

“DYING IS AN ART” - THE AESTHETICS OF DEATH IN PLATH'S *SELF-ELEGIES**Agnibha Banerjee, MA in English Literature (Second Year), University of Calcutta***Abstract:**

The poems of Sylvia Plath are characterized by an ingenious deployment of the genre of the elegy towards an evocation of self-negation in a hostile patriarchal post-Holocaust world. Defining the elegy as an aesthetic reflection on death, the paper endeavours to trace Plath's journey towards self-annihilation using the textual codes embedded in her most celebrated poems. The paper thus seeks to illumine how, for Plath, boundaries of the real and the literary are blurred and porous, with personal anxieties bleeding into textual spaces. The inability of these texts, contaminated as they are by the commercial realities of a late capitalist system, to purge or at least contain these anxieties is then revealed. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of her last poem 'Edge' culminating in her suicide where the text/context binary ultimately collapses in the undifferentiated amalgamation of art and life.

Keywords: *Aesthetic, elegy, patriarchy, suicide, text.*

“Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living?”

- Orlando, Virginia Woolf

“Death is the mother of beauty.”

- 'Sunday Morning', Wallace Stevens

Among the oldest and subtlest of poetic genres, the elegy, defined by Cuddon in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, as “a sustained reflection on transience, mutability and mortality usually in respect of a specific object of loss” (117), survives the twentieth century's challenge to inherited forms, assuming in the modern period an extraordinary diversity, incorporating seething anger, devastating scepticism as to the validity of (often rehearsed) consolation, and a dialogic conflict between a paralytic sense of grief and an exhilarating rush of freedom. Gauged from this perspective, the poems of Sylvia Plath can be read as a discourse on the aesthetics of death - not only the metaphorical and psychological death of the symbolic overbearing patriarch that dominates her poetry, and towards whom she bears a complex relationship marked by a coalescence of rage and guilt, but also a self-effacing 'death drive', achieving a tantalising fusion of art and death, the culmination of which could have only been her almost mythic suicide.

An aesthetic contemplation on death that precedes such a drive towards self-annihilation is not without precedents, the most fertile of which can be located in 'Romantic' verse. One recalls Faust's demented tirade in Goethe's play of the same name - “the earth's a prison, one can't get away...by existence tortured and repressed, I long for death.” (27), or Keats' 'death wish' in 'Ode to a Nightingale' - “for many a times I have been half in love with easeful death...now more than ever it seems rich to die” (140), an yearning which also permeates Victorian poetry, especially that of Tennyson as is evident from, among others, 'The Lotus Eaters' - “Give us long rest or death, dark death or dreamful ease” (215). This haunting preoccupation with death acquires sombre poignancy in a post-holocaust world, a fragmented, ruthlessly

indifferent battle arena where "God is dead" - to use Nietzsche's proclamation in *The Joyous Science* - humanity is without the cushioning security of meaning imposing structures.

Juxtaposed against the dreary backdrop, the self-elegies of Sylvia Plath aesthetically dramatises, what Freud in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) terms, 'melancholic mourning' which, unlike its binary counterpart 'normal mourning', refuses a consolatory displacement of grief from "the object of loss to a new one, to which the ego binds itself, becoming free and uninhibited again." (34), enacting instead a fierce resistance to illusory solace, an incinerating self-criticism through a "bifurcation of the ego...one part narcissistically identified with the lost object and the other part, fuming with sadomasochistic rage, attacking this encrypted object." (to use Melanie Klein's hypothesis in her essay 'Mourning and its Connection to Manic-Depressive States'). The 'death drive' in Plath's poetry consequently stems the fragmented dichotomous flux of a multiplicity of selves, each intricately bound to a mutually exclusive desire, resulting in an unsettling tussle which she herself anticipates in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* - "if neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time then I am neurotic as hell" (67). It is this evocation of a self - conflicted 'mindscape' torn between the stasis of grief and the dynamics of tumultuous freedom that characterises Plath's elegies to her father (the arresting finale of which is 'Daddy') who dying when she was only eight, became both the "buried male muse" of her poems and the suffocating "black shoe", the maniacal "vampire", the deceptive "devil" which she must figuratively "kill" so as to break the strangling shackles of patriarchy and achieve a metamorphosis into 'Lady Lazarus'.

'Lady Lazarus' deserves special attention in this context because it, as Jahan Ramazani notes in his pioneering work *Poetry of Mourning*, "is Plath's greatest self-elegy, both a death poem and a commentary on the aesthetics of death poems, brilliantly envisioning the death of the self while also theorising poetry's dramatic performance of death" (339) - "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well." Dying, Plath suggests, is as much a theatrical construction as the performance of any other human experience which is commodified and commercialised in a late capitalist economy with the allusion to fee readers must pay for the "eying of my scars", mocking her own stance as a so - called 'confessional poet' who would market pain through an exhibition of her private world - "there is a charge/ For the hearing of my heart." - where she would stage "the theatrical/ Comeback" to cries of "A miracle !" by a "peanut munching crowd." Ironically, the poet endeavours to humanise the subject by revealing and reconstructing an interior life only to dehumanise it by making the interior exterior, by objectifying subjectivity into an aesthetic spectacle, clearly exposing the economic calculations behind the self - sacrificial facade of the self-elegist.

Like 'Lady Lazarus', most of Plath's self-elegies enact death to renew the self, using the aesthetic performance of dying as a stepping stone to an impassioned transcendence into artistic completion and fruition which reaches its tumultuous climax in 'Ariel' - "...I/ Am the arrow, / The dew that flies, / Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning." However, her last poem 'Edge' seems to relinquish the drive towards rebirth, eerily prophesying the suicidal termination of an aesthetic journey. Reading as though it were written posthumously, the title of the poem alludes to a life that has reached its furthestmost boundary before death, facing what Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* evokes as the "the nothingness that lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm" (63), before which the only possible response is uninhibited submission and appropriation of the self (one recalls the romantic Stein's passionate rhetoric in Conrad's *Lord Jim* - "into the destructive element immerse" (184), staging as it were a Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'.) Repeatedly textualizing herself with funeral detachment, Plath foretells the transformation of a woman into her work; with her poems acting as the postmortem site for a multiplicity of interpretations. "The woman is perfected, her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment." she bleakly begins as if the poet were already no more than the body of poems - flux of fragmented texts - whose completion she anticipates as the aesthetic transformation of her disjointed life into the appearance of a

finished narrative - “the illusion of a Greek necessity/ Flows in the scrolls of her toga” - as if dressed in texts, her body seems to be a literary corpus, the anatomical feet, subsumed into poetic feet which have now reached their terminus, “seem to be saying/ We have come so far, it is over.”, juxtaposed against which is the amoral indifference of the universe - “The moon has nothing to be sad about. . . She is used to this sort of thing”, recalling “the gentle indifference of the universe” (131) - to use Albert Camus' expression in *The Stranger* - which deeply vexed the twentieth century creative mind.

Six days after writing 'Edge', Sylvia Plath committed suicide by ingesting sleeping pills and asphyxiating herself in the oven, uncannily faithful to the aesthetic dictum, 'life imitates art.' The aesthetics of death in Plath's self-elegies therefore reaches its arresting culmination in the colligation of art and life. As Lydia Bundtzen observes, “the genesis of art for Plath lies in an aesthetic confrontation with 'death anxiety'”, climaxing from the rehearsed performance of death within the secure boundaries of the page to an 'actual performance' (Plath's poetry dissolves the paradox the expression seems to suggest) of death on the boundless stage of life.

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