with ever more surprising consistency how successful Plath was in shifting those structures, molding tone and pace and language to reflect the poem in its unique form – both tragic and comic. (18)

By the age of 30 Plath had built a strong reputation on either sides of the Atlantic as a first-rate poet, the author of a very well-received book of poems, *The Colossus* and of many innovative and brilliant magazine published poems. Her literary career was a virtually uninterrupted string of

success from the time of her first published poem in 1950, “Bitter Strawberries,” when she was seventeen, in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Soon she was recognized as a sure new voice in the proud array of American twentieth-century visionary writers. The new voice was speaking in tightly wrought patterns and conveying a definite sense of control.

Plath was obviously a well-educated, disciplined writer who usually avoided the sentimentalities of some female writers. Linda Wagner observes, “She wrote tidy poems, reminiscent of those by Richard Eberhart, Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell and Richard Wilbur.” She wrote fiction – at least part of *The Bell Jar* with a wry voice somewhat like that of J.D. Salinger (Wagner 1). Plath herself characterizes her poetry as a life-giving force that deals with the frightening realities of the modern world in terms of biological and creative processes. She never considers poetry as a means of escape from the hard prosaic realities of life. In her article in the *London Magazine* Plath wrote:

My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighbouring graveyard.... For me, the

real issues of our time are the issues of every time – the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms – children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings, and the conservation of life of all people in all places. (45-46)

It was not out of any physical or social necessity that Plath became a writer. An uncontrollable urge from within constantly compelled her to transcribe into words her own intimate inner experiences. So much so, she felt wretched and miserable when she refrained from writing. However, she never ventured to give a free vent to her emotional experiences in her writings. Plath clearly saw poetry as a method of controlling and manipulating the emotional and psychologically disturbing material. According to her, an artist's conscious manipulation of his/her own personal suffering is absolutely essential in good poetry. In an interview for the BBC during the last year of her life, Plath spoke of the sum and substance of her poetry thus:

I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experience I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except, you know, a needle or a knife, or whatever it

is. I believe one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, like being tortured... and should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant to the larger things, the bigger things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (Alvarez 64)

Critical Fictions: Diverse Perspectives

Since her suicide in 1963, at the age of thirty, Sylvia Plath has become the most widely read and one of the most controversial poets of her generation. Plath has grown into a cult figure, a strange icon, a dramatic presence, whose dramatic absence shrouded the woman and her work in conjecture's cloak of holes. She has become an object of intense speculation, of fantasy, repulsion and desire. Few twentieth century Western writers have inspired such a range of deeply felt responses, not even her tomb stone is allowed to rest in peace.

Admirers exalt Plath as a priestess of high art in a degenerate culture, the authentic poet pursuing sensation to that ultimate, exciting uncertainty, death. Her work is viewed as an indictment of patriarchal society, as she painfully experienced it in her relationships with her family, her analysts and her husband. Detractors, however, see her as a seductive, destructive death figure whose solipsistic, negative rantings offend conventional mores and values and who was undone by a sensitivity too acute for our gross physical world. In both popular and scholarly circles, there seems to be no middle ground and the list of projected Plaths might go on for pages, as everyone seems to have his own vision of the Sylvia Plath myth or as stated rightly by Susan Bassnett as “many Sylvia Plaths are offered to the reader’s attention” (2).

The manner of Plath’s death and the mythologizing of it, affects everything about the poet, including the critical responses to her work. Few modern or contemporary writers have had the quantity of critical responses, dedicated to their writing that Plath’s work has received. In his *Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, Ronald Hayman states this to the effect, “When Sylvia Plath died, she wasn’t yet “Sylvia Plath.” The name had none of the reverberations it has today. She has gained more of her fame in the years since her death than in the thirty years of her life” (198).

Plath criticism has fluctuated widely, depending on when it was written. In 1970 Mary Kinzie realized that Plath criticism divided sharply into two periods, with the poet's death marking the turning point. Subsequent to her death, Plath's life was placed under a magnifying glass and whatever details were discovered, found their way into the assessments of her work. Linda W. Wagner describes the situation perspectively thus:

(After Plath's suicide) the second stage of criticism of her work began immediately. Within a week eulogies and laments appeared that, of necessity, changed the tenor of reader response for years to come. For a young woman to kill herself at the beginning of a successful writing career posed an intriguing – and frightening mystery. All kinds of equations between art and life began to be suggested.... Controversy was rampant, and criticism of Plath's work would never again be untouched by biography. (1)

Although these questions were never fully answered, hundreds of articles, mainly essays, reviews, and several books including more than six outstanding biographies were generated in the attempt to address them. The

critical debate centered around the question of whether or not Plath's work could stand on its own artistic merit, without biographical facts to support or illuminate it. If it could not, then her talent as an artist would have to be considered negligible and Plath herself dismissed as just another clinically depressed; or at least hysterical woman who could keep neither her mental illness nor her autobiography out of her work. An influential critic's comments will be enough to demonstrate this: "Underneath the other motifs of Sylvia Plath's work, however, is the confusion of terror at death with fascination for it. The visions of the speaker as already dead are so vivid that they become yearnings towards that condition" (Rosental 75-76).

Though there is no dearth of critics on Plath, the controversial comments and the uneven nature of Plath-criticism are quite disturbing. In spite of the publication of total Plath oeuvre including the *Collected Poems* (1981) and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) it is unfortunate that Plath-criticism even today veers always towards the extreme of eulogy or invective. Pashupati Jha remarks:

The situation of Plath-criticism has, if at all, changed marginally only. She is still variously called a White Goddess, a bitch Goddess, a temptress... a Cassandra, an Electra, a

Media, an Emily Dickinson, and a Virginia Woolf – becoming everything to every critic as per his whimsical choice. (2)

None of her critics can claim like Plath herself, that

I am silver and exact.
I have no pre conceptions
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

(CP 154)

To put it with Mary Lynn Broe, “Since 1963, a remarkable range of poems has been autopsied, reduced to snippets of coroner’s reports, and then reassembled every few years in some new literary exhuming” (1).

The first serious critical scrutiny of and response to Plath’s work, however, came while she was still alive when *The Colossus and Other Poem* appeared in 1960. At that time, critics did not have to deal with the perplexing questions raised by her suicide and hence the early criticism had been brief, reserved and entirely conventional. While most reviewers emphasized the influence of other poets on Plath’s style, especially Theodore

Roethke and John Crowe Ransom, the volume was generally well received. When her only novel was published less than a month before her tragic death, the author was compared with J.D. Salinger, her novel to *The Catcher in the Rye* and the heroine of the book, Esther Greenwood was often called a female Holden Caulfield.

After Plath's death, the criticism of her work continued to be positive, though the period was devoted to reevaluation and canonisation. In every review and essay, the circumstances of Plath's life and death began to be taken into serious account. Her biography which played a pivotal role in eliciting any critical response, became all the more important with the publication of the *Ariel* which canonized her as an original, brilliant poetic voice. As Alfred Alvarez rightly puts it, "The achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable" (67).

Writings about Plath mainly fall into articles, memoirs, biographies and book-length studies, most of which were written before the 90s. A cursory glance at the book-length textual studies and biographies on Plath which contribute towards the source material of this undertaking is provided as an item in the appendix. Besides these numerous book-length studies, there are more than nine hundred reviews and critical essays on Plath, most

of which form the parts of books of collected essays edited and published by major Plath critics. In the year 1988 alone there were 92 articles on Plath, which can give a clear picture of the enormity of critical response to Plath oeuvre. However, a few significant essays important for the purpose of the present evaluation will definitely appear in the selected bibliography. The contexts where they are referred to will reveal their thrust areas.

The flood of Plath-criticism began to recede after the 90s as the comparative literary studies began to gain momentum. Articles, reviews and dissertations written in this direction examined Plath's themes, style, use of language, attitudes, and reactions in comparison with those of her contemporary twentieth century female writers like Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Janette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Smart Gertrude Stein and Toni Morrison. Her work was also brought under focus in juxtaposition with some of the prominent twentieth century male counter parts like Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Stéphane Mallarmé, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, John Berryman, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett and Ted Hughes.

As far as Plath-criticism is concerned, the amount of mystery and intrigue is compelling – almost irresistible. Linda Wagner remarks as, “There

is a mystery about the Plath oeuvre... Several collections of materials are housed in the Smith Library Plath Collection, sealed until either the year 2013 or the year of the deaths of both her mother and her younger brother” (21). Till the seal is broken on the Smith Library Plath Collection, the writings on Plath will progress in the present direction and once the mystery is solved, what follows is left to destiny. In either case the relevance of Plath study never wanes. She too is ‘not of an age but for all times’. It is in this light that this study is undertaken and completed.

Point of View: The Postulates of the Study

The prime locus of this dissertation is to examine the contributions of selected poetry and prose of Sylvia Plath, who explores universal themes from a uniquely female perspective. In examining the fragmentation of the self, the loss of innocence, and the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, Plath confronts themes of patriarchal entrapment and subsequent victimization. At each successive stage of the growth in her poetic sensibility, Plath attempts to voice her protest against the oppressive forces of the patriarchal society. Though this process of reaction begins with a whimper, it definitely ends with a big bang at the final phase of her career as a poet. Hence, the thesis of the study attempts to trace the process of the evolution of the feminist

consciousness in Sylvia Plath in the course of her quest for 'self-definition.' Though as in the case of a few other studies on Plath, this too is conducted from a feminist perspective, the approach varies in a great degree as shall be perceptible from the manner in which the thesis of the study is argued out. Of course, in a study of the sort, what is more pertinent in the final analysis is the approach or the method, than the hypothesis itself.

Through a close and chronological reading and careful explications of her selected poetry and prose against a backdrop of current feminist theory and scholarship, the discourse establishes that through exploring the universal themes from a uniquely female perspective, Plath's quest was an existential search for a true self, a distinctive and authentic female voice of her own, which undergoes a process of evolution to acquire a feminist nature at the final phase. The study which incorporates the philosophical speculations about 'self', the postulates of feminist theory and the Bloomian poetics of the 'anxiety of influence' has the following aims:-

1. to examine the nature of the quest for the 'authentic self' and to show how Plath, through her work strives for the achievement of it;

2. to analyse the nature of the 'feminist consciousness' of Plath as to see how far this consciousness is portrayed in her work;
3. to survey, through a close and chronological analysis of her work, the different stages of the growth of the mind of the poet, in the emergence of her feminist voice;
4. To delineate how Plath's artistry transcends the limitations of her peers and predecessors, as she perfects her own poetic style and forges her own authentic female voice; and
5. To evaluate the significance of her suicide in the context of her quest for self-definition and feminist consciousness.

The proposed study is thus a detailed analysis of the gradual process through which Plath grows in her feminist poetic sensibility culminating in the achievement of the true and authentic self. Plath's maturation process as a writer is similar to that of a living organism. As a writer, Plath goes through successive stages of slow evolutionary process and finally reaches a stage of total liberation. Her early work differs so greatly from her late poetry, both in style and substance that, they would appear to have been

written by two different authors. The poems of *The Colossus* in no way represent the poetry of the poet of *Ariel*. Hence, the prime locus of the study is the close and systematic analysis of the successive stages of Plath's development as writer; to delineate the dominant theme of her feminist consciousness in the process of her quest for 'self-definition'.

The second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the major postulates that the present enquiry is based on. It falls clearly into two distinctive parts. The first part attempts to trace the concept of 'self' through the ages. It also touches upon the problem of the loss of the self in the period of modern existentialism. Finally it shows that the attainment of 'true' or 'authentic self' is the ultimate motive behind the quest for 'self-definition'.

This philosophical analysis introduced is to show that an individual values personal liberty more than anything else and that the quest for self-liberation is a perennial quest in every human being. Any attempt to restrict the empirical or intellectual space of an individual by others, constitutes psychological torture and the consequent feeling will be that of a sense of oppression. Such a situation definitely entails protest, and it is here that these ideas hold water when applied to Plath in her existential struggle as a writer.

In the second part, the position of a woman in a patriarchal society is discussed and the existential angst of a woman writer in such a society is highlighted. Since the thesis of the study is undertaken from a feminist perspective, a cursory glance at the diverse schools of feminist thought as well, is brought under focus. The conclusion drawn in the end is that Plath's work predominantly voices her sense of victimization and oppression. Consequently, Plath exhibits a feminist consciousness which has an evolutionary nature.

A chronological analysis of Plath's work commences with the third chapter. *The Colossus*, chronologically the first collection of poems, which represents the final stage in the first phase of Plath's poetic career, is brought under consideration here. In this volume Plath delineates the world of nature and animals which is basically hostile to man. The dominant images employed in the poems are 'sea', 'stone' and 'animals'. The self in these poems emerges out as alien and isolated amid indifferent natural surroundings. A vicious landscape of danger and lurking menace is evoked in almost all poems of this phase. Her reflection on her family's past further intensifies her isolation.

Plath's sense of the other, the negative evil presence which evaded identification in the earlier phase of her career, becomes more intense and objectified. Nearly all aspects of nature and human beings act as agents of doom and oppression. Plath as a woman in this volume encounters only failures, trails, and isolation, and tries to resolve her humiliations with an unwavering ability. Her repressed reactions reside in the feminine psyche.

The fourth chapter presents a brief analysis of the selected poems from *Crossing The Water* and *Winter Trees*, written during the last nine months of Plath's turbulent life. These poems exhibit essentially a transitional nature and through them Plath concentrates on an intense personal psychic exploration of the invidious image of the woman . Hence the main concern is the investigation of human emotions. Here the self is presented as vulnerable and threatened. The poems are characterized by a growing internalization of external landscapes. Attempt is also made to trace the various aspects and forms of a woman's life as presented in these poems. They reveal a woman undergoing the sexual and mental experience of brutality and they are a medium to express a woman's cultural alienation.

Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices, a radio play in verse written for the BBC broadcast, and her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, written during the

transitional phase are also brought under detailed study. The pinpointing of the masculine as the source of violent destructive force is the most vital development noticeable at this transitional phase. The poet's growth towards maturity is marked by her recognition of man's contribution towards creating a world of nightmare. There is also a noticeable change in her style.

The fifth chapter attempts an assessment of the influence and originality in Plath's work. The Bloomian poetics of the 'anxiety of influence' and the feminist notion the 'anxiety of authorship' of Gilbert and Gubar, are brought into focus to provide a theoretical stance to the discussion. Plath is discussed in connection with both her male and female poetic precursors like Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, William Butler Yeats, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson.

The discussion is mainly to show that how in her quest for the achievement of an authentic self, Plath emerges out of these influences with a true voice of her own. Gary Lane remarks, "The echoes of other poets are not central to Plath's search for a voice...." They are merely "nodes of acquaintance, hats tried and returned to the shelf: they do not become her" (6).

The sixth chapter discusses *Ariel* which includes the poems of Plath's final frenzied phase of writing, coinciding with a period of four months preceding her death. In this period of brilliant poetic output, there comes another significant change in the manner of her poems, indicative of the utter clarity of her final vision of the oppressive forces. She further becomes aware of how to liberate her self to achieve transcendence from the oppressive social evils. Death is a recurrent theme and it is seen as a vision of hope. The self is presented as oppressed, tortured and victimized and death is contemplated as the only means of transfiguration of the self.

Plath's experience as a woman is also examined in *Ariel*. The poems reveal the dark and injured world of a woman. She portrays woman as man's prey, tormented beyond endurance by what she perceives as his impossible expectations. The poems speak of the hatred for the existing social fabric. As her feminist consciousness gets more crystallized, the poet experiences a painful ecstasy and the battle between sexes culminates in death.

The concluding chapter sums up and restates the major findings of this study – much of which is speculative; but speculation based on a careful

reading and analysis of Plath's work. The conclusion inferred at the close of the study is that the entire Plath oeuvre is an endeavour to arrive at an authentic self and in the course of such a quest Plath exhibits a feminist consciousness, which gets intensified through the successive stages of her career as poet.

CHAPTER – II

Quest for Self-definition: Transcending the Gender

You are not in your own home,
intruder, you are a foreign body
in the world, like a splinter in
flesh, or a poacher in his
lordship's forest.

– Jean Paul Sartre

Authentic Self: A Perennial Obsession

Things which move us deeply, touch us most closely, and threaten us most nearly, most often escape our full comprehension and articulation. Such is the perennial state of man – the questioner, the seeker, the wanderer. The history of recorded thought is a history of man's desire to withdraw, to ponder, and ultimately to understand his experience. Ever since the development of human thought man has been confronting the problem of knowing and understanding himself. Human life has been a saga of search, a search for the answer to the most fundamental questions which touch man as

man. Man at every cross-road of life pauses to ask – who am I? What am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going to? Hence, quest for identity and self-understanding is the basic quest. Knowing himself is man's fundamental curiosity.

Even before the emergence of systematic philosophy men tried to express their knowledge of self. Critical and systematic ideas about human existence can be traced to the age when different civilizations were witnessing an upsurge in philosophic and reflective thought. According to John Macquarrie this period dates back to 500 B.C; when Greek, Hebrew, and Indian philosophers were making immense contribution to the knowledge of human existence (37-38).

The early Greek philosophers were less concerned with existential questions. Philosophers like Thales and Anaximander were concerned more about the nature of the universe rather than man. Their intellectualism and rationalism did not permit them to go beyond the reflection of man's relationship with the world. However, Socrates inverted the priorities. Man versus nature was his subject. By emphasizing "know thyself", he ushered in the newer areas of personal existence. His primary concern was with authentic human existence.

The contribution of Eastern philosophy regarding individual existence is very vital. The Upanishads and later Buddhism probed into a detailed study of self and problem of existence. The Upanishads deal with the problem of achieving true or authentic self through transcendence. Brihadaranyakopanishad, Kathopanishad, and Chandogyopanishad are concerned with the analytical study of the self. Self-redemption through self knowledge is the basic doctrine they advocate. The Bhagavadgita too pronounces clearly the theory of self-transcendence and how the self can achieve true existence. Buddhism advocates that the world is full of sorrow and the theory of suffering can be overcome by self-realisation.

The Bible throws light on human dignity and authentic existence. The rise of Christianity contributed much to the propagation and attainment of authentic selfhood. The teaching of Jesus was all about the necessity of man leading a meaningful life. He always admonished his followers to be true to themselves and to spend their lives in the service of their fellowmen to add meaning to life. Besides Christ's teaching, the New Testament contains a lot regarding human existence. St. Paul provides an understanding of authentic human existence in terms of theology.

As a result of their reflection of human existence, the early Christian thinkers like St. Augustine propounded the theory of self. According to them reason was insufficient to define true existence. They stressed the need for self-transcendence based on faith which goes beyond the limits of reason. Blaise Pascal too asserted that reason is insufficient for resolving the problems of human existence. Hence he admonished that man should step beyond reason to realize the true self.

The romantic and existentialist request for authentic self illuminates the question of self-definition. It arises out of a sense of loss of the true self. The arrival of Industrial Revolution and consequent technological growth was marked by a process in which people were stripped of their identities. They were transformed into mere things. As Paul Tillich puts it, “a self which has become a matter of calculation and management has ceased to be a self. It has become a thing” (124).

The process of reification or dehumanization is thus responsible for man’s urge for affirmation and discovery of his lost self. Spanos remarks:

Scientific rationalism and the technological society subordinate man to the tool, conscious of efficiency and the individual to

the social and productive organization... he is reduced to the status of an object like other objects in nature, or to use Martin Buber's term a manipulable *It* (2).

The existentialists felt that man is the victim of this process leading to an absolute loss of self. Existential pre-occupation has increased more than ever in modern age. Peter Abbs observes, "...in an age which so ubiquitously threatens our sense of personal meaning, we become pre-occupied with the question of identity..." (511).

While the romantic quest was for individual freedom and liberty, the existentialists emphasized the need for the attainment of an authentic self. Whyllie Sypher makes this difference clear when he says, "If the romantic rebellion was against God and Kings, the existential rebellion was at first against 'the others'. An existential self must be earned against a banal majority" (29).

In the post-romantic period this quest was primarily a quest for authenticity. But this involves the serious issue of our relationship with others. To this remarks by Buber, John Macquarrie observes, "There is no

(human) existent taken in itself but only the existent who constitute being-with-others or being-in-the-world” (105).

This quest may lead to the realization that a particular role is not an authentic one and thus, the self is not a real self, it is only an illusion, a false self. In the words of White Sypher, this quest sometimes reveals that “we have no self but only selves with changing profiles as we act out our existence”(32). Hence, quest for authenticity always encounters inauthenticity, but the real drive is always towards attaining a true selfhood. John Macquarrie observes, “To exist as a self... is to stand in the possibility of becoming at one with oneself, or fulfilling oneself... or being divided in oneself, separated from what everyone knows how to call his ‘true self’” (75). Hence every person tries to identify himself with various roles and objects in a quick succession, until some role or identity appears to him authentic.

Henry Bergson was the most influential in France and beyond its border in the sense of ‘Life philosophy’ through his doctrine of ‘Elan Vital’. In his celebrated book, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson gives the highest priority to the treatment of the quest for authentic self. He has concerned with “how the self exists within the flow of time, how it endures behind or within

change” (Sypher 58). He tried to resolve, the problem of knowing what a true self is, and where it resides.

But a few other thinkers challenge the very notion of such a self’s identity. They find that the self is petrified, split, and dissociated. One is simply an association of conflicting and warring selves. Such a state of existence is called a schizoid state where man exists, devoid of freedom, autonomy and loses all meaning in life and the universe. Herman Hesse believes that these scattered selves can be gleaned, rearranged and integrated, but arrives at the conclusion that such a quest is illusory. Thus it is only when the quest for integration and meaningfulness fails and when one feels, in the words of Holbrook, “a horrified sense of human life being meaninglessly mechanical” that the need to dissolve the present existence and be born again, becomes so ardent and compulsive (114).

The existentialists in the twentieth century carried on this quest and it was the central theme in their speculations. They considered reason and logic as insufficient to explain the intricacies of our existence. ‘Choice’, the most fundamental issue which confronts the twentieth-century man cannot be helped by these. The contemporary existentialists make it very clear that the thrust of existentialism is a drive to confront the deepest human questions in

their existential immediacy, to grapple with the anxiety and threat of human existence. As such it is a bid for authenticity, a challenge to man to wrestle with all the uncertainty of human life. It stands almost as an invitation, calling man to a more radical realization and awareness of himself, while also suggesting the awesome realization that turning away from that call involves compromise and inauthenticity.

Some atheistic existentialists like Frederick Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus, in their quest for authentic existence looked down contemptuously upon the hypocrisy and vanity of institutional Christianity. Existentialism assumed that self has an identity of its own. Self according to Sartre is imprisoned in our body, though “it may be irrational, divided, baffled, fearful, torn by doubt...we ourselves make it while we choose this or that as we meet the possibilities of each instant” (16). Sartrean man is constantly fashioning his self by means of his existential choices and is responsible for all what he does. Hence according to Sartre, man’s authentic life consists in making existential choices amidst anguish and dread. The challenge Sartre throws at man is to be authentic amidst absurdities of life.

The quest for authenticity or true selfhood is usually characterized by a death-wish as a result of choice. Authenticity of self according to some philosophers has to be achieved only through dying. Existentialists believe that “nothingness” is the ground of our being and our true self relates to an awareness of this nothingness of our being. Sartre and Heidegger find meaning of our lives only in relation to our death – the annihilation of our being. Heidegger describes man as ‘being-to-death’ and death is one fact through which man can grasp himself as a whole. Man’s whole life is but a life facing death and as soon as man comes to life he is at once old enough to die. But as long as man lives, he is always incomplete still projecting his many possibilities and death “is the supreme possibility of human existence” (Macquarrie 120). Thus death is a kind of affirmation of the self and it is a way to true selfhood.

Thus self-definition can be viewed as a preoccupation with true identity of the self. It deals with the significant question as to how our sense of the self can be protected and it envisages the problem of finding a ‘true voice’ that may express one’s genuine concerns. Like any other human being, a poet or a writer is also repeatedly confronted by a question of true or authentic identity. As a result, he indulges in the quest and explores and authentic self through his writing. In the process he identifies himself with a

series of animate and inanimate objects until he achieves his true self and transfigures his false identities. Hence self-identification involves self-transcendence.

The quest for self-definition usually ends with the death of the false self and the rebirth of the true and much stronger self. For Judith Kroll, it is a life in death; where the self emerges as purified and purged (13). Hence always a propensity on the part of the poet or the persona towards death. As death is virtually a prerequisite for this desired rebirth, it is always a crazy passion to a poet who is exploring the authentic self. Hence death-wish is revealed in their writings through different personae and thus they celebrate the ritual of rebirth.

The analysis of human existence shows that there are two poles of characteristics of every being. First is man's self-relatedness to his existence that is, he is an individual. The second, is an essential communal character of his existence. There is a vital confrontation between these two roles in human existence. Man has to take decision alone and has to be responsible for it, yet he can't exist without other people. His existential choices have repercussions not only on himself but also on the society in which he is a

member. Just as there can be no man without the world, so too there can be no man apart from other existents.

Man is a 'being-in-the-world' and a 'being-with-others', implying a sharing of this world with others. Kierkegaard and Heidegger reflect the polarity between the self and others. Heidegger identifies others as 'they' and experience the power of this 'crowd' or the 'mass' in everyday life. Voicing the views of Heidegger and Nietzsche, John Macquarrie says, "The 'they' takes away choice, disburdens the individual of his responsibility, levels everything down to mediocrity, determines standards of tastes and morals" (120). Here the individual is dominated by others and the self is defined by others.

'The self' which is defined by others lacks authenticity. This self is different from the free self. Autonomous self is true self or 'self-defined self.' Technological developments, dehumanization and reification have, to a great extent taken away man's significance as an individual. The so-called "they" includes not only others but also the external realities which dominate the individual and determines his wholeness and autonomy of the self. In today's world being-with-others deprives the essential human uniqueness and suppresses freedom and individuality. John Macquarrie observes,

“whatever kind of relation to the others depersonalizes and dehumanizes is an inauthentic one” (121).

The modern age is characterized by a frightening erosion of human values and human personality. This is a result of the twentieth-century technology which is highly impersonal, abstract and objective. Here man has become a function; he is worth only what he produces. He is objectified. Functionalisation of man depersonalizes and dehumanizes him. In such a society it is difficult to develop a wholesome and genuine relationship with others. Hence being-with-others or ‘the other-defined self’ is marked by inauthenticity. To escape from such a dehumanizing process, man should dissociate himself from being-with-others and turn to an act of self-definition. He should seek freedom, choice, identity and attain a whole and authentic personality. John Macquarrie remarks:

Existence is authentic to the extent that the existent has taken possession of himself and shall we say, has moulded himself in his own image. Inauthentic existence on the other hand, is moulded by external influence whether these be circumstances, moral codes, political or ecclesiastical authorities or whatever (206).

Hence, the quest for self-definition is characterized by freedom from oppression and domination by others. A sense of dignity in Paul Tillich's word is "an affirmation of the individual self as individual self" (113). Thus freedom from others is the first aim behind the quest for self-definition – else lost in a crowd. Whatever is hostile, threat of estrangement is responsible for depersonalization, dehumanization and objectification.

In the attainment of true selfhood the relevance of death is of supreme importance. Quest for authentic selfhood ends with the extinction of all forms of the false self, possible only through dissolution into death. Hence the existentialists' attraction for death. For Heidegger the authentic self is attained in the moment before death. Death, in his view delimits man's existence and gives it a unity. It also sets him free from "they" and the clutches of all forms of the false self. If we use Virginia Woolf's terms as referred to by Peter Abbs, the "moments of being and the false self with the moments of non-being (511).

The history of recorded thought is a history of man's quest for self-understanding and authenticity. As has been already mentioned, a poet or a writer as any other human being, is repeatedly confronted by a true or

authentic identity. As a result, he indulges in the quest and explores an authentic self through his writing. However, like every other being, the poet or a writer is also a being-with-others. His genuine aspirations in the process of self realization can be just chocked by the conventional values of the society.

Sylvia Plath as a poet in her quest for self-definition demonstrated a feminist consciousness and produced great poetry, voicing the protest against her entrapment and victimization. Before assessing the nature of such a consciousness, which gets crystallized at the final phase of her career as a poet, it will be profitable to examine both the traditional and the feminist approaches to the complex and continuing problem of victimization of a woman in a contemporary world. First the traditional, malestream and nonfeminist view of a woman in a patriarchal society is examined and then how feminist ethics or the feminist schools of thought reject such an approach, is considered.

Hostile Cosmos : The Female Space

Throughout history, and in all civilizations, the personality of woman has been sought to be damaged and distorted, and her very status as a human

being reduced to inferiority under the overwhelming male-domination. According to Sara Grimke, all history is 'male-centric' and she attests that:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to the rank she has created to fill. He has done all he could do, to debase and enslave her mind; ... and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior(10).

Thus, women's personality is disfigured and they are confined to "the footnotes of history" (Tomasevski xii). As Kate Millet says, "The history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities perpetrated on women" (46). There is no denying the fact that violence against women has continued throughout history unreported and rarely challenged. Irrespective of the economic, political, and social progress, invariably in all countries, women are subjected to gender discrimination.

According to conventional standards, she is considered to be subordinate, a kind of deprived victim. Hence, a woman begins the

conscious analysis of male behaviour and explores her own experiences as a victim. She becomes aware that each and every field is dominated by the male. She also becomes conscious of the fact that a woman should fulfil the expectations of the society. Elionor Wylie painfully notes:

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get (278).

Ever since the development of male-centre societal structure, the woman has been confronting the problem of identity. According to Simons De Beauvoir, “woman is even required by society to make herself an erotic object. The purpose of the fashions which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires” (543). Fear of regressive forces prevent her from acting on her knowledge. Beauvoir focuses on the woman’s subverted position:

The religion of woman bound to the religion of irreducible duration of contingency, of chance of waiting, of mystery....Condemned to pity the part of the other, woman

was also condemned to hold only uncertain power: slave or idol it was never she who chose her lot (70-71).

In a male-centred society woman has no self-actualisation and fulfilment. Oppressive forces are that circumscribe her life. She is expected to be a specimen of feminine purity and wifely obedience. In Betty Friedan's words, "Anatomy was her destiny. She might die giving birth to one baby or live to be thirty five, giving birth to 12, while men controlled his destiny with that part of his anatomy which no other animal had: his mind" (81).

Almost all serious works in American literature portray a woman in stereo-typed roles – goddess, bitch, virgin, prostitute, wife, mother, daughter and a symbol of maternal sacrifice. She is always portrayed as a secondary character in men's writing. Carol Pearson assesses woman's place in men's literary works:

In every period of British and American literature in fact, whatever qualities are out of favour are identified as female. In the Middle Ages, for example, an age of literature written mostly by unmarried clerics, lechery is represented in female characters such as Chaucer's Wife of bath and Cressyde. In

the 18th century Age of Reason, female characters like Belinda in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* are satirized for their irrational behaviour (19).

The masculine tendency considers man and woman as inherently opposite. Dualistic traditional values consider man and woman as embodiments of head and heart, aggression and passivity respectively. The old patriarchy denies her genius and judgement and holds that she never exercises mental powers. Virginia Woolf sums up the place of woman in man's world thus:

A very queer, composite. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from corner to corner; she dominates the lives of Kings and conquerors in fiction....some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scare spell and was the property of her husband... (45-46).

Woman is trained to remain small from birth to fit in the system of the normal rules of society. Patriarchal structures ensure that a woman depends

on man for her economic and social welfare. Christianity insists certain traditional values to woman. She should be an embodiment of chastity, virginity, selfless suffering and without ego. According to some Christian mystics, Eve, the ideal female perfection had to experience rejection only because she strayed away from Adam's eyes.

Aristotle's theory of virtues, developed in the *Nicomacheon Ethics* has double standards of morality. While men's virtues were those required for freedom and political life, women's virtues consisted in obedience and silence. Immanuel Kant in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1985), considers women as deficient moral agents who are unfit for public life. This misogynist vision did not end with Aristotle, but his influence has continued down the centuries in the West. In the history of Western thought, not only Aristotle and Kant but Thomas Aquinas, Jean Jacques Rousseau, G.W.F., Hegel, Freidrich Nietzsche and even Jean Paul Sartre considered women as morally inferior.

In the Indian social thought, Manu, the law giver of *Hindu Dharma Shastra* assigns woman a secondary position in relation to man. According to *Manu Smrti* or *Manu Samhita*, a woman should depend upon a man from cradle to grave and should never live as an independent entity. He endorses

servile existence and attitude of woman, and curbs the growth and development of her as a free and autonomous human being:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no paternal kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes (55).

In short, feminine measures show that moral theorists have legitimized the oppression of women by insisting on their moral, rational, and epistemological inferiority.

Paradoxically, when a woman deviates from the idealistic image, when she develops a self, literary portraits suggest that she is likely to face danger and sufferings. However, her sense of gender, sexuality and body assume a shape in her conception of her self. This consciousness leads to her victimization and vulnerability. But she rises to challenge the phalanx of oppressive forces. She is awakened into the world of experience through encountering men. Virginia Woolf says that a woman should encounter life

and the denying forces within: “Ah, but what is “herself”? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know, I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all arts and professions open to human skill” (286).

A conscious woman artist seeks a place to express herself and becomes a powerful creature. She bursts upon male power with fury. The consciousness of her position within the male defined structure of the society leads her to react. It includes emotions, feelings, desires, and pains. She has a conscious awareness of all her experiences. When the environment becomes a barrier, she moves towards negativity. She responds to male authority by withdrawing from social relationships between the sexes. She submits to the confronting world of her own experience. Virginia Woolf sees them as captor figures – strange organisms that had been “under the shadow of the rock these million years” (47). Finally she breaks the cocoons of subordination. As Beauvoir puts it, “woman can be defined by the consciousness of her own femininity ... she acquires this consciousness under the circumstances dependent upon the society to which she is a member” (80).

Once free, she staggers but finds her own way out and moves towards the shaping of female power. When this newborn woman takes a separate attitude, a feminist consciousness emerges. Such a consciousness necessitates reorientation of a class, culture, a historical period. It places human need and human sensibility above all polarization and profit. It “creates a sense of rights and obligations” and threatens the previous pattern of subordination (Keohane 55). According to the French Post-modern feminist Helan Cixous, woman writing “will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulation and codes... get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourses” (886).

Through the long line of women writers, who protested against the oppression of women, of their moral, natural and epistemological inferiority, from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft and through Simone De Beauvior to present day feminist thinkers, an out look, a ‘theory’, a feminist thought system evolved. The history of feminism is traceable to 1830s in the USA. Feminism both as a concept and movement has emerged as a reaction against the atrocities of patriarchy. Hence, the underlying principle of feminist consciousness is the awareness of victimization and women writers have explored the problem from different perspectives.

Even though, feminist theory itself is not a united political ideology, all schools of feminism share certain commonalities in their political perspective. However, within the “parameters of commonality are extreme differences: in political strategy, in vision about what constitutes women’s liberation, in attitudes to men, in understanding the roots of women’s oppression, in setting priorities, [and] in identifying constituencies and allies” (Adamson 9). In other words, each current of feminism offers a different perspective in the nature of women’s oppression. Each of them has its roots in a long history and each needs to be understood in relation to the mainstream. However, it is impossible to discuss with in the purview of this study, all these schools of thought in feminist theory.

Liberal, Marxist, Radical, Psychoanalytic and Post modern feminism attempt in their own way to describe women’s ‘otherness’. However, in the final analysis, all of them believe that women can overcome binary opposition, phallogentrism and logo centrism by breaking silence, speaking and writing.

Post modern feminism tends to be more complex than the other feminist perspectives. Referred to as “French Feminism” it has its genesis in the existentialist text of Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1961). The

writings of the postmodern feminist critics, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are profoundly feministic that they transcend the boundaries of feminism and offer women freedom from oppressive thought. They attempt to criticize the dominant patriarchal order and valorize the woman who is the other. According to Cixous, Women must develop feminine writing to change the male defined world. In other words, a woman must write herself putting into words her ‘otherness.’ As she affirms it, “It has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logo centrism and phallo centrism – bring to light the fate dealt to woman” (65).

As far as feminism is concerned it was only after the 1970s that most of the significant works especially in Post modern feminist theory appeared, establishing it as a new approach in the field of literary criticism. Feminist movement with its multidimensional character and concerns, deeply influenced many an intellectual, especially the writers. A whole range of women writers of various political hues began looking at the realities as women, and thus contributed new perceptions and perspectives. Through the narrative strategy of irony and fantasy these writers not only demanded revision of social values and conventions but also envisioned an alterate world in which women would be autonomous and self-defining citizens. As

for feminist schools of thought, such writers exhibited essentially feminist consciousness.

To locate Sylvia Plath in the feminist literary tradition, what Elaine Showalter considers in her *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) has to be foregrounded. She speaks of a female literary tradition and sees its identity in resistance to a dominant society. According to her, this tradition of women's literature has a hierarchical nature and it falls into three periods. During the first phase, which she calls "feminine", women wrote like men *imitating* their literary devices. In the second phase of *protest* or the 'feminist' phase, women dramatized injustice against women and wrote about their oppression and victimization. In the third phase, a period of *self-discovery* or the 'female' phase, women wrote, turning to their own experiences and relying on their own resources in their quest for a true identity.

As the entire Plath oeuvre can be considered as demonstrating protest against her sense of oppression and victimization and her quest for self-definition, she can very well be located in the second phase of female literary tradition as per Showalter's division of it. At the thematic level, Plath's work examines themes related to the politics of gender such as the enforced

alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of woman, the gradual carving out of the female space by woman through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy.

Through her work Plath not only demands demolition of the gender system – the real source of women's oppression, but also envisions a new world in which man and woman are equals at every level of existence. Hence in her attempt at self-definition, Plath exhibits a feminist consciousness, which runs as an under-current and serves as a unifying principle which governs her work. This is what the thesis of this study argues out.

Sylvia Plath as a writer never reconciled to stasis or stagnation. Her creative genius can be assessed by her own statement, "Frozen inertia is my worst enemy" (*J* 253). She never lacked imagination. Once she wrote, "what I fear most, I think is death of imagination", (*J* 260). It has been to her the synthesizing spirit, a shaping force, equipping her with inventiveness and artistic creativity. Her quest for self-definition too is connected with this.

Plath's quest for identity is also for her a quest for self-expression, the expression of her experience as a woman. Her images give objectivity and universal appeal to her personal and subjective experience. The most striking particularity of her poetry is in her ability to transform autobiographical elements and personal experiences artistically into a dramatization and acts out her existence in the guise of various personae and their encounter with the others. As Ted Hughes observes:

Her poetic strategies, the poetic events she draws out of her experience of disintegration and renewal, the radiant visionary light in which she encounters her family and the realities of her daily life, are quite different in kind from anything one finds in Rober Lowell's poetry, or Anne Sexton's. Their work is truly autobiographical and personal.... The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by dramatist personae of nearly supernatural qualities. The world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events (95).

Her poetic experience is a dramatized version of personal experience. This required a great deal of craftsmanship and artistic exercise. As Plath herself puts it in a BBC interview:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, like being tortured ... and should be able to manipulate these experience with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but, certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience (Chesler 15-16).

She goes beyond these experiences and indulges in the quest for her liberation as a woman. That she gave her poetry a broader base of objectivity and rich cultural significance, must be seen in the light of the fact that she was presenting 'objective correlatives' for giving expression to the problems of her existence.

Her endeavour to resolve the conflict between the warring selves necessitated her to present it in ritually and dramatically stylized form. Hence mythological and biblical analogies can be cited for her disintegration

and renewal. Oppression by male-figures is portrayed through the suggestion of the victimization of the Jews at the hands of Nazis, and the tragic vision with the tragedy of the political victims of Horoshima.

Plath creates her own personal mythology through the autobiographical elements. As Jon Rosenblatt observes, “Sylvia Plath’s importance in recent American poetry lies... in her dramatic approach to the representation of a threatened and violent self” (23). Hers was an existential search for a true self. This makes her undertake such themes and motifs as death, rebirth, self-annihilation, suffering and pain. Problems relating with children and family also are included. Her poetry creates a series of personae who are poised against hostile and antagonistic human and natural forces. Hence an encounter between self and others pervades her poetry.

Plath’s life has been a representative of the existential crisis of modern life. She expresses this dilemma in every level. Her poetry deals with the individual’s loss of meaning and the battle to recover this great loss. Plath’s quest for self-definition is a journey through her relation with others where every encounter leaves back one or other form of false self. Her concept of the other was not a limited one. It included all external realities – treated antagonistically as they mar the freedom and uniqueness of the self.

Nature, animals and human beings in Plath's poetry serve a two-fold purpose. They create a sense of otherness in her which leads to the self-definition, and become symbols to project her entire tragic vision of life. In *The Colossus*, the poems on animals and other objects of nature reflect death-hauntedness and the threats of extinction. In this collection of poems landscapes and seascapes are presented in such a manner that they appear antithetical to human wishes. Consequently, they threaten estrangement to the self. Her struggle against the hostile forces of nature objectifies her own obsession and fear at all levels and makes her aware of her personality.

In poems like "Hardcastle Crags" and "Wuthering Heights," nature is presented as hostile and indifferent to man. These poems are a record of Plath's own experience as a young girl. The sea-poems depict sea as a great force, a powerful agent of death, capable to devour all false identities. "Man in Black" and all other poems locating near the sea-shore demonstrate a divided and conflicting response of the poet towards the sea. The poet's sense of blankness and loss, her apprehensions, her alienation and isolation have been conveyed through identification with natural objects – like the moon, trees, the sky and the sea. Poems on animals and other creatures and natural vegetation also represent Plath's threatened and troubled position.

The same vulnerability is experienced in relation to other human beings. Male-domination poses the greatest problem to Plath's poetic sensibility. The woman in her poetry confronts the protracted vicious battle against male authority to discover the world of feminine experience. The traditional female functions act as a hindrance to the flow of her creative energy. Adrienne Rich speaks of this role-conflict in a woman's life:

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships ... and interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately. Yet I grope in and out among these dark web. (44)

Plath exposes the distorted vision of the female trying to emerge out of the restricted circumstance of traditional sex roles. In a letter to her mother she wrote about the hostile world:

My battles are intricate and complex, and that I am without despair, facing them, wrestling with angels, and learning to tolerate that inevitable conflict which is our portion as long as

we are truly alive. I am growing strong by practice. All the growing visions of beauty and new world which I am experiencing are paid for by birth pangs.... What I am fighting for is the strength to claim the 'right to be unhappy' together with the joy of creative affirmation.... (LH 224)

However, ignoring the rejection of validation to her art, Plath pursues her feminist consciousness. With the purpose of self-actualisation she heroically admits herself to the male territory. Hence, her poetry is a ceaseless attempt at defining the roles which the persona can play in a process of self-transformations. Judith Kroll observes: "The false and true selves, initially determined by her relation to her father is the basis of further development and consequently pervades all future manifestations of self, whether in relation to others or in her image of herself" (6).

According to many critics alienation from her father caused a crisis in Plath's life. Hence he is recreated in the form of an oppressor, a Nazi, a Hitler. In relation to this, the self is victimized, isolated and oppressed. The theme of exorcism of "Daddy" is seen as an attempt at doing away with these manifestations of Plath's false self. When her attempt at staging a reincarnation of her father fails and when she comes to realize that it is his

memory that has given rise to a spurt of existential questions, she puts him at the center of all male-atrocity, and adds historical and political dimension to his autocratic profile.

He becomes no more a beloved figure, but an object of contempt and the daughter a victimized and oppressed Jew:

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen,
I begin to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

(CP 223)

The journey from *The Colossus* upto “Daddy” is a slow evolutionary process that witnesses Plath’s gradual upsurges from a helpless daughter to a wounded woman, conscious of her own precarious femininity.

The father-figure is substituted by the husband who is also associated with tyranny. War of true and false selves in relation to him hurt her. Marriage is looked down upon as a kind of imprisonment and the self feels

trapped and subjugated. "The Couriers" is the best example of contempt for female entrapment in married life and domesticity. In poems like "Purdah", "Jailor", "The Applicant" the dominant emotion is that of revolt against male-domination. The woman of all these poems is slavish, oppressed and victimized. Male is a masochist and woman a play thing.

However, Plath tries to rise against such coercion and male-domination as a solution to the existential crisis. She attempts an escape from the captivity of her conditioning. As she wrote once, "spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free" (*LH* 40). In Simone De Beauvoir's opinion, it is essential for women to emerge out of their demarcated limitations to regain lost power:

Now, one must first emerge from it into a sovereign solitude if one wants to regain a grasp upon it. What woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty (669).

"Lady Lazarus" is a landmark in Plath's quest for self-definition as a woman. Here she dramatizes female victimization in mythological as well as historical terms and stages a spectacular comeback of the liberated self.

Robert Lowell puts it, “The voice is now coolly amused, witty, now sour, now fanciful, girlish, charming, now sinking to strident rasp of the vampire (vii). The bee-pomes harp upon the same theme. Solution is sought through the metaphor of bees’ aggression towards and revenge upon those who pose danger to them. In “Sting” the queen bee is comparable to ‘Lady Lazarus’. ‘Bee-series’ is an attempt to liberate her from victimization.

The role of a mother in the process of self-definition is quite consoling to Plath – of course, no less vulnerable. The birth of a child is a sense of fulfilment to her. Though opposed to conventional marriage, she accepted motherhood as a life-giving reality. Here she enjoys autonomy and independence. Extension of her self thus provides relief in the face of all external threats. In *Three Women* Plath considers sterility as a vital loss and emptiness and childbirth as a much wanted birth of a whole self. It is related with hope, meaningfulness and new life. She glorifies motherhood as a soothing experience. By contrasting the secretary’s miscarriage, the Girl’s leaving the child in the hospital with the joyful experience of the wife, Plath is able to define the true identity of women.

All the manifestations of the self where the woman feels repressed, subjected and subservient are inauthentic. The true self is characterized by

independence, autonomy and freedom from suppression and not in relation to others – especially men. Her major concern in self-definition is to do away with all forms of male-defined roles. Hence her female energy draws the language out and develops her own sensibility and protects it. Plath disengages self from all the involvements in man's world, commits to her femininity and receives capability to annihilate aggressive laws. Soon she realizes that the courage and potential lie within herself and they can be the positive means to her identity.

Hence, Plath's poems confront the issue of gender constructing social roles and she views life from a feminist perspective in the process of self-realisation. Adrienne Rich recognizes a powerful feminist voice in Plath's poetry. "It is finally the woman's sense of herself – embattled, possessed that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy"(36). Hence, Plath's quest for an authentic self is essentially a quest for an authentic feminist self.

Plath's fascination for death should be seen as the final stage in her quest for an authentic existence. Whenever the false self arises, the need to destroy the existence is urgently felt. Death, which pervades the entire Plath oeuvre, should be seen in the light of this war of selves. Death is presented

as a comprehensive vision, never disgusting and decadent. Death in the early poems is an occasion for the outlet of suppressed energies and promises of new state of being.

Her general attitude towards death is peaceful, though *The Colossus* presents it as dreadful. As Caroline King Barnard puts it, “It is an annealing, transfiguring experience” (116). For her death is not only a destroyer of all forms of false self but also becomes a meaningful activity, a means of self-generation and rebirth into new existence. Many of Plath’s eminent late poems signify that self-purification and self-transcendence are her crucial themes which signal the possibility of the birth of a true and authentic self.

A detailed analysis of Plath’s poems will show that her pre-occupation with death has to be linked with her quest for self-identification and rebirth to true self. In this quest death must be seen not as an end but as a mid-point which marks the obliteration of Plath’s everyday, mundane self and the beginning of a new existence. Hence, death is her ultimate triumph, an answer to all her existential problems. “So she prepared for it, perhaps with the murmur, ‘perhaps this will set me free’ ”(Alvarez 41).

Plath's poetry is thus, a journey between the quest for and the attainment of true selfhood. It is structured like the maturation process of a child from infancy to adulthood. Hence, her quest for an authentic self which began with *The Colossus* had to pass through various midpoints to find its fulfilment in *Ariel*. Edward Butcher observes, "Sadness, isolation, family conflict, art in the face of enormous odds, a climatic metamorphosis, the story of Sylvia Plath had encompassed them all with dramatic thoroughness, despite the brevity of her life" (29). The successive stages of the growth of Plath's feminist awareness in the quest for an authentic self will be discussed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER – III

The Breviary of Estrangement: The Fragmented Self in *The Colossus*

A man said to the Universe;

“Sir, I exist.”

“However,” replied the Universe,

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

– Stephen Crane

Though her creative life was very short, the pride of place which Sylvia Plath adorns in the Modern American poetry is owing to not as much as in the exposure of the biographical material, as in her dramatic approach to the representation of a threatened and violent self. The developing world of her self was indeed a pessimistic one where no glory descended, but characterized by blunt, indefatigable facts of hopelessness and life-negation, full of stasis and the feeling of estrangement. An existential situation where disaster within the surface of life, incense of death and hours of blankness confronted her; where there was not true blending of the comic and the

tragic, only the latter looming large, leaving the self to face the blank wall, with no place to get to. “If love is the bridge between life and death, then, life for her was pointless and absurd” (Salop 21).

Sylvia Plath’s evolving world at the initial stage of her poetic career was essentially a dark terrain of estrangement and isolation, where the self was left naked to confront, in T.S. Eliot’s great existential metaphor, “a heap of broken images”, the reality of nothingness (76). In this confrontation or existential struggle against the irrational cosmos, an individual becomes an absurd man. For Albert Camus the mythic symbol of ‘this man’ is Sisyphus, “who, despite his being condemned to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it fall back of its own weight, nevertheless not only endures but also finds joy in this task” (Spanos 5). Hence, living amidst the absurdities of life brings meaning to life.

As far as Plath was concerned, this was just what she practised as an artist, when she projected a rational microcosm in confronting the irrational macrocosm where existence was a mere absurdity. As a writer, Plath very consciously and conveniently converted the fantasy and memory of her mixed, violent world of nostalgia and hatred, of self-transformation and negation, into dramatic expression and encounter. Consequently they

acquired a significant poetic force in the path to her search for an authentic self. Here what Jon Rosenblatt voices in his *Sylvia Plath : The Poetry of Initiation* is very adequate :

In the crucial year of change in her career, 1959, Plath came to realize that purely lyric methods could not adequately represent her sense of the antagonism between herself and others and that this antagonistic relationship must be rendered through a dramatic heightening of her own speaking voice. This recognition eventually led to the poems that have been responsible for Plath's posthumous reputation and for her large influence upon contemporary poetry. (23)

Plath's pomes collected mainly in four volumes, viz., *The Colossus*, *Crossing the Water*, *Winter Trees* and *Ariel* testify to her ability to capture the self in relation to its own birth and death, to physical mutilation, to children, and to the family. The dramatic principle of her work encompasses the methods through which the speaker in her work comes into contact with the 'Other'. The personae in her poems speak to a wide variety of listeners, thus dramatizing a struggle with both human and natural forces. In this process she uses a number of poetic forms like, direct address, invocations

and interior dialogue where the poet splits the narrator's personality into different parts. Whatever the poetic form, her intention is clearly to find a voice and a situation that will externalize the internal, conflicting agencies of her personality.

In her poems, using methods which combine the qualities of both lyric and drama Plath dramatizes a ritual confrontation either with death and its symbolic agents or with life and its harsh demands for self-negation and painful individuation. This confrontation between the self and the 'destructive other' occurs in a symbolic space where death and birth, self and other, good and evil merge in a kind of darkness. This situation is analogous with the picture of the sea as described in her, childhood memoir, "Ocean 1212-W", where the sea had been both a nurturing and terrifying mother for her "like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill" (*JP* 117).

Plath consistently finds the same opposition which she discovered as a child in her filial relation to the sea in her adult reaction to the external world. Throughout her life, she experienced the world, like the sea, simultaneously "delicate" and "terrible", that which both "courts" and

“kills”. Hence, in Plath’s work, the journey to the centre of life is the same as the journey to death, where all boundaries between being and nonbeing cease to exist. The external world in relation to nature, animals and human beings always appeared before her as contradictory realities and her work is an account of how she perceived this phenomenon.

Plath started writing poems quite early in her life because it was for her, “a new way of being happy” (*JP* 118). Her early work (1950-56) includes poems that were written while Plath was at Bradford Senior High School in Wellesley and Smith College in Northampton. These apprentice poems neither hint at the issues of death and rebirth that largely governed her poetry from late 1956 until her death in 1963, nor suggest their power and psychological dynamics. Only the general mood of depression and fear in this body of work anticipates the character of the late poetry. As Jon Rosenblatt aptly observes, “Sylvia Plath’s early work differs so greatly from her late poetry both in style and in substance that they would appear to have been written by two different poets” (47).

In this period of “Juvenilia”, Plath’s main concern is to “hammer her talents into acceptable shape” (*LH* 25). They were mere exercises in Poetic diction and traditional stanza forms with complex metrical schemes. Ted

Hughes throws light upon the pre-occupations of Plath's apprentice poems when he reports, "she wrote her early poems very slowly, thesaurus open on her knee" (188). They had in them no sign of what was to come. On the whole they were "Philosophical poetic chants" wrapped cleverly in "grave but stock concepts" of man's entrapment in the cosmic web (Broe 35, 43).

Considered as a whole Plath's early work fit under the category of "academic poetry" of the 1950s as contrasted with the traditional poetry, written largely in the Universities. She found models for every aspect of her apprentice poems in the well-known modern British and American Poets and directly imitated the stylistic elements of Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, E.E. Cummings and John Crowe Ransom (Rosenblatt 51). Her wide-ranging imitations of these recognized poets concealed a definite thematic unity in her early work. The thematic substance of the apprentice poems is completely dominated by visions of despair and death. In this respect they foreshadow some of her concerns as a mature poet. As Hughes says, "And even at their weakest they help chart the full acceleration towards her final take off" (*CP* 16). However, their detailed discussion is deliberately suspended as they do not substantially contribute to the study of this thesis.

Plath's apprentice work eventually gave way to the greater achievement of *The Colossus*, the only collection of poetry published during her life time, which includes the poems written between 1956 when she was reading English at Cambridge and the end of 1959 when she was about to return to England to live there permanently. The achievement of *The Colossus and Other Poems* is extraordinary when set beside the raw imitative attempts of the early work. Though the carefully crafted poems of *The Colossus* take up the same obsessions as the earlier ones, they are elegant and smooth, as the others were forced and harsh. By the time *The Colossus* was written, as a result of much experiment, she had come upon the dynamic contrast that determines the form of her later poetry.

In *The Colossus* poems Plath recognizes the external world as split between two warring principles, death and life, that limit her desires and control the possibilities of existence in general. Hence, in her poems she divides the visible universe into these of objects or people that aid and assist, the self in its struggle to survive and those that attack and persecute the individual. This approach implies that there is a separation between the world and the self and how the self is conditioned by the world of realities. In *The Colossus* Plath's attempts to conjoin two initially separate images,

herself and the problematic world; takes the form of an attempt at the transformation of her own self.

The death force in the universe as perceived by Plath, embodies itself in separate forms and they provide themes and subject matter for different poems. The attitude of the self in relation to death is perceptible from the poems which deal with animals, with nature, with the family, with human or animal corpses and with women. Though in a casual reading, these poems superficially appear to speak about different areas of experiences; they all share a common imagery that allows Plath to treat the omnipresent figure of death. By 1959 she had come to see her subject as the conflict between death and rebirth.

An apt example for Plath's treatment of the theme of death in *The Colossus* is "Mushrooms" (1959), where the mushrooms are presented as a form of menacing animal life. Animal or human forms are projected on to these small natural shapes and consequently they become aggressive, threatening the appropriation of the whole world:

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth

Our foot's in the door.

(CP 140)

By presenting even the harmless mushrooms in this fashion, Plath gives expression to her staunch conviction that every animate being is potentially wild and dangerous to the self. Animals often bring death to the self, which is vulnerable and unprotected. In *The Colossus* she writes about a giant sow, a gigantic bull, wolves, wasps, sharks, owls, foxes, frogs, spiders, crabs and bees. These animal forms symbolically embody the life-and-death struggle of the poet herself. Hence self in relation to the animal world appears vulnerable and the awareness of this otherness is almost inexorable.

As in the case of her relationship with the animal world, Plath as a poet obviously unable to establish a meaningful relationship with nature. The poems in *The Colossus*, on nature speak of the non-human environment, landscape or seascape, as hostile to all human desire and intension. Infact, the indifference or resistance of nature to human desire pervades almost all of the poems of this volume, even those dealing with family or women.

Plath typically locates her poems near the ocean which is destructive and rough or in a rocky landscape that affords little or no response to the

poet's desire for relationship. She constantly engages the images of 'stone' and 'water' as stone resists the poet's attempt to communicate with nature and water threatens the security of the land and human habitation. The natural world as a whole is thus metaphorically the field of battle for the poet's struggle for existence.

"Hardcastle Crag" (1956), which describes a rocky landscape, the first of the poems about nature in *The Colossus* is perhaps the clearest account of the relationship between self and nature. The poem demonstrates that the natural can hurt the poet even when she merely wants to walk about and observe it. According to the poem, perception itself can endanger the sense of a stable, strong selfhood. The poem is the record of the experiences of a woman who one night leaves the town and walks out in the surrounding country side. She feels that the landscape eagerly awaits her annihilation. Nature, she says, "could break / Her down to mere quartz grit" (CP 63). The blank mood of the woman is reinforced by a similar blank and black night around her. The oppressiveness of the inhuman and the alien looms large before her:

All night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
Of her heart was the burped indifferent iron

Of its hills... bordered by black stone set

On black stone.

(CP 63)

The girl feels reduced in size and importance in relation to an “indifferent” nature and she begins to fear that her human frame cannot survive in the “antique world” of the landscape (CP 63). The stone, the hills and the moon, perceived in their otherness and externality, seem capable of breaking down the human body. Even the living creatures are presented as impervious to the affliction of the persona and a crushing silence envelopes the atmosphere:

The whole landscape

Loomed absolute as an antique world was

Once in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,

Unaltered by eyes,

Enough to snuff the quick

Of her small heat out, ...

(CP 63)

The hardness of the landscape carries over to the seascape in “Departure” (1956), the next nature poem in *The Colossus*. The panorama of

the Spanish seashore, which Plath visited with her husband in the summer of 1956, emphasizes the brutality of the sea and the poverty of nature:

Retrospect shall not soften such penury –

.....

But always expose

The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay

Against which the burnt of outer sea

Beats, is brutal endlessly.

(CP 67)

The sun and the moon are hostile to human life and the sea violently attacks the earth. The poem emphasizes not the couple's action or response to nature, but the poet's longing for a response *from* nature. But as in the case of many poems in *The Colossus*, the final scene is of an absent response. Pamela J. Annas puts it, "The subject of *The Colossus* poems in the boundary between self and other: Plath's concern in these early poems is where the boundary lines are, of what they consist, whether and how they can be passed, and whether the traveller can get back" (18-19).

Plath's view of nature as hostile in the process of her self awareness characterizes such poems as "A Winter Ship", "Suicide off Egg Rock", "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", "Man in Black", "Snake Charmer", and "The Hermit at Outermost House". In "A Winter Ship" (1959), the speaker goes to a wharf to watch the brilliant sunrise, but her expectations are shattered: "We wanted to see the sun come up/And are met, instead, by this ice ribbed ship" (*CP* 112). The icy waves dashing against the rickety edifice of the warehouse, derricks, smoke stacks, and bridges glitter "like a knife". The poem perfectly recapitulates the situation, images and theme of a human being or a man made object being threatened or attacked by natural forces like the stone, sea and sun.

The lack of response from nature is found in yet another poem "Suicide Off Egg Rock" (1958-59). The poem with its third-person narration of a young man's suicide stresses the morbidity of the industrial landscape as well as the young man's corresponding inner feelings of aridity. He becomes a part of the oppressive scene where the "sun struck the water like a damnation" (*CP* 115). According to Edward Butscher this matrix of imperfect landscape offers an objective-correlative for Plath's personal sense of alienation and anguish, and thus, Plath's poem is her "brave attempt at merging personal despair with social significance" (244).

The young man's identity itself, the "I am. I am, I am" becomes almost unbearably meaningless and like the girl in "Hard Castle Crag" he suffers from a perceptual blankness: "Everything glittered like blank paper" (CP 115). Finally, the only image which pierces his self-imposed blindness is the sea and the Egg Rock, the sea which holds out death:

He heard when he walked into the water

The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.

(CP 115)

It could be safely concluded from these poems that Plath is actually aware of the indifference, threat and hostility inherent in nature. Rosenblatt puts it. "Plath... is the inversion of Wordsworth: she writes obsessively about nature not because of her love for it but because of her overwhelming terror in the face of it" (63).

Not only the hostile and harsh world of the animals and nature but also the death of someone, especially a family member, makes the poet suffer the excruciating pain of her own 'otherness' in the world and the vulnerability of her self. Such an attitude at the same time forces the poet to

discover a means of escape from her own threatened annihilation. In “Point Shirley”, “The Colossus”, “All the Dead Dears”, “The Disquieting Muses”, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, and “Full Fathom Five”, death is pictured as both the enemy of everything that the self loves and the ultimate escape from the life of pain.

The explicit subjects of these poems are the poet’s relatives and hence they are more personal than those written on animals and nature. Plath uses the same complex images of her nature poems to represent her conflicting feelings towards the death of loved parents or grandparents. So connected in her imagination are the places and images associated with her relatives that it is sometimes almost impossible to distinguish between her consideration of the natural environment and her consideration of the family members.

For instance in “Point Shirley” the grandmother’s home in Winthrop is described as grandmother herself and nature and death are considered as one and the same agency. The “Sluttish, rutted” sea destroys the grandmother’s house and the poet is left with the hope of converting the round egg-stones into breast and resurrect the lost grandmother’s body (*CP* 110). But the stone will not be humanized and the poet is left with a resigned and bitter realization that lost love and lost relationships are lost for good:

I would get from these dry-papped stones
The milk your love instilled in than.
.....
Grandmother, stones are nothing of home
To that spumiest dove,
Against both bar and tower the black sea runs.

(CP 111)

“The Colossus” is another poem of similar development of the family motif where Plath imagines that the Colossus, which once dominated the harbour of Rhodes, is her father’s dead body, now lying broken in pieces on a hillside. The broken statue indicates that the dead man cannot be recovered through piecing him or the poet’s memories of him, together again, although she continues to gaze in fear and love at him:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.

(CP 130)

Plath had used the Colossus image once before in an apprentice poem, “Letter to a Purist (1956), without identifying the statue with her father and without imagining that the statue had been broken into pieces. “Colossus” with its double objectives of the expression of a vitriolic contempt for the abandoning father and a rigid pride in his all-powerful paternal authority in half way to “Daddy” from the apprentice poem mentioned above.

In “Full Fathom Five”, another significant poem dealing with the father figure, the father’s image is positively presented, covering the abyss separating the father and daughter in a fantasy of paternal rebirth. Here water is presented not as a force that has destroyed the family members, but as the living environment for the dead. Unable to distinguish clearly between the dead father’s shape in the imagination and the actuality of death itself, the poet symbolically wishes for her own death:

Father, this air is murderous

I would breathe water.

(CP 94)

Plath here believes in the possibility that the self may be forgotten in the water and there rediscovers its lost world of happiness. The Paradox of

Plath's relation to death lies in this contradictory use of the images of 'water' and 'ocean'.

The sea or water which is viewed as a negative force in her poems of nature, is treated as a means of escape from death in a number of significant poems including "Lorelei" (1958). Here the poet invokes the sirens, "those great goddesses of peace", to take her down to the beautiful world below the sea (CP 94). The poem presents a death-wish and paradoxically, the images of stone and water symbolize a death wish, since death by water seems attractive to the self. The sirens have "hair heavier/Than sculpted marble," and the poet asks the stone to carry her down to the watery world of peace : "Stone, stone ferry me down there" (CP 95).

Plath thus characteristically presents opposite reactions to the same set of objects, people or landscapes in different poems. Objects like stone and water are valued in contradictory fashion, because Plath actually shifts between two opposed relationships with the world. In her nature poems, like "Hardeastle Craggs" and "Mushrooms", and in the family poems like "The Colossus," the self is distant and alien from the external universe. Objects and people are hard, indifferent and objectified and consequently the self appears vulnerable, threatened and almost suffers annihilation. But in such

poems as “Full Fathom Five” and “Lorelei”, the self tries to merge and identify itself with nature and other people.

It could be said that in the first case nature is identified with the father as hardened and set in death and in the second case, with the father and mother as fluid and transforming. The two relations to the external world, objectification and identification, are embodied in the same natural images, stone, water, sun and moon. However, the emotions objectified by these images change with the mode of relationship described in each poem. At one moment the sun can be a destructive force; in the next, it is a purifying and life-giving agent. This revising of the symbolic significance of a particular image is the result of her polarized view of reality. Sometimes nature attracts her, other times she experiences repulsion from the natural world. The same view is applicable in her love and hatred for the family and her desire for and fear of death.

“All the Dead Dears” (1957) is one of such poems, occasioned by “a stone coffin of the fourth century A.D. containing the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew” (*CP* 70). The poem rapidly becomes meditation on the relationship between the poet and her family. The dead woman reminds her of her own dead relatives like the great grandfather, great grandmother,

and father, who rather than being protectors of the self, extend their cold “hands” to “haul” the poet into the watery underworld of the dead where they exist. Hence, she has an antithetical view of the family where “All the Dead Dears” are “grinding crumb by crumb/Our own grist down to its bony face” (*CP* 71).

In the poem Plath totally reverses the sense of the family as a loving group whom death destroys and whom she wishes to recover. Instead, the family is identified with the hard, crushing world of nature and death outside her that threatens her selfhood and her continued existence. The gruesome sense of cosmic oppression which she experiences from the external world has its parallel in familial oppression. Since her family constantly reminds her of her own death, if she can forget her love for them and their death, she can live a happy life. But such an escape is impossible and so the family becomes an agency of persecution representing the cosmic forces of death and cyclical destruction.

The memory of the family as a persecutory force of the past is again celebrated in “The Disquieting Muses” (1958), where she accuses the family for leaving her in a world of stone. Based on Giorgio de Chirico’s painting “I Musi Inquietanti”, the central issue the poem discusses is the author’s

ambiguous attitude to her own artistic gifts, personified by those three sinister ladies in the painting whose company she cannot get rid of. The mother, who is repeatedly addressed throughout the poem has no share in this unique relationship:

I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you dear mother.

(CP 75)

Like so many threatening and dangerous objects in *The Colossus*, the muses are made of stone, and they haunt her wherever she goes. All on her own, the poet is destined to live under their doomed shadow for ever:

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.

(CP 76)

Hesitation and anxiety dominate the poet's attitude to her 'muses', but a certain sense of pride and determination can be perceived in the final acceptance of her destiny. This attitude of fatality and resignation in the face of the universe is Plath's only possible response at this stage of her growth as a poet:

And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, Mother. But no frown of mine
Will be tray the company I keep.

(CP 76)

In *The Colossus* collection Plath has devoted a number of poems to voice her view of women. Her attitude here too, is ambivalent and she considers women as ambiguous beings. They are at once alive and dead, loved and hated. This duality in the poems on women is generally expressed through the opposition of fertility and stability. In "Two Sisters of Persephone" (1957), "Spinster" (1956), "Moonrise" (1959) "Media" (1956), and "Metaphors" (1959), Plath pictures women as intensely vulnerable to attack and they can only defend themselves either by becoming sterile creatures or by giving birth to children by becoming mothers. Hence, a

woman's body either dies because it does not bear children or it lives because it has become fertile.

In the "Two Sisters of Persephone", one of the sisters, the "Wry Virgin" chooses the "barren enterprise" of mathematics and goes to the grave "Worm husbanded". The other enjoys a richer and fuller life by becoming a mother. The speaker in "Spinster" identifies men with nature's assaults against human beings and lives an unhappy life:

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no more insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, first, threat
Or love, either.

(CP 50)

Medea is portrayed as similarly condemned to a living death because she destroys her own children. Though the speaker in the riddle-poem "Metaphors", is exuberant, compares herself to animal life and various objects of nature to give expression to her innermost feeling of being

objectified. The speaker in “Moonrise” experiences a temporary solace in the process of birth after many images of death and pain: “The white stomach may ripen yet”. These reflections on the lives of women, make the poet herself aware of her own vulnerable and precarious femininity.

Plath at the commencement of her career as a poet viewed the external world and human beings in two conflicting modes. She considered nature, animals, the family and women as either the frightening death or the vital living, as objectified enemies or as internalised friends. In a number of poems in *The Colossus* dealing with corpses Plath describes her confrontation with death directly. She observes a dissected body in “Two Views of the Cadaver Room”, two dead moles in “Blue Moles” (1959), a dead fiddler crab in “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” (1959) a dead snake in “Medallion” (1959) and the “Corpse” of a “dead building in “The Burnt out Spa” (1959).

“Blue Moles” describes Plath’s dual relationship with the dead. In the first section she objectifies the dead moles by ascribing qualities of stiffness, stoniness, neutrality and whiteness and indicates her deep-seated awareness of the malevolence of nature against living creatures. In the second section

she identifies herself with them and thereby tries to escape from her human nature which can easily be destroyed by death:

I enter the soft pelt of the mole.
Light's death to them: they shrivel in it.
They move through their mute rooms while I sleep,
Palming the earth aside, grubbers
After the fat children of root and rock.

(CP 131)

In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" Plath repeats her dual view of nature, self and death. The first section is a narration of a woman's visit to a dissecting room, a visit that Plath also describes in her novel *Bell Jar* as, "I started out by dressing in a white coat and sitting on a white stool in a room with four cadavers, while Buddy and his friends cut them up.... They had stiff, leathery, purple-black skin and they smelt like old pickle jars" (BJ 69).

Here the poet tries to objectify them and this produces a series of disturbing perceptions. The corpses in the room seem to the woman to be made of animal flesh and she is totally disgusted at the sight of death. However, in the second part the self has a sympathetic attitude towards them

and enjoys a kind of perverse attraction to the enclosed babies, as if their condition is almost definable. This identification with the corpses, though limited and less effective than in “Blue Moles”, is achieved through an aesthetic transformation.

In “Medallion” and “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” the poet approaches death in the same manner and escapes from objectification through aesthetic means. Here too, the dead bodies are transformed into aesthetic objects and this conversion of the frightening and disfigured into beautiful, lessens the pain of confronting death. In this last of the series of poems on the bodies of the dead, including “The Colossus”, Plath recognizes that she cannot enter into the world of the dead or rather cannot escape into the waters of “Lorlei” and “Full Fathom Five”, “where the durable ones keep house”(CP 93). This sense of estrangement is convincingly expressed in the eighth stanza of the “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” where she says that she knows for certain that the “other world” to which the crab belongs will be shut to her in the end:

That question ended it – I
Stood shut out, for once, for all
Puzzling the passage of their
Absolutely alien
Order

(CP 97)

The discussion in this chapter on the poems of *The Colossus* volume which deals primarily with Plath's search for a self-image true to her own sense of her potentiality, ends with a series of poems on self transformation and rebirth written in 1959. Though transformation resulting from aesthetic perception was discussed in some poems, the most striking use of art as a means of transformation is "Sculptor" (1958) which takes up the same image of stone and hardness and treats them in completely different way. The poem describes the work of Leonard Baskin who was artist-in-residence at Smith College while Plath was there. In traditional sense, art is seen as a transforming activity that can turn dead matter into images of a world that transcends death. But in the poem Plath considers art in the context of the physical metamorphosis of the self. For her the new shape that sculptor

gives to human body is akin to the reborn body that she desires to acquire through rebirth.

The idea of physical transformation and rebirth is, in fact, the direction and goal of *The Colossus*. This is expressed nowhere better than in her “Poem for a Birthday” (1959), which is a compendium of physical changes. The primary concern of each of the individual poems, “Who”, “Dark House”, “Maenad”, “The Beast”, “Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond”, “Bitch Burning”, and “The Stones”, is to regress to an earlier human or a nonhuman physical state. Instead of looking at the dead either as animals, natural forms, corpses or family members, Plath now becomes the very objects she has up to now feared. Hence, the whole of “Poem for a Birthday” posits the self as becoming part of this other realm, as she says in “Who”, “mother of otherness eat me” (CP 132). The poet now dramatizes a change in her being as if she had actually abandoned her normal physical condition. She celebrates a birthday by imagining a series of death like transformations, which are indispensable for a rebirth.

“The Stones”, the culmination of “Poem for a Birthday”, is the fitting end to the thematic drama of *The Colossus*. Throughout the volume the resistant, unforgiving force in the world is stone. The natural and the human

including the family members, had been formed into stone. But in the final poem of the volume, the poet herself becomes stone as if to show that death has trapped the poet's self as well. The poem turns the drama of petrification, which Plath had presented as the fate of those outside her, into the self's own struggle. Hence those qualities that had been seen as frightening and dangerous in the 1956 "Hard Castle Crag" are by 1959 taken on by the self as a defense. R.D. Laing in *the Divided Self* writes:

It seems to be a general law that at some point those very dangers most dreaded can themselves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrences. Thus, to forego one's autonomy becomes the means of security safe guarding it.... To turn oneself into a stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by some one else. (51)

When the search for an authentic self, is thwarted by external forces and internalized social restrictions, it will assume distorted and ambiguous forms. This is most perceptible in "The Stones" which is described by Ted Hughes as "clearly enough the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel*. It is the poem where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds it whole" (192). Plath herself later dismissed every thing prior to "The Stones" as

juvenilia (Orr 170). Even though the woman in the poem is going to leave the hospital, feeling that “I shall be good as new”, her attitude toward her cure is ambivalent (*CP* 137). It is possible that all the repair that has been done to her may only affect the outside; the real self, shadowy and elusive, may be still untouched:

The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose
Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.

(*CP* 137)

Thus despite the trials undergone by the poet through the seven poems of the Birthday series, she fails to have a complete new birth. The glued together ‘vase’ has to bear many cracks. Plath realizes that her humiliating process of identifying herself with the very objects which she feared and her final transformation into a stone has helped her only to fix and rigidify the outer limits of the boundaries between the self and the other.

The Colossus can be described as a true account of a saga of attempts of Plath as a poet to become the part of the otherness that relentlessly poised an inexorable threat to her existence. Objects of nature, animals, family

numbers, both dead and alive, and even women as discussed already, make her painfully aware of the relentless and annihilating, oppression of the other. Consequently her pervasive, tireless obsession with death – subject matter of a number of poems – may lead one to think that Plath’s sense of identity was frail and that she “suffered from a characteristic sense of existential insecurity” (Holbrook 1). Together with Camus, it could be stated that “there is only one liberty to come to terms with, death, after which everything is possible” (Salop 49).

As an artist Sylvia Plath can be linked with the existentialists and extremist poets, like Rilke, Roethke and Wallace Stevens. “Stevens commented that a man’s sense of the world derived from his personality and his temperament, over which he has little control” (Salop 22). Speaking existentially then, if we agree with Suhl, literature can be thought of as latent existentialism because “The subjects, the particular and the specific experiences of individuals, are the primary concern of both” (18). Plath as a poet developed a unique sense of perception and along with the twentieth century poets, including Randal Jarrell, Anne sexton and Robert Lowell. She was haunted by fears of alienation, realizing that “there are no heroes in this world, no hope and little glory – only a co-mixture of despair, loneliness,

terror and finally, death. Reality is so bleak that it can only elicit commensurately grim responses” (Salop 22).

As a poet, particularly at the beginning stage of her career, Plath was almost totally obsessed with her own personal experience. Consequently, the poems at this stage portray an intensely personal unfolding of a dark and deepening psychological nature and descend gradually into the negation of life. As Arnheim observes, “Concern with his own mind is an occupational characteristic of modern man” (125). Since at this stage she could never come to terms with death, a resultant nagging sense of ontological insecurity is the very fabric of her poetry, reminding one that “man’s being is an existence toward death and the certitude of dying overshadows all his life” (Sartre 26).

At the close of this discourse on the majority of poems in *The Colossus*, what could be inferred is that Plath as a poet in her quest for a true self or a poetic voice of her own, was exposed to an alarming and almost annihilating awareness of the ‘other’ in the external realities. Coupled with this, the knowledge of her own self as vulnerable and fragile makes her experience an acute sense of anguish and alienation. To strike an escape from these hard prosaic realities, Plath tries objectification and aesthetic

identification, culminating in the final phase, self transformation, leading to rebirth.

Consequently, as has been already mentioned, through out *The Colossus* there has been attempt after attempt to become part of this 'Otherness'. An attempt to cross the borders into the unknown and there find a self redefined with which the poet can merge and be truly reborn and then to bring that reborn self back across the boundaries into this world. But finally she comes to the shocking realization that, after all, the other will always remain alien. Hence rather than a projection of self outward, she begins to feel trapped inside the self. Here one is reminded of what Heidegger has to say: "Man is in this world limited by death and experienced in anguish; is aware of himself as essentially anxious, is burdened by his solitude within the horizon of his temporality" (26).

"Aware of [her] own solitude, within the horizon of [her] temporality", Plath now begins the second phase of her quest for a true identity of her own, which actually commenced with "Poem for a Birthday", a poem of regression and reconstruction, the last poem of *The Colossus*. It is a journey of the self in the dark night of the soul. To quote Uroff:

In “Poem for Birthday” Plath has sunk a shaft into her inner life, allowing its turmoil and chaos to erupt at the surface. It is as if the stoat had licked the stylist out of her skill, and what we have the red unmanageable life split onto the page. (120)

For Ted Hughes himself “The Stones”, the last of the seven poems in the “Poem for a Birthday” sequence, represents both a culmination and a departure from the earlier poems. It is interesting, and perhaps enlightening, to note that Ted Hughes, also sees “The Stones” as a turning point in Sylvia Plath’s poetic career:

“The Stones” was the last poem she wrote ... in America. The immediate source of it was a series of poems she began as a deliberate exercise in experimental improvisation on set themes. She had never in her life improvised. The powers that compelled her to write so slowly had always been stronger than she was. But quite suddenly she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts.... STONES... is clearly enough the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel* . (192)

In this first phase of her development towards a feminist consciousness, as represented by the poems of *The Colossus*, Plath's sense of the other, the negative evil presence which evaded identification in the earliest phase of the 'Juvenilia', becomes more intense and objectified. A vicious landscape of danger and lurking menace is evoked in almost all poems of this phase which deal with even the most common things of external life – places, sea, animals, plants, children, motherhood, and even an appendectomy. Nearly all aspects of nature and human beings act as agents of doom and oppression.

Plath slowly and painfully becomes aware that even the male who is supposed to play a complementary role during this precarious state of her existence, can no longer be trusted, "No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing" (*CP* 130). At this phase, as a woman, though Plath encountered only failures, trials, and isolation, she honestly confronts these problems and resolves her humiliations with an unwavering ability. Instead of creating artificial outbursts, she controls the facets of her personal dilemma and finally stages a withdrawal into the narrow, personal world of her own self.

CHAPTER – IV

The Avenues of Speech and Silence: Self in the Transitional Poetry

The themes we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves; that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation. A theme should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us.

– Franz Kafka

In Sylvia Plath's quest for a self-image true to her own sense of potentiality, *The Colossus*, chronologically the first collection of poems, represents the final stage in the first phase of her work. However, viewed from the perspective of *Ariel*, her piece-de-resistance, the volume has usually been defined and judged as a starting point, though in thought and expression it betrays Plath's immaturity as she was blatantly honest. She had been publishing poems fairly regularly, in the late fifties, and Ted Hughes has

pointed out that she scrapped many poems before *The Colossus* took its final shape (188).

Hence, the real starting point of the final development can be found in the poems now collected in *Crossing The Water*, though it is hinted at in “Poem for a Birthday”, the last and in many ways the most untypical poem in *The Colossus*. Caroline King Barnard comments:

If “The Stones” is the first eruption of that final, excellent voice, however, it does not herald as immediate success. There are a number of poems which Sylvia Plath wrote between 1960 when *The Colossus* was first published and early 1962, which may be accurately termed transitional. (57)

Though the poems of *The Colossus* were selected and arranged to highlight the thematic groupings, Plath was unable to fix upon an overall organization for the poetry written from 1960 through 1963. Although she had begun to choose poems for the *Ariel* volume before her death, she could not complete the process (Hughes 193). Though the three books of later poetry, *Crossing the Water*, *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, contain poems from different periods of Plath’s career, only *Ariel* seems to approach the shape of

a finished work. However, all the discrepancies and errors of judgement regarding the exact chronological order of Plath's poems seemed to be wiped out entirely by the publication of her *Collected Poems* (1981) by Ted Hughes with an introduction.

In the transitional poems, Plath as a policy maintains a low profile and consequently, they neither reveal the honesty of the early poems nor the power of the late ones. A number of pomes properly belong to Plath's late period were also written during this 1960-62 period. Hence the distinction between 'transitional' and 'late' must be made on the basis, not only of composition date, but also of style, approach and attitude. In this regard, it could be safely concluded that all the pomes printed in the various volumes mentioned above, are strictly of transitional mode, except those rapidly written poems of the last few months of her life enshrined in the *Ariel*. However, most critics believe that *Crossing the Water* with its twenty-eight poems truly represent the transitional phase in the growth of the mind of Plath as a poet, and indeed it is aptly named:

For most of the poems of this period do indeed evince, variously, a kind of stepping stone quality, or a sense of floundering, of being neither on the one shore nor the other.

Both in form and in substance, these poems are mainly interesting only because they are there, because they represent an important stage in Sylvia Plath's poetic development. (Barnard 57)

The transitional poems as a group, throws light on a very important period in Plath's personal life. They belong to the three-year period which followed Plath's second visit to England as the result of Ted Hughes' desire for the birth of his first child in his own native land. This was the time of the Hugheses' two years in London and their first year in Devon, a period ending roughly with the break up of their marriage and Ted's departure from home. Though she was choked by domesticity, nuptial encumbrances and continued poor health as referred to in her letters addressed to her mother, it was the most meaningful and fulfilling period in her personal life as her both children were born in these years – Frieda Rebeeca in 1960, and Nicholas Farrar in 1962. As she wrote in December 1960: "I am very excited that children seem to be an impetus to my writing" (LH 404).

All these sordid as well as pleasant experiences of her personal life, found their way into the edifice of the transitional poetry which stands half way between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, in the development of structure, theme,

approach, and attitude of Plath in her quest for achieving a new identity.

E.M. Aird remarks:

As an experimental, transitional volume *Crossing the Water* is very valuable as a bridge between the early composure of *The Colossus* and the later originality and daring of the *Ariel*. The poems represent Sylvia Plath's growing recognition and expression of her poetic subject.... (50)

In her transitional phase, Plath as a poet makes almost a desperate attempt towards the realization of her own voice and attempts a kind of poetry which could speak out the fear and apprehensions of her life as a woman. She takes up the different aspects of woman's life through a communion with the surface of her mind, imagination of violence and sexuality. She moves away from the conventional instances in style and theme. The sexual conflict, the woman's body and the deepest levels of disturbed womanhood become inseparable from her area of poetic experience at this transitional phase.

The poems of this volume are just plain statements of art and they reveal Plath's poetic self in its evolutionary aspects. *Crossing the Water* is

half way in Plath's search for an indignant and defiant voice of the *Ariel*. According to Peter Porter it is a neatly done collection, comparable to *The Colossus* and *Ariel*. As he puts it, "*Crossing the Water* is full of perfectly realized works. Its most striking impression is of a frontrank artist in the process of discovering her true power" (46). Ted Hughes himself discussing the volume in a BBC broadcast said, "This work from the interim is fascinating and much of it beautiful in a rich and easy way that we find neither in *The Colossus* nor *Ariel*" (*CW: Some Reflections* 165).

The transitional poems document a movement of a world of fluidity and potentiality of the world of *The Colossus* to a world seen as increasingly narrow where her possibilities are closed off and the boundaries between the self and the world have solidified, "As Plath moves toward the *Ariel* poems, she no longer becomes in her poetry some aspect of animate or the animate nature. What had before been animistically projected outward on to the natural world is now internalized as Plath faces the social world" (Annas 53).

Rather than a projection of self outward, she begins to feel trapped inside the self and the difference between the first phase and this transitional phase is a strong desire for regression, coupled with a feeling of cultivated

passivity. “A cycle of Plath’s poems since October 1959 begins with an acute and manifest withdrawal into self...” (Jha 54).

This shift in perception is very well demonstrated in her attitude towards where she locates the alien and the threatening forces. What she locates in the early pomes as alien and threatening are internalized here. This process of internalizing the alien that has earlier found mostly outside herself and a threat, actually commenced with the last poem of *The Colossus*, “*The Stones*”, where she metaphorically becomes a stone, as to escape from reacting to the world around her, thereby professing a studied passivity and indifferences.

The entire struggle of the self in relation to the external world exists in the plain of her private, seemingly unknown sphere. Hence, the most conspicuous hallmark of the transitional work is that of tension and uneasiness. The poet knows full well, that her real self has yet to be born and it will be the result of an intense struggle. This progressive internalization of the alien continues into poems of her final phase, like “*Elm*” (1962), where the alien is seen as living inside her:

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me,
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings,
its malignity.

(CP 192)

The change in Plath's poetic voice and the transformation of her central images are both tied to a change in her conception of self image, the image of the world, and the relationship between self and the world. As in the case of the rest of her work, the primary concern of the transitional work as well is self-definition – a record of the attempts of “a woman poet trying to work out a redefinition of self through her poetry” (Annas 54).

The poems here are open statements of the interaction of the self with the external realities, with other human beings including her children and family members and finally with death. Hence, in this transitional phase “Plath's obsession with both identity and death becomes intense, urgent – the mounting excitement of her voice suggested that she is closing the gap between the two” (Johnson 24).

The perception of nature as void or nothingness and the deep feeling of man's separateness or estrangement from nature and an equally deep experience of nature as inherently hostile to man, is one of the dominant concerns of the transitional poetry. In poems like, "Finisterre", "Two Campers in Cloud Country", "Wuthering Heights", "Sleep in Mojave Desert", "Whitsun", "Private Ground", "Stars over Dordogone", "Crossing the Water", "Parliament Hills Fields", and "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the obvious purpose is to depict different moods and tones of nature that coincide with and correlate to Plath's own depressed, questioning, somber feelings.

In these intensely self-absorbed poems of nature, the third-person narratives of *The Colossus* are replaced by first, as the self often feels one with the external objects. A series of identifications with landscapes and seascapes have been devised to explain and define the complex self. She concentrates on external natural objects to evince the vulnerability of her own self when exposed to hostile surroundings:

As a number of poems collected in *Crossing the Water*, make clear, her awareness of a cosmic menace at work, the threat of extinction hanging over and deforming every human act of

will, returned to images of a vulnerable female lost among the stones of hostile nature. (Butscher 98)

Sylvia Plath's treatment of the themes of estrangement and of hostility and threat as experienced by the self in relation to natural surroundings is best illuminated in "Wuthering Heights", where Emile Bronte's world of bleak and desolate moorland in West Yorkshire is invoked. The poem is written from the point of view of the persona herself. The pronouns "I" and "me" make the poem more personal in tone than do the corresponding "she" and "her" used in "Hardcastle Crag" (Ingrid 63). The situation described in the poem is a lonely human being's immediate and helpless response to a type of landscape that has a depressing influence on her. The wind is introduced as a powerful agent of nature threatening the life of the frail woman:

... and the wind
Pours by like destiny, the wind bending
Everything in one direction
I can feel it trying
To funnel my heat away.

(CP 167)

Even insignificant grass becomes a source of menace, inviting the woman to “whiten” her “bones among them” (CP 167). Hence, in the poem the recognition of nature’s inherent hostility towards man and everything created is emphasized even more strongly than in any other earlier poem.

The indifference of nature becomes pure hostility in “Sleep in the Mojave Desert”, a landscape based on Plath’s trip to the South West in 1959 which culminated in the stay at Yaddo. The desert landscape appears inhospitable and the dominant mood in the poem is determined by images of heat. The assertion made in the very opening lines of the poem lays bear the feelings of uneasiness, loneliness and even homesickness suffered by the self:

Out here there are no hearth stones,
Hot grains, simply. It is dry, dry.
And the air dangerous.

(CP 144)

“Two Campers in Cloudy Country”, which is set in Rock Lake, Canada, presents a grandiose mountain landscape whose dominant features

are rocks, woods, and clouds which refuse to pay attention to the needs of human beings. The rocky landscape overwhelms the two campers with a sense of alienation from ordinary human condition and the risk of annihilation makes them aware of the frailty of the individual's sense of self:

Around our tent the old simplicities sough
Sleepily as Lethe, trying to get in.
We'll walk blank-brained as water in the dawn.

(CP 145)

The central theme of "Stars Over the Dordogne" is without doubt that of estrangement. The feeling of loneliness and bewilderment that disturbs the persona of this poem are caused by the abundance of stars that shine over the river Dordogne and its neighbourhood in Southern France. The scene reminds her with a nostalgic longing, of the starry nights in New England and she turns inward to the "puritan and solitary" American stars:

And where I lie now, back to my own dark star,
I see those constellations in my head,
Unwarmed by the sweet air of this peach
Orchard.

(CP 166)

In “Finisterre,” which describes the rocky shoreline off the coast of France, makes the self feel effaced, silenced and neutralized: “I walk among them, and they stuff my with cotton” (CP 170). Nature is once again harsh and indifferent to the human world, and even religion is of no help. “A giant marble statue of Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is an object of devotion. As with the unresponsive Colossus, however, the statue does not show the slightest interest in the plight of the people” (Rosenblatt 93):

She does not hear what the sailors or peasant is saying –

She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea.

(CP 170)

A truly negative response to land and seascapes dominates “Whitsun”, a description of a holiday trip to the beach in England. Here the poet compares the natural world to people or objects which she dislikes. “Degenerate and deadning, the seascape is simply there, leaving the speaker and her companion seasick on the beach” (Rosenblatt 95). The dominant notion of “Private Ground”, is the perception of nature as a void or nothingness. This description of the Yaddo estate in New York state, where

the Hugheses stayed in the fall of 1959, focuses on a drained fish basin in which the dead fish lie. When the speaker throws the fish into a nearby lake, she seems to be offering to the water the debris of human reality:

Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake
Opens and shuts, accepting them among
its reflections.

(CP 154)

Like the sea, the lake is a totally indifferent world accepting uncaringly both man made objects and logs.

The sense of hostile, indifferent nature continues in “Parliament Hill Fields”, set in the Hampstead Heath areas of London, where Plath lived in 1961. The speaker is a mother who apparently has lost a child through miscarriage and it seems to have reference to Plath’s own situation in the winter of 1960-61. The woman goes to nature for consolation at the time of her utter sense of loss, but nature appears totally ignorant of it:

On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.
Faceless and pale as china

The Round sky goes on minding its business.
Your absence is inconspicuous;
Nobody can tell what I lack.

(CP 152)

Just as she is rejected by the landscape she also feels herself to be rejected by people, confirming her conception of her own utter importance: 'I'm a stone, a stick'. The poem "is especially important for articulating the existential anxiety of the protagonist" (Jha 72).

The sense of doom that overhangs Plath's inner landscape finds expression in "The Moon and The Yew Tree", inspired by a scene outside of her house in Devon. The landscape offers no hope of any sort, only a sense of complete existential despair stares in the face. In this existential drama even the church fails to provide deliverance to the self; it turns out to be smug and apathetic, too remote for human comfort:

Inside the church, the Saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and face stiff with holiness.

(CP 173)

In the poem Plath takes a key step towards the ritual participation of the self in the death-and-life process of the universe. As in all her poems of nature discussed above, here too the self is portrayed as trapped in a world that speaks to this trapped self incessantly of personal issues through natural objects. The moon in the poem is the presence of a controlling, dominating mother, the blackness of the tree is the absence of a loved, though feared father, and the Virgin Mary provides an image of transformation to escape from the world of sad vicissitudes and death. Hence the landscapes in the poem “speak” (not in the literal sense) to the poet about the condition in which she finds herself.

However, the self has to continue to be bearing the brunt of this existential angst, for its moment of rebirth or transformation into an authentic self, has yet to be waited upon. The consequent withdrawal of the self into its private world, results in the production of the poetry of regression during the transitional phase of Plath’s quest for an authentic voice if her own. In this regard what Jon Rosenblatt speaks of “The moon and the Yew Tree”, can be applicable to the entire landscape poetry:

“The moon and the Yew Tree” does not offer a dynamic movement to rebirth, but it marks the moment in a career when Plath combines the language of her landscape poetry with the obsessive images and concerns of her poems about the family, *about her own self*. (98-99, Italics mine)

In the transitional phase to scrutinize, her aesthetic development, Plath draws upon distinctly personal subject matter. Her hospital experiences at a number of occasions creep into the poetry of this phase. In poems like “Face Lift”, “Insomniac”, “Surgeon at 2 A.M.”, and “In Plaster”, Plath describes the pain or bizarre incongruities of life on the medical ward or in the mental hospital. These poems are classified as ‘hospital poems’ and the personae in them are all patients and all the events are narrated from their points of view.

The individuals who are the central characters remain almost passive and indifferent and allow themselves to be worked on and shaped by someone else. The objectification of the self, expressing its vulnerability in conjunction with the sordid realities of the hospital world, causes the atmosphere of the poems to be bleak and foreboding. Plath’s characteristic passivity, indifference and consequent regression of the transactional phase, loom large in these poems to make them quite poignant.

The locale of the internal drama in “Face Lift” is a hospital ward and the speaker, a post-operative patient, is recuperating after a plastic surgery. The woman, following the sloughing off her old skin, emerges self-created fresh and innocent:

Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauge,
Pink and smooth as baby.

(CP 156)

“But the face lift seems to be merely a cosmetic illusion, for, it has been achieved without fire and blood of such late poems as “Getting There”, and “Cut” (Jha 67). Hence, the poem is “a kind of tribute assigned to passivity”, as if the old self is just gone for a while to rest (Broe 43). However, according to Caroline King Barnard “Face Lift”, is a poem in which the woman’s face-lift operation sounds very much like suicide, shows clearly, and for the first time the reincarnation image so common in *Ariel*” (68). In this regard, Ted Hughes considers the poem as one of the biggest advances which relates to Plath’s “myth of self-renewal” (CP 291).

Depersonalisation is the central theme of “Insomniac”, where the speaker who suffers from lack of sleep, like the persona of “Suicide Off Egg Rock”, is cursed with too much awareness. He can never shut off into the “no-life” of sleep and the imagined world is totally different from the speaker’s immediate and personal world. “Like Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, who wanted to die, but who wouldn’t go to sleep, the insomniac finds that with constant awareness, things merge, flatten out and ultimately have no meaning” (Annas 67). The state of peacefulness is totally elusive to the insomniac and he could only stimulate such peace temporarily through drug-assisted sleep:

These sugary planets...won for him
A life baptized in no-life for a while,
And the sweet, drugged walking of a forgetful baby.

(CP 164)

“The Surgeon at 2 A.M.” one of Plath’s few poems with a male persona, portrays a surgeon who sees people as objects to be worked upon, perfected, put under his control and created a new. For the tired surgeon the hospital ward is a ghastly garden of bodies through which he strolls like God. Plath here emphasizes the idea that the self trapped in a hospital-world as a

patient is reduced to an “it” bereft of any sense of individuality. In a depersonalized world of mechanized medicine the individual remains passive and indifferent, to be acted upon by the other:

The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful
The body under it is in my hands,
As usual there is no face.

(CP 171)

The tension between the active and passive aspects of the self is portrayed in “In Plaster” and the poem is the record of an attempt of the self to escape into a free world from social constraints. In the poem the external world as represented by the plaster cast, acts as the passive agent while the persona is the active self trying frantically to break through the rigid cast. The plaster mould or the passive side of the self, seems to be an integral part of the speaker in the beginning: “I shall never get out of this” the active self bemoans. However, she secretly plots for revenge which may free her from the passive self:

She may be saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she’ll soon find out that doesn’t matter a bit.

I am collecting my strength; one day I shall manage
without her,
And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to
miss me.

(CP 160)

Thus, the poem moves quite subtly from adoration to submission and then to revenge; it “presents a sensitive seismograph of slowly awakening emotions” (Broe 118). Hence, “In Plaster” is vital in charting out the difference between the poetic self of *The Colossus* who accepts the suffering caused by the fears of different sorts, and the new emerging self who collects strength to fight back. Formally, “In Plaster” heralds Plath’s break with a strict imagistic mode and her discovery of a dissociated speaking voice. The wry irony of “In Plaster” looks...forward to the self-performing spectacles that characterize the *Ariel* poems” (Broe 120).

“Tulips” is another poem which deals with the hospital world where the speaker is a patient recuperating after surgery. The hospital ward, with its white beds and white clad nurses, symbolic of a neutral world bereft of “loving association”. She has receded back to nothingness:

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions
I have given my name and my day-clothes upto the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

(CP 160)

But this passive mindscape of the patient is rudely shaken by the “too excitable” tulips, presumably a gift from the outside hospital world, full of health and vitality. As the speaker has consciously cut herself off from her active identity, this intrusion of the external world in the form of tulip flowers is resented, as she wants to unlook herself from everything and slither down to death – to immobility. The harmonious correspondence between the active external world and the passive self, achieved at the end of the poem is a new achievement in Plath, since the menace of the external world felt in *The Colossus*, is now internalized.

In the transitional phase of her poetry, characterized by a black world of introversion, where the self is portrayed as caught up in the web of uncertainty and passivity, certain aspects of nuptial encumbrances find their expression in some poems. The attitude and condition of the self in

conjunction with family matters like pregnancy, giving birth, and the relationship of mother to infants are the subject of some of her poems like “Heavy Women”, “Magi”, “Love Letter”, “Candles”, “Barren Woman”, and “Metaphors”.

Plath’s treatment of women’s myths, particularly the use of birth as a metaphor, demonstrates her intension of rejecting the former style and giving life to a new approach, which reaches its culmination in her later poetry. In these poems, Plath attempts to mock stereotypes of the way female experience and mentality shape women’s writing. By early 1961, Plath had infact already begun to transform her experience into a highly original style of imagery, connected with her search for a new poetic voice, proper to her as a woman. With respect to this point, Broe in her *Protean Poetic* is able to see the connection:

[Plath] seems to suggest that poetry should be a kind of birthing that, if it does not result in the creation of a definitive new self, at least explores a range of possible expressions for that self. Instead clinging to barren and sedate professions of love, the new poetry should show ripeness, fullness, and the

danger, risk, and turmoil of art; it should create not stammer, in the face of death-art confronting experience. (104)

In “Heavy Women” where Plath discusses the conventional illusions surrounding pregnancy, the classically idealized portrayal of fertility is reduced to a mockery. The underlying tone of the poem is evoked in such descriptions as that of the “beautifully smug “women who, like the famous image of Venus, seen “Pedestaled on a half shell”. The pregnant women are portrayed as complacent and often object-like and Plath mocks the brooding physical contentment of pregnancy through a series of deflating metaphors that employ art history and Christian tradition for their debunking effect:

Over each weighty stomach a face
Floats calm as a moon or a cloud.

Smiling to themselves, they meditate
Devoutly as the Dutch bulb
Forming its twenty petals,
The dark still nurses its secret.

(CP 140)

The poem is an example of Plath's reversal of popular women's Myths which indicates the transformation of her poetic self during the transitional phase. As David John Wood remarks, "The quest for achieving a new identity by the initiation of an original poetic voice naturally requires that the old one must be progressively distanced and ultimately discarded" (31).

In "Barren Woman", set in the small hours of the night, the speaker of the poem sees both the world and herself as blank and empty. The poem describes an internal landscape. The self, isolated, wanders through this landscape, which is littered with the symbols she had previously used in *The Colossus* poems to picture her internal condition. The persona sees herself as an empty museum, where she is faced with a world of stultification and sterility in which her dreams of power and greatness give way to the reality which surrounds her. She can find no possibility of advance or communication in a world where

...the dead injure me with attentions, and nothing can happen

The moon lays a hand on my forehead,

Blank-faced and mum as a nurse.

(CP 157)

In the poem Plath employs a number of images like “White Nike” and “bald-eyed Appollos”, which are basically transitional in nature. Clearly they refer both to classical statues and to a modern series of missiles, like the ‘Nike’ tested in the late 1950s. The image of missiles can suggest a potential power in Plath which can be recognized as obviously linked with her quest for self destruction, the only means through which she can emerge as a new self.

Pamela J. Annas observes:

The movement in “Barren Woman”, then, is from a recognition of emptiness, futility, blindness, and stasis to an imagined possibility of strength, power, activity and purpose....It is also a movement from human creation to human destruction... toward a recognition that her social reality is dominated by patriarchal values and modes of action. (56)

“Candles”, together with “Magi”, is the first in a series of poems about children Plath wrote in her final fruitful years. In this poem, written after she had given birth to her first child, Plath explores the meaning of the idea of family, looking backwards in time at her own origins and speculating on the future of her own daughter. “Candles” in particular, evinces a new gentleness that modifies the stark, nerve-peeled surrealism of other poems of

this period. Centred on the figures of mother and child, the poem has a Renaissance serenity, like a painting by Raphael or Murillo instead of the usual de Chirico or Dali” (Stevenson 199).

The poem which Plath was very fond of, written by candlelight at 2 a.m., while nursing her first child, depicts the reminiscences of her maternal grandparents in Austria, “These recollections are prefaced, however, by the reference to the light of candles that “drag up false Edwardian sentiments”. The past petrified by sentimentality is falsified and sterile” (Bassnett 73). Though the candles have a positive influence on the child, their ephemeral “globes of light” foreshadow a sorry future. The candles weep fruitlessly for the passing of time and the mother contemplating her own child, reflects on how she will be perceived in the future:

The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open
In twenty years I shall be retrograde
As these draughty ephemerids.

(CP 149)

“Magi”, a companion piece to “Candles”, directs attention to the poet’s baby and her superior bodily innocence as compared to the abstracts of philosophy. Plath envisions the ‘Magi’ hovering over the cradle of her baby daughter.

[The Magic] are [not only] the wise men of Christian myth, but also the zoroastrian priests who know the mysteries of the universe, who understand the struggle between the forces of light and dark, good and evil. Theoretical spirits, they have nothing to do with mundane existence. (Bundtzen 41)

Plath as an eager student who had opened her mind to philosophers like Plato at Cambridge, now looks with scorn on such “dull angels” and considers that “these papery god folk”, have nothing to do with her daughter, whose idea of evil is no more substantial than a “belly ache”, nor her idea of ‘Good’, which is “the mother of milk, no theory.”

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
Snow, Chalk, or such like. They’re
The real thing, all right: The Good, The True
Salutary and pure as boiled water,

Loveless as the multiplication table.

(*CP* 147)

In the final section of the poem Plath affirms that since her daughter is a living embodiment of innocence, they can in no way affect her. She scoffs at their mistake and in her final question, “What girl ever flourished in such a company?” implies that a little boy, “a lamp-headed Plato”, not a little girl, might fill their requirements (*CP* 147). The poem though appears slight, strongly reflects Plath’s view of sexual differences. Man’s body is persistently described as stiff and mechanical, flat and two dimensional, and as an instrument or tool to work upon the outside world and other creatures. A female body is weighty, cumbersome and three-dimensional.

These contrary views of male and female extend to her children and consequently she takes such a stance in this poem, which elicited a lot of adverse criticism. It was on this poem that Joyce Carol Oates built a case against Plath’s Romanticism in her famous essay “The Death Throes of Romanticism.” Anne Stevenson puts it:

Joyce Carol Oates accuses Plath on slitting her own throat in this poem, arguing that since language is itself abstract, to

reject the achievements of high culture for the sake of regressive fantasies of Romanticism is tantamount to admitting to herself and to us that she is inferior to her own infant. (199)

Plath's notion of the external world was in no way as romantic as that of William Wordsworth. The benevolent force that rolls through all natural, human, and material entities as experienced and expressed by Wordsworth in his poetry, is totally absent in the order of things in Plath's imaginative world of external realities. To her this order is not benevolent but rigid and paralyzing. Throughout her poetry, early and transitional, Plath gives vent to her experience of the immanence in the external world as essentially alien and hostile to her vulnerable self. Hence she portrays landscapes, seascapes, the animal world, and other human beings as menacing forces which plot together to procure her alienation and estrangement.

Apart from the poems of the transitional phase already brought under detailed discussion a few poems like "Leaving Early", "Widow", and "The Baby Sitters", present character sketches or surrealistic portrayals of personal relationships, expressing the poet's fear, suspicion, or hatred especially of other women. Times without number Plath evaluates all these relationships,

for they are inevitably circumscribed round the intriguing enigma, that is her own self.

The poem “Leaving Early” has as its subject matter the hostility between the “I” of the poet and another unnamed woman. In the poem the furnishings of the other woman’s house become what the speaker sense to be her “friend’s” aggressiveness, hypocrisy and bad taste. Here the reader recognizes that the friend is hated and reviled because the poet really hates herself, because her own sense of identity is so weak that she must fear the other woman’s offer of friendship as a threatening intrusion. Though the poet succeeds in expressing her personal antipathy for the other woman, and the writing of the poem may well have been cathartic for Plath, her irritation, sarcasm, and outrage are not sufficiently objectified. In this regard what Mary Lynn Broe has to say is very pertinent, “In “Leaving Early,” a final poignant question betrays the speaker’s dislocation, her simple fear of going ahead, and her need for some directive” (112):

Lady what am I doing
With a lung full of dust and tongue of wood,
Knee-deep in the cold and Swamped by flowers?

(CP 146)

“Widow” is though, literally a depiction of a wife who has lost her husband, the mental disposition accompanying such a condition is the real focus of the poem. Naturally enough, this disposition is one of loss, incompleteness and utter helplessness. However, the descriptive power of the poem penetrates the real nature of the experience by suggesting that it is equivalent to the spirit when it loses its receptacle, the body, which is quickly consumed as “a sheet of newsprint on the fire.../That will put her heart out like an only eye”. The dead husband leaves devastations behind him. His wife becomes a “dead syllable”, a “shadow thing” and her life constricts to “fusty” remembrances of the “moth face” of her dead husband (*CP* 165).

Finally, echoing Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, the widow fears that the husband’s soul may be searching for her, but failing because she is unable to perceive his “dovelike” form beating against the “pane” of her “gray spiritless room”:

That is the fear she has – the fear
His soul may beat and be beating at her dull sense
Like blue Mary’s angel, dovelike against a pane
Blinded to all but the gray, spiritless room

It looks in on, and must go on looking in on.

(CP 165)

In “Widow” a number of major motifs from the early poems are drawn together and treated with brutal honesty. “Problems with father, sex, love, despair, and frustration melt with the poet’s intense energy and skill to produce, truly, the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel* (Barnard 71).

On the whole, though Sylvia Plath’s poems in general, describe her relationship to nature, to her family, to other women and to death, ultimately, all these relationships centre upon conflicting visions of death. The landscapes and seascapes presented in her poetry provide Plath with the symbolic settings for the initiatory drama of life and death. In Plath’s universe, life always stands opposed to darkness and loss. In her quest for an authentic self, Plath, at every phase of her growth as a poet was aware that death was the only reality through which she could transcend the self.

The result of such a peculiar realization was that, most of her poems in one way or other were either directly connected with death or echoed the ideas of death. As Melander Ingrid puts it, “Any attempt to estimate the total number of poems in which Sylvia Plath is preoccupied with death will

probably fail in accuracy, since several passages, particularly in her late compositions, offer interpretive problems that so far have not been solved” (79). As far as Ted Hughes was concerned, Plath’s excessive obsession with death was deeply rooted in her peculiar temperament. In his “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems”, he writes:

Her elements were extreme: a violent almost demonic spirit in her, opposed a tenderness and capacity to suffer and love things infinitely, which was just as great and far more in evidence. Her stormy, luminous senses assaulted a downright practical intelligence that could probably have dealt with anything. Her vision of death, her muse of death in life and life in death, with its oppressive evidence, fought in her against a joy in life, and in every smallest pleasure, for which her favourite word “ecstasy” was simply accurate, as her poems prove. (88)

Apart from the poems which have death as their theme in *The Colossus*, a number of poems in the transitional phase too, deal explicitly with death, expressing her wish to lose consciousness and the longing to transcend the self. Through poems like “Blackberrying”, “I am Vertical”,

and “Last Words”, Plath covertly and at times overtly hints at the fact that only death can bring her the desired self transformation. Here one is reminded of what Wallace Stevens says in his poem “Sunday Morning”:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. (82)

In “Blackberrying”, which belongs to the poems of Plath’s landscape tradition, nature is forced to assume almost human significance. The poem begins simply as a description of a lane leading down to the sea, bordered by heavily laden blackberry thorns, but all the details of the description are infused by a desperate yet unexplained sense of urgency. Everything is larger than life; the ripe, huge berries, the birds wheeling overhead, the stillness of the afternoon and the regular hooks of the blackberry bushes are menacing to the girl, who moves down the lane towards the sea.

Though at first reading the poem is a superb evocation of a windy, cliff top region, on a closer inspection it invokes the poet’s reluctant hold on life and how a horror of meaninglessness grips her gradually. To escape from the inexorability of such an absurd situation, the presence of the sea is

suggested as a defense mechanism, at the very commencement of the poem. An atmosphere of tension and a sense of foreboding permeate the entire scenario, as the appearance of the sea is delayed till the fag-end of the poem.

Though the sea is ‘the only thing to come to’, finally when the poet finds herself pitted against the open sea, she could recognize it only as a further assault on her precarious sense of identity. The hooks of the blackberries have lured her on to this terrible noisy nothingness:

....A last hook brings me
To the hill’s northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and din like silver smiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

(CP 168)

As David John Wood puts it, “The sea’s blustering bodyguard, the ‘sudden wind’, begins ‘slapping its phantom laundry’ into the speaker’s face, simultaneously slowing her and warning her against continuing the pursuit.... her inadequate human perception is finally incapable of assimilating the relative infinity of the pelagic panorama” (65).

Consequently her urge to become one with the ‘heaving’ sea and thereby to lose consciousness and to transcend the self was totally defeated. Finally, as in many of her transitional poems, when the poet withdraws into her own self, what she confronts is the numbness of death around her. This is one of her Devon poems and according to Anne Stevenson, “Sylvia’s first Devon poems were drenched in death” (228).

In “I am Vertical” the speaker belittles herself by admitting her own meagerness and insignificance in contrast with the immeasurable achievement of nature. She desires to experience an alternative state of being and quests for the “longevity” of a tree and the “daring” of a flower. But the speaker realises that she can never attain such a state of existence while she is alive. The awareness that the state of being vertical causes her estrangement and makes her long for death or a horizontal permanence:

Unknowing I must soon unpetal,
.....
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally;
Then the trees may touch me for once,
And the flowers have time for me.

(CP 163)

The theme of “Last Words” is death and the speaker asserts an attitude of defiance towards human transience. She revolts against the conventional attitudes to the subject and refuses to bow out of life quietly, when the time comes. She describes the coffin and the type burial she desires to have as she feels that death is a ceremony which should be attempted by bravery and beauty. The poet parodies the prospect of extinction in her desire for an extrovert’s burial:

I do not want a plain box, I want a sarcophagus
With tigery stripes, and a face on it
Round as the moon, to stare up.

(CP 172)

The world of the spirit and the emotions threatens her because it is confusing and elusive, but objects and possessions have a comforting solidity. Even after the death of emotion, loved objects will retain their associative power. The entire poem is in a humorous vein and according to David John Wood, “Such humour, far from devaluing the sincerity of the piece, constitutes a vital element of the speaker’s resistance” (70).

Though it is commonly agreed that the twenty eight poems collected in *Crossing the Water* – most of which are discussed in detail above, in conjunction with the issue under consideration – represent Plath’s transitional phase, even some of the poems written during the late period of her poetic career and particularly those collected in *Winter Trees* exhibit essentially “transitional” aspects. The term “transitional” does not pertain strictly only to poems written during a particular period, but the distinction between “transitional” and “late” must be made also on the basis of style and approach.

Such stance entails that the discussion of the transitional poems which, represent an important stage in Sylvia Plath’s poetic development can be made wholesome only by considering at least a few poems in *Winter Trees*, which are strictly transitional in theme, style, approach, and attitude. Plath’s only novel *The Bell Jar*, the most autobiographical and written almost at the middle of her transitional phase, portraying the awkward predicament of a young woman, too requires some attention.

Winter Trees (1971) is the fourth collection of Plath’s poem as regards its date of publication, while on the basis of the date of composition of the poems included therein, the volume is to be placed before *Ariel*. However,

many of the poems are contemporaneous with *Ariel* poems, as they belong to the same period of trouble and tumult in Plath's life. Regarding the selection of the poems for this volume Ted Hughes notes that these poems "are all out of the batch from which the *Ariel* poem were more or less arbitrarily chosen and they were all composed in the last nine months of Sylvia Plath's life" (Winter Trees 7). Again, like her other poetic collections, the British and the American editions of *Winter Trees*, too, differ from each other as regards the number of poems included. Including the verse play "Three Women" the British edition contains nineteen poems where as the American twenty five, the additional six poems in the American edition being "Apprehensions", "An Appearance", "Among the Narcissi", "Event", "Pheasant" and "The Tour". The volume falls clearly into two parts – first the poems and the second, a radio play, "Three Women" completed rather earlier for a BBC broadcast.

As has already been noted, these poems belong to the most turbulent period in Plath's life, marked by tremendous upheavals. The last nine months in which the poems of *Ariel* as well as many of those in *Winter Trees* were written, witnessed Hugheses relationship getting sour, Plath's resultant agony and isolation, leading finally to her suicide in February 1963. As the struggle for survival grew much fiercer in these years, she had to intensify

her quest for a true identity of her own. Commenting on the themes taken up in *Winter Trees*, Damian Grant Writes, “There is ample further evidence of her endless imaginative resource in restatement of her familiar themes, all proceeding, ultimately, from the ‘divided self’, the self which is alienated, oppressed, disembodied, dissolved” (53).

As in the case of the transitional poems already discussed, here too, the external landscapes are internalized, and they become metaphors for the poet’s inner state of mind. In poems like “Apprehensions”, “Lyonnesses”, “Among the Narcissi”, “Childless Woman”, and “Winter Trees”, the scenes of nature and objects are treated as personal symbols to describe the threatened and isolated self. The language, imagery and colours objectify the poet’s state of mind and the strong interests and attitudes reflected in poems are in fact indirect statements of the oppressed woman. Rosenblatt remarks:

The internalization of the natural world; the adoption of private symbolic meanings for red, white, and black, for tree, moon, and sea; the conversion of a positive symbol into an image of death, or vice-versa – all these represent Plath’s desire to fuse the external and internal worlds into a “language” for the self.

(105)

Most of the other poems in this collection also project various threats and fears and the resultant agony of the self. “The Courage of Shutting Up” illustrates Plath’s personal suffering through various objects which troubled her existence in the world. She dissociates the mind from her body and looks at it as an instrument which has recorded all her poignant and painful experiences. The threatened self realizes that the struggle for existence is violently difficult. “Among the Narcissi”, “Thalidomide”, “Event”, and “The Tour” – all evince the vulnerability of the self which is threatened and victimized. In “Thalidomide”, a pervasive feeling of insecurity is conveyed. There are images which express man’s efforts to build up his life and happiness. Yet the poem ends with a reassertion of evil:

The dark fruits resolve and fall
The glass cracks across,
The image
Flees and aborts like dropped mercury.

(CP 252)

“Brasilia” describes the dangers of annihilation while the fear of mechanization is expressed in “An Appearance”. The imprisoned self of the

mother has been contrasted with the child's happy world in poems like "Child" and "For a Fatherless Son". "Stopped Dead", seeks the much-desired rebirth and liberation from her false self by confronting death in an imaginary motor accident. "By Candlelight" expresses her fear of loneliness and despair from the darkness which threatens to overshadow the self. "Childless Woman", portrays a sterile woman who transforms her body into a landscape in order to show her infertility. The title poem "Winter Trees" also presents a contrast between the woman's sterility and the fertility of nature and longs for an identification with trees.

As has already been stated, though these poems stem from Sylvia Plath's "great period" – the last nine months of her turbulent life – they exhibit essentially transitional nature and through them she concentrates on an intense personal psychic exploration of the invidious image of the woman. They reveal a woman undergoing the sexual and mental experience of brutality and they are a medium to express a woman's cultural alienation. But as the characteristic poetic control of the transitional phase masters the atmosphere, the external conflicts are internalized and a tendency of regression to aggression is preferred.

However, this is not true of the entire collection, as some of the poems, as in the *Ariel* collection, “since they burn with the same central passion to destroy the old ego and create a new self, to undergo death and rebirth, to enter the lives of animals, plants, or inanimate objects so as to transcend one’s humanity” (Perloff 140). In poems like “The Rabbit Catcher” and “Purdah” the dominant emotion is that of revolt against male-domination and overtly lodges a scathing attack on institutionalized form of marriage, a kind of a ‘Catch-22’ situation, where a woman is entrapped, enslaved, oppressed, and victimized.

Here she does not maintain any relation to tradition and her energetic pursuits are realized as she picks up poetic contents which are independent of any constrictions. These poems aim at the daring attempt to achieve an individual voice that reflects her as a representative figure, captured in a situation of the prevailing despair. They break with tradition and move towards a poetic strength, performing a purgative function of free association of the mental with a new voice.

Poems of this nature in *Winter Trees* where Plath for the first time hurls open defiance at every form of oppression, the fullest expression of it is the sole concern of *Ariel* – will fall under discussion in the final section,

where Plath emerges out with a clear voice, with full of discernible feminist undertones and overtones. The writing in the late poems excludes a sense of feverish necessity whose motivation is, as Stephen Spender observes, “Pure need of expression” (53). Indeed in such a crucial phase there is little search for new meaning and no self-pity whatever and Plath herself announces there that, “The Blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it” (CP 269).

As has been already stated, the role of a mother in the process of her quest for a new voice is quite consoling to Plath – of course, no less vulnerable. Though opposed to conventional marriage, she accepts motherhood as a life-giving reality, and gives a special importance to the maternal world, as meaningful life takes place there. The birth of a child is a sense of fulfilment to her as extension of herself provides relief in the face of all external threats. As she realizes that all other relationships are oppressive and promotes alienation, she shrinks from everything else deliberately and produces great poetry on the basis of her maternal experience. The most expressive poem of this nature, written in her transitional phase is *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices*.

In *Three Women*, a radio play in verse written for the BBC broadcast, Plath explores a wide range of conventional and unconventional attitude

towards motherhood in the characters of a “perfect” Wife who gives birth to and keeps her boy, a Secretary who miscarries and an unmarried Girl who gives birth to a daughter, whom she gives up for adoption. Hence the poem deals with “threatened and vulnerable identities of women experiencing child birth” (Rosenblatt 112). The voice of the wife is expressive of the normal attitude, for her the expectation of delivering a child is a “great event” she feels herself like “a seed about to break” (*CP* 180). But she is also aware of “Its cargo of agony” – the labour pain, and is quite apprehensive of the “calm before something awful” (*CP* 180). But almost immediately she is “reassured” and “simple again”, ready to accept an ordinary child whom she assures that he can grow up freely and can “Marry what he wants and where he will” (*CP* 186).

The calm portrayal of the Wife is soon threatened by the aggression of the second voice, the Secretary, who is apprehensive of the death of her unborn baby. For her abortion means to become flat like men and she considers flatness the source of all misery on earth. Hence, she is passionately hostile toward men:

They were so flat!

There was something about them like cardboard,

and now I had caught it,
That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions
Bulldozers, guillotines white chambers of
shrieks proceed.

(CP 176)

For the Secretary, the issue of gender boils down to just one concern which is women's fertility versus men's sterility and she feels that her entire identity as a woman has been destroyed when she miscarries. Her depression increasingly condemns herself for being like men, flat and sterile, "Idie. I make a death" (CP 181). Yet, she has some consolation and hope that her husband would love her even through the "blur" of her "deformity". The poem ends with the faint glimmer of her optimism. "The little grasses/Crack through stone, and they are green with life" (CP 187).

While both, the Wife and the Secretary have accepted their motherhood happily, the Girl always accentuates the negative and threatening aspects of child birth. The Girl abandons her daughter, attempting to put behind her the awful memory of conception and childbirth. But her effort to deny motherhood only makes her feel intensely sterile and

empty, a feeling that is common to all the women at different stages of their lives:

There is an emptiness.
I am so vulnerable suddenly.
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers
like bandages: I go

(CP 184)

In *Three Women* Plath explores sensitively the emotional fluctuations of each character, heightening the intensity of each one's view point by juxtaposing all three effectively. Though it is around the 'mother-earth' figure represented by the first voice, that the doubts and apprehensions of the other two revolve, it is possible to see the three women as aspects of just one woman, as the experiences which they represent – successful motherhood, the death of a foetus and separation from a child by adoption, respectively – are all universal enough to relate to any woman. The dominant mood of the poem is one of apprehension and a sense of ambivalence – the conflicting feeling of women towards their femininity.

However, Plath links her ambivalence to her large view of the world as ruled by a male deity struggling to embody his spirit in a “mega machine”. The entire imagery of the poem, especially the girl’s “small, mean, black” world and the secretary’s flat, cold, abstract world, should remind one, of all those poems of the transitional phase where Plath is not explicitly speaking in a woman’s voice but simply confronting the “black, intractable mind” of nature, history and society (*CP* 181). Plath’s primary concern in the poem seems to assess the nature of the society in which she lives and to see the possibilities of coming to terms with the necessary involvement of the individual creative woman in her society. The conclusions she arrives at are not optimistic as the mid-twentieth-century corporate bureaucracy undercuts the creative possibilities of the self.

In the poem the Secretary’s bureaucratic, machine-dominated world populated by cardboard people most closely represents the social world of Plath. In such a world, real and sustained creativity is almost impossible. Such consciousness makes the poet at times quite aggressive, and an inkling of it is found in the poem when the Girl grinds her teeth contemplating feticide: “I should have murdered this, that murders me” (*CP* 180), and when the secretary expresses her murderous rage:

Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.

Eat then, eat them, eat them in the end.

(CP 181)

However, all three women survive by choosing, blindness in varying degrees, from the Wife's almost total retreat into a nursery world of illusion through the Girl's abdication of responsibility to the Secretary's conscious decision to be numbed with resignation. "What *Three Women* finally says is that one can no longer be a heroine of the central and the real, merely a heroine of the peripheral" (Annas 92). But the ambivalence with which the poem ends is just a prelude to many of the poems collected in *Ariel*, which move beyond ambivalence to a bitter satire which uses the socially based and gender related structures of imagery to define her own personal situation. Truly, the ambivalent nature of *Three Women* makes it a significant representative poem of Plath's transitional phase.

During the middle months of 1961 and early 1962, a period both of a great personal difficulty and great creative productivity, sacrificing the production of her poetry, Plath worked on her only autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. Even as she wrote it, Plath might have sensed the shock its

appearance in print might cause those people whom she had adapted to her fictional use, that she cautioned her brother in a letter thus: “This is a secret; it is a pot-boiler and no one must read it!” (LH 742). In January, 1963, the novel was published in England under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. “Although it is less often treated as a novel, when it is, critics often type *The Bell Jar* as an adolescent crisis narrative in the style and mood of Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*” (Bundtzan 109).

Recording a period of confusion, disintegration, and renewal in the life of its protagonist and narrator, Esther Greenwood, the novel draws its materials primarily from the time of Sylvia Plath’s *Mademoiselle* guest editorship in summer of 1953, through her subsequent breakdown and attempted suicide, to the time when, sufficiently rehabilitated, she returned to Smith College. The novel no doubt represents an attempt on Plath’s part to place these turbulent months in mature perspective, looking back at her own young and sensitive self from her transitional phase as a writer.

Despite its frantic pace of progress, the novel still exhibits a high degree of control and very significantly from the view point of this study, an inseparable link with her poetic concerns and their expressions. *The Bell Jar*, far from working independently of poetic process, actually extends and

develops it. The main concern here too, as in the poems of the transitional period, to depict her own personal struggle for release from the pressures imposed on her by society.

The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, through out the novel is harried and haunted because of a very fragile and vulnerable self. She is an unwilling captive of her background and conditioning; external familial and social pressures war with her natural instincts and her level of self-confidence is far too low for those instincts to assert themselves sufficiently. The discussion here does not probe deeply into the intricacies of the incidents presented in the text, but confines itself to only a few deliberations regarding Plath's attitude to a woman's place in the society, particularly in conjunction with man.

In the novel, the heroine's naïve expectations of sex and marriage are thoroughly conditioned by her mother and others. According to them, to be acceptable as a wife she must remain a virgin, and after marriage she must assume a submissive domestic role. Instinctively she rebels against these notions, partly because she naturally senses their limitations, and partly because she discovers that men are not bound by similar premarital rules. "I couldn't stand that idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a

man being able to have a double life..." (BJ 90). The confusion thereby produced is extreme.

For the nineteen-year-old protagonist, "pureness" becomes a "great issue" (BJ 90), and because she does not want "infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from" (BJ 92), as advocated by Buddy Willard her fiance and his mother, she decided that she should never marry. When she recognizes that "the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't," she resolves to cross "the boundary line" (BJ 90). Yet her conditioning remains a powerful influence; she can be comfortable with neither alternative.

Indeed, Esther finds it impossible to pursue either alternative in even a remotely satisfying way. "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't...and this made me even sadder and more tired" (BJ 32). This depression, caused by immobility baffles and frustrates her and indeed she is trapped within the stifling confines of the bell jar. Unable to establish and nurture a self-identity, she is reduced to act according to the expectations of others. This in

turn makes her lose touch with her own true self and the result is further loss of confidence and growing disorientation.

The result of her role-playing makes her feel placed in an increasingly defensive position, for in responding to the expectations of others, she allows herself to be constantly acted upon. She comes, therefore, to see her environment as increasingly hostile and threatening. Things accost her and people menace her. The bell jar effect progressively alters her normal vision and her capacity to appreciate men and women; her deprecation becomes “purely uni-dimensional” (Butscher 308). All women in her life, with the single exception of Doctor Nolan are, “dolls, zombies, and mannequins” (Bundtzan 127).

Men especially threaten her; their reality always fails her expectation. They are either hypocrites like Buddy Willard, or violently selfish like Marco, or sexually cold like Costantin and Erick, or crude and cruel like Irwin. From her experience with Buddy, she knows that as “flawless” as men may seem “off in the distance”, they would not “do at all” when they “moved closer” (*BJ* 92). Hence, marriage is impossible for Esther, since she knows that any man would require that his wife becomes a domestic drudge, “being brain washed” and becoming “a slave in some, private, totalitarian

state” (*BJ* 89). Even sex terrifies her and Esther’s description of Buddy’s sexual organ is particularly devastating and dehumanizing, “The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards” (*BJ* 75).

It is in this frame of mind which the Rosenberg motif in the novel illuminates. Like the Rosenbergs electrocuted, Esther feels powerless and victimized, threatened and judged by everyone and everything. Placed in such a precarious emotional position by her insecurity and disorientation, the embattled Esther finds it more and more difficult to connect her inner self with outer reality. She feels as though she is “being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out” (*BJ* 144). The glass walls of the bell jar permit only tantalizing, often distorted visual contact between inside and outside and the interior environment not only isolates; it stifles. “The air in the bell jar waddled round me and I couldn’t stir” (*BJ* 210).

Total withdrawal becomes Esther’s only course of action. “To the person in the bell jar... the world itself is the bad dream” (*BJ* 267). To restore herself to a state of simple purity, she must destroy or dissolve all the evidences of the present “bad dream”. It is this kind of action which Plath employs also in the imagery of many of her last poems, where release from oppression is often expressed in terms of death, purification, and rebirth.

Finally Esther attempts suicide as it represents for her a total withdrawal to the “pure” and “sweet” condition of infancy (*BJ* 22). Though she fails and is hospitalized, under the psychiatric treatment of the sensitive Dr. Nolan, Esther slowly constructs for herself a new and better integrated personality.

Slowly Esther grows to understand the futility of building her identity on the expectations of others. She achieves sufficient perspective to see that her struggle against the tyranny of customs and expectations is not hers alone, but is generally characteristic of human condition. The bell jar has now been raised, it now hangs, “suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (*BJ* 242). Several other events herald Esther’s emergence from the stifling confines of the bell jar. Her friend Joan’s burial signifies an aspect of Esther’s new freedom, for what she buries at Joan’s funeral is a part of her old captive self. The burial is equivalent to the healing of the wounds in Esther’s identity. “I took a deep breath, and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am” (*BJ* 198-199).

The protagonist is no longer a sexual victim, even though her fear of marriage persists, she comes to terms with her sexual identity. Casting aside the bandishments of her mother and Mrs. Willard, she sheds her virginity which has been such an intolerable psychological burden to her old self, and

narrates the particulars of her tryst with Irwin, on whom she practises her “new, normal personality” (*BJ* 254). Thus renewed, the heroine avails her dismissal from the hospital. She has been as she puts it, “born twice – patched, rethreaded and approved for the road” (*BJ* 275).

However, an atmosphere of uncertainty pervades toward the end as the fear of the bell jar is simply “suspended”, and like the persona of the transitional poem “Poem for a Birthday”, Esther is as good as new, but not completely new. Esther, the narrator-character is quite apprehensive of future: “But I wasn’t sure. I was not sure at all. How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions wouldn’t descend again?” (*BJ* 271). The voice that emerges in this question is that of Esther’s autobiographical author, for whom the prognosis is dark and future is still quite bleak.

In her only novel, given its final shape in the transitional phase of her career as a writer – the most demanding and disturbing period in her personal life – Plath, using the young protagonist as her mouth-piece, lodges a scathing attack on the conventional notion of marriage, the orthodox sense of female virginity and the double standards of morality as practised by men. Hence, the indignation and angry outbursts of the protagonist should be

viewed as a sign of Plath's new attempt at artistic independence in the final months of her life. She unburdens herself of a male god at the centre of her universe and also frees her from the restraints on her imagination. In speculating on the psyche of the woman writer, Adrienne Rich notes:

It strikes me that in the work of [Sylvia Plath] man appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of fascination is simply, Man's power – to dominate, tyrannize, choose or reject the woman. The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him. And in the work...it is finally the woman's sense of *herself* – embattled, possessed – that give the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy. (36)

It is not in her anger for men but in the artistic expression of it that she finds a new awareness of her distinctively feminine – “fertile” and “life-giving-creative energies. Further, Plath's attempt “to free myself from the past” is an ample evidence of the indication that she will not be dominated by images of femininity other than by her own concept of a true woman liberated from all forces of oppression. It could be safely concluded that

though the text as Plath cautioned, is a pot-boiler, when the ingredients do really boil, what emanates is definitely a feminist tang. However, the novel does not surpass the “terrible resurgence of *Ariel*” (Ellman 221).

To wind up the discourse, it could be stated that as in her transitional poetry, the “pervasive sourness of the novel also show that past feelings have not been mastered so much as spewed forth” (Bundtzen 110-111). As she feared, the bell jar did “descend again” and only a few days after its publication Plath attempted suicide a third and final time.

However, by then breaking forth all the shackles of influence, Plath had already achieved her poetic transformation, a voice proper to her own potentiality as a writer. The predominant nature of the newly acquired voice was that of a powerful female writer with a distinctive feminist tone, proclaiming anathema to every trait of female oppression and subjugation. The remaining portion of this study tries to assess the nature of such a voice.

CHAPTER – V

Revisionist Myth Making:

Sylvia Plath's Break with Tradition

If you want to be a top-notch,

You have to break with everyone.

You have to show up your own father.

– F. Scott Fitzgerald

The early burden of almost all poets is quest for voice, a unique voice proper to their own potentiality. Such venture, at each step is characterized by painful awareness of the existence of external forces, which exert inexorable pressure on the poet initiator. The most excruciating existential angst which haunts a poet from the moment of his initiation into creative process – a torture that continues till the crucial juncture of his liberation, if at all possible – is the awareness to wrestle with and live constantly in the shadow of a strong precursor. As Emily Dickinson once sang:

I rose – because He sank –

I thought it would be opposite –

(*Poem 616*)

The aesthetic and metaphysical implications of the central fact of literary history, that writers assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors, have been discussed in details by theorists as diverse as T.S. Eliot, M.H. Abrams, Erich Auerbach, and Frank Kermode. However, in the 70s, some of them have begun to explore, what might be called the psychology of literary history. They embarked upon the task of assessing the tensions and anxieties, hostilities and inadequacies writers feel when they confront not only the achievements of their predecessors but the traditions of genre, style and metaphor that they inherit from such “forefathers”. Increasingly, these critics study the way in which, as the distinguished Yale critic J. Hillis Miller has put it, a literary text “is inhabited... by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts” (16).

Before the attempt of an examination of the dynamics of literary history, however, it would be highly profitable to consider for an instant, the nature of female authorship itself as projected especially by post-modern feminism. The woman writer’s stance is continually at odds with that of the male writer and the former is always evaluated in terms of the latter. This

tendency is inevitable, and the reason is not far to seek. There is an implicit assumption among writers and critics throughout the world that authorship is, by definition, male. Such an assumption is deeply rooted in patriarchal culture. This is best brought out by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's observation:

In patriarchal Western culture...the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pens power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity, to which he lays claims, as, in Said's paraphrase of Partridge, "an increaser and thus a founder." In this respect, the pen is truly mightier than its phallic counterpart the sword, and the patriarchy more resonantly sexual. (64)

In such a situation, a woman writer's position is rather precarious. She knows that the male has appropriated the privilege, and authority, not only of aesthetic creation but of language itself, and she knows that she "lacks" the phallic power to face male dominance head-on. This inturn, creates in her awareness of the impossibility of self-assertion, which conflicts

with a basic impulse concerning the necessity of self-definition. This is what Susanne Juhasz has qualified as the anxiety of the “double bind” experienced by the woman writer. She remarks:

Since poets in Western Society are traditionally white and male, a person who is black, or brown, or female, of necessity brings qualities different from the norm to the poetry that she or he makes. How, then, to succeed as a “good” poet? If the woman poet “writes like a man,” she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial (3)

Grilbert and Gubar state this problem with even greater simplicity: “for a woman-artist is, after all, a woman – that is her ‘problem’ – and if she denies her own gender, she inevitably confronts an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she is trying to surmount” (66).

When this “double bind” is considered as an operational element in female writing, it has far-reaching consequences. The most important of these is the way it impinges on women’s language which tends to vacillate between two worlds – the patriarchal world of man-made language and man-

made literary conventions, and the dream-world of a pure feminine language and pure feminine literary conventions. The former is as yet too powerful a world to be fully escaped, and the latter is as yet an ill-defined, and shadowy landscape of desire, though by no means insignificant. Thus the vacillation continues, and it leaves its imprint on the literary text, especially at the initial phase of the career of a writer.

The Western literary history or literary criticism is overwhelmingly male or more accurately, patriarchal and it assumes that authorship is exclusively male. It is only with the advent of feminist criticism at the fag-end of the twentieth century that an alternative view has begun to gain ground. However, the first and foremost student who analyses and explains literary history with an explicit contention that authorship is by definition male has been Harold Bloom. In a series of critical assumptions, applying Freudian structures of “family romance” to literary genealogies, Bloom has postulated that the dynamics of literary history arises from an artist’s “anxiety of influence”, his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. As he puts it, “Poetic history... is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history

by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (*Anxiety* 5).

Thus Bloom propounds the thesis that each great poet struggles with and overpowers a literary father or rather, a strong poet engages in a heroic warfare with his precursor in order to overcome the anxiety influence from the past and to create a space for his own art. Bloom states it thus, “My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to death” (5). The mantle of the great poet is not passed on in an unbroken line of benevolent fathers and dutiful sons, though Bloom’s paradigm of the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father and son, specifically that relationship as it was defined by Freud.

The great poet becomes autonomous, self-propagating father to himself, only through a willful misreading of the father’s work – a “killing” of the poet-fathers by their sons. Hence the patriarchal tradition in lyric poetry is a history of Oedipal strife, where a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father. According to Bloom even Milton, “with all his strength” had to struggle with a major precursor in Spenser and Coleridge had to be an “ephebe” (the poetic son) of Milton” and later of

Wordsworth (11). Every strong poet had to suffer such an experience, except Shakespeare, who “belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness” (11). Above all, it is in the field of poetry which is more subjective than dramatic form, that “the shadow cast by the precursors has become more dominant” (11).

In this “battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the cross-roads”, Bloom empowers the latter with certain literary tools, with which he can effectively invalidate his poetic father (11). These he calls “revisionary ratios” and they are six in number, viz., *Clinamen* (a swerving away in a new direction), *Tessera* (the antithetical completion of the parent-poem), *Kenosis* (an emptying-out or discontinuity with the precursor), *Daemonization* (a movement towards personalized counter-subline), *Askesis* (A movement of self-purgation, an attainment of a state of solitude) and *Apophrades* (the return of the dead – the precursor’s characteristic work appears to be written by the later poet), (14-16).

Bloom’s historical construct, though useful as it helps to identify and define the psychosexual context in which so much Western literature was authored, it is intensely male oriented and exclusively patriarchal. For this

reason it has seemed offensively sexist to some feminist critics and they have reacted to this theory based on Freud's notion of "Family Romance" rather vehemently, and some of them have tried to adapt it to accommodate the female writer's situation also. The chief exponents of this view are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who have rightly pointed out that Bloom's reversionary model is basically male-centred and it cannot adequately represent the anxieties of female writers. They voice their apprehensions thus:

Where does a woman writer "fit in" to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom describes? – we find we have to answer that a woman writer does not "fit in". At first glance, indeed she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider.... Bloom's male-oriented theory of the "anxiety of influence" cannot be simply reversed or inverted in order to account for the situation of the woman writer. (48)

According to them a female poet does not experience the "anxiety of influence" in the same way as her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male

and therefore significantly different from her. Hence, they offer their own reading of poetic anxiety – with reference to women writers – as follows:

The ‘anxiety of influence’ that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary ‘anxiety of authorship’ – a radical fear that she can not create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. (48-49)

This is, of course, equivalent to Susanne Juhasz’s point about the impossibility of self-assertion of women as writers.

Betsy Erkkila goes a step further and calls into question both Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” and Gilbert and Gubar’s “anxiety of authorship.” According to her, American women poets experience neither of these anxieties; “rather in returning to their poetic mothers, they experience a release from anxiety” (544). Hence, the attempt to radically transform the paradigms within which criticism has to think and function, and to invent new theoretical frameworks that go beyond patriarchal myths and perceptions, are thus a vital phenomenon in literary studies, and it highlights and exposes the hitherto male-centred definitions and perceptions of

literature and criticism. Feminist criticism, however, has no strict homogeneity and there are multitude of voices in the critical firmament. Some women critics go to the extend of even questioning the validity of talking about a 'female voice' at all. Such dissenting voices apart, it is undeniable that feminist criticism has succeeded in bringing to light certain important considerations in literary discourse that have been almost ignored. And the question of female authorship and allied anxieties connected with it is one such consideration.

From this brief outline of Bloomian poetics and its consequent reaction from feminist critical perspective, one can safely assume that the relation of the woman poet to a tradition defined by masculine conflict is very different from that of her male counterparts. The woman author experiences an "anxiety of authorship", according to Gilbert and Guibar, which is more crippling than the 'anxiety of influence'. From the moment a woman dares to pick up the pen, she is threatened with madness, loss of her feminine identity. She also has to suffer various forms of punishment like imprisonment, death, social ostracism, and loss of love. Hence as Gilbert and Gubar argue that, it is not the anxiety of literary influence, so much as the anxieties experienced by a growing up female writer in the course of her career to become a mature woman to assert herself as a creator.

The present chapter is concerned primarily with the anxieties experienced by Sylvia Plath, in her quest for an independent voice. The analysis of these literary influences will in turn reveal the anxieties of authorship she experienced. Her literary firmament at the initial phase was crowded by a multitude of male and female precursors. Hence, her search for a voice began with a scurry among many voices and it was more complicated and less paradigmatic. Since her gift for poetic mimicry was always exceptional, she never accepted any voice as a perfect model and at last, as the first poem in her first volume prematurely announces, “Come[s] clear of the shadow” (*CP* 126), etching a wholly original voice deep into the landscape of the contemporary poetry. The final voice is essentially feminist in tone.

The development of Plath’s literary identity was interlaced with her conflicted relations with the male writers of the canon, whom she regarded as highly powerful, like her biological father. At times she viewed them as protecting geniuses or spiritual company. For instance, in the last months of her life, while living in Yeat’s flat in London, she felt that, he was blessing her (*LH* 477-80). More often, however, she thought of them as threats and even as women-haters, just as Elizabeth Greenwood claimed that, “women-

haters were like gods; invulnerable and chock full of power, who descended and disappeared: You could never catch one” (*BJ* 127).

Thus Plath regarded her male forerunners with confused mixture of admiration, awe, fear, and resentment. She felt torn between a worshiping attitude and a defiant reaction, between sacrificing herself to the poetic gods and attempting to curtail their authority. Although she eagerly read male writers and modelled her writing on theirs, often she felt that she was eclipsed by the shadow of these powerful ones, as they seemed to obstruct rather than foster her aspirations. Hence, on the one hand she believed that she needed to read what influenced her writing, but on the other she found that too much blind worship of these modern poets made her feel, “stifled, weak, pallid, mealy mouthed and utterly absurd” (*J* 32). Among the host of male precursors whose works formulated a crucial aspect of Plath’s own self, a few of them need special consideration. Hence, the following account is a cursory consideration of the literary influences exerted on Plath by a few writers of male tradition, viz., Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, William Butler Yeats, Theodore Roethke., and Robert Lowell.

This is by no means to dismiss the presence in her work of other borrowings, nor to set up the male writers mentioned as a sacred quartet.

Other poets like W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Ted Hughes, John Berryman, Cummings and even William Shakespeare were important to Plath and she in fact echoed them at one phase or another during her poetic career. However, these echoes were not central her search for a voice of her own. The relationship between, these poets and Plath was just external and casual and as she could not draw usefully on the emotional resonances of their voices, her mind's ear led her away from such cadences. Hence the major voices which influenced Plath are as mentioned above.

A close reading of Plath's first mature collection of poems, *The Colossus* makes one immediately aware of the fact that almost no poem in the collection does not utter indebtedness. The person to whom she is predominantly indebted at this stage is none other than Dylan Thomas. Describing his influences on *The Colossus*, Gary Lane states thus:

Dylan Thomas is the vocal colossus of *The Colossus*, the father poet whose virtual suicide corresponds in a curious way to needless death of Otto Plath. It is Thomas's rhetorical surf of assonance, of chinking consonants, of syntactic swells, that we hear throughout the early poems. (120)

Perhaps the poem which betrays the influence of Dylan Thomas most in *The Colossus* may be “Hard Castle Crags”. Mimicking perfectly the condition of the “Windy Boy” in Thomas “Lament”, (194), Plath Wrote thus in her poem:

The long wind, paring her person down
To a pinch of flame, blew its burdened whistle
In the whorl of her ear, and like a scooped-out
pumpkin crown
Her head cupped the babel.

(CP 63)

The threat of the alien nature in the poem is as much a veil as is its borrowed voice, and what could be seen behind the putative subject of the poem, is the struggle of the poet herself to escape the “Loom[ing]... antique world” of poetic inheritance.

For Plath, the sublimity or gigantism of Thomas is a scale commensurate to the greatness of her need, especially during the period of her ‘Colossus poems’. Later, maturing as a poet, she would mould her own mask and through its mouth-hole pour like plasma the intensities of her feelings. She is drawn to his grandness, never to his modesties and as a

romantic overreacher, she embraces Thomas' "After the Funeral" rather than "Poem in October." One of Plath's early poems, "Maudhin" is a perfect demonstration of how the grandness of Thomas' voice influenced her.

Thomas' voice has also the advantage for Plath of its character. He is at heart an elegist, in poignant mourning for the lost Eden of Fern Hill, presexuality, and deathlessness. Plath, too, is an adult whose grieving child cries within, and Thomas' sensuous cadence echoes her longing for a place and a time gone out of mind. To feel how Plath's anxious nostalgia merges with Thomas', it is enough to hold "The Eye-mote" or "Oceane 1212-W" against "Fern Hill" or "Poem in October." Both of them portray their bitter feelings as adults who know they cannot go home, both beat nonetheless upon the door. Yet for Thomas the expulsion is general, natural and inevitable; for Plath it is narrowly specified, a personal injustice: "My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth" (*JP* 124). Thus Thomas' elegiac swell has a general nature, while Plath's appropriation of him, like the past that she envisions, has a dead end.

Dylan Thomas' influence did not die in Plath's poetry even when her poems did move inland, away from the crashing periodicities of rhetoric. Thomas as father poet influenced Plath from her earliest published poems to somewhere around 1959, when she commenced composing the serious poems of *The Colossus*. Inland, Plath encountered Theodore Roethke and Wallace Stevens, and for some time their voices, too, propped up her poems.

Plath knew Theodore Roethke personally and apprenticed herself to his work. Plath, who believed in signals and omens, would have been struck by the similarities between Roethke's life and her own. Their fathers, Otto Roethke and Otto Plath, were born in Pomeranian towns, less than one hundred miles from each other and came to America as children. The death of their fathers during their childhood was the most traumatic event in the lives of Roethke and Plath. Both felt guilty as well as loss, suffered mental breakdowns and endured electric shock treatments. Both portrayed their fathers as God-like figures and absorbed the symbols of their fathers' work – the greenhouse and the beehive – into their poetic vision.

Ted Hughes has pointed out that Plath began her close and sympathetic study of Roethke when isolated at Yaddo in the autumn of 1959

and that the series ending *The Colossus*, “Poem for a Birthday,” was the result:

She had always responded strongly to Theodore Roethke’s poems, but it was only at Yaddo, in October, that she realized how he could help her. The sequences began as a deliberate Roethike pastiche, a series of exercises which would be light and throwaway to begin with, but might lead to something else.... the result was a series of pieces, each a monologue of some character in an underground, primitive dream. STONES was the last of them, and the only one not obviously influenced by Roethke. It is full of specific details of her experience in mental hospital, and it is clearly the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel*. (192)

In effect, Hughes admits that Roethke is behind the voice that produced *Ariel*, Plath’s most acclaimed work. Plath’s *Journals* confirm Hughes’ statement about Roethke’s influence. Just before her birthday, on October 27, she adopted Roethke’s greenhouse imagery and began to write a sequence of seven poems – on her breakdown, suicide attempt, and confinement in a mental institution – which expressed for the first time, the

distinct voice of *Ariel*. As she puts it, “Yesterday: an exercise began, in grimness, turning into a fine, new thing: first of series of madhouse poems. October in the toolshed. Roethke’s influence yet mine” (J 323).

Plath adopted Roethke’s short lines, bumpy cadence and fragmented language as well as his concern for creatures victimized by the cruelty of nature. In an interview about her idea of poetic language and rhythms with *London Magazine* in 1962, using Lowell and Roethke to exemplify craftsmanship, she declared:

The poets I delight in are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing. Their finest poems seem born all-of-a piece, not put together by hand: certain poems in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, for instance, Theodore Roethke’s greenhouse poems. (46)

In 1959 Lowell’s *Life Studies* and Roethke’s children’s poems in *Words for the Wind*, propelled Plath in the direction of her greatest work.

Marjorie Perloff has demonstrated with parallel passages, how in “Pomes for a Birthday” Plath “perfectly assumes [Roethke’s] voice, his

image patterns and his aphorisms” (169). Margaret Uroff has noted Roethk’s influence on two other Plath poems written at Yaddo: “Mushrooms” and “The Burnt-out Spa”, and she concludes that Roethke had a technical and thematic impact on Plath whose temperament was quite different and response to nature more guarded:

His association of the human and natural world, his search for his own identity through this association, the uncertainty and vulnerability he admits, as well as his poetic confrontation of his own insanity – all these attitudes and interests find expression in Plath’s poem.... She took from Roethke’s poetry certain images, rhythms, and general idea of how she might handle madness as a subject for poems; but ‘Poem for a Birthday’ shares neither Roethke’s participation in nature nor his driving sincerity and openness. (116, 120)

Plath’s fellow poets were quick to notice Roethke’s influence on her poetry. Anne Sexton, a friend whose work was often linked with Plath’s said:

I remember writing to Sylvia in England after the *The Colossus* came out and saying something like... ‘if you’re not careful,

Sylvia, you will out-Roethke Roethke', and she replied that I had guessed accurately and that he had been a strong influence on her work.... No doubt of it – at the end, Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out with the image – ridden darer, Roethke. (178)

Another extremist poet, W.D. Snodgrass, who had been a student of both Lowell and Jarell, was of the firm belief that Roethke's influence might have reached Plath indirectly, through Ted Hughes, who often dealt with the same subject matter that Roethke took up.

However, after Plath's return to England, Roethke's influence reduced. She met him once in London and wrote to her mother thus", Ted and I went to a little party last night to meet the American poet I admire next to Robert Lowell – Ted Roethke. I've always wanted to meet him, as I find he is my influence" (*LH* 407). But Roethke was more impressed with Hughes than with her. Nevertheless, her poetry continued to allude to his in its imagery of shadow, echoes, trees, stone, moon, and papery feelings. Steven Gould Axelrod puts it:

The tree caught by the moon in Roethke's "All the Earth, All the Air" and "Meditations of an Old Woman" reappear in Plath's "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "Elm"; the breathing red flowers in "The Lost Son" recur in "Tulips" and "Poppies in July"; the "Shadows" that "start from my own feet" in "The Surly One", return as "a shadow starting from my feet" in "Three Women"; ... and the "fixed stars" in "Her Becoming" remains "fixed stars" in "Words". (64)

Yet when Plath spoke of Roethke, she never depicted him as a domestic poet and as Anne Sexton opined, at the final phase of her poetic career, Plath deliberately broke away from Roethke's influence, as she knew that, "the poetry is the therapy for the poet, that is, the poetry must eventually satisfy the poet's own sense of identity within the world" (Harry Williams 189). Hence, in her journey out of the self, Plath comes to the recognition that there are no pursuing forms, no more idols, only the harsh world to confront.

The elegant, gaudy, and aesthetically cool voice of Wallace Stevens is the most careful of the modulations in the chamber of *The Colossus*. At the first phase of her mature poetry Plath borrows Stevens' poetic diction, mainly because its elegant, portly resonances suggest a mind that takes calm

stock of itself, an idea of order. Not only his diction, but also she pursues his philosophical subject matter for the same reason. Stevens was a man deeply threatened by emotional fragmentation; yet in the gorgeous play of the mind in poetry, he protected himself from the domination of black. Plath's poems face the same fear and her early adoptive poetics found in Stevens a useful weapon.

Though Stevens was not as influential on Plath as Theodore Roethke, she borrowed and adapted his linguistic tricks, images, tonal variations, and significant uses of phrases. The first early poem of Plath which explicitly demonstrates the influence of Stevens is "Night Shift", which exemplifies both fear and the defense. Gary Lane comments, "Indebted to Stevens' "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself", whose plot and language it echoes, the poem presents an escape from solipsism, a shaky but apparent salubrious recognition that there is a reality external to the self" (124). Plath's debt to the poem is considerable as it opened before her a new knowledge of reality. She masterfully seizes the esoteric aspects of Stevens' poem of the mind and orders her own chaos from its strategies.

Another aspect of Stevens' influence lies in his endless exploration of poetry as subject in his devotion to the relationship between creative

imagination and the world. Plath, too, thought constantly about that relationship – it is the subject of “Mad Girl’s Love Song”, one of her first published poems, and “Words”, her last – and she found in Stevens a model whose strategies she could usefully appropriate. In her concern for the poet in a dry spell as voiced in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather”, Plath echoes Stevens’ following lines from “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad”:

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know (51).

Her “A Winter Ship”, composed at Yaddo in 1959, during her first pregnancy and just before the final move to England seems largely static. Read, however, in the context of its precursor, Stevens’ “The Man on the Damp”, Plath’s poem has movement. Hence, a final and an obvious example of Stevens’ influence is “A Winter Ship.” The deeper subject of the poem is style, Plath’s picturesque, academic poetry of the fifties and written at a crucial juncture of her life, it is a farewell to what has been and an indication of what is coming. In the strict sense, Stevens’ poem is an account of his yearning for a renewal of imagination and imitating Stevens’ attitude, Plath too, turns on a similar desire. Though Stevens was not a major influence on

Plath, read against the background of some of his poems, the thrust of her earlier poetry becomes much clearer.

The influence of William Butler Yeats on Plath, extending more broadly than the poetic fatherhoods of Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethike, or Wallace Stevens, is such as to legitimize him as her god-father. Barnett Guttenberg has admirably set out the dialectical aspects of the relationship. Plath, he argues, “builds a complete system, with a Yeatsian antithetical vision and consistent clusters of Yeatsian imagery. In addition, she seems to offer a series of rejoinders on various points of disagreement” (139). The discussion here confines to the way Plath uses Yeats’ voice.

In one of her teenage letters from Smith College, the seventeen-year-old Sylvia Plath wrote to her mother, “I think I would like to call myself: ‘The girl who wanted to be God.’ Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be...? But, Oh, I cry out against it. I am I ... (*LH* 40). This “I am I” a somewhat theatrical adolescent phrase, oddly and prophetically echoed the words of a poet whose work, even a precocious teenager like Plath might not yet have read – William Butler Yeats. It was in a late verse called. “He and She” Yeats had used just the phrase “I am I” which the young Plath used in her journal. However, later on he became Sylvia Plath’s beloved Yeats and

in whose house, some fourteen years later she was to die in a suicide that, as most critics see it, might have been either a cry for help or a cry of pain.

Plath's poetic evolution, though was helped or hindered by powerful male precursors like Thomas, Stevens, Roethke and Lowell, the poet whom she admired throughout her career was none other than Yeats. Sandra M. Gilbert puts it:

For her, paradigms of poetic (if not personal) survival came from a woman novelist – Virginia Woolf – who did not herself personally survive, and, paradoxically, from one of the male poets – W.B. Yeats – whose awe of female power facilitated Plath's art even while, ... his anger at female intellectual energy repressed and depressed her ambitions. (217)

No wonder, at the fag-end of her days and ways, when she was left destitute, Plath longed to live in a house used by Yeats in London. Just a few months before her death, Plath wrote to her mother: "By an absolute fluke I walked by the street and the house... where I've always wanted to live.... And guess that, it is W.B. Yeats' house – with a blue plaque over the door, saying he lived there!" (*LH* 478). Living in Yeats' flat that Plath wrote her most

distinguished poetry of the final phase of her career, all the while, feeling the blessings of Yeats' spirit (*LH* 480).

An early example of the influence of Yeats' voice on Plath is essentially hermetic impulse of "Spinster", a poem in the thrall of Yeats' glimmering nineties. His Maud/Helen figure in "The Sorrow of Love" disrupts

The brawling of a sparrow in the leaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves (40).

She plays havoc with natural order. Plath's spinster also fears a similar destruction and longs for winter. Both poets show an early fear of freckled life, a fear that poses as aristocratic disdain. In "Easter 1916" Yeats imperiously scorns the casual, comic Ireland he misunderstood before the Easter uprising, though he lived "where motely is worn" (176). Similarly Plath's spinster scorns April love:

...a burgeoning
Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits,

Into vulgar motely.

(CP 50)

A somewhat later example, “Heavy Women” echoes the more mature Yeats; the glimmer is gone, replaced by the ominous shadow of historic inevitability. As from the discussion of the nature of the poem in the previous chapter, it could doubtless be asserted that, behind the “Heavy Women” is Yeats’ “The Second Coming”, a specter of savagery and recurrence:

...but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (185).

In Yeats’ poem “The darkness drops again”, a falcon is “Turning and turning” in the “Widening gyre”, and the troubling image comes “out of *Spiritus Mundi*” (185). In “Heavy Women” similar language is employed: “The dark still nurses its secret”, the women are “Looping” wool, and they step” among the archetypes” (CP 140). Yeats’ historical beast can be an ancestor of Plaths’ colossus, but Yeats’ beast is public, while Plaths’

colossus is quite personal. Comparing their poetic visions Gary Lane speaks thus:

Yeats, whose personal anguishes lived intimately with his political ones, might make great poetry in such a voice; from the lofty slope of his vision he truly surveyed the human scene. Plath's vision was far narrower. It never compassed much more than the arc of herself, and its poetic fulfilment required that she speak from a less elevated vantage, the valley of the shadow of death. (129)

In spite of such differences, that Yeats always remained as one of the most luminous stars in Plath's poetic firmament, becomes perceptible when one reads the countless letters she wrote from Smith and Cambridge.

Plath's connection with Robert Lowell, as with Roethke, was personal and literary. During 1958-59, Lowell's influence was even more pronounced than that of Roethke. Both came from Boston and were inspired by the dolorous greys of the Massachusetts coastline. They knew each other socially; and in 1959 she attended his poetry course at Boston University, along with Anne Sexton, Kathleen Spivack, and George Starbuck, and she

began to write poems in the style of his *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). It was in 1958, when she was teaching at Smith College, that Plath met Lowell and she describes it thus, "We met the mad and very nice Robert Lowell.... He is quiet, soft-spoken, and we liked him very much. I drove him around Northampton, looking for relics of his ancestors, and to the Historical Society and the graveyard" (LH 396).

However, Plath's journals of March and May 1959 expressed increasing disillusionment with Lowell's teaching and character – though she still valued his criticism of her work. She responded more favourably to Lowells' poetry than to his teaching. In May 1958, a month before she met him in Northampton, she had been excited by his work and compared it to the poetry of Ted Hughes:

Read some of his poems last night and had oddly a similar reaction (excitement, joy admiration, curiosity to meet and praise) as when I first read, Ted's poems in *St. Botolph's*, taste the phrases: tough, knotty, blazing with color and fury, most eminently sayable. (J 222)

In an interview of October 30, 1962, she recalled her reaction to the extraordinary revelations of *Life Studies*:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new break through that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense break through into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example interested me very much. (167-168)

Hughes noted that Lowell had enabled Plath to transcend the formal constraints of her first book, *The Colossus*: "Reading Lowell in 1958 had really set her off to break through whatever blocks there were.... She had tried for a way out through Robert Lowell's early manner of writing (as in "Point Shirley") (*Notes, CP* 289).

Following Hughes' hint, critics have detected Lowells' influence in several poems by Plath. Ian Hamilton noticed that "You are a bastard, Michael, aren't you! *Nein*" in "Thanksgiving's Over" (183), found its way into the conclusion of Plaths' famous poem "Daddy" thus: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through" (*CP* 224). Katha Pollitt called Plath's "The Baby

sitters”, about a summer with the rich on the north shore of Massachusetts, a “Lowellian exercise” – in the manner of “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devere Ux Winslow” of *Life Studies* (198). And Jerome Mazzoro wrote of “Memories of West Street and Lepke” (*Life Studies*):

As that poem has seen his own breakdown, shock treatment, and recovery in terms of the electrocution of Czar Louis Lepke of Murder Incorporated, Plath’s heroine [in *The Bell Jar*] sets her own breakdown, shock treatment, and recovery against the electrocution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. (219)

Lowell also left his mark on a number of other poems. “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” appears in the topographical “Point Shirley”, just as the oceanic and religious imagery of Lowell’s identification with tyrants–Napoleonic and Hitler – recurs in Plath’s “The Swarm” and “Daddy.” His poems about mental hospitals, like “Walking in the Blue”, freed Plath to write about her own similar experiences in “The Jailer”. After Sylvia Plath’s death, Lowell placed her in the manic tradition and praised her combination of authenticity and technique:

She was truly driven, but with the mercy of great opportunities.... `May be, it's an irrelevant accident that she actually carried out the death she predicted... but somehow her death is part of the imaginative risk. In the best poems one is torn by saying, 'This is so true and lived that most other poetry seems like an exercise', and then one can back off and admire the dazzling technique and invention. Perfect control, like the control of a skier who avoids every death-trap until reaching the final drop. (*The Art* 73-74)

Lowell, who had encouraged Plath's poetry by his example and his art, was disturbed about his responsibility for its suicidal direction and cultish influence. Although Lowell was the American poet Plath admired most, he also made her nervous. Since she associated his authority with that of Ted Hughes and both of theirs with that of her father, her feelings were cathected from the start (*J* 222, 229). Not fully recognizing Plath's competence, Lowell seemed to prefer Sexton's work to hers in the initial stage. Several years later Plath took revenge on her ambivalently admired mentor by naming one of her central suicide poems "Ariel", and by giving that title to her second collection of poetry. Lowells' nickname "Cal", combined Caliban with Caligula (Hamilton 20). Thus, Plath may have

sought to proclaim her artistic superiority over her mentor named “Caliban”. Steven Gould Axelrod remarks, “Caliban is the natural bestial projection, Ariel the creative imagination. Like the ‘airy spirit’ of Shakespeare’s play, Plath wanted to transcend her rival, the ‘man-animal” (67).

Plath explored her sense that patriarchal tradition excluded and threatened her from the very commencement of her career as writer. In one of her early stories “The Wishing Box’, she portrays how a man’s fluent fantasies and colourful imagination, put to shame his wife’s more fragmentary and glowering imaginings (*JP* 49). According to Gilbert and Gubar, the whole account is nothing but an expression of the female “anxiety of authorship”, an anxiety “built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (*Mad Women* 51).

Over the next several years, Plath’s anxiety grew as her poetic fathers undermined her sense of her own competence and she began to dread them. Though articulating her loyalty to the male traditions, she expressed her worship of her beloved Yeats, her admiration for Lawrence, her reverence for Joyce, her respect for Thomas, she simultaneously hinted at her feelings of rivalry towards these men and measured her own power in comparison to

theirs: “I am learning and mastering new words each day, and drunker than Dylan, harder than Hopkins, Younger than Yeats in my saying” (*LH* 243). However, in the last years of her life, Plath attempted to rescue herself from this incapacitating anxiety by openly rebelling against male poetic authority. “Although she never ceased to admire the poetic gods, she increasingly sought to put on their knowledge through resistance rather than through acquiescence to their power” (Axlerod 39).

While Sylvia Plath’s growing rebelliousness toward male authority played an evident role in her creative life, her effort to locate herself within female inscription systems played an even more central and enduring one. Plath was not simply a madwoman in the attic of man’s ancestral house, intent on stealing his language for her own purposes; she was also a woman residing in a house built by other women. That female house was hardly less agonistic than the other, but it possessed many features that the male house lacked. As has been already stated, the situation of the woman poet was complicated, because she was at least partly committed to a male-dominated tradition that subjected her to a wide variety of exclusionary strategies. Axlerod comments:

Thus, whereas male poets invent themselves under a hegemonic self-rule, female poets have been divided between two worlds: an institutionalized, andro centric culture that has defined, moulded, restricted, estranged, and wasted their utterance, and an unsanctioned female culture lacking prestige and power (81-82).

Harold Bloom convincingly depicts male writing as an “agon” or “contest” (*Agon* 16-51), but this paradigm does not fit in the context of female writing. Hence, the strands connecting women writers to each other or the way they situate themselves within female culture, are more diverse and uncertain than those connecting men writers. Realizing that women writers of the twentieth century have had complex and problematic relations with their literary foremothers, Gilbert and Gubar initiated a study regarding this, in their important work, *No Man’s Land*.

Plath’s attitudes towards other women writers were probably more ambivalent than most. Though she increasingly accepted and explored her identity as a “woman singer” (*LH* 256), she did not necessarily think of herself as singing in a woman’s chorus:

This was her dilemma: given her growing identification of herself as a woman writer, she could not feel competent without female precursors and peers near her, but given her inherent egotism, suspiciousness, and injured self-esteem, she also had difficulty feeling competent in their presence. (Axelrod 82-83)

When Sylvia Plath wrote poetry, a host of female presence hovered about her. However, she constantly rewrote her literary genealogy on the mother's side to range herself among the greats and to purge it of any unsuitable characteristics, as in this boast in her journals:

Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be
The Poetess of America Who rivals? Well, in history
Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy
Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay – all dead.
Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses,
and poetic godmother Phyllis McGinley is out – Light verse:
she's sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner,
and most close Adrienne Cecile Rich – who will soon be
eclipsed by these eight poems (*J* 211).

To those eleven historical “rivals” a few more names might be added like, Sara Teasdale, Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Sexton. For her the image of these literary mothers involved competition, envy, misunderstanding, and a desire to control, mixed with more supportive traits of attention, help, and guidance. Plath’s female precursors were fully adequate, but that adequacy posed a problem of its own, since it seemed to leave little room for her own efforts. She regarded her creative mothers with bifurcated emotional response. Although they often appeared nurturing and even saintly, they also claimed the power to kill. Plath who was vulnerable because she loved them, had to be continuously on guard.

As it is impossible to consider Plath’s creative acts within the context of the other creative acts by all the women writers mentioned above, only two of these writers with whom Plath in particular affiliated, is discussed in brief below, to study the way she lays claim to her matrilineal inheritance. They are Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson. She lavished intense, ambivalent, and luminous attention on Woolf, whom she discussed more frequently than any other novelist, male or female. Though her comments on Dickinson were brief and perfunctory, her poems engaged in a ceaseless dialogue with her. Plath adopted divergent strategies to deal with the two

literary mothers who most deeply penetrated her artistic identity. But if Woolf and Dickinson often made Plath struggle, they also offered her satisfying images of female creativity.

Plath took Virginia Woolf as a model very early in her life and undoubtedly considered her as the greatest woman writer of her century. But beyond that appeal, Plath might have identified her own emerging life pattern with the one she saw in Woolf. Woolf too suffered loss at an early age, she too had a writer-father who was remote and demanding; and she too had an ambivalent, obsessed relationship to her mother, who remained an invisible presence in her life and art (*Moments* 80). Moreover, Woolf, like Plath, suffered through periods of intolerable mental pain. Woolf attempted suicide at thirteen, had a second breakdown at twenty-two, took lethal dose of Vernol at thirty-one; had recurrence of mental illness and drowned herself in the river Ouse at the age of fifty-nine. When Plath at twenty, tried to drown herself at Nauset Beach and then took an overdose of sleeping pills, she clearly had Woolf in mind. Nine months before she had written in her journals:

I am a conglomerate garbage heap of loose ends – selfish, sacred, contemplating devoting the rest of my life to a cause –

going naked to send clothes to the needy, escaping to a convent, into hypochondria, into religious mysticism into the waves... the colossal wave, sweeping tidal over me, drowning, drowning....Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale or the other brilliant women? (J 61-61)

Plath may well have been thinking about Woolf again during the black autumn and winter that ended her life. At the end of *A Writer's Diary*, which Plath knew well, Woolf describes her fears of German invasion. To avoid humiliation and torture that would await them, Woolf and her Jewish husband planned to gass themselves in their garage: "I reflect: capitulation will mean All Jews to be given up. Concentration camps. So to our garage" (323). In her own last months, Plath figured herself as a Jew at "Dachan, Auschwitz, Belsen" and then she realized the metaphor by gassing herself in her kitchen oven.

If Plath thought of herself as Woolf's inheritor on the basis of their lives, she must also have noted the correspondence in their creative outlook. For both of them, the text figuratively assumed the dimensions of a living person, while the self became a reader/writer or nothing. During her final dark night, Woolf complained in her diary that "the writing 'I' has

vanished.... That's part of one's death" (323). Plath similarly discovered during her dark times that "the words dissolve and letters crawl away" (*J* 298). For both of them, writing was a basic desire, a desire for creativity. Plath first encountered Woolf in Bradford High School and Smith College, where she was included in the curriculum. At Cambridge University, where David Daiches lectured eloquently on Woolf, Plath took pleasure in being considered "a second Virginia Woolf" (*LH* 230). She wrote in her journals that, "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible" (*J* 168).

Even at this early stage, however, Plath was beginning to view her precursor ambivalently. In a letter she wrote to her mother that Woolf's novels provided excellent stimulation for my own writing" (*LH* 324), while she confided to her journal that they put her off and anxiously wished she could be stronger than Woolf (*J* 165). One of the crucial passages concerning Plath's desire to discover her voice through and despite Woolf's, occurs in the *Journals* in 1957:

Last night: finished *The Waves*, which disturbed; almost angered by endless sun, waves, birds, and the strange unevenness of description – a heavy, ungainly ugly sentence next to a fluent, pure running one. But then the hair-raising

fineness of the last 50 pages: Bernard's summary, an essay on life, on the problem....That moment of illumination, fusion, creation.....That is the lifework. I underlined and underlined: reread that. I shall go better than she. (*J* 164)

In this statement on *The Waves*, one can glimpse the beginning of Plath's efforts to separate herself from a literary progenitor who could evoke strong and conflicting emotions in her like a Bloomian strong poet, Plath sought to enhance herself by diminishing Woolf. If she was to win, the precursor had to lose.

By 1959, the year Plath discovered her distinctive poetic voice, she was in full-scale revolt against her precursor, a revolt that required her to misread Woolf and to reduce her deliberately into a minor novelist. After having read Woolf's novel, *The Years*, Plath dismissed not only that novel, but virtually the entire Woolf oeuvre: "That is what one misses in Woolf Her potatoes and sausages. What is her love, her childless life, like, that she misses it, except in Mrs. Ramsay, Clarissa Dalloway? Surely if it is valid there, she should not keep losing it to lighting effects" (*J* 307). By this time Plath was defining her literary task in opposition to her precursor's

accomplishment: "I MUST WRITE ABOUT THE THINGS OF THE WORLD WITH NO GLAZING" (*J* 305).

If Woolf initially functioned for Plath as a blessed spirit and a source of stimulation, she ultimately became just another canonical statue standing in her path, another depriving mother. "Although we do not have Plath's journals for her last years, her letters for that period numbly include Woolf along with Auden, Eliot, Lawrence, and Spender as emblems of a hide bound English high culture that had little to offer her" (Axlerod 104). However, Plath did think back through her foremothers, more than she even knew. And the most prominent progenitor of all those literary mothers was Virginia Woolf, who showed her what it meant to be a powerful female creator, the writer whose rhetorical acts incorporated her life and whose death doubled her words.

Plath consciously or unconsciously, substituted Woolf's textual immanence for her mother's empirical reality. According to Bloom's revisionary ratio of "daemonisation," "an intermediary being, neither divine nor human enters into the adept to aid him. The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor"

(*Anxiety* 15). Plath similarly opened herself to what she believed to be a power associated with Woolf, a power intended to ward off or transform the power of the biological mother. But at the final phase of her career, when she attempted to resist the power of the influence of that ‘intermediary being’ in totality, she was transformed in effect into the daemon’s daemon. Hence, Plath obsessively read Woolf initially to learn from her and finally to surpass her.

Of all the women poets mentioned above, Emily Dickison was undoubtedly the germinal influence – “The one poetic giantess” who achieved a stature equivalent to Woolf’s in prose fiction (*J* 212). Plath studiously avoided mentioning Dickinson throughout her career and referred to her only perfunctorily in her journals and letters. She must have repressed Dickinson, possibly fearing that she had already learned too much from her and could never surpass her. If Plath did indeed feel influenced by Dickinson, she must have experienced a powerful contradiction between that dependency and her need for autonomy.

Sylvia Plath as a poet, established a lifelong identification with Dickinson. As early as September 1951, Eddie Cohen, her most insightful early correspondent, compared her to Dickinson. In April 1953, four months

before her first suicide attempt, she wrote three poems in conscious initiation of Dickinson's style: "Admonition", "Parallax", and "Verbal Calisthenics" (*LH* 110-111). In the flush of her October 1962 exuberance, four months before her death, she boasted to her brother that she was the first woman poet A. Alvarez had taken seriously since Emily Dickinson (*LH* 476). If one acknowledges the Bloomian notion that the meaning of a poem can only be another poem, then one should begin to suspect whether Plath's poetry means Dickinson's. Certainly her poetic ambitions were entwined with those of her predecessor.

Dickinson played a number of interrelated roles in Plath's creative economy. In one sense she functioned as Plath's poetic mother, replacing the biological mother and in another sense she was Plath's poetic double, whose struggle for voice portended, permeated, and rivalled Plath's own. The younger poet seemingly projected all the considerable ambivalence she felt toward her biological mother on to her poetic mother/double. Plath in fact, enacted Dickinson's repressed desire on the stage of her own life and texts. At the same time, she attempted to separate herself from Dickinson by refusing to read her or speak to her, since Dickinson was already present in her purpose and utterance.

In his early essay "Candor Is the Only Wile" Charles Newman established the affinities between the two poets by interweaving their verses and arguing that "Emily is in many way the beginning, and Sylvia the culmination of the movement whereby the imagination, sated with the abstraction of myth, is driven back to the concrete" (29). Subsequent critics have as well taken it for granted that Plath's poetry reveals "the impact Dickinson's work continues to exercise" (Diehl 186). Although she remained indebted to Dickinson to the end of her life, Plath achieved degrees of independence in her major texts of 1958-63.

Unlike her Dickinsonian poems of 1953, which Marjorie Perloff has rightly called "remarkably clever imitations" (163), the later poems attempt to complete Dickinson antithetically, a relation Bloom terms "Tessera". According to him, "A poet antithetically "Completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (*Anxiety* 14). In her most famous poems Plath subverts the predecessor's rhetoric through programmatic intensification. The following examples can validate the statement. Whereas Dickinson's speaker calls her father a "Burglar! Banker-Father!" (49), Plath's calls hers a "panzer-man" and "devil" (*CP* 222-224); whereas Dickinson's speaker terms her home a "soft....prison" (1334),

Plath's tells of being "drugged and raped" by her "Jailer" (*CP* 226-227); and whereas Dickinson personifies death as a "Kindly courtier" (712), Plath personifies him as a "Bastard masturbating a glitter" (*CP* 254).

Plath's misprision or misreading of Dickinson suggests that she thought back through her poetic mother not simply to find a support but also to hold an adversary at bay. Her interior conflict was that she needed Dickinson and her other female precursors to permit her words to count as meaningful utterance, but also she needed to have them away in order to open a space that was hers alone. On the one hand Plath feared that her poetic mothers would absorb her identity, analogous to the threat of her biological foremothers as described in "All Dead Dears":

From the mercury-backed glass
Mother, grandmother, great grandmother
Reach hag hands to haul me in.

(*CP* 70)

On the other hand, she feared that they would withhold their nurturance entirely, leaving her abandoned on the beach like the little girl in "Ocean 1212-W." Thus, for much of her career she was uncertain where she

stood and was often unable to adopt a single, consistent attitude. Hence, it could be stated that in relation to the female poetic tradition Plath's adult career encompassed two manifestations or voices. In the transitional poetry of 1957-59, her voice had to struggle with the verbally playful and imagistically precise poetry of her foremothers like Dickinson, Moore and Bishop. The voice of the final phase was powerful, innovative and exploratory in its approach to experience, achieving a degree of autonomy denied to her other voice. Time and circumstance however, erased this latter poetic immanence before it could fully establish itself.

From the above discussion it can be logically inferred that, it was imperative for Sylvia Plath to break away from every form of influence, thereby to bury for good the angst of the anxiety of influence in the course of her quest for a voice of her own. She achieved it so admirably in the final phase and the predominant nature of the new voice was essentially feminist. What Gary Lane said regarding this can aptly sum up the entire discourse of the chapter:

In the late poems, travelling light and unshepherded there, Plath cast aside what had by then become academic baggage – “Dead hands, dead stringencies” – and was able to weld, at

great heat and under great pressure, a uniquely intense voice....
Plath's originality lies in the uniqueness of the voice that emerged. Alternately self-enlarging and self-appalled, wild at its hurts and wild to avenge them, the late voice can be elegant, torrential, formal, weary, tender, hopeless, furious. It was hard-edged and brilliant.... Her words became axes, honed and deadly, and a major voice cut itself into the echoing wood of our poetry. (130-135)

CHAPTER – VI

No Fantasy without Protest: The Feminist Self in the Late Poems

Don't talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What a person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the *worst*, just what it is like. It is much more help for me, for example, to know that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriage. Let the *Ladies' Home Journal* blither about *those*.

– Sylvia Plath

Revising her life was for Sylvia Plath a recurrent personal and poetic necessity. In her letters and journals as much as in her fiction and poetry, Plath's methods of self-representation suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text which she could at will invent and rewrite. In one of her earliest journal entries at seventeen, she already exhibits a sense of identity as a projected persona, "I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God' " (*LH* 40). Repeatedly, at moments of crisis, she

imagines she can erase the inscription of personal history and be born again, unmarked as an infant, inviolate as a virgin. In one of the last poems she wrote, Plath regards her life as if it were a completed oeuvre, an already closed book that she has produced in her writing, “The woman is perfected” (CP 272).

In agreement with her practice, a rupture that occurred during the fall of 1962, a vital turning point in her personal life, demanded a refiguration of her identity in and through poetry. The attempt to this effect, resulted in *Ariel*, the posthumous volume of Plath’s poetry published in 1965. Unlike her first volume *The Colossus*, which is the collection of several years’ writing, the majority of the poems in *Ariel* were written during the four months preceding the poet’s death in February 1963. Her creative spurt, analogous to the last glorious year of Keats’ life was compressed into an even shorter span and inspired by the certain knowledge of death. In October, wrote Hughes, “when she and her husband began to live apart, every detail of the antagonist seemed to come into focus, and she started to writing at top speed, producing twenty-six quite lengthy poems in that month” (162).

The rupture with Ted Hughes was in fact the greatest shock in Plath's life, though she wrote to her mother in August, announcing her separation from Hughes in the language of a soap opera, "I simply cannot go on living the degraded and agonized life I have been living, which has stopped my wiring and just about ruined my sleep and my health" (*LH* 542). Finally when Hughes left Devon in early October for good, Plath, who had absorbed his interest in supernatural powers and black magic, expressed her hatred in a ritualistic exorcism of his heat and presence. Like many abandoned wives, she pretended she was much happier without her husband. She wrote to her mother: "Living apart from Ted is wonderful. I am no longer in his shadow, and it is heaven to be liked for myself alone" (*LH* 567). However, her pride was shattered and later on she confessed to her mother: "The horror of what you saw and what I saw you see last summer is between us and I cannot face you again until I have a new life" (*LH* 549).

After Hughes' departure, Plath, in a turmoil of emotions, was at a turning point. Alone in charge of her fate, she was suddenly able to focus the full force of her expert craft, her huge energies, on the unresolved inner predicament that had brought her to this pass. She could now examine every facet of it and definitively conquer her predicament by writing it out. She could then go forth, unencumbered, to a new world full of possibilities. In

the long hours she spent alone, the poems came in a spate – ripely, almost effortlessly, with a hugely amplified freedom and felicity. As she wrote to her mother in October, “Every morning when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (*LH* 545). When discussing the atmosphere and thematic concerns of the *Ariel* poems, Hughes observed that, “in her late poems there is a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her ‘hood of bone’, floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminous vision of Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death” (1).

Plath had spent most of her life studying and preparing for examinations, suppressing her individuality, acting conventionally to fulfil the expectations of others and writing formulaic, stories and poems. She bitterly resented her father’s death her mother’s sacrifice, her husband’s success. His betrayal hurt her into poetry and suffering finally enabled her to reach and reveal her deepest feelings. Her extremist poetry of the *Ariel* finally turned out to be more extreme than any of her predecessors’. It forced the confessional mode to the edge of exhibitionism and hysteria. Renouncing her former mode of writing and her mother’s *Weltanschauung*,

she justified the nature and content of her final poems in unequivocal terms as recorded at the commencement of the chapter.

The primary concern of Plath in drafting these poems was to reconstitute her self; exhibiting a poetic transparence in which a woman writer is assumed to be writing directly and authentically from her lived experience. As Pamela J. Annas comments, “Marked by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, Sylvia Plath’s late poems are largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the “the self” (95). In “Totem” she writes:

There is no terminus, only suitcases
Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes.
Nations and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.

(CP 264)

In Sylvia Plath’s early poems, the world is often imaged for the most part in natural terms; it is static, cyclic, nonhuman, and at times immoral. The relation of the self to such a world is in terms of its own possibilities for change and transformation. In the *Ariel* poems however, Plath increasingly

images the world as a social and contemporary landscape; as an office, a battle field or concentration camp, a kitchen, and a hospital. Though natural images continue to appear in these late poems, they exist within the context of a social and socialized world. In these later poems she creates her own system of mythology based on modern historical images and events, a mythology whose central figure is a protean female protagonist.

As noted previously, coinciding with a period of four months preceding her death, a period of extraordinary brilliant output, there comes a significant change in the manner of her poems. Such a dramatic change is an indication of the utter clarity of her final vision of the forces – both masculine and feminine – which contributed the elements of oppression in her life. Such an identification further offers her also a clear solution as how to liberate her self from the oppressor and achieve transcendence from the pervasive evil forces which exercised a perfect sway over her existence. Hence, the prime burden of the discourse concerned is to identify and analyse those poems from the *Ariel* collection, which express rather openly and defiantly the brunt of apprehensions experienced by Plath as a writer and a woman; her apprehensions about marriage, her attitude to the chief oppressive forces, both male and female and finally, the decisive and ultimate step she took to liberate her self.

As the *Ariel* poems belong to the most critical and chaotic phase of her life, Plath displays tremendous skill in converting her extremely personal and domestic experiences into the motifs of broader human concern. Jon Rosenblatt writes in this connection, “Plath’s late poems dramatize the transformation of her personal situation into a metaphor for universal struggle” (107). The poems in *Ariel*, no doubt, originate from one or other real event or experience, but ultimately, they involve the basic issues of human existence which provide universality to Plath’s work. She finally finds her own voice which could give expression not only to her vengeful attitude towards her victimizers but also to her tragic vision of the self and its conflict between stasis and movement.

The quest for self-defenition necessitates Plath to focus her attention on every possible manifestation of the self which may impede the way to transcending the false and mundane existence. Hence, on the whole, through her last poems Plath successfully objectifies her relationship to all aspects of reality which victimize and oppress her. Finally she addresses death in direct terms and wishes to achieve deliverance from the unreal and illusory world of her existence. The predominant passion that governs the entire

atmosphere of these late poems is that of aggression and in Plath's universe life always stands opposed to darkness and loss.

Plath's *Ariel* poems display an intensity, which only a high-pressure subjective involvement, like that of an entrapped animal trying to break free, can bring about. The victimization and betrayal in married life portrayed in these poems, reached their climatic point, when Ted Hughes finally left her on October 9, 1962. In the final months, husbandless, with two young children to look after, she comes to the full realization of the extent to which she allowed herself to be victimized. She found herself to be recapitulating her mother's own predicament. Her torment was objectified through the images of the self effacing woman, the Jew, and the female prisoner. Some of her best poetry came out immediately prior, to and in the week following Ted Hughes' departure.

Simultaneous with her taking over from her mother as the image of the victim, the masculine as the source of oppression, shifts from the external social world into her own family life, crystallizing itself in the image of her own husband in the miniature society within the family which provides the ideal location for the exercise of the masculine craving for domination and destruction. The fury that was kept in check since their separation in the

previous summer bursts loose in a flood, in the fiery poems of *Ariel*. In a number of poems of rage written in the summer and fall of 1962, and particularly during the last four months of her life, Plath constructs a highly theatricalized performance of the feminine victim. She recasts marriage as a criminal act, an intimate violation that robbed her of her poetic voice. In each of these poems a betrayed woman – sick, sexually abused, even dead, survives to meet out vengeance to the chief tormentor – her husband.

The first poem which overtly voices Plath's approach to family is "The Rabbit Catcher," where marriage becomes a trap with "grose" and "spikes". Significantly enough, the impersonal forces of the early phase like the wind and the sea play the role of villains in this marital drama. There is a clear hint at the end of the poem of the constricting bondage of personal relationship.

And we, too, had a relationship–
Tight wires between us,
Pegs to deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also.

(CP 194)

One of the more bitter poems in *Ariel* is “The Applicant”, a portrait of marriage in contemporary western culture” (Annas 104). The low-pitch protest against the institution of marriage in “The Rabbit Catcher” becomes more apparent in “The Applicant” where the need for marriage is presented as some affliction, a physical absence, like an amputated limb. From this viewpoint, marriage is packaged as a marketable product. It is disposable, but can be recycled instead, if required. The marriage partner is described variously as a coffin, an investment, and a mindlessly servile robot. The eligible bachelor, on the other hand, becomes a sort of psychometric cripple, desperately seeking spare-part surgery to cure his singular sickness – his empty hand, which can only be filled with another, on one condition that he marries ‘it’:

...Here is a hand
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it
Will you marry it?

(CP 221)

Here the emphasis is on the impersonal nature of the contract. David John Wood puts it, “The sales pitch reaches its crescendo when the speaker

promises that the merchandise can fill any sense of inadequacy by providing an idealized “image” to satisfy the need of his “eye [I]” for the illusion of self-completion” (120). The applicant for marriage is offered “.... Another quasi-sentient being, not another conscious self” and “is promised a glittery reflector of his comforts” (Bundtzan 227). She would also be whatever the husband wants her to be in future:

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver.

In fifty, gold

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

(CP 221).

“The Jailer” is a poem which goes further than “The Applicant” in its negative representation of marriage. Marriage is pictured as a form of imprisonment, identification confirmed in several other works. In this extraordinary dramatization of female victimization and suffering, Plath equates the woman’s entrapment to the victimization of all men by a hostile universe. The poem presents increasingly intense images of physical torture inflicted upon the female speaker by her “Jailer”. This fantasized relation

between the prisoner and the jailer clearly reflects the sado-masochism of a husband-wife relation.

The poem describes the woman's sleeping with her jailer, his sexual abuse of her, her addiction to pills, his dependence once upon her for security and finally his envy of any diversion of her attention from him. The central theme of the poem is, in fact, the male jailer's need for his victim, whom he rapes, starves, burns, and humiliates. This sado-masochism recalls "Daddy", where the father-husband figure is a Nazi torturer. But in "The Jailer" the woman cannot liberate herself from her sexual-physical imprisonment, as the daughter in "Daddy" can. Plath ends the poem with a series of cosmic analogies to the sado-masochistic relations, thus implying that the universe is constituted as a mechanism of torture:

What would the dark
Do without fevers to eat?
What would the light
Do without eyes to knife, what would he
Do, do, do without me?

(CP 227).

This tortured wife of “The Jailer” shows her true colour in “Purdah” as she liberates herself by revolting against her husband. Just as the future bride in “The Applicant” is a convenient domestic helper, the wife in “Purdah” is nothing more than a “doll”, a plaything. She is not flesh and blood at all, but a gleaming statue of jade, only unleashed to satisfy the craving of her husband, the supreme “Lord of the mirrors!” She has got no self of her own, she is an extension of her husband as is also affirmed in the beginning of the poem itself where the story of the Genesis is referred to as to how Eve was created out of Adam’s rib. In the harem, she is a dehumanized jade figurine, and one of the several precious stones in her lord’s coffer.

The husband is an “I” and the harem wife an object, an “it” – a two-dimensional reflector and spectator to the man’s performance in the bedroom. She hides her “I” like a multifaceted gem. Here what Dinnerstein speaks of the “I”s stance toward the non- I is very pertinent:

Man’s monopoly of history-making follows from the double sexual standard. As the unpossessed possessor of woman he is free than she is, to come and go – geographically or psychologically – from the place where they are intimate. It is

he, not she, who can leave what belongs to him – to go to war
or a laboratory, to spend all night writing or painting – without
violating the terms of ownership. (208)

Plath asserts to evils of this relationship poetically and struggles against it.
The speaker becomes the angry mother Clytemnestra behind the veil, seeking
revenge on Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia, to the
favour of the gods in the war against Troy. She is the mother versus the
mega machine of history making. At the end of the poem, she screams and
shatters the lord's mirrors into a million silvers – “a million ignorants”
because they reflect only male blindness to the woman behind the veil:

I shall unloose –
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart –
The lioness
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes

(*CP* 244)

According to Linda Bundtzan, “In these few lines, Plath captures Clytemnestra’s fury, the mother’s rage at this violation of nature, and asserts in mythic form woman’s right to take back the self she had been denied” (224). The shift from humility and modesty of veil to the final “shriek” is quite slow and subtle:

Gradually, the speaker has gathered up enough energy to turn her limitations into strengths. Where once she might have been the submissive doll, she is now the lioness. Where previously there was docile silence, now there is a shriek. Where there was the customary covering of the face (Purdah), there is nothing but a “cloak of holes”. (Broe 136)

The freedom that the speaker earns in “Purdah” is fully celebrated in “The Couriers”, where she rejects the false promise of marriage: A ring of goldsmith the sun in it?/Lies, Lies and a grief? (*CP* 247). The poem has the double object of dissociating the poet from the symbols of married life and of projecting a vision of love outside marriage. Though apparently an obscure poem because of its personal symbolism and elliptic expressions, it crystallises Plath’s attitude towards marriage in this aggressive phase. There are two types of symbols in the poem; one representing the placid and dull

married life, and the other fatal attraction of and exposure to, elements. “Snail” symbolizes the sluggishness of married life, “acetic acid in a sealed tin”, its sourness and enclosure, and golden ring its outward glitter. Contrastingly, frosted leaves represent dangerous but desired exposure to elemental forces; and boiling cauldron on Alps suggests magnetic aloofness and exclusiveness of a single life.

The monotonous harmony of married life is replaced at the end by the seething sea. The speaker wants to be loved in the season of wild and she does not wish for the safe spring in marriage. Thus, the speaker responds to the violent emotional life of the crackling cauldron in order to celebrate her independence:

Frost on a leaf, the immaculate
Cauldron, talking and crackling
All to itself on the top of each
Of nine black Alps.

(CP 247)

The poem deals, thus with the polarity of static domesticity and the charged dynamic world of the self that concerns several *Ariel* poems like “Burning the Letter,” “The Detective” and “The Courage of Shutting Up.”

“Plath’s images of exploitation in these poems are heavily freighted with associations of other experiences of powerlessness, entrapment, and the extinction of articulate selfhood” (Van Dyne 44).

Of the *Ariel* poems that concentrate on the family, those dealing with her father, provide a clear and powerful example of Plath’s attitude towards those forces of patriarchy he represented for her. After an aggressive attack on husband and the institution of marriage, Plath turns to her greatest tormentor – her father. Father has always been an obsession with her, denoting Electral awe and admiration. Her treatment of this theme is most consistent in her poems. In the earlier poetry, the father appears in an idealized form; by the time of the poems of the last phase of Plath’s creative life, he embodies all the traits of oppressiveness and authoritarianism that Plath dramatizes in the Nazi doctor in “Lady Lazarus”. Jon Rosenblatt remarks:

The development of the patriarchal figure in the poems varies a pattern that characterized the landscapes and seascapes; the later poetry personalizes the concerns of the early work by specifying in detail the poet’s death-and-life drama. The poems about the father demonstrate Plath’s ability to convert

private psychic material – fantasies, memories, family history –
into coherent dramatic forms. (119)

Two significant poems “Little Fugue” and “Daddy” which belong to the final phase of Plath’s poetic career, express openly and defiantly her attitude towards the father. In “Little Fugue”, the father is portrayed as black, authoritarian and Germanic. The father is described through the image of a black yew tree. The blackness of the yew image indicates a hidden viciousness in the father, a sadism that becomes obvious in “Daddy”. The daughter is obsessed with images of dismemberment and cutting when she thinks of her father and recounts his awesome memory thus:

I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,
A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German,
Dead men cry from it.

(CP 188).

Plath completely reverses the idealization of the father, thereby profoundly changing the character of her late work in connection with the

father. The vicious, unmerciful father is now equivalent in the family world of the brutal Nazi in the historical world. Blackness is the key imagistic element indicating the presence of the father. He is the Nazi doctor, the composite enemy-god-devil who persecutes women. He is the priest in cassock and black boots in “Berk Plage”, symbolizing death and cruelty, “This black boot”, says the speaker, “has no mercy for anybody” (*CP* 196). In “The Bee Meeting”, he is the rector, a nefarious man in black, who leads the villagers in frightening bee-rites: “Which is the rector now, it is that man in black?” (*CP* 211). In “Years”, he is God, with his unresponsive “black void” and in “Daddy”, he is the father-husband who brutalizes the daughter.

“Daddy” is of course, Plath’s most extended treatment of the father symbol. The image of the father as black, Germanic autocrat is the beginning point of this last poem on father, “an emotional, psychological, and historical autopsy, a final report” (Broe 175). It opens with a reference to the father’s black shoe, in which the daughter has “lived like a foot”, suggesting her submissiveness and entrapment. The poem then moves to a derisive commentary on the idealized image of the father and summarizes his background: his life in a German-speaking part of Poland, that was “Scraped flat by roller/Of war” (*CP* 223). The daughter admits here, for the first time

in poetry that she was afraid of him. In a reading prepared for the BBC, Plath spoke of the poem:

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 of 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 force of it. (*CP* 293)

The plot of the poem is almost completely invented. Plath's real father was not a Nazi nor her mother a Jew, they are metaphors depicting largely a psychic state. The historical references, however, allow her to dramatize her rebellion against the oppressive father and also to equate and elevate her fearful suffering to the universal level. "Her personal dilemma – a potentially Jewish daughter born to a Nazi father – immediately confronts the conscience of a post World-War-II audience, and so expands her private tragedy into a social travesty" (Wood 123).

“Daddy” is obviously an attempt to do away altogether with the idealized father, in part, of course, it also is a reaction to the betrayal by the poet’s husband. When the father dies, she tries to “get back” to him, through successive suicide attempts, but she fails. Then she marries a model of him with “a love of rack and screw”. But ultimately she has to dispense with him, once for all, so she kills not only the dead father but also his living counterpart, her husband:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

(*CP* 224).

The tormentor–lover is finally killed by putting a stake through his cruel heart and the daughter heaves a long sigh of relief, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (*CP* 224).

Thus the daughter emerges from being an archetypal victim to an assertive victor, from a historically presented Jew to a traditional vampire-

killer, in short “from booted to booter” (Uroff 160). However, at times when Plath pictures herself in the poem as a victim of Nazi gas chamber – “A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” – she seemed to enjoy the torture with masochistic delight. In such a sense, the poem seems to describe a peculiar relationship in which there are both the elements of sexual desire and the urge to destroy. The relationship between power and sexuality has been basic feminist thinking. Freud and Lacan based their theories on the asymmetric relationship of male and the female sexuality. Jeremy Hawthorn comments:

Where concepts of “Masculinity” are corrupted with ideas of power and violence, and where male sexuality is related to patriarchal power, then some conflation of “the paternal” and “violent” will be found in the popular images of male sexual attractiveness. (128)

Plath’s critique of power inherent in male sexuality finds expression in the poem thus:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

(CP 223)

Plath's late poems progressively undermine the illusion of ideal paternity; a greater consciousness of the sexuality of the daughter's relation to the father and of the father's authoritarian ways surface. The poet now identifies herself as the victim of men in general, of the father figure in particular, and sees the whole world in terms of a brutal battle for dominance between life and death. Plath no longer feels protected by the father from the external world, he is as murderous as God or predatory animals. Blackness is what she attributes to him finally. Rosenblatt comments:

Blackness, the fundamental colour of death in the late poems, is the colour shared by the Black Man and all his related symbols – the yew tree, the black telephone, the black boots, the vampire, and the black sky into which all things human and nonhuman vanish. (196)

When Plath uses the Nazi metaphor to identify her personal tragedy with the external horror, it assumes a universal dimension and in doing so "Daddy" becomes the "Guernica" of modern poetry, for here Plath writes "one of the very few poems... in any language to come near the last horror" (Steiner 218).

In all feminist critical endeavours, the starting point is the asymmetric relationship between the male and the female on which the phallo-centric society survives. It provides the framework for the feminist investigations, of the gender-role stereotyping, of the 70s, by theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Elizabeth Janeway, as well as for the philosophical and psycho-analytical research associated with French Feminists Helan Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who examine woman's position as the other in the binary oppositions produced by the phallocratic culture. It is the division which is at the core of feminist concept like "gender" and "sexual politics", and the concepts of "Oppressed woman", all of which suggest the presence of the victim and the victimizer in confrontation.

In this context, when Sylvia Plath poises the problem, she seemed to assume a slightly deviated path from the normal direction of feminist pursuits, in as much as, the problem is projected on to a broader canvas. That is to say, she detects within the binary opposition, two sets of opposing forces, one within the male and the other within the female. Hence, at the final phase of her poetic career, when Plath attempts to liberate her self from the oppressive and dehumanizing forces, she lodges a scathing attack also on those women who threaten her individuality.

Here what Elaine Showalter, in her attempt to define the tradition of women's literature has stated, sounds pertinent. In her discourse on female literary tradition Showalter considers that when a woman dramatizes in her work, any form of injustice against her, she writes in accordance with the feminist tradition. She pictures the predicament that Plath experiences as a writer thus, "The distress of Sylvia Plath's mother over the "ingratitude" of *The Bell Jar* suggests how difficult it has been for woman to transcend social and familial pressures to write only what is pleasant, complimentary and agreeable" (303). Hence, in the course of her exorcism of all forms of oppression, as performed in the late poems, it is almost imperative to explore the poet's relationship to her mother and women in general.

After doing away with fears, torments, and restraints imposed by married life and after an aggressive attack on husband and father, the poet turns to her mother and a host of other women who are her hell. The poems like "The Rival", "Medusa", The Other "and "Lesbos" are all dramatic monologues attacking women who threaten the speaker's identify. The Rival and the Medusa represent the negative versions of Plath's own mother. In the earlier poems like "All the Dead Dears," "The Disquieting Muses," and

“Poem for a Birthday,” there lurks the fear of the mother. Now the poet comes out aggressively against the mother-figure.

In the “The Rival,” the rival appears as the omnipresent, hostile moon, an image, that is always associated with the mother in Plath’s work. Like the Medusa, she has the ability to turn the world to stone. The mother haunts the poet by constantly observing her. Distance does not prevent the mother from thinking about her. The poet detests the regular and affectionate letters of the mother and treats them as blank white papers, though they are full of admonitions:

Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
Arrive through the mail slot with loving regularity,
White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

(CP 166)

“Medusa” centres on the powerful symbol of the medusa, a jelly fish, a hydra or a sea-monster with a big mouth. Medusa is also a mythological Gorgon with snakes round its head like poisonous darts, and a petrifying gaze. The central metaphor is used to express the speaker’s feeling of oppressive maternal influence which she wants to escape. The reference in

the poem to the umbilical attachment between the poet and Medusa identifies this figure undoubtedly as the mother. The religious imagery – “Blubbery Mary”, “Ghastly Vatican” and the like – suggests, on the spiritual side, that just as the daughter feels it necessary to revere her father in “The Colossus”, so devotion too, is demanded by her mother. As this situation denies the daughter any claim to emotional maturity or self-determination, she now lashes out frantically for freedom.

The navel allusions indicate that the speaker is threatened with being throttled by the psychological birth cord tangled around her throat: “My mind winds to you / Old barnacled umbilicus” (*CP* 225). The mother figure’s desire to reabsorb her offspring emotionally is revealed in horrifying physical image: “You steamed over the sea, / Fat and red, a placenta” (*CP* 225). The effect is to make sterile both the daughter’s physical creativity and by inference, Plath’s artistic creativity. The speaker however, more resolved than ever, rejects her blood-sucking grip with firm determination, as the final lines screech to their frantic climax: “Off, off eely tentacle!/There is nothing between us” (*CP* 225).

The passionate rage against mother turns against women in general in poems like “The Other” and “Lesbos”. The women in these poems refer to

figures from Plath's life in England. "The Other" alludes to the mistress of Plath's husband, Assia Wevill and the poem was written in July 1962, when her marital troubles were clearly surfacing to force. In her *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson relates the incident connected with the writing of the poem:

While Ted was in London, she invaded his attic study, hauled down what papers she could find – mostly letters – and made a bonfire in the vegetable garden. As the fire consumed the letters, Sylvia fanned out the ashes.... A name with black edges unfurled at her feet: *Assia*. Sylvia now had confirmation of the name of her rival, and when Ted returned she confronted him. (250-51)

It has been suggested that on this occasion Plath also burned an entire novel, written early that year, entitled *Falcon Yard*, based on her love for Ted, which she had intended for him as a birthday present. Two other poems "Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone" and "Burning the Letters", written at this time, can be treated as companion poems to "The Other" as they too are full of private images of her nuptial life.

“Lesbos” deals with an incident that occurred at a friend’s house while Plath was living in Devon. The speaker visits her neighbour who is a liberated woman, a femme fatale, a sex-goddess in the mould of Marilyn Monroe. She encourages the speaker to wear fashionable tiger pants and indulge in extra-marital affairs as an antidote to domestic durgery. She does not talk kindly to the speaker’s baby and her kittens. The speaker, in return, resents her domineering and overbearing outlook, and seethes with violent hatred against her arrogance and Lesbian overtures. So, there is a virtual breakdown of communication:

Your voice my ear – ring,
Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.
That is that, that is that.
You peer from the door,
Sad hag. ‘Every woman’s a whore.
I can’t communicate.’

(CP 229)

According to Rosenblatt, the poem is an artistic failure in as much as “The intensity of vilification and hate in the poem hardly seems warranted by the incident” (127). Edward Butscher calls “Lesbos” merely “a pretty

revenge gossip, and whinning decked out as art” (323). As far as Linda Bundtzan is concerned, “It is only a satiric exposure of the connubial bliss celebrated in the media” (28). But for Pashupati Jha, it is something more, “It is an expose of the apartment-culture which fails to hide the hypocrisy, the cruelty, and selfishness behind the so called ‘liberation’ ” (85). The poem ends on a note of complete hostility and Plath has expressed her open rage in a quite colloquial but highly wrought style, “Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet (*CP* 229).

The predominant passion that Sylvia Plath as a writer demonstrates through her late poems is that of rage. However, Plath’s rage in her late poems is Vesuvian, to adapt Dickinson’s metaphor of woman poet’s dissembling restraint and her potentially destructive expressive power. Susan R. Van Dayne puts it, “Plath constructs a highly theatricalized performance of the feminine victim in order to justify the retaliatory script of her consuming homicidal rage” (5). What entrapped and enraged Plath was her belated recognition that in attempting to validate her marriage and her husband’s vocation, she had assigned to herself a subordinate role as woman and poet. Hence, Plath’s self blame for not playing an equal role in marriage and her resentment at her role as apprentice poet in their partnership are common place in the journals, “Get over instinct to be dowdy lip-biting little

girl. Get bathrobe and slippers and nightgown and work on femininity.... Must try poems. DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED. I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinions is so important to me” (J 295).

American feminist critics, have elaborated several theories that attempt to explain a woman writer’s rage at her position in social and literary history. To see a woman writer as Vesuvian is to mean that a woman writer suffers an alienation within herself that is culturally produced and that is textually reproduced in different but discernible forms. In *A Room of One’s Own* and “Profession for Women” Virginia Woolf articulates the logic that links a woman who would write inevitably to anger. In “Profession for Women” Woolf claims murder as the ritual that initiates her into the profession, a necessary self-defense of her right to write: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of the woman writer”, Woolf asserts; “had I not killed her, she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (286). Hence according to Woolf there exists a true and false self in a female writer and only the authentic self can enact the rebellion.

Many feminists, and virtually all Plath scholars, have posited such combat between true and false self, socialized self as a central tension in

women's writing. Patricia Spacks, Elaine Showalter, and Adrienne Rich believe that to the extent a woman writer mutilates her rage, she betrays her art and mutilates herself. In her feminist critique "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," Adrienne Rich claims that female rage is constitutively feminist, personally therapeutic, and creatively liberating, releasing the woman writer from defensive narrative strategies and granting access to an authentic and unalienated voice. She remarks:

Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets.... They are our birth-pains, and we are bearing ourselves. (98)

Reading Plath, Rich revises Woolf's performances and praises precisely the qualities Woolf lamented in Charlotte Bronte: "It is finally the woman's sense of *herself* – embattled, possessed – that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy" (91). According to her, anger, once spoken, can make way for a psychic and poetic reintegration, a moment when "the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become the same person" (197-98).

For Spacks, Showalter, and Rich, and perhaps even more definitively for Jane Marcus and Paula Bennett in the 1980s, anger does not preclude art but becomes its necessary precondition. They read female anger as demonstrating desirable feminist politics, but more significantly as sign of female psychic health. Marcus cites Freud to justify women's equal right to anger: "It is a result of the ego's first struggle to maintain itself, to find an identity separate from the mother" (124). Bennett praises the poetry written during the 1970s for the "Catholicity of its rage" and claims "emotional liberation, the release of rage ... is psychologically anterior to the integration of the self and makes possible the artist's song" (242, 258). Since these critics maintain that anger is a primary source of creative power, they rank women whose texts appear to lack it, like Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, as inferior poets. A poet's failure of nerve in confronting her rage, according to them, necessarily constrains her imagination.

The feminist readings of this group hold a consistent faith that a wrathful persona in the poem stands for the authentic self in the poet, as in Bennett's equation, "Medusa, the angry or unangelic underside of the self... became the passionate symbol for the women poet's liberated self" (245). They disagree with Woolf's belief that the existence and nature of the self

who seeks to cast off her feminine roles is problematic or undefinable. According to them the true and false selves discovered in a text are unambiguously separable. The false self can be shed, transcended or killed off for the sake of an always more powerful subjectivity that is described as purified, integrated, liberated or autonomous. Marcus puts it as:

Anger is *not* anathema in art; it is a primary source of creative energyout with it. No more burying our wrath, turning it against ourselves....When the fires of our rage have burnt out, think how clear the air will be for our daughters. They will write in joy and freedom only after we have written in anger.
(153-154)

Plath's poems of rage enact both the feminine predicament and the potentially feminist solution. Her performance of an enraged woman, capable of murder, depends on separating herself from emotional and sexual bondage to an intimate enemy. Since the fiction of her marriage depended on an ecstatic fusion of the self and the other, Plath's need for revenge always carried with it the risk of self-destruction. As has been already discussed, the pain of poetic silencing and erotic dependency is figured in a series of late poems in which the speaker poses as a pornographic victim,

starved, raped, and murdered by her partner. The end of this series is “Daddy” in which the chasm which divides the wife and husband is clearly constructed. Finally, in the punishingly sexual aggression of “Lady Lazarus”, Plath attempts to annihilate both the persona of the female victim and her oppressors.

Plath’s annihilating rage reaches its culmination in “Lady Lazarus”, another signature poem of the bitch goddess. Here the rage is no more contained within. It is turned against man in general, a multiple forms of male authority like, professor, executiner, priest, torturer, God and Lucifer. What lady Lazarus suffers is not just the male brutality, but the gender asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependent and defective: to male professor she is student; to executioner, criminal; to priest, sinner; to doctor, patient.

In the poem, Plath borrows the miracle of Lazarus, the horror of the holocaust and the legend of the phoenix rising from the flame, to construct herself a blazing triumph over her feeling of tawdriness and victimization. Plath’s fascination with the myth of Lazarus was life long. In her “Cambridge Notes” she wrote thus:

I feel like Lazarus: That story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the more sensation value of being suicidal, or getting so close, of coming out of the grave, with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek....

(JP 204)

The legend of Lazarus and that of the Phoenix are mixed up and stirred together in the cauldron of suffering and retribution. The speaker, a freak lady, very confident and lethal, begins with an assertive tone, “I have done it again”, relishing her several attempts at suicide. Practice has made the speaker efficient, she flaunts her expertise:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve a call.

(CP 245)

She relates her third suicidal attempt to the genocidal killing of the Jews by Nazis; this additional historical suffering proves too much even for her. She “turns and burns” in the gas chamber, only to resurrect, phoenix-like, with more vigour, and then menacingly threatens all her tormentors:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

(*CP* 246-47)

Thus the poem which begins as a theatrical performance of suicidal act, ends as a straight drama of revenge. Unlike the Biblical Lazarus, the Lady Lazarus of the poem is not revived by a divine grace, she rises herself by her sheer power and desire to wreak revenge, thus she denies the possibility of any controlling power outside her. She peels off the napkin of her fear and bitterly taunts her tormentors. She teases the “peanut-crunching crowd” that has sadistically enjoyed her torment with sensuous relish that she is “The same identical woman” who does not now care even if she has to die “nine

times". Her aggressive revival is a "miracle" to them because they are used to seeing her fearful, tormented, and alone. But now she is the incarnation of pure energy, of extraordinary will power, and can eat them as easily as breathing air.

Paradoxically enough, "Lady Lazarus" is also a "futuristic indictment" of those critics who fail to see beyond the sensational and confessional aspects of Plath's poems (Broe 178). These critics are the crowd of the poem, reveling in her suffering with "brute amused shout", without taking note of the human pain hidden within. Commenting on the imagery of the poem Mary Lynn Broe says:

The imagery is an audacious mixture of incongruities: The Lazarus story from the Bible and the Nazi extermination. Recklessly, Plath mingles the miraculous with the cadaverous, spiritual promise with witness of horror, a striptease act with death, the myth of the phoenix with the parable of Lazarus, the simple superstition of a cat's nine lives with the holocaust in the Nazi ovens. (176)

There is self-parody, sarcasm, and theatrical chattering – all presented in a gust of colloquial speech. Starting with a self mocking tone and a slow release of transforming energy, Lady Lazarus assumes the suffering of the whole humanity in the garb of the imaginary Jew, symbolically destroys the society by destroying herself. “From the ash of her oppression and suffering, an aggressive Phoenix rises as menacing as the predatory hawk of Ted Hughes” (Jha 92). Finally she utters her personalized warning: “I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air” (*CP* 247). The warning of “Lady Lazarus” is one that applies to Plath’s complete posthumous reputation, and one that vindicates the critical position of considering Plath as a writer who wrote in conformity with a feminist line of thinking.

Plath’s preoccupation with death is the predominant factor which persists to the end of her poetic career. The finest poems of Plath’s last period, refine and concentrate the vision of death. However, in these poems which deal with death theme, the idea of rebirth is a major aspect. It is only through rebirth that she can achieve her final transformation. Hence, death linked here with her quest for self-identification and rebirth to true self. As has been already stated in the second chapter, death is her ultimate triumph, an answer to all her existential problems. Moreover, as far as the feminist school of thought is concerned, Plath’s suicide is an inevitability in

accordance with its critical canons. For in a female writer, the expression of extreme rage and the need for revenge always carries with it the risk of self-destruction. In the final enactment of rage, there can occur, both homicide and suicide, the annihilation of both the victim and the victimizer.

It is this vision of death and rebirth as means of the transformation of self, which redeems Plath's poetry from extinction, which is the common fate of poetry which excites only immediate interest, by their unusual images and shocking rage. For Plath the woman, as well as the poet, perfection has no limit. If there is one, its image for her is nothing less than godhead. Hence, Plath's sense of acceptance of death in the very last poems attains a tragic dignity. To strike a fitting finale to the discourse, one has to analyse through the last poems of Plath to explore fully her slow but steady grappling with her vision of rebirth and self-transformation consequent upon death.

Written in the last few weeks of her life, "Totem" is an intense statement of the primordial relationship between blood and death. The vision in the poem is a continuous devouring of the universe by death, and it does spare none. The relationship between the killer and the killed is "blood hot and personal". The pig and hare are slaughtered for their flesh and fur, and the human eater is himself eaten by death. "In a series of associations,

the speaker traces the eating process: The field that fed the pig that fed the butcher that fed man that feed on Christ” (Uroff 154). The poem opens with the image of the train from “Getting There”. Here, “The engine is killing the track”; but the speaker assures that “It will be eaten nevertheless. Its running is useless” (*CP* 264).

Not only non-human, but all living creatures are caught up in the merciless claw of death. In its portrayal of a cosmic voraciousness, the poem provides the clearest rendering of Plath’s agony in the face of cannibalistic universe. “Human symbols of spiritual achievement and love, Plato and Christ, are derisively regarded as impotent heads on sticks; they, too, will be eaten” (Rosenblatt 135). The metaphor of the train ride suggests that no redeeming self-transformation occurs to the speaker as the self is unable to be reborn. The poem reflects the mood of Plath’s final months, a mood of despondency and hopelessness.

Another poem on the horror of death, “Getting There” incorporates the train ride of “Totem”, but the unrelieved gloom of the latter is partially relieved in the former by a possibility of rebirth. In the poem the speaker actually participates in the violence of history, identifying with all the victims of war. Plath’s personal situation feeds into the poem as she pictures

herself as the victim. This in fact lends weight to the feminist reading that “Getting There” is a kind of statement of woman’s physical and social suffering. However, Uroff sees the subject of the poem purely in terms of historical violence:

We are not instructed by history: rather, the train that drags itself through the battle fields of history ultimately becomes “the black car of Lethe,” a symbol of the forgetfulness of the past. It becomes a cradle, nurturing a new generation of killers; the pure baby who steps from it will perpetuate murder because she has forgotten the world’s past history of murderousness.
(154)

The train journey through a war-torn European landscape becomes, in effect, a literary vehicle used to express the self’s relentless path through life and the intense, almost maddening expressive urge that it seeks for fulfilment. The details of past carnage represent the oppressive forces which each individual has to contend with. Yet stronger than the sense of pain is the desire to get to the “minute at the end of it / A minute, a dewdrop” (*CP* 249). According to David John Wood, ““Getting There” in some ways resembles a passage from “Revelations”, the last part of the New Testament

– it prophesies a new life through the insight of the artistic instant, transmuting a host of apocalyptic images into the hope for poetic birth” (152). Hence, the poem ends on a conviction that out of the wreckage of life, the speaker will transform herself into creative renewal and that bloodshed may be a ritualistic sacrifice for rebirth and the rocking carriages of the train may be just rocking cradles:

I shall bury the wounded like pupas,

I shall count and bury the dead

And I, stepping from this skin

Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,

Pure as a baby.

(CP 249)

“A Birthday Present” is a dramatic monologue in which terror and hysterical panic predominate. The drama of the poem is frightening in its transformation of a domestic, and usually a happy occasion – the visit of a friend carrying a birthday gift – into a celebration of suicide. It captures the movement of the speaker’s mind as she throws herself into the sequence of

steps that might lead her to kill her. However, the confrontation with death generates the hope for rebirth. The poem can also be interpreted as expressing Plath's yearning for a voice and vision that would last enduringly. In the conclusion to the poem, the speaker demands as her birthday present, not just the symbols of death which are mentioned in the poem, or the figure representing death, but death itself. For she knows, full well that, it is only through death that she can attain the desired self-transformation:

If it [the birthday present] were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.
There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter
Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side.

(CP 208)

The tension between the stasis of death and the motion of life is a common feature of Plath's last poems. But in this contest it is ultimately the former which wins, which means absolute perfection. "Fever 103" is one of the first dramatic monologues of Plath, where she discusses the notion of

purity as related to rebirth, both depending on the ultimate reality of death. Outwardly “Fever 103” reads like an incoherent and unrelated talk under fever and delirium. In her reading prepared for the BBC, Plath illuminates the world of “Fever 103”: “It is about two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonises, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second” (*CP* 293).

At the commencement of the poem, the speaker appears to be answering her own internal question about self-purification through suffering – “pure? what does it mean?” (*CP* 231). In the middle of the poem, she turns to her husband and resolves her doubts – “I am too pure for you or any one.” At the end, she transforms herself into a “pure acetylene/Virgin”, who can reject all attachment to others. She becomes an unblemished beam of angelic light, and her skin becomes. “gold beaten” and “Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive”, beyond the lecher’s kiss and lover’s body. Rosenblatt comments, “At once immersed in the nightmare of radiation poisoning and in a fantasy of religious salvation, the poem gives the most balanced version of Plath’s striving toward a purification of self in the midst of the world of death” (131).

“Ariel”, written on Plath’s thirtieth birthday, was chosen as the title piece for the volume of poetry that firmly established Plath’s reputation. It can also be chosen as a central representative of her poetic concerns. It employs the act of insemination as a vehicle for expressing the creative urge – the same urge which stimulated all of Plath’s best work. The name, Ariel, has several possible meanings. It is as Hughes points out, the “name of horse which she rode, at a riding school at Dartmoor, in Devonshire” (CP 294). This experience provides the surface structure of the poem, a horseback ride, – accounting for the reference to Lady Govida – although the underlying proceeding of the poem transcends its literal origins.

According to Judith Kroll it is primarily a biblical allusion as it is a Hebrew name signifying “Lion of God” (Plath uses the phrase “God’s lioness”) that is applied to the city of Jerusalem (Isaiah 29: 1-7). In literature Ariel is the name of a spirit occurring in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (VI, 371) and in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, where it is the symbol of Prospero’s power. Plath’s development during the last stage of her work was very much a process of coming to terms with bitter experience and this approximates very generally to Shakespeare’s own reconciliatory development as expressed through the character of Prospero and the symbol of his benevolent spirit Ariel.

“Ariel” is the only poem of Plath which traces the process of transformation of the woman to her ideal, the woman poet and further. The transforming ritual of purging and fusing leading to a new birth, conceived in other poems as a ritual leading to death, is presented here as a journey from stasis in darkness through a nightmarish landscape. The rider and the horse, feminine and masculine principles as separate entities, melt into one another as they moved forward – “How one we grow.” The rider absorbs kenesis from the horse and moves from submission to assertion to become “God’s Lioness.” The journey itself is a heroic struggle to overcome the snares of the world: “Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks” (*CP* 239).

There are “black sweet blood mouthfuls,” indicating the inherent force in the male dominated social scene, and “Shadows” symbolizing the nonbeing, sterility, and despair which are the encrustations on the feminine psyche. Even the sexual fascination of the woman by which she confers extra power on man, is suggested vaguely in the lines “Something else / Hauls me through air – / thighs, hair.” But they are all shed off as Ariel moves forward: “I unpeel – / dead hands, dead stringencies.” And there is a new birth:

And now I

Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas

The child's cry

Melts in the wall.

(CP 239)

It is no more Ariel but "I", a single entity "And I am an arrow", a symbol of self-assertion, speed, effectiveness and sharpness and definiteness of direction. This involves a powerful sense of transcendence and marks the victory over suffering and death; yet the destination is death and rebirth.

There are also other equally important poems of her final phase, where Plath confronts death more directly, such as "Death & Co.," "Contusion", "Edge", and "Words". Like "A Birthday Present", "Death & Co.," converts an ordinary human encounter into a metaphor for death. Visited in her hospital bed by two acquaintances, the speaker envisions them as two faces of death as Plath herself said:

This poem is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death – the marmoreal coldness of Blake’s death mark, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water, and other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends, who have come to call. (*CP* 294)

The two human figures destroy life in different ways. The first figure is literally voracious and icy; he eats people: “I am red meat. His beak / Claps side wise...” (*CP* 254). The second is seductive and fatal, a “Dickinsonian kindly chauffer turned seedy exhibitionist” (*Blessing* 63). He is a pure narcissist: “Bastard / Masturbating a glitter...”(*CP* 254). But the speaker is not attracted to either of these faces of death and simply notes their existence as if it were “perfectly natural”. The poem ends, however, with a brilliant vision that death is as common and daily an occurrence as the dew on the grass or the frost on the window pane. It is as beautiful as the dew and as icy as the frost. Hence, the poem is one of Plath’s extended metaphors for the reality of death which is the only passage to rebirth. It is not as A. Alvarez would have it, a poem of suicide (31).

The poet’s mood of indifference and weariness with life reaches its culmination in “Words”; one of Plath’s most brilliant but also one of her

most despairing statements. The relationship between death and art forms the essential subject of the poem. Poems are “words” that ride off, away from the original act of thought that gave birth to them. The poet’s self and her language are separated from each other and after several years, a piece of writing may no longer be recognizable to its author. Rather than preserving the self, language may thus make us aware of our distance from ourselves:

Years later I
Encounter them on the road –
Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.

(*CP* 270)

The final image suggests that an objective factor operates within the self and controls it: “From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars/Govern a life” (*CP* 270). The poem, thus defines Plath’s fundamental sense of doom and fatality. The hand of the dead rules the living, and language cannot overcome the primordial disturbance created in the self by the consciousness of the dead and death. Rosenblatt puts it, “By presenting these personal conceptions of language and death in highly elliptical image sequence, Plath creates a stark but beautiful image of her fate” (139). Plath’s calm

acceptance of her fate becomes obvious in “Contusion”, written just a week earlier than her suicide. The blow to the body causing an injury in the form of a contusion symbolizes the painful experience of life itself. The speaker internalizes the entire hurt feelings, though bleeds below the surface and accepts death with a sense of resignation as it is the only act which brings purgation:

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirror sheeted.

(CP 271).

“Edge”, the very last poem of the *Ariel* provides a ritual setting for a suicidal drama, where Plath specifies the symbolic setting for her death. “Edge” presents the view of a dead mother and her children locked in a final embrace. The real end comes when the woman, torn throughout life by too many fears, is “perfected” in death and her body “wears the smile of accomplishment” (CP 272). Though the title suggests a point of no return, the woman crosses over to the dangerous edge of life into the eternal calm of death, the final act of salvation for which she has purified herself in “Fever

103”’. Purged of all the fury of fearful existence, the woman welcomes death in a touching but impassive tone:

Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

(CP 272)

Completion and perfection are frequently negative aspects in Plath’s oeuvre, expressed explicitly in poems like “Berck Plage” and “The Munich Mannequins. In “Edge” for the first time, there is no sense of dismissal. She accepts perfection in death, as it is futile to think of escaping from it, or attacking it and thus the poem ends on a note of finality. However, as perfection means sterility to Plath, so the speaker has “folded” her children back into her body as smoothly and protectively as petals of rose close at sunset. The death presented as a ritual in the poem occurs under the eye of an internalized object, a cold mother, who is “used to this sort of thing.” Plath has thus envisioned her death in the same landscape and setting that characterized her poems as far back as *The Colossus*.

“Edge” finally serves as “the concluding tableau”, the last scene of the tragic drama (Kroll 144). The tranquil composure of death in the woman’s body is tell-tale eventually of the resolve in the poet’s mind – a resolve that would be translated into real death all too soon. The woman who had suffered through-out her life now attains an invaluable status unmarred by any oppressive force. It is such a resigned and detached attitude to that distinguishes Plath from others. In Charles Newman’s apt formulation: “The only difference between the artists and people like me, is that the artists watch themselves die, while we are dead before we know it” (53).

Ariel must be read as several chapters of a creative autobiography, written by a woman whose purpose in the last years of her life was to come to terms with the various female roles and identities into which she was split. It is full of wrong leads, frustrated efforts, obscure and private battles that attest to the difficulties she had to face and to the energy she expended on them. Her final poetic accomplishment was not to transcend these hardships, but to face them directly and to leave a record of that confrontation.

The sense of menace that looms large in the entire Plath oeuvre acquires a new significance in the poems of this period. Horror and hysteria which were till then a part of the exterior landscape, is internalized and these

converge on the drama within, with herself as their victim. The dark undercurrent of her experience becomes a fierce passion and a terrible beauty is born. There is no aesthetic distancing anymore, no distinction between poetry and life. The suppressions of *The Colossus* give way to the fiery revelations of the *Ariel*. In her early poems Plath stood outside, drawing caricatures not only of madness, but also of hysterical sanity. But now her characters speak for themselves, in caricatures, parody, and hyperbole, not as vehicles of judgement, but as inevitable methods of performances. The poet not only imagines herself to be, but becomes Lady Lazarus and the Virgin of “Mary’s Song”, bearing her Christ into this “heart / this holocaust I walk in” (CP 257). In the image of the rising lioness, the Virgin, the red comet, she identifies a female figure, violent enough to triumph in a world where the woman is reduced to a jade statue.

CONCLUSION

Darkness sometimes finds the light
And joy can interface the night,
Lonely prophets turn to dust,
Their vision left behind.

– Lynne Salop

Since her death, and more especially since the publication of her *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath has become a legendary figure, generating myriad responses about her work particularly in conjunction with her personal concerns. The woman, who learned her craft of poetry in the hard way, has in turn become a muse in her own right. As more and more of her writing becomes available, the response of readers from different generations also changes considerably, though the central image of the woman poet who died young remains intact. Jon Rosenblatt remarks, “No recent body of American poetry has produced as strongly divided response among its readers as Sylvia Plath’s. One obvious reason for the conflicting opinions about her work lies in the sensational extra literary aspects of her suicide” (141).

This study has attempted through a close and chronological analysis of the work of Sylvia Plath to arrive at the conclusion, that Plath in her poetic career basically appears to prefigure many central feminist issues in her work, and as a poet she explores universal themes from a uniquely female perspective. In examining the fragmentation of the self, the loss of innocence, and roles of daughter, wife, and mother, Plath confronts, themes of patriarchal entrapment and subsequent victimization. However, through the creation of compelling and unique images and through the evolution of her female themes, Plath at the close of her poetic career emerges out with a voice proper to her own potentiality which is basically a feminist voice.

A woman's self-exploration leads her to the discovery that she is the product of a culture in the making of which or in its making of her, she has no part. Her true identity is smothered by patriarchal culture through assigning her experience to the margins of existence. To salvage the self, to quest for the essence of her existence and to become conscious of what she has lost, it becomes imperative that she should redeem and reinstate her experience as a woman, with which alone she can acquire the autonomy over her being. The realization triggers off a journey into the recesses of her being and like a phoenix she is reborn. It is this struggle for self-realisation

that becomes the text of most women writers. The prime concern of this dissertation has been to view Plath as a significant member of this female tradition, as in her explorative journey to the centre of her being, Plath traverses a new field of literary and subjective experience to confront and come to terms with the changing notions of the feminine.

The woman as quester, finds herself trapped between two worlds, one external and regressive, of which she is a passive object, the other inner yet dynamic struggling to break through. Hence, a woman writer's task is twofold. She has to break through the encapsulating and circumscribing self-linked taboos, to deconstruct the identity she has received from the patriarchal culture, risking an existential conflict between the self and the social and cultural structures. Simultaneously she has to engage in the process of unravelling what she understands to be her real self, relative to her social role. She explores the possibility of a new self not only in the denial of the self moulded by the patriarchal society, but through an affirmation of positive values that have been ignored.

The continuous process of evolution which starts at the birth of a human being makes Erich Fromm remark, "The whole life of the individual is nothing but a process of giving birth to himself" (26). Similarly, the

whole of Plath's poetic career can be viewed, as nothing but a conscious attempt at self-definition, a quest for an authentic self and voice proper to herself, which in the final stage assumes a feminist tone. An examination of the successive stages in Sylvia Plath's development towards a feminist consciousness shows that, her attitude and reaction at each stage vary significantly. There is a slow but steady growth in such a consciousness; to be precise, its nature is predominantly evolutionary, becoming overt and explicit in the final phase of her poetic break through. Hence, a statement of the evolutionary nature of Plath's feminist sensibility will be in every respect, a fitting finale to the discourse concerned, as it sums up the major findings of this dissertation.

An analysis of the early stage in Plath's development towards a feminist consciousness shows her to have a less clear vision of the woman's predicament. Her single-minded pursuit of personal excellence never gave her breathing space to observe the typical woman in society. There was something wrong yet unidentifiable in her mother – once as ambitious and talented as herself – living from hand to mouth, allowing her identity and individuality to be swallowed up by the requirements of domesticity. Plath's early poems are so totally free of this disturbing presence that the early and later works look as if they were written by two different poets.

Her apprentice poems, belonging to the period 1950-56, had in them no sign of what was to come. As has been already mentioned, they were mere exercises in poetic diction and traditional stanza forms with complex metrical schemes. Though she attempts to create a paradise out of art, she is also aware of the presence of corruption, death and despair, which she hopes to overcome by restraint. Though she experiences a sense of doom, it is never allowed to go beyond control. In such poems where she deviates from life, the general feeling expressed is that life is not at all good, that there is a negative evil presence somewhere at close proximity, yet evading identification. As Pashupati Jha says: "The poems of this phase are the work of an aspiring but self-conscious neophyte.... The zeal of a youthful mind dominates the suffering persona, and formal design covers up the thin surface of experience" (111).

The poems of *The Colossus*, written during the first three years of her marriage, were not contrived or self-conscious as those of the early years. Casting aside the protective shield provided by her literary precursors, Plath scales new heights of literary perfection. As with the increase in technical skill, Plath's sense of the other, the negative evil presence which evaded identification in the earlier phase, becomes more intense and objectified.

Death and corruption, hinted at earlier, become abiding presences and gradually move to the thematic centre of the poems. Death or suicide becomes an obsession with the poet as it is the common theme for a number of poems, which begin in a conventional tone describing pastoral settings, suddenly deflect into darkness and muted hysteria.

As has been already stated during the discussion of the poems of this phase concerned, though exposed to an alarming and almost annihilating awareness of the 'other' in external realities, yet the poet is not yet able to paraphrase the sense of menace which she identifies on the unconscious level. However, the knowledge of her own self as vulnerable and fragile causes to experience anguish and alienation, leading finally to a fascination for death, the key to self-transformation, which is the ultimate goal of the poet.

The pinpointing of the masculine as a source of violent destructive force is a development noticeable towards the fag-end of the transitional phase of Plath's poetic output. As has been already pointed out, the feeling that the persona is surrounded by forces of violence and agents of doom has been there from the very early poems, though identification of the source comes only late. The poet's growth towards maturity is marked by her

recognition of man's contribution towards creating a world of nightmare. She realizes with a shock that man absorbs into his psyche the forces of domination offered to him by the invisible ideological realm. This shift in perception is very well demonstrated in her attitude towards where she locates the alien and threatening forces. What she locates in the early poems as alien and threatening are internalized here.

The poet's introduction to such monstrous state of affairs is indicated by a noticeable change in style. The sensitivity of Plath's style and imagery which bears the imprint of every emotional change of direction is something that distinguishes her from almost all other feminist poets. While treating the problem of the victimizer, a favourite topic for feminist writers, if Plath does not fall into the pitfall of becoming a propagandist, it is because her poetry's substance is mainly made up of the imagistic and stylistic translations of her emotional reactions to a social situation, rather than a clinical analysis of it. In the poems of this stage, there is a noticeable change in Plath's style which becomes more frightening and fluent. The cadences shorten towards brief lines of concentrated violence, which shock the reader by the remarkable ease with which they move.

The final frenzied phase of writing follows, coinciding with a period of four months preceding the poet's death in February 1963. In this period of extraordinarily brilliant output, there comes still another change in the manner of her poems, as has been already mentioned, indicative of the utter clarity of her final vision of the masculine and feminine contributions towards the making of the oppressor, as well as how to liberate her self and achieve transcendence from the oppressive social evils. "Poetically, she becomes as fierce and scathing in her rage as a Byron" and in the quality of this expression of rage against men, which sometimes escalates to a hatred of their oppressive power has led a number of feminists to claim Plath as a major, spokeswoman for their cause (Jha 112).

Plath's expressed attitudes in any volume of her poetry, especially *Ariel*, do indeed lend credence to this view. As has been already stated, in majority of the poems of her final phase, Plath portrays woman as man's prey, tormented beyond endurance by what she perceives as his impossible expectations. To be sure, the materials and the texture of male oppression are vividly rendered not only in her poetry, but also in her prose. Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar*, as has been already mentioned, may be seen, to a point as the quintessential victim of a male-dominated society. Her confusion and breakdown result from her inability to integrate the

conventional wisdom which has been externally imposed upon her with her most basic personal instincts.

The most striking difference in the poems of this phase lies in the nature of imagery employed. Frightening images from the world of man are superimposed on the world of nature, giving it a quality of inescapable menace. Words simply burn on paper as Plath speaks daggers to the dehumanizing oppressive forces. Hence, ... “the intense emotional content of her poems... evoke awe even in those readers who only partially understand them” (Barnard 13). Thus, “the most impressive and horrifying fact about these last poems is that they were written at all, that the creative mind could articulate and organize mental conflicts of such intensity” (Jones 22). Conflicts of such intensity do generate strength and hence, the last poems of Plath become an incarnation of pure performing energy, “adrenalin shooting around” (Ostriker 201). The exquisite beauty of these rare poems stimulate interest, exhilarate imagination, and exhort admiration.

Since the attitude towards men which emerges from her writing is a love-hate relationship, the destruction of her male oppressors requires also the destruction of her own self. The only way for the speaker of her poems to deny the male victimizer, the only way not to be a victim is to reject or

destroy him altogether. But in doing so – in refusing to be a “Living doll” – she places herself in an equally impossible position, victimizing herself. She too is condemned to an equally hateful existence of solitariness and loneliness. Death and love go together and when love becomes betrayal, what remains is only death. The need for unconditional love inevitably lead to figurative or actual death. The woman finally joins her murdered lover-oppressor in death.

For the wholesomeness of the argument of the thesis of the study concerned, it is also imperative to consider the critical position that, to tag Plath a feminist is critically lazy, or that Plath has little in her to endorse the feminist cause. Instances of humdrum feminine conventional roles which a woman is almost condemned to fulfil in any century, consequent upon social conventions, are culled out and analysed in conjunction with Plath’s personal life in a magnifying manner to drive this point home. Hence, her sense of vulnerability, her rush into marriage, her concern for children, her fear for barrenness and widowhood are poised as impregnable fortification to resist Plath’s treading into the arena of feminist concerns. Though the argument is seemingly convincing and almost cogent, it fails to escape the label of the Lemon Squeezers’ school of critical thought.

However, an equally cogent and perhaps more convincing counter argument to the dilemma can be offered. Plath's domestic submissiveness or conjugal submission and the exhibiting of domestic energy emanated basically from her perfectionist tendency, the habit established in her early life of devoting her full energies to the performing of any task set before her. As far as the institution of marriage is concerned, Plath's freedom to set priorities for her *own* marriage was limited by her earlier background and conditioning, as it specifically stemmed from the influence and example of her own mother. Birth imagery is an obsession in Plath's work and for her biological creativity is supplementary to artistic creativity. Children are considered as the extension of her own ego, and child birth, as has been already mentioned, the only meaningful biological activity to effectively counter the annihilating oppressive existential threats.

Plath's priorities in nuptial life, though may have been pre determined, she acted especially in the final phase of her poetic eruption, in ways consistent with her enlightened convictions. She did rebel from time to time and often resented the restrictions which her chosen wifely role imposed upon her. She regretted the fact that infant care with its attendant domestic duties left her little time to write. Perhaps the most significant measure of Plath's dissatisfaction with her conjugal situation was one of her responses to

its collapse. After her separation from her husband, she began to write poems, daily, urgently – as she said, as if domesticity had choked her. However, stretching these factors further, will appear as harping on the same string, as much to this effect has already been dealt with in the body of the discourse.

Ellen Moers, referring to Plath, wrote in *Literary Women*. “No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement” (xv). Linda Wagner points this out as a “shorthand of acknowledging this kind of generation of images that meant more than their literal significance” (36). Pamela Annas in her essay on “The Social Context of Sylvia Plath’s Late Poems,” points out how “a dual kind of consciousness of self as subject as well as object is characteristic of the proletarian writer in his...perception of his relation to a decadent past, a dispossessed present, and a Utopian future” (134). In Plath’s case she argues that the foreshortening of the historical consciousness, the inability to develop a consciousness in relation to the past and future beyond her own lifetime affects her accounting of herself as object, in the absence of which subject and object becoming functions of each other could result in a kind of entrapment of the individual (134). On the other hand, Plath’s images show how they represent her attempt to

extricate the woman of today from the woman of yesterday, so that she can grow into the woman of the future.

In the final analysis, one has all the right as there are ample evidences in her work, to feel that Plath, at the fag-end of her poetic career, as if to immortalize title of her very last poem– “Edge” – was at the edge of conscious feminist awareness – that she might, had she lived longer, have been able to build from the wreckage of her marriage a self-reliant, clearly feminist point of view. This should not be dismissed as mere conjecture, as has been already pointed out by Linda Wagner:

There is a mystery about the Plath oeuvre.... Her journals of the last three years of her life are not available. Several collections of materials are housed in the Smith Library Plath Collection, sealed until either the year 2013 or the year of the deaths of both her mother and her younger brother, Plath’s last novel, titled *Double Exposure*, has never been found, though 130 pages of it ...were known to exist at the time of her death.

(21)

The year 2013 is not a distant future and the Smith Library Plath Collection will definitely be unlocked, and the figure emerges from the stony sleep can definitely be a fully conformed feminist figure of Sylvia Plath. Until then, “the echoes” of her work will be still “traveling”/Off from the centre like horses”, producing myriad responses and one such response is this humble attempt.

APPENDIX

1. Review of Plath Criticism

It was nearly seven years after her death that the first major effort in Plath-criticism was taken up by Charles Newman, who edited and published a collection of essays in book form with 282 pages, entitled, *the Act of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (1970). It contains essays of the early prominent trend-setters in Plath-critical school as A. Alvarez, Mr. L. Rosenthal, Anne Sexton, Stephan Spender, Ted Hughes, George Steiner, A.R. Jones and Mary Kinzie. The basic critical attitude of all these biographical, textual and even bibliographical essays was favourable to Plath. There was almost a convenient ignoring of her negative aspects and most of these essays even today maintain the tone of authority as far as Plath-criticism is concerned.

The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes (1972) by Melander Ingrid is the first book-length study on Plath and the prime concern of the text is a discussion of the major themes in Plath's poetry. Her attitude

towards nature, death and the image of her father are discussed in some detail. The writing is lucid and terse and makes an easy reading. Eileen Airds' *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work* (1973) provides a lengthy discussion on Plath's poetry and the novel. The book commences with a biographical and critical introduction which outlines Plath's career and ends with a few comments on the influences of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Theodore Roethke on her work. Plath's use of imagery and her two dominant images the 'sea' and the 'moon' - are also discussed. The attempt is more of textual nature than biographical.

The first remarkable memoir on Plath, Nancy Hunter Steiner's *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (1973), is a vivid and touchy record of the author's friendship with Plath at Smith College and during one summer at Harvard. The book ends with her reaction to Plath's death and an introduction of considerable length by George Stade is an attractive and valuable asset to the book.

Though in 1976, three book-length studies on Plath arrived almost simultaneously, they in many respects were not so balanced appraisals. Edward Butscher's "gossipy, over simplifying critical biography," *Sylvia*

Plath: Method and Madness, is at best cursory in its criticism and though it is the first full biography of Plath, nowhere captures the poet (Lane x).

In his *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, David Holbrook approaches Plath phenomenologically. Gary Lane observes, “Holbrook’s reductive psychoanalytic study... conceals its occasional insights among a forest of Freudian trees; there are so many more pricks than kicks that we lose track of the kicks almost entirely” (x). *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* is a mythical interpretation of Plath by Judith Kroll, where she examines Plath’s work as literature and rejects her suicide as irrelevant.

Edward Butscher’s a collection of critical essays, *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* was published in 1977. The first part is an account of reminiscences and the second part contains certain brilliant critical essays. Since both the parts are not properly linked with any concluding remarks “the woman” remains apart from “the work”. The first book in Plath-criticism appeared in 1978 is Caroline King Barnard’s *Sylvia Plath*. While the author maintains that Plath’s early poetry was amateur, it contains all the concerns and themes expressed more expertly in the later poems.

Gary Lane's and Maria Steven's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1978) contains both primary and secondary sources and a chronology of Plath's work according to dates of publication. *Suisong* (1978) by Lynne Salop, highly subjective in approach, examines the connections between suicide and creativity. She offers an overview of several artists who committed suicide at the height of their creativity and the list extends from Virginia Woolf to Anne Sexton.

A collection of critical essays, "*Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (1979) published by Gary Lane discusses Plath's romanticism, contemporary relevance, spirituality, melodrama, comedy, techniques, and structures and medusian imagery. Some of these essays deliberately refrain from the usual persistent praise and voice balanced judgment. Another book which steers clear off biographical obsession of Plath-criticism and analyses many of her poems by applying the concept of 'initatory structure' is that of Jon Rosenblatt's *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (1979). He expresses his strong contention that Plath was influenced by Paul Radin's *African Folktale and Sculptures*. A comparative study of the creative output of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and the mutual influence between them is the crux

of the matter of the book *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1979) by Margaret D. Uroff.

In *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (1980) Mary Lyne Broe focuses on the critical analysis of all Plath's work published up to that time. She is highly critical of "biography sleuths and psychological speculator" and proposes to "demythologize Plath" through "a close and careful examination of themes and techniques rather than the lurid details of her life" (7). Lynda K. Bundtzen's *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (1983), a combination of biographical and textual approaches is quite a comprehensive text which deals with her relationships to her father, mother, and husband. Her study is backed up by psychoanalytical theories as formulated and interpreted by feminist thinkers.

Perhaps one of the largest collected essays edited and published on Plath must be Linda W. Wagner's *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (1984) with an introduction, in which the editor presents an overview of twenty years of Plath-criticism. There are more than thirty essays in this collection dealing with various aspects of Plath oeuvre. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath* (1985), a collection of essays edited and published with an

introduction by Paul Alexander, includes the voices of A. Alvarez, Ted Hughes, and Auralia Scober Plath. The editor was very particular in including only those essays which avoided sensationalizing the poet's life and death and instead examined the craft of her poetry and prose.

The year 1987 witnessed the publication of two remarkable and ambitious accounts on Plath. Susan Bassnett's *Sylvia Plath* begins with an overview of Plath's life and work. The importance of family, of love, of husband-worship, of domestic crisis are some of the themes discussed. This cute account is straightforward in style and constitutes easy reading. Of the six biographies of Plath written to date, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987) by Linda Wagner Martin, discusses the significance of Plath's death and her relationship with her mother which are deeply connected to the poet's long battle with emotional problems. "The chief interest of this book... is its preface in which Wagner-Martin boldly speaks out about her unhappy dealings with the Plath estate" (Malcolm 24-25).

Pamela J. Annas' *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (1988) traces the way in which Plath's poetry grows out of the conflicts and paradoxes the poet experienced within herself. The author is of

the staunch conviction that much of her work is an exercise in redefinition of her self. At the outset Annas deals with the socio-cultural background of America during the poetic productive period of Sylvia Plath.

The biggest collection of critical essays, *Sylvia Plath : The Critical Heritage* (1988) was edited and published by Linda W. Wagner includes most of the essays published in her previous collection of 1984. The most attractive aspect of the collection may be perhaps a detailed introduction by the editor which deals with an overview of criticism on each of Plath's published volumes of poetry and fiction.

In Plath-critical tradition the 90s earmarked the emergence of a number of biographical studies, which all steered towards the direction of independent assessment. Janet Malcolm puts it, "Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world"(9). Though an endeavour to this effect was commenced by Anne Stevenson in her *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989), she was brutally attacked for maintaining a sympathetic stand about Hughes and his associates. Her open confession in the preface that, "Any biography of Sylvia Plath written during the lifetime of her family

and friends must take their vulnerability into consideration, even if completeness suffers from it,” was considered by the biography-loving public as a gross injustice from a true biographer (2).

The only significant book-length study on Plath appeared in 1990 is *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Wound* by Steven Gould Axelrod. It is an inner narrative of the poet’s life and work. Combining psychoanalytic, feminist and inter-textual methods the author traces what Roland Barthes has called “the body’s journey through language”. He also explores the way in which her father, mother and the literary figures including her husband influenced her and how she transferred these experiences into her texts.

Rough Magic: A Biography of Plath (1991) by Paul Alexander is very special in as much as it is the first book of its nature to be published without any censorship of Plath’s estate. In the preface the author speaks at length about his troubles in publishing the unauthorized biography. The book deals in details with Plath’s early life and gives a graphic account of her death and her transfiguration after death, always consciously trying to portray Ted Hughes with his negative aspect prominent, so much so that his punishment

by a biography was raised to a new level of excruciation. Janet Malcolm puts it, “Alexander’s book is the prize negative example” (165).

Ronald Hayman’s *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (1991) written in the same vein as that of Alexander’s *Rough Magic*, portrays an uncensored explanation of how Plath’s deep-seated death-wish, combined with the cruel circumstances of the last four months of her life, ultimately led to her demise. Here too, the copy right control exercised by Ted Hughes over her literary estate is brought under critical lenses and Hayman plays the sport of tearing off Hughes’ wings by publishing “above-and below stairs gossip about his relations with Assia Wevill before and after Plath’s death” (Malcolm, 165). He presents Plath as a cult figure of her generation and offers incisive insights into her agony and her work, always poising the inevitability of her death.

Amidst the sound and fury of there controversial biographies, a textual study of Plath was published by an Indo-Anglian writer Pashupati Jha, namely *Sylvia Plath : The Fear and Fury of Her Muse* (1991). The book attempts, “through a close and chronological analysis of Plath’s work to delineate the dominant emotion of fear and her response to it...” (Jha 15).

The approach here is primarily textual, which had been facilitated by the publication of Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981). Though the author claims that it is an unbroken ground, "A great deal has been written about Plath and fear... analysed as the logical reaction on her part to the cruelty and harshness of the world" (Rose 34). However, Jha argues the point out in his own way.

A Critical Study of the Birth Imagery of Sylvia Plath, American Poet 1932-1963 (1992), by David John Wood is a study that has grown out of Plath's poetry and her only novel and it reflects both the sense of responsibility and of accomplishment that motherhood brings. The writer also discusses the problems inherent in any approach that involves too much of the elements of a writer's biography. He remarks, "Perhaps the hardest task in any reading of Sylvia Plath is to establish a balanced relationship between the writing and the life" (1).

The year 1992 witnessed the publication of the fifth biography on Plath by Jacqueline Rose, a critic of distinction and originality, who too in the eyes of the Hugheses, "was just another member of the pack of Ted Hughes' tormentors and pursuers, and they fought the publication of *The*

Haunting of Sylvia Plath with their usual clumsy fierceness” (Malcolm 175). The work has an intellectual shimmer as Rose carefully mounted her polemic on the Hughes on the frame work of deconstructive, psychoanalytic and feminist ideology. Reading passages from poetry and prose, she illuminates links between the sexual, political and personal in Plath’s work. “...she speaks for the dead poet and against Hughes in a way no other writer has done” (Malcolm 176).

Revising Life (1993) by Susan R. Van Dyne, one of the latest book-length works on Plath deals with the fact that revising life was a personal and poetic need for Sylvia Plath and this is most evident in the twenty-five poems of the *Ariel* collection, written in the turbulent last six months of her life. By examining the massive manuscript evidence for these poems, the author reveals the startling complexity of their gestation and revision from first draft to final form and through the process portrays Plath as a resourceful creator and self-conscious critic of her own work. She comments, “In her poetry Plath’s goal was to rewrite her life; in her practice...we can understand how she also revised the very notion of ‘woman’ ”(5).

The last of the six biographies written on Plath to date, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994) by Janet Malcolm is distinct in many respects, in as much as that it reprises the Plath biographic wars and updates the combatants. The book deals with her musings on biography as vehicle for set pieces and aporias, the notion of Plath's silence and the assessment of the five Plath biographies and their critical acumen. The work which can be read as a travelogue – the graphic description of her extensive journeys in England to meet those associated with Plath – also mentions the important memoirs on Plath by people like Nancy Hunter Steiner, A Alvarez, Elizabeth Compton, Clarissa Roche, Ed Cohen and Trevor Thomas. The portrait of the tragic poet that emerges from this work is totally unique from those of the other biographies.

2. Chronological List of Poems Referred to

(Each poem is preceded by the number assigned to it in *The Collected Poems*.)

1957:

- 49 “Hardcastle Craggs”
- 60 “The Disquieting Muses”

1958:

- 74 “Sculptor”
- 75 “Full Fathom Five”
- 76 “Lorelei”

1959:

- 97 “A Winter Ship”
- 100 “Suicide off Egg Rock”
- 102 “Metaphors”
- 103 “Electra on Azalea Path”
- 104 “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”
- 113 “The Manor Garden”
- 117 “The Colossus”
- 119 “Poem for a Birthday”
- 120 “The Burnt-out Spa”
- 121 “Mushrooms”

1960:

- 122 “You’re”
- 124 “Stillborn”

- 126 "Sleep in the Mojave Desert"
127 "Two Campers in Cloud Country"
128 "Leaving Early"
129 "Love Letter"
130 "Magi"
131 "Candles"

1961:

- 134 "Parliament Hill Fields"
135 "Whitsun"
136 "Zoo Keeper's Wife"
137 "Face Lift"
138 "Morning Song"
139 "Barren Woman"
140 "Heavy Women"
141 "In Plaster"
142 "Tulips"
143 "I am Vertical"
144 "Insomniac"
145 "Widow"
146 "Stars Over the Dordogne"
147 "The Rival"
148 "Wuthering Heights"
149 "Blackberrying"
150 "Finisterre"
151 "The Surgeon at 2 a.m."
152 "Last Words"
153 "The Moon and the Yew Tree"
154 "Mirror"

155 "The Baby-sitters"

1962:

157 "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices"

158 "Little Fugue"

159 "An appearance"

160 "Crossing the Water"

161 "Among the Narcissi"

162 "Pheasant"

163 "Elm"

164 "The Rabbit Catcher"

165 "Event"

166 "Apprehensions"

167 "Berck-Plage"

168 "The Other"

169 "Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone"

170 "Poppies in July"

171 "Burning the Letters"

172 "For a Fatherless Son"

173 "A Birthday Present"

174 "The Detective"

175 "The Courage of Shutting-up"

176 "The Bee Meeting"

177 "The Arrival of the Bee Box"

178 "Stings"

179 "The Swarm"

180 "Wintering"

182 "The Applicant"

183 "Daddy"

184	“Medusa”
185	“The Jailer”
186	“Lesbos”
188	“Fever 103°”
189	“Amnesiac”
190	“Lyonnse”
191	“Cut”
192	“By Candlelight”
193.	“The Tour”
194	“Ariel”
195	“Poppies in October”
196	“Nick and the Candlestick”
197.	“Purdah”
198	“Lady Lazarus”
199	“The Couriers”
200	“Getting There”
201	“The Night Dances”.
202	“Gulliver”
203	“Thalidomide”
204	“Letter in November”
205	“Death & Co.”
206	“Years”
208	“Mary’s Song”
209	“Winter Trees”
210	“Brasilia”
211	“Childless Woman”
1963:	
213	“Sheep in Fog”
214	“The Munich Mannequins”

215	“Totem”
216	“Child”
217	“Paralytic”
218	“Gigolo”
219	“Mystic”
220	“Kindness”
221	“Words”
222	“Contusion”
223	“Balloons”
224	“Edge”

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