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Existential angst in Sylvia Plath: A literary critique

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Abstract: This literary critique explores Sylvia Plath's existential angst as a feminist poet through the lenses of existentialism and existential feminism. Sylvia Plath was an American poet whose works are critically presented with references to her existential angst and feminism. It unleashes not only her agony at a private level but also portrays the anguish of women at large and of Holocaust victims. For the "I" voice of the speaker, she created the voice of the women with whom she shares solidarity. Plath effectively and cynically blends her existential anxiety with feminism to depict the appalling conditions that women faced during the Cold War era. The critique employs a qualitative approach using the content analysis method to theoretically present the related issues on the topic.

Keywords: Death, existential angst, feminism, holocaust victims, voice

Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), a poet of the twentieth century is often considered as an icon of that generation, but this iconic stardom came only after her early death in 1963. The main theme of Plath's writings is herself as a woman in a predominantly oppressing patriarchal society of the 1950s and 1960s, where she deals with her fears, anxieties, inner turmoil, and depression from the relationship with her husband as well as a fellow poet Ted Hughes, and, responsibilities for her children. The imposed control of a male over the female is also represented through the collective metaphor of Plath's poetry. For example, the 'Holocaust' metaphorically explains the woman's struggle against the male-dominated society. Plath has been always in search of the individual existence of women. She used various strong words in her poems to express her inner turmoil, trauma, and fear of not being a total person. Plath's poetry depicts the journey of a Woman striving to break herself free from the shackles that control her with norms and rules imposed by a male chauvinistic society. Her poetry also demonstrates the existential angst that is destroying the inner aura of a female in a patriarchal society. In this paper, the author used content analysis and textual analysis to critically examine the elements of existential angst in Plath's poetry, probing how it affects her as a feminist poet and how she mingles her personal crises in a fictionalized way through her poetry. The primary source for this study was *The Collected Poems* by Plath and Hughes (1981).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Existentialism has been derived from the word 'exist' and, 'existential'. Existence conveys the stage of being, and existing in the universe and, existentialism is the philosophical movement that emphasizes the uniqueness of every human. Existentialists advocate for individual choice, rejecting the flawed societal, philosophical, religious, and moral frameworks that complicate the world. Emphasizing human freedom and choice, existentialists acknowledge the burdens of personal accountability. Recognizing complete responsibility for one's actions, decisions, and beliefs empowers individuals to own up to their conduct and actions. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, man is

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nothing but that which he makes of himself. All values, morality, and, ethics are human-made and, everyone is free to create his own values according to his own choice (Tanabe, 2024). Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century philosopher also maintains that the individual has sole responsibility for a meaningful existence in the world (Tanabe, 2024). In existentialism, existential angst is a state of anguish or despair in which a person recognizes the fundamental uncertainty of existence and, understands the significance of conscious choice and, individual responsibility. Feminists, particularly existential feminists, emphasize the importance of women's autonomy. They emphasize the epitome concept of individual human rights and, rejoice in the pursuit of personal liberty, dismissing all socially defined roles. Simon de Beauvoir remarked that one of the primal and seminal concerns of feminism is "to declare that a woman is an individual being", she is neither the "other" nor an addition to man. She is autonomous being, capable of finding her own way of sensation (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 48).

Human society is mostly patriarchal. Women are oppressed and suppressed on a regular basis under feign of various social rules, codes, and, norms. They struggle to survive in society as an individual human being. So, when they go against the tradition, rules and, codes, that often lead them to isolation, loneliness and, frustration. Women suffer from emptiness, fear and, have also got depersonalized by society. Though the core problem for existentialist philosophy is not alienation, angst, and, suffering, but overcoming these problems is the main problem in this society.

Sylvia Plath, a poet of the post-world war period was surrounded by deep depression, surrealism, nihilism, and, emotional breakdown. It is the evil period when living caused the existential anxieties of the post-world wars individuals, especially for the female writers. Plath wrote marvelous poetry about the existential crisis of that time because the history was heady, the future stillborn, and, her speakers trapped in a stagnant, present that was incapable of going anywhere.

Literature Review

The time and terrain that Sylvia Plath created were delineated by one of the most influential literary critics of that time, Alvarez (1980), who claimed that English poetry was too imbued with gentility, "a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and, habits more or less decent and... controllable" (Micarakis, 2016, p. 1). Scholars like McFarland (2013), Ghanshayam (2006), Daiya (2013), Damayanti et al. (2019) hold their opinion that Plath was a feminist poet but with a difference. Most respond with an adjacent opinion or hypothesis about her existential angst and, feminism. The splatted expression can be combined together and, can also be found in Plath's poetry through existential feminism. Beauvoir (2010) expressed her opinion about Plath as an "organic solidarity upon which any unified community is founded" (p. 638).

The previous studies focused on different types of feminism through Plath's writings such as Marxist feminism, Radical Feminism, and, Socialist feminism. There are not many works on her being an Existential feminist. Plath hoped to reshape the culture that existed in society to create a solitary space for the female to express their opinion and, fulfill their desires without any obstruction or contradiction with a fantastic outcome. She fictionalized her angst to depict her existential crisis through feminism which can be found in her poetry. Nevertheless, Plath is a feminist poet who suffered from existential angst, and, her poetry reflects that existential feminism.

Analysis and Discussion

Sylvia Plath's poetry constantly includes a resurgence theme, along with a powerful one which is the attempt to redeem meaningless life through art. Plath's poems are not merely some confessions as she brings out the pathetic fallacy of modern city life into the light, as well as the poor economic position of women in society just like the confessional poets, although it is one controversial topic. Plath's poems ask questions like "What is to be human? What is the purpose of life?" and so on which are proof of her being an existentialist. But the conclusions that she draws always baffle the

readers. The connotation refers to other insider meanings. Plath frequently used the Holocaust victims, the mass murder of European Jews by the Nazis during World War II, as a metaphor for the personal crisis, and the characterization of personal suffering reflects there. Suicide can be called an art—this tragic necessity raises many controversial questions about her mental sanity and, many point fingers at her being existentially void, but we cannot deny her being so powerful with her words that diminish this void. Plath's "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" opens with the one–letter question "I". The next line- "I walk alone" depicts the speaker's doubt over her own self or being an individual being. In 1940, when Plath was about eight years old, her father Otto Emil Plath died of complications from diabetes. He has been always a strict father, and, for both his dominating male persona and, his death drastically changed her relationships and, her poems beautifully flourished how anguished she was over this patriarchal authority. Her most notably elegiac and, infamous poem "Daddy" is particularly a strong poem with violent imagery. The speaker "I" of "Daddy" powerfully states, "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" (Plath, 1981, p. 183). "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm" and, "Wintering"; these poems visualize the internal oppression Plath always fought against her entire life, but the main revelation here is her marital situation. Plath first wrote poems are brilliant poems of anguished existentialism, and individualism, including "Lady Lazarus", "Ariel", "Medusa" and, so on. These poems employ vivid, memorable images that depict a world of existential angst. In "The Bee Meeting", the final stanza depicts the images of Plath's angst:

> I am exhausted, I am exhausted--
> Pillar of white in a blackout of knives
> I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
> The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
> Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished
> why am I cold. (Plath, 1981, p.81)

The speaker here stands a "pillar of white, in a blackout of knives," determined they will not smell [her] fear. She repeats she was "exhausted" from trying to identify the source of her fear, her identity and, it is the identity they are forcing her to make her own. She is the "magician's girl" which signifies her acceptance of the identity that was imposed on her is derived from the realm of the occult; it is unnatural and, fatal. The "disguises" they wear serve to perpetuate the speaker's mistrust of the individuals attempting to transform her, as well as their symbolic identities. The bees are successful, "shaking hands," and, applauding their victory, fixing her in their socio-symbolic structure. Death is alluded to again, with the "long white box in the grove," the "white" serving to fuse the marriage/death image a final time. She is "cold." She has lost. "Stings" continues with a similar theme. "Bare-handed, I hand, the combs" indicates a feeling of emptiness within the speaker. This time the hive is a "teacup/White with pink flowers on it;" and, she indicates that "With excessive love I enameled it," commenting upon the labor that went into arranging the household with thoughts of "Sweetness, sweetness" but soon realized that her efforts seemed to produce nothing of value to her individual identity. Her voice is thrown outside of her body into that swarm of mother-bees and, questions her abilities as a wife and a mother, the voice echoes: "is there any queen at all in it?" indicating the home she shares with her family. The speaker acknowledges this by responding:

> If there is, she is old
> Her wings torn shawls, her long body
> Rubbed of its plush
> Poor and, bare and, unqueenly and, even shameful. (Plath, 1981, p. 176)

The speaker plays with a sarcastic tone revealing the tone of despair that indicates the resentment she feels toward her situation. "Wings torn" reveals a restraint or restriction the speaker feels, her body "rubbed of its plush" signifies her feelings toward pregnancy and childbirth, her body

is no longer hers solely, it has been inhabited by someone else, something literally happens during the pregnancy. However, figuratively, this signifies the embodiment of the collective socio-symbolic order, the rules and norms that are imposed on her as a female, identifying her as a vessel and, nothing more. The speaker knows that the new identity is imposed on her by the mother-bees, she "stand [s] in column/Of winged, unmiraculous women," isolated. The speaker mourns the loss of her previous identity, before marriage and, children. She states that she has "seen [her] strangeness evaporate," indicating that her individual essence has been lost. Her "honey-machine/ […] will work without thinking," signifying the dull, immanent qualities of domesticity and, the frustration that she feels in being locked into them. The speaker feels as if her individuality has been compromised for the benefit of the collective unit—not just her small family, but the expected way in which she is to function as a married woman. Her body and, mind, once hers solely, are now fixed within the socio-symbolic identity imposed on her. She has "dried plates with her dense hair," indicating a frustration at domesticity. She is underutilized. Like "The Arrival of the Bee Box," in "Stings," the speaker indicates a flight from or a step away from her current situation. She indicates that she "has a self to recover […] / is she dead, is she sleeping?" and, her "lion-red body" indicates a simultaneous strength and, fragility. The speaker suffers from a dilemma, she is in love with her children, she does not wish to abandon them, and she is the mother. However, in order to recover the life that she has lost, she must take flight "over the engine that killed her—/ the mausoleum, the wax house." Plath urges the bees to *utilize* their "mind" in an effort to solve their problems, instead of solely resigning to them. The dynamic between black and, white serves to perpetuate the image of marriage, however "black" in this usage signifies a death—the death of their previous identities as worker "bees" The "white" they fight against that identity, it "smiles" at them, subordinating them to positions of the blushing bride. The "white snow" functions to perpetuate the lifeless union that would serve to freeze their transcendence. The reference to "Meissen" China in this stanza alludes to the endless routine of maintaining the household that refutes transcendence. How is there an opportunity to rise against when dishes remain in the sink? "Lady Lazarus" defines a barbaric relationship between society and, the individual through multi-layered imagery and, identity. The poem is full of beauty, terrible beauty that guides us to its meaning. The success of the poem is due to the tension created between its extraordinarily light-hearted tone and, exceptionally serious theme. Plath's personal battle and, agony is translated and, elevated to poetic excellence and, collective metaphors. Almost every stanza of "Lady Lazarus" picks up a new possibility for this theatrical voice, from a mock movie talk "So, so, Herr Doktor. /So, Herr Enemy" to bureaucratic politeness, "Do not think I underestimate your great concern" to witch warnings "I rise with my red hair/And, I eat men like air." "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And, I ear men like air". In "The Jailor" a wife expresses anger at her brutal, self-centered husband; "Poem for a Birthday" explored her college breakdown and, suicide attempt. In her journal, Plath described the "Birthday" poem begun in grimness, turning into a fine, new thing. Through these poems, Plath writes of becoming an object, always being played by others rather than a person possessing free will, a free individual.

Sylvia Plath has always cherished the things she creates, her poems, and her children. Even after suffering from a distinguished marriage, which must have been hard for her, she regained the determination to be not only the great poet she would so long dream of becoming, but also a responsible mother beyond reproach. A feminist existentialist writer always struggles to do both well, women in search of their sole identities and, in search of liberated independence. Sylvia Plath was painfully aware that to become all she wanted to become would be to break the binds of stereotypes and, sexual double standards and, that society would not make it easy for her. But where her writing speaks of her inner dualities, and, sometimes even to extreme resentment and, jealousy of men for what they had, she did not. It is also words of a woman who did want to be fully a woman, in many contrasting senses of the word, and, to claim as hers some of the very things that so many women who call themselves feminists have rejected in their own searches for completion- Love of a man, the raising of children, the creation of what she could create to leave her dual stamps of a

woman and, wit in indelible imprint on her world. During the cold war era in America, pre-existing anti-communist sentiments intensified exponentially and, were increasingly directed inward at the domestic front. Women were heavily impacted by this cultural trend. As Daniel Horowitz described it, “the Cold war linked anti-communism and, dampening of women’s ambitions” (Pinke, 2011, p. 3). In other words, a woman’s ability to pursue a career, which the previous generation of women had striven for, was no longer a priority or even a worthy aim for women in the post-war era. Consistent with Adlai Stevenson’s massage in his commencement address, Horowitz claims that "it fell to women to restore value, integrity, and, wholly to American life” while men were engaged with specialized bureaucratic work. As Deborah Nelson reemphasizes in “Plath, History and, Politics”, “Cultivating the private space of the home” was not merely a worthy aim for women of the time, but served as their “greatest possible contribution to the US’s success in the sphere of Cold war international politics” (Pinke, 2011, p. 3).

The contradiction in terms lies within the delicate proven fact that, while women try for a way of a male-operated society, they need to internalize society’s understanding of gender convention to the point where their selfhood has been contorted, and, the effect is the very path of achieving selfhood privilege male superiority. Plath well versed her uncertainty by recreating her struggle in an exceedingly fictionalized manner, which allowed her to resolve an inner conflict, that she was so obviously unable to break down the reality on paper. For lack of any overt or clear statement of resentment by Plath regarding whether she saw herself oppressed by patriarchal law, feminist readings of her work shave often struggled to accuse patriarchy and, they have preferred to extend the scope of Plath’s problem to encompass all women, most of whom do not feel entrapped in their practical life, with the exception of certain situations: these situations may be likened to those in which some “men” feel entrapped.

Critics like Harold Bloom argued that Plath cannot rightly be considered as a feminist because she lacks an attribute of feminism, which is the consciousness of the fact that society can change. He opined that her death is a consequence of disillusion from her failed marriage, saddled financially, and struggling to care for her children (Bloom, 2009). However, she has been hailed as a feminist writer for a long period of time, also with great significance. Bassnett (1978) considered Plath a pioneer of feminism, and her work was a demonstration of the bitter resentment that women could not be liberated from oppression. She is different from other feminist writers. She is a symbol of the women’s rights movement. A common theme throughout her writing is the author’s intense desire to be a beloved and, loving wife, a stronger mother as well as a whole human being. The existential angst and the struggle to do both in a patriarchal society was the dream of the feminist writer, who was in search of her sole identity and, also in search of a liberate independence.

Conclusion

Plath’s poetry has a haunting beauty that captures the existential agony of a feminist poet while still holding out the hope of a new beginning. Her art uses rich imagery and a strong feeling of self to transform the brutal dynamics of society and the individual. Plath’s personal problems and anguish are creatively fabricated, resulting in poetic brilliance and universal symbolism that endow her work with significant meaning. This research exposes a realm formed by Plath's poetic alter egos, in which she combines powerful words and imagery to cast a veil over various difficulties. Her obsession with death not only aligns with existentialist concepts but also characterizes the tone of her poetry oeuvre.

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