

Confessional Poetry In The Light Of Psychoanalytic Theory with Special Reference to Sylvia Plath

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ABSTRACT:

Confessional poetry is an expression of personality and never escape from it. The personal life of the poet under the stress of psychological crisis, sex, family life, private humiliation and psychological state of mind are the major concerns in this kind of poetry. The expression of personal pain has been regarded as the hallmark of confessional poetry. It chiefly deals with personal experiences, trauma, depression, psychological break-down and the relationships articulated through a new kind of rhythm and mode of expression. Psychoanalysis acts both as a means of self-analysis and as a literacy device. It enables consideration of the poet not only in terms of the straightforward narration of his/her life, but also in relation to his/her poetic language and the process of creativity. Hence, in order to study the confessional poetry psychoanalytic literary approach objectively plays a significant role.

KEY WORDS: Confessional poetry, Electra complex and Psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION:

Confessional poetry flourished in America in twentieth century with the poetic articulations of Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton etc. The critic M.L. Rosenthal used this term to describe a new poetry which, he believed, was therapeutic and autobiographical as it 'put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization' (Rosenthal, 1985, p. 69). 'I' or the first person narrative voice in the confessional poetry is the poet himself/herself who confesses his/her repressed feelings to the reader.

One definition of confessional poetry is offered by Irving Howe, who argues that 'a confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without mediating presence of imagined event or persona, something about his life'. In this sense the main objective of the confessional poetry is to unburden your heart to the reader with the poet's untold privacies like personal faults, sexual desires, psychological complexes, and physical privacies like intercourse, menstruation, abortion. . . etc. which simultaneously solidifies the existence of the individual 'poet persona'. Steven Gould Axelrod states three essential elements of confessional poetry: 'an undisguised exposure of painful events . . . a dialectic of private matter with public matter . . . and an intimate unornamented style' (Axelrod, 1979, p. 98). Here the personal becomes the universal.

The new confessional poems removed the mask that poets had been hiding behind and

provided an insight into the private lives of the poets. In case of subject matter, confessional poets concentrated on the history of their own life; in case of expression they removed psychological barriers and poetic artifice that arrested the free flow of poetic consciousness. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams defines confessional poetry as 'a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life' (Abrams, 2005, p. 45). M.L. Rosenthal explains this concept of confessional poetry in his review on Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*: 'Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal' (Rosenthal, 1985, p. 64). Lowell's *Life Studies* dealt with many of his family dysfunctions, alcoholism, and sexual guilt, and thereby breaking the previous poetic tradition.

The word 'confession' is derived from the verb 'to confess', which means to acknowledge or to admit. It has a religious connotation as it denotes a Catholic practice in which a guilty person confesses his or her guilt before the Father of the Church and prays for forgiveness. This process of making confession was clearly therapeutic, as it aims to unburden one's conscience and to rest in peace. Then from religion the term 'confession' was adopted by psychiatrists. While trying to ascertain the cause of a patient's neurosis, the doctor made him to confess or to narrate the incident. By the process of self-analysis, the psychiatrist helps the patient to purge the buried experiences. Some poets like Anne Sexton and

Sylvia Plath were encouraged to poetise their experiences buried in their unconscious.

Thus, confessionalism became a process of therapy in which a patient recounted and recalled his or her past to get rid of it. From religion and psychiatry, the practice of confession crept into modern literature. Most of Anne Sexton's poetry concentrates on her deeply personal feelings especially anguish. As she told Beatrice Berg that her writing began, in fact, as therapy. Her analyst told her to write between our sessions about what she was feeling and thinking.

Confessional poetry written by Sylvia Plath recognised as stunningly original in its anger, its vivid colours, and its depiction of energy, and the life juxtaposed to the seductive lure of despair, emptiness, and darkness. Her poetry reveals the intimate moments of her life. When Sylvia Plath lost her father, Otto Plath at the young age of eight, it meant an unforgettable betrayal for her all effort. It seems that her father's death was exactly the point when she started writing to fill her empty ego. It became her obsession, her need. She explained her writing intentions and said:

You ask me why I spend my life
writing?

Do I find entertainment?

Is it worthwhile?

Above all does it pay?

If not, then, is there a reason? . . .

I write only because

There is a voice within me

That will not be still.

(Letters Home 34-5)

Sylvia is suffered from mental breakdowns which led her to commit suicide. In her poem *Lady Lazarus* she talks about the art of dying and claims that she is exceptionally good at committing suicide: 'Dying/Is an art, like everything else. /I do it exceptionally well' (43-45). Plath's poem *Daddy* represents the lack of communication and powerlessness of a daughter who has been a victim desires killing her father to escape the passivity which has been forced upon her: 'Daddy, I have had to kill you. /You died before I had time'- (6-7). Sylvia suffered from insufficient fatherly affection.

Confessional poetry erases the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious. It is built on the relation between objective experience and the materials previously repressed. That is the reason why confessional poetry often called 'the poetry of suffering' (Rosenthal, 1985, p. 130). In this process the aesthetic gap between the man who suffers and the mind that creates vanishes and the poet becomes the victim. This poetry is woven

around the poetic self as the chief symbol. The poet encounters a painful awareness of self; his anxiety springs from a corrupted by egotism. The poet's story of life becomes true tale for humanity at large.

Psychology is the science of human behaviour, soul, consciousness, and unconsciousness. It includes feelings, attitudes, thoughts and other mental processes. In the same way poetry represents thoughts, imagination and awareness, experiences expressed through meaning, sound and rhythmic language in such a way to evoke an emotional response. According to modern psychologists the unconscious processes are more important than the conscious one. These are the unconscious impulses that lead the poet or any other artist to produce a poetic work or any other work of art. Poetry embraces the resources of the unconscious. Confessional poets' depression can be understood through psychoanalysis as most of these poets suffer depression, loneliness and frustration.

Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind' (as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* puts it). The classical method of doing this is to get the patient to talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining 'buried' in the unconscious. Psychoanalysis bridges the inner and outer world using its own means of expression. It is a method of studying the mind and treating emotional disorders based on revealing and investigating the role of unconscious mind. Psychoanalytic practice is based upon theories of how the mind, the instinct, and sexuality work.

Sigmund Freud was the first true opener in the recognition of the value of unconscious mental activity. His theories on the inner working of human mind are now widely accepted by most of the schools of psychoanalytical thought. He undertook a detailed elaboration of the functioning of human mind. Freud argues that depression and frustration are not due to physical predispositions to madness, but due to repressed childhood trauma, repressed aggression or desire. Repeated gestures, disturbing dreams, slips of the tongue, delusions, hallucinations, and so on are caused by and connected to unconscious drives and desires.

The unconscious is a crucial concept for Freudian psychoanalysis, in which it is understood as the repository of the fears, desires, traumas and conflicts too difficult for the conscious to manage. (Qtd. in Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, and Kirkby: 44)

The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, memories, and urges that are outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unnoticed or continue to influence our behaviour and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences. The unconscious mind is concerned with instincts such as sexual drive and aggressive drive that can be affected by conscious and preconscious factors such as social values and individual upbringing. These experiences directly influence the behaviour of person and cause hysterical symptoms. These ideas were the basis of Freud's theory of the development of neurosis. He described dreams as the 'royal road' to the unconscious, arguing that dreams provide us with the best understanding of the repressed desires in us. According to Freud,

Dreams are undoubtedly caused by conflict and are characterized by their power to bring up memories that the dreamers have forgotten; their strong use of symbolism, and their ability to reproduce repressed impressions of the dreamer's childhood. (Freud, 1977, p. 40)

The dream is the expression of the unconscious, just as speech is the expression of the conscious. Freud believes that 'a dream is an escape-hatch or safety valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind' (Quoted in Barry, 2008, p. 99). A Freudian psychoanalytic reading of confessional poetry is that it is the unconscious, the abode of the suppressed desires that is presented in front of the reader so that they are sublimated.

French theorist Jacques Lacan focuses on language and issues related to it. His famous formulation about unconscious is that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (Lacan, 1977, p. 203). For him, language structures not only our conscious social life, but our unconscious life as well. By studying a subject's dreams and speech patterns, one can illuminate features of the split in the subject's imaginary register. Lacan's notion of desire is in some way different from that of Freud. The desire remains in the unconscious, unfulfilled and unsatisfied because that biological demand does not satisfy the desire. It is through substitution, through an endless metonymic chain of language, that the subject seeks to evoke the object of desire. The social and the individual psyche are fused together in a way that seems quite foreign to the model of the subject as an individual. Lacan believed that the unconscious was affected by the feeling of absence. As David H. Richter explains, "The sense of absence can take the form of mere 'lack' or 'need' which force the psyche to make demands; or it can take the highest form of desire". This sense of absence is manifested in how

individuals perceive reality, with desire creating an increased sense of self-consciousness. He suggested that all desire is linked to a lack: in fact the lack is desire. He links language with desire and unconscious. In the unconscious mind, desire is structured like language. Like other psychoanalysts, he sees mental illness as a product of early childhood difficulties. Thus the unconscious is not only reflected in the language we use, but is equally controlled by it.

Sylvia Plath is more a Lacanian postmodernist who uses the cultural paradigms, 'to bring plague, subversion and disorder' (Roudinesco, 1997, p. xv) to her psychic confessions. The confessional poetry is more often therapeutic in nature. The therapy involves a cleansing of one's subjectivity via presentation of the personal unconscious through what Carl Jung called the 'collective unconscious'. Sylvia Plath's personal (father's demise and failed marriage) and professional failures found a better outlet in Lowell's poetic strategy:

Following Lowell's example, Plath now wanted her poetry to deal with matters close to the bone . . . issues of the self. Previously, she had chosen topics that presented her with little challenge. Now she hoped to tackle difficult subjects: her husband, her dead father . . . and herself. (Alexander, 1991, p. 229)

Indeed, this involved a prolific use of language and symbolism. He continued to emphasise the necessity to understand the rules/processes of human communication to understand human behaviour. Lacan said:

All human beings share in the universe of symbols. It is as a function of the symbols, of the symbolic constitution of his history that those variations are produced in which the subject is open to taking on the variable, broken, fragmented, sometimes even unconstituted and regressive images of himself. (57-58)

Psychoanalysis helps to study Electra complex of Plath in her poem *Daddy*. This poem deals with her own unresolved Electra complex of which stemmed from the anger and resentment the author felt for the father who has passed away when she was eight years old. It is written at the difficult time when her husband divorced her and left her with painful feelings of emotional abandonment. Plath displays this unresolved Electra complex when she describes her father to be:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal.
("Daddy" 8-10)

She wrote these lines from the piece of her mind when she was still a young girl who thought her father was capable of anything like God. In this poem the daughter speaker, remains herself, as well as becomes the alter ego of the wife, to express her hatred towards her father and husband. Her poetry is a ritualistic ratification of the exorcism of the unconscious.

I never could talk to you.
The tongue struck in my jaw.

It struck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene.
("Daddy" 24-30)

Jill Scott argued that Plath 'demonstrates this willingness to go the extreme lengths to falsify the image of the father, as if it might provide some relief no matter how tentative' (Scott, 2005, p. 153). She believes that this stems from survival: the innate will of the daughter to gain control over the image of her father, and of patriarchal oppression. As per the psychologists views the poetry is the creative work which has its origin from imagination. Imagination stands for the repressed or hidden thoughts of the mind. As per *Psychoanalytical Theory* of Carl Jung 'the mind of a creative writer is molded by his/her collective unconsciousness and not by libido or sexual energy. The poet who responds to the prompting of the unconsciousness is able to tap deep emotional sources' (Jung, 1968, p. 77). He also assumes that all stories and symbols are based on mythical models from mankind's past. Jung believed that myths are symbolic representations of the archetypes of the collective unconscious.

Utilising psychoanalytic concepts to access Sylvia Plath's poems, it is clear that her poems offers an unmediated access to the personal; here, after all, are poems regarding the raw struggles of motherhood, marriage, bereavement, sexuality, and therapeutic psychoanalysis. The language of poetry, which as Julia Kristeva has argued, function as a metonym of broader category of poetic language, represents a linguistic formation that dramatically foregrounds the semiotic and explicitly makes way — structurally, evocatively, emotionally — for the heightened possibilities of the paradox, of speaking the unspeakable. Melanie Klein, one of the post-Freudian scholars, argues that the pain of mourning

and reparation experience during the depressive position is the basis of creative activity. She terms a depressive syndrome:

That is, the cluster of semiotic murmurings of attachments, guilt, anxiety, and loves which stalk the infant's relation to its significant other and which recur throughout life at each new confrontation with loss and limitation". (Gill, Waters, 2011, p. 45)

In an essay *Sylvia Plath's Mourning and Creativity*, Keiko Kimura applies the theory of Melanie Klein to the creative process of Plath and conclude that it was her father's death that triggered the process of compensation and Plath must have felt that what has been lost in her father's death was not only the person but some parts of her own self. [. . .] She attempted to restore the lost love object by poetry. For Sylvia Plath, it was a means of reinstating the lost love objects as well as the lost internal good objects.

Helene Cixous wants woman to reclaim her natural self-expression and looks to the creative mother within to write, whether writing assumes form of lived experiences, actual childbirth, or written expression. Sylvia Plath was a mother and her motherhood affects her poems. Her poems include the themes of maternity, abortion and pregnancy. Thus, Plath transgresses the phallogocentric system by talking about body, love and motherhood. She does not afraid to talk about female experiences.

CONCLUSION:

Therefore, psychoanalytic account of the unconscious provides confessional poetry with resources for inquiry. It offers a depiction of the forces that impel us to organise, disorganise and reorganise the bonds that hold us together. Through this paper it is tried to examine the ways in which literary and psychoanalytical techniques help to understand Sylvia Plath's trauma of losing father, Otto Plath and also the psychic repression she had on her. According to Freud, during the narrative stages of mourning, once the steps have been experienced and completed, the 'ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (Freud, 1977, p. 40). The allegory of the poem *Daddy* may be seen as Plath seeking to achieve freedom through the figurative murder of her father, and the image of her father that she made in her husband.

Both literature and psychoanalysis might be said to interconnect the external and internal world of human existence. They bridge the outer and inner using their own means of expression. The literary arts are closer to the psychoanalytic approach because they use language as a major means of communication. Confessional poet's relentless self-exploration was encouraged and

framed by psychoanalysis. In spite of their constant efforts to develop an individual, highly personal voice meant to resist oppressive structures, the language of their confession is not entirely their own. Psychoanalysis provides the epistemological and rhetorical background of the confessional poet's quest for self.

Like most of other confessional poets Sylvia Plath was suffered from nervous breakdown,

hospitalised and underwent psychoanalytic therapy. Her depression, her suicide attempts and her gradual recovery are well recorded in her writing. Psychoanalysis became the instance which authorised the poet's discourse, fully grounding their claim to authenticity. In a nutshell, psychoanalytic perspective gives the reader a deep view of the mind of the author and the issues she faced. Moreover, it helps to understand the depth of her confessional poetry.

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