
THE SUICIDE PERPETUATED IN WRITERS LIFE AND LITERATURE

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Abstract: This paper focuses on women writers often use suicide as a vehicle of escape for female characters who find themselves trapped within a restrictive and domineering masculine centred society. Tragically, many of these same writers materialize their fascination with freedom through suicide into the reality of their own lives. Although the writing of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf delivers successive examples of this terrifying fascination, the horrific reality of their repetitive attempts to take their own lives taints the eloquence of this body of work. This paper aims to discover the actual motivations in committing suicide of these writers, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf.

Key Words:- Suicide, image of death, motherhood, vehicle of escape.

“Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art.

The man himself is ignorant of it”.

— Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton give us endless images of death furnishing a complete natural history of it. This is unusual in poetry by woman whose concern is usually with quotidian realities. “Tragedy is not a woman; tragedy is cultural, mysteriously enlarging the individual of her private agony”(Alexander,1993:26). Sylvia Plath’s poetry pathologically expresses the aspects of her era that makes the death of a spirit inevitable, but the cult of Plath insists she is saintly martyr as she describes death to be god like. Sylvia Plath considers death to be the final denouement through which perfection could be attained. Death is a major theme in Plath’s poetry because of her experiences of it in life. She was a manic-depressive for most of her life and attempted suicide twice before she succeeded in 1963, since her suicide, Plath has risen to iconic status. Like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass (who exerted a great influence on her work), and other “confessional” poets, Sexton offers the reader an intimate view of the emotional anguish that characterized her life. She made the experience of being a woman a central issue in her poetry, and though she endured criticism for bringing subjects such as menstruation, abortion, and drug addiction into her work, her skill as a poet transcended the controversy over her subject matter. Death was an ever present shadow in Virginia Woolf’s life, but insight could illuminate aspects of life that would have otherwise been overlooked. For Virginia Woolf, death created meaning in life, and without death there would be nothing to cherish and nothing to live for. The author had intended for Mrs. Dalloway to commit suicide at her own party, but later decided

that the main character’s double (Smith) would be sacrificed instead. This relationship between life and death is a central theme in her writing. Sylvia Plath’s attitude to motherhood is seen to be doubled-channelled. She betrayed a strong repulsion for babies and family life, as she depicts in *The Bell Jar*. At the same time, she had the yearning to live a domestic existence with a suitable man and beget babies. Whatever be her wish, she never inclined to stop to serve patriarchy in any way. So she disregards the patriarchal definitions of motherhood. One reason for her hatred for mothering children is the hatred that she felt for her mother, from childhood, since her father’s death. She confesses her resentment for her mother in many of her works. Plath’s hatred for her mother was a deep set and seething menace to her. Plath found a self – effacing woman in her mother who realized to be a pathetic victim of the patriarchal society. In her mother, she had the living example of a woman sacrifice her life for the advancement of her husband and children. In her, she found degradation of being confined within the ‘bell jar’ of social protection and condescending to the patriarchal demands of self sacrifice. As her mother was a typical victim of patriarchal society, Plath considered the sacrifices of her mother for her to waste (Journals, 269). As a result, Plath considered her mother to be “a collaborator with patriarchy” and perceived that her “oppressor” is none other than her own mother, who tries to invade her psyche and make her a victim to patriarchy (Joseph 53). In the poem “tulips”, Plath describes the patriarchal claims on a woman as “smiling hooks” and she understands that her mother whom she identifies with patriarchy tries to ensnare her with her hooks. Plath well knows that she gives into her mother and stays confined to the domestic sphere; she will lose access to her goal of writing. Plath is an iconoclastic woman who never relented to social norms and patriarchal limitations. She states this strongly in her journals: I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and

nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect. (32) So Plath feels a high degree of irritation and antagonism towards her mother and considers her as an enemy. She says in her Journals, "My enemies are those who care about me most. First: my mother" (35). Plath was careful not to let her mother be aware of her desires and aspirations, especially regarding her plans for career and her plans for suicide. She decided that she "must keep clear of any confidence to mother" (261). She wanted to write and entirely free, creative life. But her mother exhorted her to get herself practically trained and take up a job to earn her living. This advice of her mother provoked Plath to anger and to commence on this in *The Bell Jar*. My own mother wasn't much help. She was always on to me to learn short hand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. "Even the apostles were tentmakers", she'd say "they had to live just the way we do" (32). Plath could understand the difficulties that her mother undertook to give her a comfortable life. As she tells "My mother is working, teaching, cooking, driving, and shoveling snow from blizzards, growing this in the terror of her slow sorrow. I had hoped to make her strong and healthy" (143). But she could never reconcile herself with the demands and expectations of her mother. She could never lead a vegetable existence under "the thumb of man" and this created hostility in her for her mother. "she was wrestling with the "never-satisfied goals" of her mother's presumed expectations' those ideals of success, security and conventional domesticity which were embedded in her culture" (Stevenson 164). The dislike for her mother was so powerful that it sometimes even induced her to attempt murder. In her short story "Tongues of Stone", she narrates her experiences when she was hospitalized after her first attempt of suicide. Here she feels a gnawing resentment for her mother that is narrated in the following passage. During these last night before her blacks out the girl has laid awake listening to the thin thread of her mother's breathing, wanting to get up and twist the life out of the fragile throat, to end at once the process of slow disintegration which grinned at her like a death's head everywhere she turned. (265) In Plath's biography *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson describes the reasons for which Plath hated her mother. Suicide, for Virginia Woolf, was at one literal and personal, and also a trope that stood for the human/societal experience of deadly impasse. Woolf, herself was famously suicidal. Death, the ultimate experience, is for Virginia Woolf the supreme touchstone. To the suicide of Sylvia Plath various causes have been assigned. Most of the critics have laid the blame for

her death as her own door. English and Indian Critics have laid the blame for her death as her own door. English and Indian Critics have opined that the cause of her suicide was her only despondency, depression and her own too much feeling and thought about death. Sylvia Plath's life and especially her death have never been fully understood. An acclaimed poet and novelist, she is the golden girl who had everything—beauty and brains, a great and recognised talent family that included a daughter and son. Plath poems even showed a kind of professionalism in death. As Paul Alexander says,

"With Sylvia Plath suicide is a performance which describes it with a ranging, confident pride. There is no apology of fearfulness. Suicide is an assertion of power of the strength not the weakness of the personality" (Alexander, 1985:106).

What are the similarities between Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton. They were fascinated with death and darkness; they were very close with their mothers and the women in the family, yet were attached and were condemned to live out their mothers and the women's unfinished business. They struggled with the prescribed role model of a woman as housewife, and with the conflict between their needs for independence and for security, attachment and belonging. They exhibited strong intuitive abilities, uncanny powers, healing abilities, and felt close to images of the witch. But unable to integrate the spirituality of the witch with patriarchal religion both turned away from religion and felt cursed. Yet inevitably they turned and returned to spirituality as salvation, looking for grace and redemption. They were hungry for spirit, but spirit, impregnated with the matter of the tribe, of culture, and the body. And both were heroines without adequate role models and with incomplete journeys of return. Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton who wrote a great deal about death. With all three poets, the emphasis on death seems to go deeper, to be extremely more personal and to extend in more directions than does a flourish linking death to sex or love.

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has risen to iconic status. Death in her purely is an action, a possibility, gesture complete in itself unmotivated and unexamined. Dissolution of personality leading to death is common in her poems. Plath's ego suffers dissolution where she oscillates between the self and the object that is the I and the non I. Human consciousness to Plath was always an intruder in the natural world. As Joyce Carol dates says, "If the self is set in opposition in the natural world. As Joyce Carol Dated says, "If the self is set in opposition to everything that excludes it then the distant horizons of the wilderness will be as terrible as the kitchen walls and the vicious of hissing fat" (Alexander,1985:26). The ignorance of life is clear in her early Ariel poem the 'Tulips' where she described that she has no place in this world and she would like to quit the worldly pleasures and attain peacefulness in death. Plath can be said as an escapist who never insisted on warring against the patriarchy but to lay submissive to it. Kate millet says, "In the matter of conformity patriarchy is a governing ideology without peer; it is probable that no other system has ever exercised such a complete control over its subjects" (Millet, 1995:33). Like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W.

D. Snodgrass (who exerted a great influence on her work), and other "confessional" poets, Sexton offers the reader an intimate view of the emotional anguish that characterized her life. She made the experience of being a woman a central issue in her poetry, and though she endured criticism for bringing subjects such as menstruation, abortion, and drug addiction into her work, her skill as a poet transcended the controversy over her subject matter. Death was an ever present shadow in Virginia Woolf's life, but insight could illuminate aspects of life that would have otherwise been overlooked. For Virginia Woolf, death created meaning in life, and without death there would be nothing to cherish and nothing to live for. The author had intended for Mrs. Dalloway to commit suicide at her own party, but later decided that the main character's double (Smith) would be sacrificed instead. This relationship between life and death is a central theme in her writing. Suicide, for Virginia Woolf, was at one literal and personal, and also a trope that stood for the human/societal experience of deadly impasse. Woolf, herself was famously suicidal. Death, the ultimate experience, is for Virginia Woolf the supreme touchstone.

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