

EXPLORING PLETHORA OF FEMININE EXPERIENCES AND IMAGISTIC PATTERN IN SYLVIA PLATH'S TULIPS

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Abstract

The present paper aims at exploring the plethora of feminine experiences through the recurrent pattern of imagery in Sylvia Plath's most famous poem "Tulip." The critical assessment of the paper is divided into different segments. The first part of the paper deals with the introduction of Sylvia Plath's status among women American poets. The next part is devoted to the exploration of the psyche-cape of the poetic persona with the imagery and setting of the hospital where she is lying on her bed. The subtle usage of the floral imagery of tulips is central one around which all the images revolve and to which all are interlinked from the beginning till the very end. The poet has employed colour imagery meticulously embedded with myriads of feminine experiences from claustrophobic feminine self to her resentment towards it to break the shackles of patriarchal 'isms'

Keywords: Feminine, feminism, imagery, psychescape, and Patriarchy.

Sylvia Plath is recognized far and wide as a sensitive and emotively cogent American woman poet of post war period, though she could not acquire such a remarkable critical identification and position as a creative genius during her lifetime. But when she committed suicide at a very tender age of thirty, she became an icon of women poet because she underwent intense emotional and psychic trauma with her two small kids owing to her divorce from husband Ted Hughes whom she loved from the deep core of her heart. Though she never proclaimed herself as a feminist poet, but the implicit undertone of feminine experiences can be discerned in the entire oeuvre of Plath ranging from her poetry and fictional works. She exploits daring metaphors and imagery of death and sexuality to lay bare the impact of societal restrictions in her poetry and won approbation as a woman poet who explored the predicament from her own lived experiences. The experiences, a woman has to undergo has been dealt with a tinge of personal mourning; however, the individuality is blurred with universal appeal through the dexterous incorporation of mythic and archetypal patterns in the texture of her poetic output. The dilemma of identity, a burning issue of modern woman, finds a cathartic undertone in her poetry through parallelism and contrast between present and past. Plath tried to be a perfect woman as well as poet. This dilemma becomes the ubiquitous motif of her creative works. This factor along with her tragic end made Plath an implicit emblem, if not an active organizer, of feminist movement and with this, her prominence virtually maintained a balance between her literary acclamation and uniqueness. Her last poetry collection Ariel published posthumously in 1961, gained her a unique and new status as a woman poet of America.

"Tulips," composed on March 18th, 1961, is one of Sylvia Plath's most famous and critically remarkable poems. It was originally published in her last collection of poetry *Ariel*. Ted Hughes himself remarked about the genesis of this poem. This poem was written about a bouquet of tulips Sylvia Plath received as she recovered from an appendectomy in the hospital. The poem contains nine seven-line stanzas, and has no rhyme scheme. Its subject is relatively straightforward: a woman, recovering from a procedure in a hospital, receives a bouquet of tulips that affront her with their glaring color and vividness. She details the manner in which they bother her, insisting she prefers to be left alone in the quiet whiteness of her room.

"Tulips," 'a sporadic artifice of incandescence' containing a keen-perceptive-artistic prodigy, commences the unfathomable psychic state of an apathetic speaker. It incorporates her psychological and spiritual peregrination in search of self. It also evinces how she gradually tries to liberate herself from the claustrophobic-compulsive-forces in an otherwise male-dominated society, by regaining her power, moving unhindered in the innermost recesses of her dynamic psyche. The whole drama is enacted in the psyche of the female protagonist and comes forward in the form of cluster of imagistic patterns with each and every move in the poem from the beginning till the end, pouring out the plethora of feminine experiences in different facets.

The setting of the poem is the maternity ward with a post-operative patient, musing on her so-called pathetic condition. The poem deals with the psychescape of the female protagonist, preoccupied with horror and depression. The opening line conjures up a sense of placidity through the images of "white", "winter," and "snowed in"(Plath, "Tulips" 1 and 2). The poetic persona observes that almost all the things belonging to the ward are white. Whiteness, a state praised by the speaker, signifies purity, kindred with anonymity and numbness she searches for. PashupatiJha remarks in this regard, "The hospital ward, with its white wall, white bed and white-clad nurses, is symbolic of neutral world bereft of 'loving association.' She has receded back to nothingness"(67). White, an elementary color, in fact, no color, symbolizes a stage where there is no space for impurities, suffering, pain, and terror, a realm ruled by tranquility. Since the speaker wants to segregate herself from the loving and affectionate association offered by her husband in the form of 'excitable' tulips and represented through the family photograph with their "smiling hooks," she yearns for the hibernation of winter, deadening her senses. She conceives herself nobody, having impounded from the peripheral world into self-willed trance. "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosion" (Plath, "Tulips" 5). This act of yielding her name, belonging and body to numbness connotes that she has forsaken the erratic and turbulent external world in search of psychic and spiritual composure of Empyrean.

But this peacefulness is treacherous and perfidious. The fragile body of the female speaker is handed over to iron handed doctors and nurses, the agents of phallogocentric society; they have disjointed her body with the administration of anesthesia to lead her to sheer oblivion; this is mistaken as a transcendental state of eternal peace experienced by an enigmatic sage. After the administration of anesthesia to her body, she is unconsciously conscious; rather conscious of nothing save a few series of hazy recollection. She is an undefiled and innocent creature, unaware of the conspiracy hatched against her. This state is similar with that of Prufrock 'like a patient etherized upon a table.'

The puissant stance of graphic and vivid color image is further reinforced, incorporating animal imagery, striding in the curve of sagacity. The passive eyes of the speaker between two white lids personifies sea gull with rhythmic motion of white capped nurses, but the relative peaceful

image of sea gull deviates from its supposed function of purification as their placidity turns out to be menacing as in *The Waste Land*, where the sea gull symbolizes sensual pleasure and carnal desires on account of which the Phoenician sailor is caught in the vortex of oceanic water with no hope of redemption and rebirth. Similarly, the speaker is being bewitched by her gull-like-nurses to push her back into Dantian-Limbo, a prefecture of torture and atrocities. They pretend to restore health to her with daunting intent so that she may be persecuted in the same region of societal pressure as mother and wife, the painful memories of which she has not yet raised herself from.

In the same vein, the forthcoming images are saturated with the kernel of symbolic undercurrent to suggest the contemplation of the speaker. The metaphor of 'stupid pupil' in connection with her reflects influence of coercive forces on her psyche. She says: "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in" ("Tulips" 10). There is pun in the word 'pupil.' Pupil also means 'pupil of the eye,' but in association with the adjective 'stupid' it implies the lack of acuity and sharpness of her emotional contours on the part of the medical staff. In the hospital ward, she can simply see the vista, but neither reflects nor expresses her point of view. She is thought to be an emotionless object in this hospital, microcosm of the mundane world. The macrobiotic and integral image of pebble is soggy and moving to drive attention to the poetic persona: "My body is pebble to them, they tend it as water / Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently" (Plath, "Tulips" 15-16). The nurses and doctors are compared with the sea water which sluices the sprinkled pebbles (women) to make them smooth. 'Smoothing them gently' has persuasive sexual connotation to denote the sinister intent of her husband and relatives as numbness is brought through the 'bright needles.'

Again an extended pause in the middle of the verse comes with a decrease of the rhythm and she diverts her attention from the medical staff to her overnight case which reminds her liabilities and obligations, with high expectation to lead death in life like state, which are waiting at home which she abjures at the very outset of the poem. She says: "Now I have lost myself I sick of baggage -- / My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox" ("Tulips" 18-19). The images where she reduces herself to inanimate objects are recurrent in this poem. She calls herself as "a thirty-year cargo boat" and declares that she has "let things slip" (Plath, "Tulips"22). She has no hope of being mother once again. The metaphor of 'cargo boat' is relevant to point out the emptiness of her devoid of her child. The 'cargo boat' is useless if it has dropped its load. MajoriePerloff writes that "now an odd metamorphosis takes place. The seemingly mindless tulips come alive and threaten the dazed emptiness of the hospital world" (119). In utter despair, she wants to put an end to her life by drowning in deep oceanic water to bring everything at the stage of stasis:

Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure. (Plath, "Tulips"25-28)

Susan Bassnet remarks about it, "As the rest of her life has slipped out of view, the metaphor of drowning is used – the water went over my head. Purified by this absence she is nun now" (126).The drowning-image is further merged with its integral version of recoiled fetus in the womb of mother – a place of sheer siesta and immobility. "Everything that gives her identity, that imprisons her in existence, has been surrendered," says Richard Grey, "and she sinks into a

condition of emptiness, openness that is associated at certain times here with immersion in water – a return to the foetal state and matrix of being” (“Modern American Poetry”). But this peaceful womb-like-posture is spoiled with the arrival of ‘too excitable’ and ‘too red tulips.’ The red tulips, representing the outside active world with life, vitality, spring, and warmth, enkindle emotions and sensation in the speaker, but to her they signify danger, blood and pain. The eccentric bitterness of the speaker towards ruddy and glowing tulips is for good reason as they ruin her prior-white-emptiness. The red tulips (blood image) bring her back into heart- broken memories of her miscarriage. That she has failed her duty is reminded once again and she moans in trauma:

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red sinkers round my neck. (Plath, “Tulips” 39-42)

1. The poetic persona cries out that “tulips are too red,” they hurt her like some dangerous animal (Plath, “Tulip” 36). The awful animal in her paranoid psyche does not arrive all of a sudden but its looming arrival is anticipated through ghastly atmosphere. The image of ‘awful baby,’ revealed through the visual, tactile and auditory nuance, resembles the harrowing effects of modern horror-movie. In a twisted metaphorical way is discerned how tulips (animal or corpse of her baby) breath under the gift wrap. The crinkling of paper as they breathe seems ominous and annoying as she feels that “they eat my oxygen” (“Tulips” 49). Moreover, the speaker feels, “Even though the gift I could hear them / Lightly, through their white swaddling like an awful baby” (“Tulips” 37-38). The gothic atmosphere is further intensified:

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(50-54)

In the last stanza, all confusions regarding the appearance of animal are removed as she actually confronts African cat, burgeoning from the violent red tulips. Jeanine Dobbs also views, “There is something wild and dangerous about them. She wants to reject them. Because she says they ‘eat my oxygen.’ She wants to reject the trappings of her life and the family she has” (“Modern American Poetry”). The tenor and intonation of the poem becomes a bit unrelenting with animosity; the speaker introspects herself from the perspective of tulips – a charismatic and conspiratorial world – persistently inspecting and judging her: “And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow” (“Tulip” 46).

The converging apprehension of being censured and criticized has been thrown to the wind. With the increasing-rhythmic-tempo, the speaker begins to wrangle with the tulips. Before the influx of the tulips, the air was calm, but the visit of the tulips with the loving relationship has caused an assault to her inner stasis and this is how she becomes conscious of her blooming heart as “it opens and closes / Its bowl of red bloom out of sheer love of me” (“Tulip” 60-61). She reaches the state of psychic-victory with the recognition of the corrupt agents of the oppressive male-dominated society, emerging forth in the form of African cat. But from this time onwards,

she will brazen out this world of uncouth beings with the whole of her force and declares, “The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous like dangerous animal” (“Tulip” 58).

The nature and pattern of imagery throughout the poem is malleable and recurrent reflecting different phases of the mood of the speaker. This poem, in fact, displays Plath’s deep inclination for floral image of tulips as it evinces and transforms itself into other images to reflect the emotional and psychic status of the speaker and in turn weave it in one string to a considerable extent. The tulip image is central to fabricate and crystallize the background of the psyche of the protagonist to resolve the crucial psychological and spiritual stasis. The image of the sea water as a symbol of power and health re-enters at the end of the poem to suggest that the protagonist has tasted the nectar of health to achieve success in her mission of justice, “The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health” (“Tulip” 62-63). Regarding the closing of this poem, MajoriePerloff writes:

The drama is complete because they [tulips] become flesh and blood in the speaker’s imagination, the tulips force her out of her earlier whiteness, her passive extinction, and she hates this active intrusion. In her anxiety, she equates the tulips petals with ‘red blooms’ of her heart which insists on beating despite her desire for death. Finally, life returns with the taste of her hot tears; health is a ‘far away’ country but at least now it is remembered. The spell of the home is broken In this poem, the tulips are not symbol in the conventional sense; the focus is not on the tulips as natural objects with such and such connotations, but on the process whereby the ‘I’ finally becomes the hated tulip so that her heart ‘opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms.’ (119)

Thus, “Tulips” is a poem in which Sylvia Plath has poured the plethora of varied feminine experiences ranging from her victimized female self to a realization of her viable and autonomous identity though not actually realized tangibly but conceived in the psyche of the female protagonist. Moreover, the imagistic pattern is recurrent, malleable and fluid throughout the poem and hence exploring feminine experiences in the innermost recesses of her psyche.

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