

The Summer of Love: The Ecstasy and the Agony of Sylvia Plath

Dr. Sanam Vaseem Shaikh

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Abstract- The title of the paper is “The Summer of Love: The Ecstasy and the Agony of Sylvia Plath”. The main intension of the paper is Plath search for an equal to accompany her through all the aspects of a multifaceted life. It reveals the solace Sylvia found in the love of Ted Hughes and the golden era they spend together unless Sylvia got to know about her husband’s extra marital affair. The agony and disheartened soul of Sylvia being projected in poems of her later years reveals the real frustration of her being alive.

Index Terms- Love, hate, agony, death.

I. INTRODUCTION

I “ must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual and while comradely, I must admire him; respect and admiration must equate with the object of my love”¹

Plath potential mate must be one who would not bind her into a woman she did not want to be; she would be a wife, brilliant student and an aspirant poet was not enough for her woman as she was, she must be the perfect wife and perfect mother to fulfill the inborn urge of womanhood. The lonely and brooding way was not in her fortune but instead she wanted to be caring as much evident from what she wrote to her mother about the feeling of getting settled:

“I do hope someday I meet a stimulating intelligent man with whom I can create a good life, because I am definitely not meant for a single life”

Letters

Home

Thus, her search for a mate began which would be imaginative, powerful and at the same time intellectual enough whom Sylvia would look up in awe and admiration. In other word, she was searching for surrogate father, while looking for a perfect mate. Living in the world of isolation no one was hers not a single friend with whom she could converse, the only way that she could continue living was to go on writing about her feeling. The rigorous breathtaking exercise of writing was simply breath giving a kind rejuvenation to her.

Sylvia Plath was a Fulbright Scholar at Cambridge when she first met Ted Hughes in 1956 at a party in Cambridge. Hughes was born in 1930 at West Yorkshire and was educated from Mexborough Grammar School, Pembroke College, Cambridge. The occasion was publication of St. Botolphs Review, a publication of thirty odd pages containing poem of Ted Hughes a British poet. Sylvia Plath admired the poet and for him she was a

beautiful girl of beautiful America, the land of impossible plenty and he never quite lost his sense of her foreignness and freedom, as though she had been cast in some more generous mould that made him feel shabby.

Sylvia Plath sensibility was altogether different from Ted and one level, saner more urban, more intellectual, more governed by nerves than by instincts in a word, more American. Belief in dark gods and shamans and the baleful influence of the stars didn’t come naturally to her, but she had always been good at things, a fast learner and a high achiever, fiercely ambitious, anything. Ted Hughes could do she could do better. Yet both of them were intense personalities, original and restless in their poetic quest. As Sylvia came to know more about Ted Hughes, her search for perfect mate seemed to get over.

Sylvia even mentioned about Ted in letters to her mother her entire personality was changing now. She appeared to be more calm and at peace with the world than ever. She even quotes of her poem to impress him. In a side room into which he had guided her, he ripped her hair band and earrings off when she pulled away as he tired to kiss her. Even her friend noticed the change in her personality. Sylvia felt that in Ted Hughes she had found he equal the man worthy of her complete devotion and quoted “I would live a life of conflict, of balancing children sonnets, love and dirty dishes; and banging an affirmation of life out ...”²

Auden and Stevens influenced Sylvia but after meeting Ted even her linking for the writers changed under the spell bound personality of Ted and she began to appreciate Dylan Thomas more than ever as Thomas was also a favorite of Ted. Everything about Ted’s personality was liked by Sylvia and she molded her thinking and imagining power in a new direction led by Ted. In fact, she was a girl with a load of troubles of her past suicide attempts that had almost succeeded a nightmare series of electro convulsive shock treatment and behind all that, an adored Prussian father who scared her stiff and died when she was eight. It was Ted who showed her a new direction in the name of poetry. Her poetry became more and more powerful, for now she had the company of her own choice.

“She believed combining the erotic and the intellectual possible and when she met Ted Hughes, a Cambridge poet, she felt that life with him would be ideal”³

They decided to get married, but secretly due to some Cambridge law which implied that marriage without seeking proper tutorial permission could result into withdrawal of her Fulbright scholarship so on June 16, 1956, in London at the Church of St. George the Martyr, attended solely by Mrs. Aurelia Plath. Sylvia wore a pink suit and held a pink rose which Ted had given her. Celebrating her marriage, she wrote “Wreath for a Bridal” a poem full of pure light and joy and hope. Sylvia and Ted

spent their newlywed summer in Paris, Madrid and Benindorm. Every aspect of Sylvia seemed to had been changed as the couple engage themselves in studying, writing swimming and enjoying every bit of their time. The willful golden bird was thus carried away by the predatory hawk, and their new bond solemnized within weeks by the ringing of nuptial bells.

Sylvia for the first time met her in-laws in Yorkshire but her meeting was not fruitful as they were the people who believed more in chard manual work, thrift and hospitality and hold with contempt all the artistic and intellectual sophistication of Sylvia and obviously had to bear more disgrace as her marriage was not accepted by her in-laws, relatives and friends. Sylvia was bewildered when she learned that unlike her, Ted too hated a teaching career and would take re-course to it only as a last resort. Plath irrespective of anything was enjoying her married life as being remembered by Jane Baltzell Copp,

“On Sylvia, the effect of marriage and happy commitment of herself to Ted seemed to be an impressive new self assurance and a new range of emotional honesty”.⁴

She continued to write and submitted her own work and Ted’s work as her literary agent to both English and American publishers. Plath had learned that the marriage was not a threat to her fellowship and so Mr. and Mrs. Ted Hughes lived openly married in Cambridge. As the secret of their marriage was out, supervisors and teachers took care to see that their darling pupil’s scholarship was maintained and so, her Fulbright was renewed for her second year at Cambridge. Sylvia and Ted Hughes moved into a small flat in Ellisley Avenue, she was at peace with herself, definitely not easy gain for her; she had to fight a hard battle for achieving all these long-cherished goals.

In March 1957, Hughes was amazed on winning The New York Poetry Center Award for his first book of poem “The Hawk in the Rain”. Sylvia too was offered a teaching job at Smith along with which she continued to write poetry one is astonished by the way Sylvia brilliantly managed her teaching career along with all the household liabilities and still write poetry.

Her marital life was full of charming social activities for it had been a year that they were together and Ted celebrated their anniversary by bringing a huge vase of pink roses in their room. Though her life seemed to be happy, somewhere in the corner of her mind haunted to another woman had always pre occupied her? Ted was fast achieving critical acclaim all around for his “The Hawk in the Rain” for which Sylvia, for the first time felt jealous of her husband. By now they had decided to quit teaching and devote themselves full time to writing. Even her decision to quit the job was not liked by her friend and well - wishers.

During the year 1958-1959 the couple shifted to Boston in a rented apartment in Boston Hill. They began to write as full timers depending to meet their basic need on grants, prizes and earning from writing. In the summer of 1959 the couple set forth for a cross-country camping tour borrowing her mother’s car. After returning from the tour, they stayed for two months, the period between September, 9 and November, 19 at Yaddo , the writer’s colony in upstate New York.

On 1st April, 1960 Sylvia Plath gave birth to her daughter Freida Rebecca Hughes, name given after Plath’s paternal aunt. Even their poetic career was on high esteem as both were enjoying their writing and the feeling of becoming parents. Sylvia second child was born January 17, 1962 and named Nicholas. Plath did

now have a spell of happiness born of being wedded to her man and being a proud mother of his two healthy children. Though Plath noticed that Ted seemed somehow disappointed that the new baby was a boy Plath now had developed a habit of writing quit early in the morning. When Sylvia learnt that her husband is having an extra marital affair as was shocked even the sight of his smile used to irritate her as evident from the following lines:

The smile of ice boxes annihilates me.

Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one!

I hear her great heart purr.

“An

Appearance”

The same dissatisfaction continues in “Among the Narcissi” and “Event” where she get haunted by the sight of her husband when she remembers him in the arm of another man. In “The Rabbit Catcher” she openly speaks up of marriage to have become a trap with “grose” and “spikes” significantly enough, the impersonal forces of the early phase like the wind of the sea play the role of villains in this marital drama, the one by “gagging” her mouth and “tearing off” her voice, and the other by its “Winding” reflection in water. 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 too deep to uproot and a mind like a ring

Siding shut on some quick thing,

The constriction killing me also.

“The Rabit

Catcher”

The low pitch protests against the institution of marriage in “The Rabbit Catcher” become more apparent in “Purdah” where the women are initially a passive victim of an oriental harem veiled to everyone and everything except to her “Lord of Mirrors”. The expression in the “mirrors” is quite apt and significant, for all the women in the harem are supposed to be inherit objects like the mirror meant only for reflecting the wishes and whims of the harem-keeper. Thus the speaker affirms helplessly,

I am his

Even in his

Absence

Purdah

She has got no self of her own; she is an extension of her husband and 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. Now, in the harem, she is a dehumanized jade figurine, one of the several precious stones in her lord’s coffer.

Thus, in a dramatically calculated release of mounting tension, she becomes, from a humble, modest and veiled slave, a Clytemnestra avenging the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. The shift from humility and modesty of the veil to the final “shriek” is quite slow and subtle:

Though being aware of her husband affair Sylvia kept silent, as she did not want to break her marriage which would ultimately ruin the future of their children. On the other hand Ted continued to see Assia, wife of David Wevill who has sub-letted the London apartment to Sylvia and Ted Hughes. In an attempt to reconcile their marriage, they went to Ireland but Ted suddenly packed up and left three days before the end of the trip.

All this indicates contemptuous indignation at Ted's falling down from the colossal height where she had put him. The anger was not the less directed at her own self, since she had been used to acclaims and accolade and not rejection and heartless cheating which is very much evident from her poem "The Detective" and "The Courage of shutting up". Neither self pity nor depression but an omnivorous anger at everything ruled her psyche. The anger was more prevalent because she could not help loving him still. As Clarissa Rocha points out:

"She called him a traitor"

"Vignettes from England"

If ever her two selves were contending for expression it was now for the other fearful one, that was trying to cloak its terror with defensive acerbity.

She no longer paused or groped for words and symbols or groped as easily as the chosen tools of an efficient surgeon terse and precise, leaving the desired effect. Her poem now describe as never before, her life and consciousness vis-à-vis death and ultimate nothingness Raw and scathing as she had taken her wounds, she was going to give them back to readers, shocking and disturbing them all the way. But she had also mastered the art, which the rewets emotions, within tight prun presentation wrap. We can only wonder why she did not exercise this astounding control in her personal life also to mould and shape it into a profitable longer life.

She was reliving her traumas in her poems, thus exorcising herself from those agonies, to come out fresh pure and innocent. A very important point to note that her craftsmanship becomes the microphone for her amplifies and glories the feelings underneath. She wrote with such stopping till the feeling left her exhausted we are left wondering, after finishing the reading of "Amnesiac" or "Thalidomide" or "The Other" or "The Tour" to which dept of her blood smeared hurt. Cutting down on all useless decorum, she has come to the centre of being that continuously pushes the question of to be or not be, resulting in the overwhelming terror. It is the bone chilling terror of finding oneself standing in the same place from where one wants to run away:

I walk in a ring
A groove of old faults, deep and bitter
Love cannot come here

"Event"

She is intensely aware that only "love" can break the vicious circle she is imprisoned in, as she is plainly ware of her utterly loveless state. There is no flimsy wishing anymore, nor romantic longing. She is keenly aware of her desperate state and as a poet gives artistic form to her deeply personal feeling. As the realization of her entrapment in the gruesome reality of lonely life dawns on her, she grows restless with hate, rage and helplessness. The reader of her poetry gets mesmerized by her short-sharp utterances and rapid twists of rhyme and is bound to move on breathless with a voice grown gradually more inflected with high pitched tension. Suspended just over the abyss as she was then in her personal life, the consequent chilling terror becomes the theme of her poetry. Her mother was a witness to her marriage on the rocks, which she resented also. Obscurity becomes almost a parallel force in many of her poems dealing with personal injuries and heartbreaks she creates her own private language with images

loaded with private language with images loaded with private references to which the general reading public can have no proper access. Highly private and highly alienated from the concurrent time as these poems are, they create their own world where she is the lone living person, speaking to and merging with her other selves, injured, enraged, sarcastic as they come, following, overlapping and cornering each other in dramatic acerbity.

This bright young American housewife with her determined smile and crisp clothes had vanished along with the pancake make up the school mistress bun and fake cheerfulness – Her face was wax pale and drained her their hung loose down to her waist and left a faint, sharp animal scent on the air when she walked ahead of me up the stairs. She looked like a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult. And perhaps that is what she had become she had broken through to whatever it was that made her want to write, the poems were coming every day, unbidden, unstoppable, and she was off in a closed, private world where no one was going to follow her.

While her children slept upstairs, Sylvia sat with her back to the uncurtained night, slipping wine and after reading some of the poems she'd written in the past coupled weeks, committed suicide on February 11, 1963. It was 17 months since his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, had killed herself. Ted was living partly in London and partly in court Green, his Devon home, with his children Frieda 4, and Nicholas 2, and his elderly parents.

Assia ill, his mistress was pregnant. His mother and father disapproved of her also. In their eyes she was a woman without morals who had entrapped their son and driven their daughter in-law to suicide. They knew she had been married three times before taking up with Ted and that she was married to another man, the Canadian poet David Wevill, with whom she still lived in London. Assia was so much tormented by Plath's suicide and Hughes infidelities that she put a mattress and pillow next to the gas stove. She gave her daughter a drink which contained sleeping pills and drank whisky and sleeping pills herself.

In America where Plath was canonized as a literary – feminist saint, there came a rain of abuse and vilification on Hughe's head. He received threats of death and castration, stalker letters, accusations of murder. His name was chipped off Plath's gravestone. Critics and those who follow literary matters took sides: Hughes, by leaving Plath for Assia Wavill, was responsible for her death.

II. CONCLUSION:

Sylvia Plath has always distinguished herself by writing poems from her heart. The emotions of love and agony can be traced in her poems as in accordance with her life. A reader can get a closure of Plath life with her poems. Every hook and corner of her life is artistically penned in her writing. Plath not only lived a tragic life but also ended it on a note of trauma and disappointment. The poems are depiction of her life and live the readers in awe. The subject matter of the poems is quite similar to the phase of her love life. Sylvia Plath has fully associated her poems with imagery of love and hate. The roles, she has influenced through her creative writing the future poets.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Dr. Sanam Vaseem Shaikh