

**A Destructive Parenthood:
The Problematic Motherhood
in Selected Poems**

By Sylvia Plath

Assistant Lecturer Fatin Khaleel Ismael*

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Abstract

This paper tackles Sylvia Plath's problem of being a mother in addition to the duties of the act of motherhood. She tried her best to balance between her literary ambition and her motherhood, but she could not. She fought for a long time to live in peace in the middle of the two worlds; the world of poetry and literature, and the world of motherhood. She wanted as any other ordinary woman to have babies, to cook, and to clean the ground. But at the same time she wanted to write her master pieces. But all her efforts went in vain because of her psychological distress and struggle.

* English Dept. – The College of Education for Woman - Baghdad University

Introduction

Although Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) life was brief in conventional terms, yet it was rich in experience. She was a bright, intelligent and determined young woman with a need to succeed and a burning desire to write. Plath had other needs that clashed with her literary ambitions. She dreamt of a comfortable home, where she could belong ,of lovely children , and people by whom she could be loved for herself. Besides she wanted a good husband,(she was the wife of the poet Ted Hughus (1930 - 1998) and the mother of his children).

No one was able to drive Plath more than herself. She knew many doubts and depressions concerning her ability to be a mother ,and concerning her poetical ambitions and dreams .That is why she was torn between her responsibilities as a mother and as a wife, and her literary ambitions. Yet to the world she appeared carefree.

In reality she worked pushing herself relentlessly, whether in her studies, her teaching, her relationships, or her writings. Only those people who were near to her knew how troubled Sylvia Plath's life was.

This paper presents the poems of her first collection *Colossus* that carry her own ideas about the act of motherhood ,and her suffering .

The paper also tackles the poems in the collection of *Poems for a Birthday* .And there is a good concentration upon "Tulip", the poem from *Ariel* the last collection, because there are direct signs of the destroying feeling of getting torn between her

ambitions and responsibilities, with some other poems from *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*.

Sylvia Plath: the Destructive Motherhood

Many of Plath's poems are in one way or another concerned with pain, suffering, sickness, torture, madness, conflict and death.

There were the amputation of her father's leg, and his early death when she was seven; her mother's chronic ulcer; her grandmother's death, her own breakdown, broken leg, miscarriage and appendectomy'. These events beside her inner conflict to prove herself,whether to be or not to be. She was full of ambitions, but at the same time, she wanted to have an ordinary womenly life in a world full of changes and problems during the sixties, be sides and her psychological and mental wars. All had led to the existence of such terrifying images and themes in Plath's poetry'. Plath's use of images and dictions depicting suffering in relation to female roles and parenthood experience are foreshadowed in several poems in her first book of poetry *Colossus* (1960).

In the poems of the *Colossus*, one can find that Plath is dealing with motherhood. These poems are mainly dark and fearful poems,because they are full of pictures of dryness,image of daeth,suffering,sickness.Besides the atmosphere itself gives a confined feeling.

In "The Manor Garden" of the *Colossus* there is a foreboding apprehensive tone:

The fountains are dry and the roses over,
Incense of death
Our day approaches. r

[1-3]

There is death in the middle of birth. The external natural world is at odds with the internal human one. Only momentarily does correspondence, a harmony occurs between the natural and the maternal.

"The pears fatten like little buddhas" [4] as the fetus evolves and the womb fills. While the real revolution to motherhood is expressed in "Sow" this poem is a good portrait of a hog not yet;

...,hedge by a litter of death-foot ninnies
Shrilling her hulk
To halt for a swig at the pink teats.

[22-24]

But she is a monstrous maiden pig waiting for a "Boar, fabulous enough to straddle [her] heat" [36]. All women are going to face this destiny. Each one of them is waking up in the morning, doing her house works in an absurd way. Then at night, the only thing she does is waiting for her man to distinguish her eternal fire. In turn this comic sow will exhaust and drain the world. In spite the fact that this sow is ridiculous, she looks frightening. In this poem Plath is

drawing a grotesque picture to women in general. Because she thinks that most women are going , or they are really like this sow. For Plath she is the destiny of the adult female, she is a kind of breed never to be extinct. She is living in a closed cycle, and no way to escape.

Another *Colossus'* poem, "Moon rise", in this poem Plath uses a clear imagery and allusion to Christ's death in relation to pregnancy:

Berries redden, a body of Whiteness
Botes, and smells of rot under its head stone,
Though the body walk out in clean linen.

... ..

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.

[4-9]

The poem ends with an address to "Lucina, " the goddess of childbirth, whom Plath changes into a woman in the moon. Traditionally the moon is connected with female cycle of menstruation. The appearance of the blood during the days of menstruation gives the idea of rejection of pregnancy. The child of labor is described as an "ancient father," [11] "White-beard, weary," [12] a figure may resemble Father Time, or perhaps Father Death rather than a mere child. Thus, the birth or the anticipation of that experience includes its antithesis.

In the collection of *Poems for a Birthday*, the main situation also begins with a pregnant speaker as in "Who" and "Dark house." The same situation is alluded in "Maened" the third poem in the collection. The element of pregnancy is repeated as a sign that part of the duties of women is to be a pregnant. But to be a pregnant means that the woman herself is losing her identity to another creature. The portraits represented in these poems are grotesque. The fetus is described as:

All-mouth who licks up the bushes
 And the pots of meet

... ..

... He's to blame.

[17-20,Dark House]

The husband himself "...[is]the
 bullman earlierm /King of the dish, my
 lucky animal," [1-2,The Beast] he is
 lucky to marry a woman like her.
 Because she considers herself as
 having a higher position than the
 husband .But he becomes
 "Memblepaws,.../FidoLittlesoul, the
 bowel's unfamiliar." [12-13,The
 Beast]. And in "Who" he turns to be a
 "Dogsbody,"[11] while in *Maenad*, he
 is a "Dog-head devourer." [16]

In these four poems from
Poems for a Birthday, birth is not only

I entered
 The stomach of indifference

 Drunk as a fetus
 I suck at the paps of darkness.

[5-6, 17-18]

In "Maened" the speaker admits
 that she can remember nothing and
 cries: "Tell me my name." [25] Here
 one can find a complete lose of
 identity and personality. The name by
 itself is the first personal identity of
 the human being. The first sign that he
 becomes someone with his own
 distinguished character, it is a sign that
 he is existed. So, to lose the name , is
 to lose everything that connects the
 human being to his existence.Which
 means that the person himself becomes
 nothing.

Those early poems, which are
 personally selected for publication by
 Plath in her first collection,are written
 around the time of her first
 pregnancy.Throughout them Plath
 reveals a good amount of mental stress
 over the idea of motherhood. For Plath

linked with death, but also with the
 loss of identity, the sense of
 insignificance and smallness are
 portrayed as common to both
 experiences. In "Who" the speaker
 begs: "Let me sit in the flower pot/The
 spider won't notice." [7-8]. She is a
 root, a stone, an owl pellet. "She
 reveals that "for weeks I can remember
 nothing at all." [33] While in "The
 Stones" the fifth in the same
 collection, she is "a still pebble," [8]
 and she becomes one with the fetus:

this maternal position may be
 something monstrous. Her fear of
 procreativity is, in large part, a fear of
 resultant and loss of creativity⁵.She
 thinks that to be a mother ,means to
 lose the literary ambitions and the
 ability of writing poetry.The whole
 situation is going to be a kind of
 sacrificing and martyrdom. A woman
 dies when she bears a child, and the
 child feeds literally and metaphorically
 on her.

In the "Tulip" of *Ariel* (1965),
 one of Plath's most popular poems, she
 hsa used a personal experience as a
 setting to express the complexities that
 the idea of motherhood has for her.
 She has written this poem when she
 has been hospitalized for an
 appendectomy in March of 1961.She
 has a miscarriage just a short time

before. In one way or another the confinement has given to her associations with death and birth⁶.

These tulips are "like an awful baby,"[38] and she wants to reject the traps of her life and the family that she has:

Now I have lost myself, I am sick of baggage

... ..

My husband and child smiling out of the family photos
Their smiles catch into my skin, little smiling hooks.

S[18, 20-21]

The *Tulip* is a psychological journey of searching for Plath's identity and purpose in life. It portrays vividly complicated imageries that unfold her state of mind and the war that is taking place throughout it.

That tug war, which is taking place between the desire to free herself from the bondage of duties, of responsibilities, of routines, of those loved ones (her babies) and her personal and literary freedom. Such a struggle is a grand struggle of the modern woman who is torn between having a successful career or just being a good wife and mother.

She feels that she is nothing anymore, she "is a pebble,"[15] a "nobody"[5] and she is "sick of baggage." [18] She represents that the act of motherhood is affecting her life and soul, and leading her to become nobody. Plath has been forced to "let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat,"[22] and to stop her fountain of talent, to be only a mother. The tulips generally "...have swabbed [her] clear of [her] loving associations." [24]

Plath refuses the ordinary things and the daily routines of life "I [do] not want any flowers." [29] She feels badly when she looks at her husband's and children's smiles in their family photos. Those smiles turn into

"little smiling hooks,"[21] and trying to snap her soul out of her body.

The maternal idea by itself creates a sense of dehumanization and depersonalization to Plath. She is a "... flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow,"[46] and no more a human being.

Such feelings are growing in her, she wants to run away from the tulips because there is something wild and dangerous about them. The tulips are trying "to eat [her] oxygen." [49]. She discovers that before her being a mother and the coming of her children, her work and life are going well, the "air [is] calm and enough." [50] But the "tulips [fill] up like a loud noise." [58] For Plath, the last solution to free herself from them is to put the tulips "behind bars like dangerous animals." [58] The tulips are taking her life away, while at the same time, they are ironically representing life.

Another example of the confusing idea of motherhood can be found in Plath's series of "Bee" poems. She uses their society and her experience with beekeeping as away to express her frustration over her own roles. In "Stings" for example, she identifies herself with both the drones and the queen, and shows the conflict between her domestic, her poetic and her queenly selves:

I stand in a column
 Of winged, unmiraculous women,
 Honey-drudgers
 I am no drudge Though for years I have eaten dust...24
 And dried plates with my dense hair
 And seen my strangeness evaporates

 Thy thought death was worth it, but ...
 Have a self to recover, a queen...

[20-26, 51-52]

But even she wishes it, the real children cannot be folded back into her womb. They are there to contend along with the daily routine and household's chores. In addition there was the frustration of being married to a poet whose own poetry was getting written and published, while she was dusted, diapered and served as his secretary.

Plath's poems with the domestic settings are usually her most pessimistic poems. There is "viciousness in the kitchen,"[1] as she

says in the first line of "Lesbos" from *Ariel* in which two women are largely involved in their households situations. In the "Detective" from *Winter Trees* "the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen."[5] There is nobody in the house at all. Because the woman ceases to exist as a person long time ago, her functions have been performed and she keeps the furniture polished, but her personhood is effaced, and her sexuality has atrophied;

The mouth first...

 Her breast next.

 Then the dry wood, the gates,
 The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.

[5, 8, 11-12]

In this situation death comes. The result is the withdrawal of love and the drain of motherhood. Mothers are devoured by their children. They are effaced, imprisoned, mutilated, made into puppets or toys, and turned to be hollow or blank with no identities or wills.

Plath's disability to avoid the ambiversion in her life toward motherhood, and her literary job ,besides the guilt she felt for not having the balance in her life, help to explain the reason of her domestic poems with their associations of suffering. They are not exaggerations of pain but accumulations of it. They

reflect not only her perception of outer reality, but they project her inner reality as well. The unbalanced feelings and disability to create the balance, lead her to dramatize the war in her soul. The detachment she achieves in her insight into a private world of suffering and humiliation is giving a central insight of her persona. Her awareness of her own schizophrenia, of herself as a victim, and as a center of pain and persecution is giving the chance to live in two extremes; love and hate. She likes to marry, she loves her children, but she hates the chain of the loved ones.

For Plath there are two choices for having her peace. The first choice is to kill herself to have her own psychological release. And the second is to get rid of her children (tulips), motherhood, responsibilities and other parental activities. She chose the easiest and the hardest way to free her soul, since she committed suicide, by using a domestic tool; the gas of the oven in her kitchen

Conclusion

It can be said that these selected poems show to a great extent how the maternal activities have trapped Plath, and attempted by their own nature to kill her abilities. This sense of entrapment has created a big conflict between her free soul, the poet's soul which she has tried hard to keep, and her daily, motherly duties. The conflict is not only between the poetess and the mother, but also between the creative literary soul of Plath, and her general role as a woman in our universe. But she has lost the battle and killed herself.

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Notes

¹ Pamela J. Annas, "The Self in the word: The Social Content of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism* John Hughes(ed), (New York: The Gale Group, 1999), p. 47.

² Jeannine Dobbs "Viciousness in the kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism* John Hughes(de), (New York: The Gale Group, 1999), p. 69

³ Sylvia Plath, *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Charles Newman(de), (Missouri: Missouri University Press, 1974). All subsequent quotations from Plath's poetry refer to this edition. The number of the lines will be enclosed in brackets in the text.

⁴ AdSsSde Vries, "Moon", *Dictionary of Symbols and Imaging* (London: North-Holland Publishing Co. 1974), p. 326.

⁵ Lisa Foster, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Carolina: University of North Carolina, 1979), p. 107.

⁶ Ibid. p. 120.

الاسرة وتأثيرها المدمر:
اشكالية الامومة
في قصائد مختارة من شعر
سالفيا بلاث

المدرس المساعد فاتن خليل اسماعيل
قسم اللغة الانكليزية - كلية التربية للبنات - جامعة بغداد

المستخلص

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