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RESEARCH CENTRE IN ENGLISH



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As per the regulations of Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Ms. S. Subha, (Reg. No.: F 9867), Full-time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, will defend her research work at a Viva-voce in Video Conference mode using Google Meet Platform.

Title of the Thesis

THEMES AND TECHNIQUES IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS

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The Synopsis of the thesis is available in the College Website <https://www.vhnsnc.edu.in/> and a copy of the thesis is available in the Department Library for reference. Faculty members, Research scholars and Students are most welcome to attend the Viva-voce and take part in the discussion on Google Meet.

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Themes and Techniques in Sylvia Plath's Poems

**Synopsis submitted to
Madurai Kamaraj University for the award of the**

**DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH**

**By
Ms. S. Subha
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MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

(University with Potential for Excellence)

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SYNOPSIS

In modern literature, women poets made poetry a vehicle to express their inner anxieties, phobias, frustrations and failures. Their writings are marked by thematic relevance and technical excellence. Their poems may be called confessional poems. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is an American poet, who can be called a confessional poet. Her poems are marked by themes like nature, love, death, electra complex and psychic disorders. She also experiments in the poetic style. In her poems, Plath evaluates her own life and her relationship with her father and her husband, Ted Hughes. Her poetry is an art of her self revelation. Her poems are inextricably associated with her life and her wounded psyche. She has powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces. Her poems are symbolic expressions of her punctuated existence and life. In her poems, the destructive forces of life are countered by the creative forces of art. Her poems express her psychic outburst as they are an earnest attempt at ordering and re-ordering the chaos in her life.

Plath was born on October 23, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts. Her childhood was spent in Winthrop, a seaside suburb of Boston. It was during the years at Smith College, she began to suffer from bouts of depression for which she received bipolar electroconvulsive shock treatment. In 1953, Plath's depression culminated in her decision to commit suicide for the first time. Her first collection of poems, *The Colossus*, appeared after her marriage to Hughes. Later, she was deserted by Hughes. In 1963, she committed suicide caused by Hughes's desertion and the resultant loneliness and exhaustion. Her poetry is therefore self-centered, autobiographical and confessional in tone. Her fixations are narcissistic.

Her collection of poems *The Colossus* (1960) was published during her life time. She left behind her a large volume of poetry after her suicide. Hughes was instrumental in bringing out *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971). In 1981, he released her *The Collected Poems* containing all the poems she had written after 1956 along with fifty poems under the heading "Juvenilia", selected from her pre-1956 work, written a few years before her departure to Cambridge.

Her early poems show her progress as a poet. The tragic vision of her life is only tentatively present in the early poems because of her uncertain control over her poetic form. She used poetry to express her fears and anxieties. Her poems like "Dooms Day" and "To Eva Descending the Stair" continue her intense fascination with the darker side of life. "Bitter Strawberries" holds out the threat of atomic holocaust. "Dooms Day" presents the vision of total destruction. Her "Doom of Exiles" suggests the recognition of an altered psyche. In her early poetry, the clock is the symbol of life's immortality. And as a result, in Plath's bleak world, love finds no gaiety or togetherness. Lovers become victims of duplicity. In her early poems, Plath is constantly drawn towards destruction and death. The poem "Temper of Time" uses images like 'ill wind', 'evil stars', 'Black birds of Omen', 'Talk Skeletons', 'Nightshades' and 'Nettles' and 'Wolf at the Door'. Her early poems show her interest in certain themes and techniques to be used and to be practised later in her poems. It is almost intellect versus imagination or of fact versus poetic impulse. Choice often begets conflict and it is between the life experience and art experience. In the earlier phase, thematically, there is a marked absence of involvement with issues outside the self. Her conception of life is bitter and sardonic.

The poems written during her Cambridge Period show her mind suffers from the background of her prejudices, preferences and influences. She has experienced disillusionment

and disenchantment in her life. Her disenchantment is clearly seen in “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea”. It exemplifies Plath's vision of waste, sorrow and death. The external world is presented in the figure of a lone beachcomber, whose isolation is contrasted and highlighted with the sense of community. Similarly, in “On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad”, she wants to impose order on her poems with the help of fantasy but in “On the Plethora of Dryads”, she wants to starve from her fantasy. She chooses to starve her senses to sharpen her inner intellect. Her impulse towards masochism is evident in her poems like "Pursuit" and "The Glutton". In this period, she admires Hughes and he is described as a god of spring by her. She wrote poems like in “Pursuit” “Ode for Ted” and in “Wreath for a Bridal”. However, it is to be noted that in a male dominated world, Plath’s women feel constantly threatened and what preserves them from harm is their agility-both mental and physical. The sense of peril is so intense. In “Aerialist”, the young woman dreams of herself as a circus artist performing exercises with dexterity to ward off danger. However, marriage to Hughes must have been a relief, but ambiguity marks Plath’s response to love. She oscillates between skepticism and total surrender to it. Plath’s sense of peril is so intense. Plath’s vision of love is completed with “Street Song”. It presents a love-lorn woman. The poems written during the Cambridge period express Plath’s vision of love and marriage. There is a steady movement in the love poetry of Plath towards disillusionment. Her Cambridge poetry presents a new woman.

Her period of apprentice as a teacher in Smith college, America, marks the third Phase. Her poems of this period prove her mind and talent. They present her griefs, agonies and drudgeries. During this period, she suffered from rejection of her poems by different publishers. It was felt as a defeat to her poetic self. The poetic self in her raged with repeated defeats and failures. Her mind gave her no chance to look at life beyond the inner self. This self insulatory

experience, though it was turbulent one, stifled her by virtue of its being too private and personal. The conflict boiled down to either boldly exploiting the self for the sake of poetic progress or spending time in self recrimination on account of her failure to be objective. The third phase is marked by the publication of her poems under the title *The Colossus*.

Colossus contains her attitude to nature, and her preoccupation with themes like death and father fixation. "The Manor Garden", is a true reflection of Plath's mood. The poem shows Plath's dichotomy with the images of death. Combining the personal elements with the external phenomena, Plath is able to express the fears of an expectant mother and an equally expectant artist. "The Disquieting Muses" has biographical elements. The poem has three characters, the narrator, the mother and the muses, who play surrogate mother and replace the mother. The poem may be read at different levels: a simple conflict between human endeavor and fate, the daughter blaming the mother, a conflict between social demands /obligations and the inclination towards an artistic life. Thematically, the poems in *Colossus* are limited in scope. They are the product of inner gloom and anguish. They cloak her inner stress and menace of her poetic self. It results in depression. Her poem "HardCastle Crag" borders on hysteria. It presents phantasmagoric, dream like experience. "Medallion" and "Blue Moles" deal with death. However, "All the Dead Dears" deals with the interrelatedness of life and death. Her "The Eye Mote" presents the most disturbing aspect of her life -her increasing preoccupation with her dead father, for whom she experienced a kind of unnatural longing. The unresolved Electra complex is worked out in this poem. The quest for her father is also a quest for her self or for her personal identity. In the absence of her father's presence, she feels a vacuum. This accounts for her psychic restlessness and her quest for death. It is revealed in the poem called "Electra on Azalea Plath". In it, Plath assumes the role of Electra and narrates the events connected with her life.

Her father's death is accepted with much stoicism. Her other poems "Lorelei" and "Full Fathom Five" record the same affection with death. In Plath's imagination, father-figure looms large than the god head and anticipates her sarcastic lines in "Daddy". Similarly, "The Beekeeper's Daughter" deals with the father-daughter relationship. In this poem, the sexual union between the father and the daughter is fraught with disaster. "Poem for a Birthday" is a fitting conclusion to *Colossus* as it gathers together the main concerns of her poems.

Her collection of poems called *Ariel* records emotions associated with prosperity, adversity, desertion, frustration, anger, despair, ritual death and resurrection. "Morning Star" recounts a mother's response to her newborn baby. "Nick and the Candlestick" presents the gloomy mind of the poet and directs the poet's gaze at the child. "The Couriers" presents a wife's skeptical view of matrimony. "The Rabbit Catcher" presents marriage as a relationship that constricts and kills a woman, while man watches the outcome of his cruelty with callous excitement. Similarly, "A Secret" and "The Applicant" too deal with marital disharmony. "Daddy" deals with father-fixation. In "Lady Lazarus", Plath goes a step further and threatens to destroy both god and Satan. "Ariel" records her desolate resolution of her plunge into death. "Edge" presents a deep sense of calm imbued with grief and despair. In fact, every poem she wrote only increased her sense of injury and placed her in sharp pain, which she felt in her inner self/heart. Death seemed to be the only way to get out of a life thwarted emotionally and psychologically.

Water combines both formal toughness and self-intensification. In it, Plath's art is undergoing a change. In "Still Born", Plath creates an atmosphere of a medical laboratory. In "Crossing the Water", an attempt is made to explore the mind and liberate the self that had remained shackled. "Wuthering Heights" represents Plath's ambivalence response and attitude to

life. The artistic and creative aspects of the mind conflict with the desire to escape into a numbed existence. Plath's death-wish is more pronounced and expressed in this poem. In the poems like "Two Campers in Cloud Country", "Public Gardens", "Crossing the Water", "Parliament Hill Fields", Plath moves from the description of nature to the confession of feeling. "Whitsun" is a poem that focuses straightly on the strained relationship between the narrator and her partner. Her emotional estrangement has soured her outlook on life. "Zoo Keeper's Wife" demonstrates her domestic disharmony and strained emotional relationship with her husband. It shows her feeling of disgust and horror. And as a result, "Morning Song", "Event", "Burning the Letters", "For a Fatherless Son", "The Courage of Shutting up", "Lesbos" and other poems deal with the loss of love, the breakdown of marriage and the agony of separation. These poems deal with the marital crisis. Similar is the case with her poem "Love Letter".

In *Trees*, six poems are included from *Ariel*. It also contains poems that are not included in *Ariel*. The poems of *Trees* play an important role in consolidating the concerns of Plath's earlier works. The major poem in *Trees* is "Three Women". "A Poem for Three Voices" can be interpreted as a social poem. Plath's *Trees* is the third volume of her poetic collection. It may be described as a companion volume to *Ariel*. Both *Trees* and *Ariel* belong to the period of Plath's life, which was marked by trouble and tumult. The poem in *Trees* like "Purdah", "Childless Woman", "By Candle Light" and "Thalidomide" are similar to poems in *Ariel*. *Trees* is a slim volume. It consists of eighteen short poems and one long dramatic monologue or a radio play entitled "Three Women, A Poem for Three Voices". There are poems about children such as "Child", "Brasilia" and "Childless Woman". Besides, there are poems on the theme of male domination such as "Gigolo" and "Purdah". There are also poems dealing with the theme of death in poems like "Winter Trees", "Stopped Dead", and "Lyonese". Mystical experience and

selfhood is the theme of the poems like “Mystic”, and “Three Women”. However, on the whole, *Trees* continues the tendencies of Plath’s poetry such as her imagistic technique, her feminism, and the confessional note. “*Trees*” places history at the centre of the landscape, where the graphic and defined landscape emerges from the indefinite and obscure mindscape of the poet. Many of the images in *Trees* recall the key poems of *Ariel*. The speaking voice is curiously elided.

Present research on Plath’s poems related to her themes and techniques focuses attention on the major themes of Plath’s poems like human relationship, nature, man-woman relationship, psychological imbalances, electra complex, love, marriage and desertion and so on. Plath’s poetry is also characterized by excessive craftsmanship. Her poems *Colossus*, *Trees*, and *Ariel*, open up a new vistas in a vast interior mindscape of the poet, who has been smothered, thwarted and betrayed in her marriage to Hughes. The universe that Plath’s persona conceives explores the horrors of mind, the intense hostility and a sense of menace that pervades her work. It could be the result of her obsession in her real life. Plath has a neurotic obsessive personality. Plath’s own tragic life, full of suffering, deprivation and conflict, provided the impulse and motivation to pen her pains. The inner poetic self of Plath yearns for death and rebirth. In poem after poem, the speaking persona of the poem, the poet, discards her old, unwanted identity and adopts a new and more fulfilling one; yet, it is not conceived but results in committing suicide.

The thesis entitled “Themes and Techniques in Sylvia Plath’s poems” is divided into five chapters. The first chapter "Introduction" introduces the life and poetic career of Plath. This chapter also discusses all her major collection of poems like *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, and *Winter Trees*. This introductory chapter also attempts to highlight her poetic method, delineating how her real life events are altered and used creatively to produce poetry. In fact, it

shows how the personal and professional elements are intertwined in her poems. It provides some introductory remarks on her poetic craft and its confrontation with her psychic disorders. This helps in tracing Plath's growth and development as a poet. It foregrounds her poetic method, themes and occasions for writing poems.

Chapter II: "Theme of love and death: A cross-examination of the poetic psyche with artistry" examines Plath's early poems which reveal her love for nature and death. Written during her periods at Smith College and Cambridge, they reveal her intention to get mature enough to treat her chosen subjects in her poems. She wants to perfect her artistry too. She wants to identify herself with nature by understanding nature. This chapter is a cross-examination of her poetic psyche to understand her stand in loving nature, her father, and even death.

Chapter III: "Theme of womanhood and womanly assertion and negation in death" is an autopsy of the inner psyche of Plath in connection with her conscious womanhood and womanly assertion and negation in death. This chapter proves that a woman's self is consciously threatened, corroded and to be made null and void. It attempts to prove that a woman's self is not understood at all. A woman's efforts to assert herself are negated and her assertion results in death or in death-wish. It shows Plath's attempts to explore the mind and psyche of a woman to treat womanhood and womanly assertion and negation of it in death. It is an attempt to free her work of inhibitions, which are psychologically tormenting her for a long time by the negligence of her father and her husband.

Chapter IV: "Technical excellence of Plath's poetic craft" is a study in techniques used/stylistics followed. It shows that Plath's poetic technique ranges from an interior monologue to the psychic outburst/cry of a woman with that of stanzaic forms and intricate and art metrical schemes with alliteration. In all her poems, she becomes the narrator or the speaking person or

the 'I' narrator. The speaking person is subjected to the feeling of gloom and despair. Hence, her tone is confessional. It is basically an intrinsic study of her poems.

Chapter V: "Summing up" sums up the findings of the study and proves that Plath uses themes like love, nature, daughter-father relationship, death, hysteria, psychic outburst, personal sufferings, humiliation, betrayal, sexual guilt, psychological breakdowns and so on. She also uses poetic techniques to perfect her craft.