



DECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL ISSUES IN PLATH'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing selected Sylvia Plath's poems with reference to Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. Deconstructive analysis of Plath's poems reveals certain cultural issues. Culture encompasses all aspects of human life. It refers to the language, social

habits, religion, cuisine, and art of a particular group of people. Edward Said views culture as "the learned accumulated experience of communities, and it consists of socially transmitted patterns of behavior" (qtd in Said 21). Matthew Arnolds has described aesthetic sense of culture in his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1867). To him, culture means special intellectual or artistic enterprise or products. Arnolds' definition of culture makes it clear that a special group of society has culture while the rest are means of anarchy. As compared to Arnolds' view of culture, Tylor gives a more comprehensive definition of culture. Tylor asserts that all people being members of society have culture (qtd in Avruch 6). Sylvia Plath was well aware of the political and cultural development of her times and the cultural milieu manifests itself through her art. The research paper is aimed at to bring out multiplicity of meanings as they emerge in Plath's poetry in the light of the theory of deconstruction. It further shows how deconstruction opens up space for multiple interpretations.

KEYWORDS: Culture; Language; Racism; Individualism.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims at deconstructive analysis of Sylvia Plath's poems. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is one of the most outstanding and well-known leading figures of twentieth-century American literature and culture. Although in her lifetime, she published only one collection

of poems, *The Colossus*, and one novel, *The Bell Jar*, the posthumous publication of the magnificent poems of *Ariel*, of her edgy and finely crafted stories and sketches, and of her *Letters Home* and *Journals* have secured her position as one of her age's most important and influential writers. Woodrow declares Plath America's most distinguished poet since Emily Dickinson.

From quite early she began to bring her poems into a prospective collection, which at various times she presented to publishers. There are three phases of Plath's poetry. The first phase is termed as "juvenilia" phase ranges from 1950 to 1955. It includes 220 poems. The juvenilia poems were published in magazines, while others survived in typed copies. These deal with the themes of feminist, political and psychological concerns. These are not regarded her best poems. The second phase is from 1955 to late 1960. The poems *The Colossus and Other Poems* appeared in this period are included in the first collection. William Heinemann published these poems. By this time, Plath has married Hughes and shifted to England which would prove the setting for her new burst of creativity. Under the influence of her teacher and mentor, Robert Lowell, some of these poems included in the category of confessional poetry. These depict her personal trauma and social issues.

The third stage starts from 1960 and continues till her suicide in 1963. This collection is named "Ariel" that marked Plath's reputation as a poetic genius. *Ariel* comprises of some of Plath's most famous poems: "Daddy," "Ariel," "Lady Lazarus," "Contusion," "Edge," "Sheep in Fog," "Tulips," and "Medusa". It attracts many critics and achieves enormous critical success. There is a lot of emotional intensity and psychological perturbation in these poems. By the time of her death, in February 1963, Sylvia Plath had written a large bulk of poetry. She wrote poetry with the perfection of an artisan by driving something if not a lot of things from the available material. *The Bell Jar* is her semi-autobiographical and only full-length novel, originally published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" in 1963.

When Plath opened her eyes D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Graves, James Joyce, William Carlos William, Virginia Woolf and W.B. Yeats were the literary giants. The works of these writers particularly T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden left a strong influence on Plath's poetic style. Her maturity came with the confessional mode of poetry for which she owed to Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton greatly.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To carry out the analytical and textual analysis of Sylvia Plath's poems, the researcher has applied Derridean Deconstructive Theory. Derridean Deconstructive theory is a vast field. Deconstruction is a post-modern and post-structuralist phenomenon. It was criticism on structuralism. If Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism emphasizes the fixity of meanings, deconstruction focuses on the plurality of meanings that is the instability of meanings. According to this theory, there is no certain or stable meanings in the text rather meanings lie in the reader's interpretation of the text. For Derrida, deconstruction is also a "structuralist gesture" because it is concerned with the structure of texts. Moreover, it stems from the contradiction within the texts. The analysis of the texts focuses on issues highlighted by the poet in her poetry. Hugh J. Silverman stresses a theoretical position somewhere between hermeneutic semiology and deconstruction. Silverman considered Heidegger and Derrida, who are the representatives of deconstruction theory, the main sources of textual authority. He seems to emphasize that the reinterpretation or rereading of any work of art must serve within the space of differences. In the last 50 years, when criticism of the text was related to the objective and the subjective approach to the literary work, Silverman presents the solution that the interpretation must respond to a legitimate openness within the texts. Thus Deconstruction helps the readers and the researchers in covering the spaces within the texts.

Language

Language is the major aspect of culture. Johnson (1781) says that language is the dress of thought. Language is inclined to highlight or diminish the impact of things. It is not only the medium of communication, but also one of the essential forms of expression of culture. People use language to express, create, interpret meanings and this creation, interpretation of meanings is done within the cultural framework. Ngugi argues in one of his interviews that language carries the burden of culture, the culture reflects the people's values which serve as the basis of a people's self-definition or their consciousness. Culture and language are strongly correlated. People are the product of culture and they express themselves through the language. Chinua Achebe and Derek Walcott are the products of African culture, Ahmad Ali of Delhi culture, Toni Morrison and Allen Ginsberg of American culture. They express their culture through the medium of language in their remarkable works. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Walcott in *Dreams on the Monkey Mountains*, Ahmad Ali in *Twilight in Delhi*, Morrison in *Jazz* and Ginsberg in his poem "America" wonderfully expressed their cultures by means of their languages. Sylvia Plath, being the product of American culture, employed

such language in her poems as reflected her American culture. Deconstruction of some of her poems reveals that the language used in these is really the carrier of culture of her age.

One interpretation of the poem “The Applicant” deals with the artificiality of the age. The line “Do you wear A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, (Plath 221)” highlights the hypocrisy of the age. People are not what they seem to be. They are the hollow men similar to those presented in T.S. Eliot’s poem “Hollow Men”.

Another interpretation of the poem brings into light the traditional role of woman that is of household lady. She knows the art of sewing and cooking very well. She is immune to everything as suggested by the lines “It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof Against fire and bombs through the roof (Plath 221)”. Water, fire and bomb cannot affect her. She has to perform her duties through thick and thin.

Deconstructive analysis of the language of the same poem brings into limelight the debased position of the women.

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver, In fifty, gold.

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it (Plath 221).

According to English grammar, the word “it” is used for the non-living things, but in this poem it is utilized for the woman to emphasize her inferiority in the male-dominated American culture of the twentieth century. She will be silver and gold, according to her services at different stages of life. In fact, she is a living doll that can do anything to please her master. The woman is associated with a doll to display her helplessness. Like the doll, she has no will of her own, no feelings, and no thinking. She is leading her life at the behest of her husband. In the given lines the woman is treated as a dehumanized creature as is clear in the usage of “it” for her. She has no individuality, no identity in the patriarchal culture. De Beauvoir (1949) professes that one is not born a woman but is made woman by the socially drawn distinction between man and woman (283).

Deconstructive analysis of “Lady Lazarus” makes familiar with the violent language that gives the readers glimpses into the brutal history of the holocaust of the Jews. The language of her poems sometimes seems to be inspired by the violence present at that time.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin Bright as a Nazi lampshade, My right foot A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine Jew linen (Plath 244).

The lines convey the idea that the living Jews are no more than a miracle in such a havoc that was prevailing at her time. The poet's feelings about her skin shining like the Jews' skin remind the history. The Jews were not only being slaughtered, but their skins were employed in the lampshade used by the Nazis. The poet shares the feelings of the Jews when she feels that her feet are heavy and unable to move while her face has lost beauty as it is deprived of its distinctive aspects, but it is fine with the poet because she resembles Jew linen with all these physical attributes.

Deconstruction of the language of the poem "Daddy" imparts the aggression of the culture against the women.

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you (Plath222).

The violent language of these verses indicates the violence faced by the women of that time. The aim of the woman's life is to please and carry out her husband's instructions. The relationship between the two was that of the boss and the servant as suggested by the words like "boot" and "brute".

Deconstructive analysis of the language of the poem "Winter Trees" draws attention to the American culture where men and women freely mix up with one another and have dating. Both have extra marital affairs: "Memories growing, ring on ring, A series of weddings (Plath257)".

The language of the poem tells that women were not considered trustworthy. A senseless thing like a tree can be relied on rather than women. "Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery, Truer than women (Plath257)". Millet (1969) argues in her book *Sexual Politics* that the main cause of the oppression of women is the ideology overwhelmed by male and the whole literature has been shaped by the male ideology in which women are counted inferior universally (qtd. in Madsen 16).

The language of Plath's poems is a major component of her artistic strategy. It provides the readers the experience of the whole culture.

Racism

One interpretation of the poem "The Arrival of the Bee Box" deals with the mental perturbation of the poet. Her mental distraction is obvious in her comparison of a square box with a square baby.

Reinterpretation of the said poem brings into light another important cultural issue that is racism. There exists the binary opposition of the ruler versus the ruled or the oppressor versus the oppressed, the white versus the black. E.M. Forster claims in his essay "Tolerance" that the Americans have strong racial prejudice against the black. The speaker in the poem stands for the white and the bees are the representatives of the black in the American community. The speaker's tone is that of the owner, ruler or dictator. The poem starts with the overbearing tone "I ordered this (Plath 212)". The speaker's voice becomes threatening "They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner (Plath 212)". These lines bring to mind Josef Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" in which Marlow sees the black dying of disease and starvation due to the indifference of the white masters who are engaged in stealing the ivory in the Congo.

The line "The unintelligible syllables (Plath 212)" has double meanings. First the language of the black is alien to the white that's why they cannot grasp their native language and try to impose their own language on them. Because the white consider themselves superior to the black, hence their language is superior to theirs. Secondly, the black's slogans against the white's undue possession of their land and usurpation of their rights, become appalling to the oppressors or the white and they try to subdue their voices in this way "It is the noise that appalls me most of all".

But the anger of the black is multiplying day by day. "With the swamy feeling of African hands Black on black, angrily clambering (Plath 212)" tell that they cannot be browbeaten by anyone. The white or the oppressor are not willing to leave them or their country at any cost. "And I can't keep away from it (Plath 212)" because the resources there are very fascinating to them. Racism was the order of the day in Plath's time. Toni Morrison has described the ins and outs of this issue in her novel *Jazz* so did Plath as revealed by the deconstructive analysis of the above mentioned poem.

Individualism

Individualism is linked with enlightenment. Markella B. Rutherford defined individualism as autonomy, freedom, rights, justice, identity and ethics. John Dewey was concerned with the decline of old-fashioned individualism and the necessity to introduce new individualism that is in accordance with the recent trends. Friedman (1990) professes that the concept of individualism has gone through change. In nineteenth century, this concept was related to the public sphere of politics and economics while in twentieth century, this concept has shifted from the public to the private, concerning lifestyle and self-expression. In America, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass emerged as the greatest champions of robust individualism. Emerson in his essay “Self-Reliance” emphasizes that the individual must follow his own ideas and instincts and does not show any conformity with already established rules. The keyword of this essay is “Trust thyself”. Deconstruction of some pieces of Plath’s poetry illustrates individualism introduced by Emerson and Douglass. The very title of the poem “I Want, I Want” contains assertion of egoism. The very first word of the poem “Open-mouthed” refers to the expression of one’s ideas and shows out-spoken attitude of the speaker and his non-conformity with the fixed ideas and rules.

Frederick Douglass, in both *Narrative of the Life* and his later work *My Bondage and My Freedom*, has made it clear that an individual can challenge the entire institution with his inner will and strength. He comes out victorious in the long run. Rereading of the poem “Poppies in October” reveals the lost individuality of the speaker. The speaker, standing among the poppies and frost, asks for his individuality: “What am I (Plath 240)”. This type of search for identity is obvious in Elizabeth Sewell’s poem “New Year Resolution” in which the speaker asks himself “Who I am” and in Arthur Miller’s play “The Crucible” where John Proctor shouts out: “What is John Proctor”.

One angle of the poem “Morning Song” depicts the motherly feelings and affection. Mother is welcoming her newly born baby. Deconstruction of the definition poem highlights the theme of individuality. “I am no more your mother (Plath 156)” is a cry for individuality. Besides being a mother, the speaker has individuality. Being a poet, she has poetic impulses too. She cannot subdue her poetic ideas and needs time to vomit them out over the surface of the page. Craig Rain stated in the Times Literary Supplement, “Sylvia Plath is an example of the egotistical sublime: her subject is herself, her predicament, her violent romantic emotions (qtd. In Wilson 19)”. But Andrew Wilson considered Plath more abject than sublime.

CONCLUSION

An application of Derrida's theory of deconstruction to Plath's poetry brought into light new vistas of her poetry, of her personality, and of her age. Literature is the mirror of the society in which it is produced. Plath's art is not exceptional from this fact. The research paper revealed some significant cultural issues of Plath's time. The cultural issues that were brought forward by the deconstructive analysis of Plath's poetry are language, racism, and individualism. Language was an important cultural issue. Language is not only a means of communication, but also an instrument to reflect the culture of a particular nation or of a particular age. Deconstruction of some of Plath's poems exposed how Plath had utilized this tool to expose the debased position of a woman of her time and the violence in her age.

Racism was another cultural issue exposed by rereading of Plath's poetry. The troubles faced by the black or the colonized at the hands of the white or the colonizer were brought into limelight by the reinterpretation of her poetry. The colonizer intoxicated with their sense of superiority considered themselves benefactress to the colonized. They, so-called civilized people, occupied their country to loot and plunder the oppressed nations and exploit their resources under the pretension of making them civilized and cultured. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* and Josef Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* had exposed the malicious designs of the rulers or the colonizers clearly, so did Plath in her poems.

Individualism was another significant cultural issue. In the twentieth century there came a shift from collectivism to individualism. Restatement of the poems "I Want, I Want", "Morning Song", brought into light how Plath raised her potent voice in favour of this movement.

The study is significant as it brought into light new angles of interpretation of Plath's poetry and left room for further interpretations of the poems. It attracts the readers to explore new layers of meanings according to their understanding of the poems as the theory of deconstruction claims that there is no end of meanings. The meanings of the text can vary from person to person as they rely on the power of comprehension of the reader or the researcher and the various contexts.

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