

## Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" and "Lady Lazarus": Relative Intruding

RUKHAYA M.K

Assistant Professor of English  
Nehru College, Kanhangad, Kerala

Flowers are emblematic of relationships. As they are given out on joyous occasions (marriages, birthdays) as well as on sad occasions (at the hospital, death). They reflect very poignantly the power of relations. It has both its positives as well as negatives. Sylvia Plath, therefore, wanted to divorce herself permanently from her worldly associations as she was caught in an emotional rollercoaster ride. This explains her repeated attempts at suicide. The prescribed poem has been stated by critics, to be penned in the hospital after a typical suicide attempt. Tulips in the poem stand for "feigned empathy". The poet Ted Hughes states that the poem was written when Sylvia Plath had suffered miscarriage and had to be hospitalized for appendectomy in March of 1961. This, he explains, is the reason for the recurring references to birth and death.

"The tulips are too excitable" asserts the poetess, as it brings with it the uncertainty of relationships. It is winter in her life, as there is gloom and frostiness all around. Though it is snowed-in, the atmosphere is peaceful as it is surrounded by white. The speaker claims that she has nothing to do with any sort of turmoil/(explosions) outside, or the hassle of relationships. The speaker lived in a world that had seen two World Wars. The identity of people were therefore deeply entangled with war or politics. She declares that she was free of all these worldly associations. She has handed over her name

and clothes to the nurses. Her history has been given to the anesthetist; as the anesthetist has relieved her of her current and past pains/worries. Her physical being has been surrendered to the doctors. The colour 'white' brings in connotations of purity far removed from all adulteration. There is a pun in the line: the light lies on these white walls." The reference is to the light lying on the wall, and lying as opposed to telling the truth. For the speaker, there is no ray of hope in her life: this is why the light lies.

Employing a striking simile, the poetess likens her head propped up between the pillow and the sheet-cuff to an eye between two white lids that refuses to shut. Charles Molesworth states in "Tulips," "the imagery of forced seeing, of vision itself as the source of the exacerbated sensibility, assaults us everywhere." The 'pupil' is expected to embrace everything within its reach. The nurses as they pass, do not pose as a hindrance. They appear as harmless and uniform as gulls that pass "inland in their white caps". With their standardized dressing, and their immunity to experience, one could not discern how many they were. They are therefore reduced to statistics and defined utilizing collective attributes like the 'uniform' and 'sea gulls'. Eileen M. Aird asserts: "The renunciation of individuality also includes the reduction of others to a depersonalized level, so that they make no claims on her and she is aware of making none on them; consequently she sees the nurses hurrying about the ward like "a flock of gulls flying inland." The speaker seems to be content with these predictable surroundings than having to deal with an unforeseeable present.

Her body is likened to a pebble, harmless and smooth. They treat it just as fragilely as water smoothes over pebbles. She appears to be static as opposed to the inanimate element water that is kinetic. They benumb her with their bright needles rendering her immune to any sort of pain. In such a context, Plath has lost herself- her real being in association to others. In such a state, the baggage (of relationships) causes

her to be sicker. Her "patent leather overnight case" is "like a black pillbox." She was constantly under medication. She looks at her husband and children smiling out of the photo. However, the smile of her kids brings pangs to her heart, like hooks that caught on to her. Jeannine Dobbs states: "Her freedom is both wonderful and terrible because the price is so high. The woman must give up her man and her child that hook onto her, as well as her things, her possessions. And the ultimate price--and reward--is death."

Over the past few days she has let a few things slip: The weight of the huge cargo boat of thirty years of her life carrying with it things both wanted and unwanted. The hospital-staff have swabbed her clear of emotional associations, just as they swab a glass clear of stains. She is now like a newborn baby without prior experiences. This is why she identifies with the vulnerable baby "Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley. The string of objects in the poem functions as an objective correlative of her domestic experience:" I watched my tea set, my bureaus of linen, my books." She perceives herself as an object in water, as an object immersed in water becomes weightless. As she is now devoid of all mundane connections, animate or inanimate; she now views herself in this state of purity as a nun. Richard Grey says: "Everything that gives her identity, that imprisons her in existence, has been surrendered; and she sinks into a condition of utter emptiness, openness that is associated at certain times here with immersion in water -- a return to the foetal state and the matrix of being."

The poetess claims that she did not want any flowers to bring along with it the load of misery or euphoria. She wants to surrender herself to death (her hands turned up). She prefers to rest in a blank state where the peacefulness bedazzles her. The vacuity also represents her nihilistic thought process. The privacy of the hospital room does not make any demands on her other than to part away with her name (individuality) for a name tag; and the jewelry she wore. The dead too seemed to feed on this nullity, like shutting their mouths onto a

communion tablet. The image of the 'communion tablet' evokes purity.

As the poetess lay in the four walls of her hospital room faraway from worldly hassles, the tulips find their way in. In her void state with white dominating the room, the colour of the blood-red tulips comes across as an intruder. 'Red' also connotes danger and passion. Her privacy is disturbed with sentiment from outside in the form of the tulips. The swaddling of the tulips comes across like those of an awful baby. The redness of the tulips only communicates with the wounds of the speaker. They interact through the common medium 'red'. They tease her through their subtlety. They weigh her down like "red lead sinkers". The colour 'red' also signifies danger. 'Lead' is a poisonous metal and its use is quite suggestive.

Nobody had watched her before, but now she was under constant scrutiny. The tulips turned to her, and the window was behind her. Both the tulip and the window were passages to the outside world. The line "where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins" depicts the thinning of her ray of hope. This streak of light can be likened to Kamala Das's 'Sunshine Cat'. She views herself as a "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow." She seems to have no existence of her own as she is caught between Time and relationships. They eat up all her energy, she has no individuality (face) and has lost the fullness of womanhood (flat).

Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,  
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.  
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

The air was calm enough before they came, but now the tulips made a lot of noise. The air-eddies surrounded them like a river would. Employing picturesque imagery she describes the pandemonium the tulips created:

Before they came the air was calm enough,  
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.  
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.  
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river

Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.  
They concentrate my attention, that was happy  
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The last line also makes an allusion to Ted Hughes who toyed with the poetess' feelings after having an extra marital affair with Assia Wevill. The walls that were hitherto cold seemed to be warming themselves with the passion of the tulips. This passion is represented by the colour 'red' and the heat that they generated. This is why the speaker refers to the flowers as "dangerous animals." They should be imprisoned, according to Plath, for their unwarranted intrusion.

The Tulips are as feral and alien to the serene atmosphere as some great African cat. She is aware of her heart that connects with the flowers involuntarily as it closes and opens up: "Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me." The concept of salt enforces the idea of salt being rubbed on her wounds. The idea of personal acquaintances poisons her very being and pollutes the ambience now. Constantly under medication, for Sylvia Plath, health was a remote possibility, as distant as an exotic country namely 'Health'. In "Tulips" Sylvia Plath attempts to attain tranquility through alienation -she attempts to come close to death by distancing herself from energy, emotion and experience.

### **Lady Lazarus**

Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is a revolt against established social institutions and power politics. "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. "The only trouble of being reborn is that first you have to die. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, resourceful woman."(Sylvia Plath) The poetess in the poem visualizes herself to be the female version of the mythical archetype, Lazarus. Lazarus lay buried for three days in the grave till Jesus raised him from the grave. (John 11:1-44)

The poetess inverts gender here, and mythification with reality. Here, she refers to her own attempts at suicide.

At twenty in 1953, Plath attempted suicide by consuming a huge number of sleeping pills and concealing herself in the cellar beneath the house for three days. She tried it again by driving off the road, and survived the 'accident' yet again. In 1963, however, she won/lost to Death/Life. She often identifies herself with victims of persecution in the Nazi concentration camp due to the mental agony and anguish that she experienced. Both of these victims may be emblematic of the male dominated monopoly in society, that she dies in and tries to arise from each time. Her domain of persecution pertains to the so-called patriarchal society that is all about chauvinistic control and power-politics.

"Lady Lazarus" according to Sylvia Plath expresses "the agony of being reborn." It points to her frustrated attempts at suicide. She refers to these in the opening lines: I have done it again.

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it--

Eillen M. Aird states, "As in 'Daddy', however, the personal element is subordinate to a much more inclusive dramatic structure, and one answer to those critics who have seen her work as merely confessional is that she used her personal and painful material as a way of entering into and illustrating much wider themes and subjects. In 'Lady Lazarus' the poet again equates her suffering with the experiences of the tortured Jews, she becomes, as a result of the suicide she inflicts on herself, a Jew." There were rumours during WW2 that the Nazis made lampshades out of human skins. It was at Buchenwald and apparently at the request of its commander Karl Koch's wife. The Nazis, as part of their vicious atrocities, made lampshades out of the skins of the murdered Jews. In such a context, her right foot serves as a paperweight to save her paper-skin. Her

right step helps her guard her individuality, though her identity was shrouded in a "fine, Jew linen." The word napkin has a Biblical reference too "He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes: and face was bound about with a napkin. (John 11:44).

Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.  
Do I terrify?

The word "enemy" connotes both Nazi persecution and Male exploitation of the female. As she is resurrected once again, the skin is yet to grow on her. The skin is the largest organ, and is omnipresent emblem of existence. She appears terrifying; the decrepit features will vanish within a day, as with the sour breath. And the skin that the grave ate shall grow on her. Like the Jews in the Holocaust, she is a victim.

The poem points to the third time she escaped Death. She says like the Cat, she has nine lives. Popular cultures contain assumptions that cats have nine lives. More than its real death, it figuratively refers to the cat's tendency to come out of dangerous situations. In spite of all the atrocities, she still has a smile on her face that defies all crime and logic. And more significantly, she is only thirty. She annihilates each decade through her act, she burns the previous decade and rises like the phoenix. Since life is primarily based on previous experiences she says:

What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.

She seems to others like a spectacle, which they mob to see. Note the phrase "peanut-crunching crowd." It points to the poking of their nonchalant inquisitiveness into other people's lives. She sums up here, others responses to her attempts at suicide. She terms the "what a million filaments"-the people as fleas or parasites that fed on the tragedy of others.

Regarding the phrase 'striptease' Dennis Walder says: "The personal impulse to death is shown to be an obscure desire to be sensational". Plath asserts that in spite of her impulses to suicide, she too was human with 'hands' and 'knees'. She was not to be looked upon as a specimen. The line: " Them unwrap me hand and foot -----" refers to the post-mortem done on her actions and intentions. She emphasizes that she is the same identical woman biologically (even after attempted suicides). Note that she does not refer to the change in her frame of mind.

She then goes on to relate a near-death accident at the age of ten. When she was ten, it was unintentional. The second time in her twenties, it was to not come back. She intended to shut herself from Life. When she brings up the image of the sea-shell, it may allude to her crouched posture (when she shut herself in the cellar). And, also to how she sought refuge in death. They come and pick out "the worms" (of death) from her that fell like sticky pearls. They have started to grow on her very existence. Her coherence to the same is echoed in these lines.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

The poetess says that she does it (suicide) so that it feels like "real" and it feels like "hell". So note that she equates reality with hell. One wonders whether she was a victim of Munchausen's Syndrome, in her tendency to inflict pain on herself. Or whether this 'pain' was more pleasing.

She stresses that her individuality has its own value: For everything there is a Charge ranging from the eyeing of her scars. For the hearing of her heart, to a word/touch to a bit of blood. Even a hair fallen apart has its individual value. The doctor that come to treats her is identified with the one at the concentration camp. The Doctor also stands for Death personified. She asserts:

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

She claims that she is endowed with creative value, logical value and material worth as echoed by the words 'opus', 'valuable' and 'gold' respectively. She possesses the substance to 'melt', and sensitivity to 'shriek'. And most significantly she does not relegate other people's concerns.

The final imagery is indeed provocative as though somebody is cooking up a concoction of herself. She affirms that that now there is only ash, there is no flesh and bone. Neither remains the domestic hygiene of a cake of soap, the religious sanctity of a wedding ring, nor the material limpidness of gold. She addresses both the reigning forces over humankind-good and evil-as Herr God and Herr Lucifer. The major forces are reflections of religion that is also at once predominantly patriarchal in nature (Herr). Hence she revolts against the same, and declares triumphantly and gloriously how she will be reborn:

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

Arthur Oberg asserts: "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are poems which seem written at the edge of sensibility and of imagistic technique. They both utilize an imagery of severe disintegration and dislocation. The public horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and the personal horrors of fragmented identities become interchangeable. Men are reduced to parts of bodies and to piles of things. The movement in each poem is at once historical and private; the confusion in these two spheres suggests the extent to which this century has often made it impossible to separate them."

**WORKS CITED:**

- Aird, Eileen M. *Sylvia Plath' Her Life and Work* .New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- Dobbs, Jeannine. "'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry." *Modern Language Studies* 7.2 (1977): 11-25. JSTOR. Web. 21 Mar. 2011.
- Gray, Richard. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*. UK:Longman Group UK Limited, 1990.
- Molesworth, Charles. "The Fierce Embrace". *A Study of Contemporary American Poetry*. University of Missouri Press, 1979.
- Oberg, Arthur. *Modern American Lyric: Lowell, Berryman, Creeley, -and Plath*. Rutgers University Press, 1978.