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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONCEPT OF FEMINISM IN THE SELECT POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH.

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Abstract

This paper aims at the concept of Feminism in the select poems of Sylvia Plath. It analyses Plath's poems *Mushrooms*, *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* in the context of the second wave of feminism. She never considered herself a feminist. In her poems she criticized the predicament of women in 1950's. The present paper analyses her select poems in terms of sexuality, family and search for identity. These are the main issues of the second wave of feminism. The main aim of this paper is to find out to what extent Plath's work corresponds to the principles of the second wave of feminism in 1960's.

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Introduction:-

The aim of this research paper is to examine Plath's oeuvre in the context of the second wave of feminism. The beginning of the second wave of feminism can be linked with Betty Friedan's nonfiction *The Feminine Mystique* in which she challenged traditional gender roles, and which was published in 1963, the year Sylvia Plath died. Plath never considered herself a feminist, yet her prose and poetry deal with issues which became relevant to the second wave of feminism. During her lifetime only two of her works – a collection of poetry *The Colossus* in 1960 and a novel *The Bell Jar* in 1963 – were published. The rest of her poetry, fiction and non-fiction were published posthumously and acclaimed by readers worldwide. We will explore aspects of feminism in her poems *Mushrooms*, *Lady Lazarus*, and *Daddy*. The reason why we have chosen the latter three poems is because they were written in a difficult yet the most productive phase of Plath's life (shortly before her death) and reflect true feelings about her life and that of American women in the 1950s.

Feminism

The word "feminism" is based on the French word "feminisme" and was first used in English in the 1890s. There are many definitions of feminism, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" ("Feminism"). Barbara Smith, an American lesbian feminist, offers a different definition of feminism:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement. (qtd. in Dicker 7)

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Road to Second Wave of Feminism

In 1920 the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) succeeded in passing the Nineteenth Amendment which guaranteed women the right to vote. Fifty years later in 1970 Betty Friedan, an American feminist, organized the Women's Strike for Equality in order to "commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment" (Dicker 57).

Social feminists focused on the enforcement of protective legislation regarding mothers' and children's health, child labour and women's working hours and conditions. Middle-class women, especially the young ones, were not interested in the women's movement since the "Roaring Twenties" offered them much more freedom than ever before.

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering French feminist, published her book *The Second Sex*. In the book she analysed the Western notion of the woman, her otherness but most importantly she believed that the perception of gender was not biologically inherited, but it was rather imposed on women by the society they lived in. Hence her famous declaration: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman"⁴ (Beauvoir 330). The book was translated into English and published in the USA in 1953, where it sold very well.

National Organization of Woman (NOW) was established with Betty Friedan as its president. "Consciousness-raising" was a technique used by NYRW feminists which enabled them to define a problem and to respond adequately. Towards the end of the 1970s the second wave of feminism went into gradual decline. There is no doubt, however, that the second wave of feminism has brought significant changes to the lives of American women.

Sylvia Plath – Life and Work

"The future? God – will it get worse & worse? Will I never travel, never integrate my life, never have purpose, meaning? Never have time – long stretches, to investigate ideas, philosophy – to articulate the vague seething desires in me? Will I be a secretary – a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually & professionally while I am impeded – will I submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse to face myself, and go either mad or become neurotic?"

----- The Unabridged Journals, Sylvia Plath

Plath was persistently concerned with reconciling family and writing career. It is one of the themes she deals with in her poetry and prose. Indeed, Plath's subjective experience is crucial for her works; her poems are typical examples of the American poetry of the mid-twentieth century referred as confessional. Confessional poetry explores taboo subjects such as infidelity, divorce, mental illness, suicide or abortion (Martin and Williams 160). Plath's love-hate relationship with both her mother and her father affected her whole life and writing career.

During her Smith College time she began publishing in national periodicals and her short story *Sunday at the Minton's* won her a Guest Editorship at *Mademoiselle* in New York. Plath's second book of poetry *Ariel*, which she had finished just a few days before her death, was also published posthumously. Most of the poems were written in a creative outpouring during the breakdown of her marriage and in the months preceding her suicide. The rest of Plath's poems written over the last two years of her life were published by Hughes in 1971 in two collections – *Crossing the Water and Winter Trees*. The final comprehensive collection of Plath's poems, *The Collected Poems*, appeared in 1981. It contains the poetry written from 1956 up to her death in 1963 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Aspects of Feminism in Selected Poems: Mushrooms

The poem *Mushrooms* (Plath, "The Collected Poems" 139), written in 1959, carries a strong theme of a protest against male oppression. It foreshadows the uprising of women and encourages women to unite forces to form a common voice. The first three stanzas explain that the women will quietly gather strength and will establish themselves regardless of men's resistance:

**Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;**

The small grains make room. (lines 7-9)

Women cannot be underestimated, they may be treated as “Earless and eyeless, / perfectly voiceless” (15-16) but one day they will challenge the beliefs and values of the patriarchal society. As the poem continues, women are described as an integral part of everyday life who do not dare to ask anything in return:

1. Diet on water,
2. On crumbs of shadow
3. Bland-mannered, asking
4. Little or nothing.
5. So many of us!
6. So many of us! (22-24)

The poem criticizes the women themselves; they should gather and ask for their rights more aggressively, they should step out of their role of a housewife:

Nudgers and shovers

In spite of ourselves.

Our kind multiplies: (28-30)

The final stanza alludes to the Bible, particularly to the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which he says, “Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth” (Constantakis 123). Women are entitled to lead the same life as men, they have suffered enough under male dominance. The whole poem has a powerful effect despite the fact that women are compared to such ordinary things like mushrooms. Using various literary devices such as metaphor or allusions, Plath steadily proceeds to a final climax and makes the reader realize that there is always a chance no matter how small to assert one’s rights.

Daddy

There are two main themes running through the poem (Plath, “Ariel” 48): the loss of a father and women oppressed by men. Plath loses her father when she is a little girl as shown in the twelfth stanza “I was ten when they buried you” (line 57). She misses her father so much that her love towards him turns to hatred, she compares him to a Fascist. Plath had a troublesome relationship with him, he was a mystery to her “I have always been scared of you, with your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook” (42) and his deaths makes it impossible to change it. His father’s shadow haunts her, she even tries to commit suicide to come closer to him “At twenty I tried to die, and get back, back, back to you” (58). Eventually, Plath in an effort to set herself free, kills her father in the very last stanza “There is a stake in your fat, black heart” (76). She is entitled to kill him, since he is German and she Jewish “I think I may well be a Jew” (40).

The theme of women’s oppression illustrates the tenth stanza “Every woman adores a Fascist, the boot in the face, the brute” (48). If the woman misbehaves or steps out of her feminine role, she is punished by the man, by the “brute”. The man is pictured as an enemy, not as an equal companion. To indicate it, she uses a metaphor when comparing men to vampires who live off women. Men use women to consolidate their social status, they do not care about women’s inner feelings or desires. By killing her father, Plath also kills the man and feels relieved and free.

Lady Lazarus

The title of the poem (Plath, “Ariel” 8) alludes to the biblical character of Lazarus from the New Testament who was raised by Jesus from the dead. The narrator describes her two previous suicide attempts, of which one was just an accident at the age of ten and has just committed her third suicide. She as well as Lazarus (or maybe Phoenix) raises from the dead which may be interpreted that no matter how hard patriarchal society tries to oppress and humiliate women, they will raise and eventually take revenge on men as can be seen in the very last stanza:

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (lines 82-84)

Moreover, Plath uses imagery of the Holocaust in order to emphasize dehumanization of women when compared to Jewish prisoners in concentration camps:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade
 My right food
 A paperweight,
 My face featureless, fine
 A Jew linen. (4-9)

Such comparison may seem very strong, but it reflects Plath's desperate feelings at that period of time when she was left alone with two children. In the letter to her mother from October 21, 1962 she wrote:

Don't talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What the person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else been there and knows the worst, just what it is like. It is much more help for me, for example, that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriages. Let the Ladies' Home Journal blither about those. (Plath, "Letters Home" 473).

The dehumanization of the woman can be further seen in the lines where the narrator is exhibited naked as a Jewish prisoner. She contrasts her scarred and damaged body with that of the woman of the 1950s who was supposed to present an immaculate appearance. The narrator wants the man to pay for those things he takes for granted, she wants him to pay "for a word or a touch / or a bit of blood / or a piece of my hair or my clothes" (lines 62-64). She feels that the woman already pays a high price for being imprisoned at home, the narrator sees herself as the prisoner of her household whose only aim is to survive every single day. The man, on the other hand, is free or can always take a different route, he does not have to sacrifice anything. The narrator's third suicide attempt is compared to the extermination procedure in the gas chambers. However, when the narrator turns into ash she warns men "do not think I underestimate your great concern" (68). It foreshadows her resurrection and her revenge on men.

Conclusion:-

Plath's confessional poems reflect the themes such as the objectification and dehumanization of women, their oppression and a conflict between work and family life. However, their feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration resulted in the emergence of the second wave of feminism. The radical feminists attempted to free women from the image of the perfect housewife and mother as presented by the mass media.

Plath as a writer was able to find words to express her feelings of anger and frustration, whereas most of her female contemporaries could not define what was wrong with them. They had to wait for the second wave of feminism to emerge and to address their "problem that has no name". We will never know if Plath would have been saved by the coming wave of feminism. What we do know is that her poems were written to alarm and disturb people and that even fifty-five years after her death they remain alive.

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